

DEPARTAMENT
DE FILOLOGIA
ANGLESA I DE
GERMANÍSTICA

UNIVERSITAT
AUTONÒMA DE
BARCELONA

2021

GENDER IN 21ST CENTURY ANIMATED CHILDREN'S CINEMA

Sara Martín Alegre (ed.)



GENDER IN 21ST CENTURY ANIMATED CHILDREN'S CINEMA

Sara Martín Alegre (ed.)

Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| Preface. Gender in 21 ST Century Animated Children's Cinema: Slow Progress. Sara Martín Alegre | 1 |
| <i>Monsters Inc.</i> (2001): Society's Pressure and Women's Stereotypes. Cristina Espejo Navas..... | 3 |
| <i>Monsters University</i> (2013): Overconfidence and/versus Sacrifice. Manu Díaz Inglés ... | 7 |
| <i>Shrek</i> (2001): Alternative Beauty. Maria Guallar Comas..... | 11 |
| <i>Shrek 2</i> (2004): Not so Far, Far Away from Tradition. Naiara López Alcázar..... | 14 |
| <i>Shrek the Third</i> (2007): Beyond the Humor. Alba Sánchez Ortiz | 17 |
| <i>Ice Age</i> (2002): An All-Male Story. Raquel Prieto Xufré..... | 21 |
| <i>Ice Age 2: The Meltdown</i> (2006): On the Meltdown of Gender Barriers. Alba Sánchez Ortiz..... | 24 |
| <i>Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs</i> (2009): Masculinity Crisis. Thu Trang Tran | 27 |
| <i>Ice Age 4: Continental Drift</i> (2012): A Prehistoric Odyssey. Cong (Jamie) Wang..... | 31 |
| <i>Ice Age: Collision Course</i> (2016): Celebrating Romance. Sara Martín Alegre..... | 35 |
| <i>Lilo & Stitch</i> (2002): Disney's Most Overlooked, Feminist Film? Ting Wang..... | 38 |
| <i>The Powerpuff Girls Movie</i> (2002): Groundbreaking Superheroines. Helena Zúñiga Centenero | 41 |
| <i>Finding Nemo</i> (2003): A Little Drop in the Big Ocean. Rubén Campos Arjona..... | 44 |
| <i>Finding Dory</i> (2016): Disability and Gender Issues. Silvia Gervasi..... | 48 |
| <i>The Incredibles</i> (2004): Conventionality and Rebellion. Cristina Espejo Navas | 52 |
| <i>Incredibles 2</i> (2018): The Female Breadwinner as Superhero. Manu Díaz Inglés | 56 |
| <i>Cars</i> (2006): Learning to Slow Down. Maria Guallar Comas | 60 |
| <i>Cars 2</i> (2011): An Unconventional Spy, a Conventional Love Interest. Naiara López Alcázar..... | 64 |
| <i>Cars 3</i> (2017): The 'New Man' and the Forgotten Woman in Old America. Jessiah Azul Mellott..... | 68 |
| <i>Kung Fu Panda</i> (2008): A Big Fat Stereotype? Raquel Prieto Xufré..... | 72 |
| <i>Kung Fu Panda 2</i> (2011): The Martial Art of Gender. Alba Sánchez Ortiz..... | 75 |
| <i>Kung Fu Panda 3</i> (2016): A Valuable Lesson. Thu Trang Tran | 79 |
| <i>Ratatouille</i> (2007): Of Men and Rats in the Kitchen. Cong (Jamie) Wang | 82 |
| <i>Bolt</i> (2008): Journey to the Authentic Self. Ting Wang | 86 |
| <i>WALL·E</i> (2008): Beyond Artificial Life. Helena Zúñiga Centenero | 89 |
| <i>Coraline</i> (2009): Lost in Adaptation? Rubén Campos Arjona..... | 93 |
| <i>Monsters vs. Aliens</i> (2009): Deconstructing Tradition. Silvia Gervasi..... | 97 |
| <i>The Princess and the Frog /Tiana</i> (2009): A Missed Opportunity. Cristina Espejo Navas | 101 |
| <i>Up!</i> (2009): Alternatives to a Retirement Village. Manu Díaz Inglés | 105 |
| <i>Toy Story 3</i> (2010): A Genderless Inheritance. Maria Guallar Comas | 109 |
| <i>Toy Story 4</i> (2019): There is a New Sheriff in Town, and She is Female. Naiara López Alcázar..... | 113 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| <i>Megamind</i> (2010): Incels and Purpose. Jessiah Azul Mellott..... | 117 |
| <i>Despicable Me</i> (2010): From Evil Mastermind to Loving Father. Raquel Prieto Xufré. | 121 |
| <i>Despicable Me 2</i> (2013): Despicable Gender Issues. Alba Sánchez Ortiz | 125 |
| <i>Despicable Me 3</i> (2013): The Redeemed Villain and His Villainous Other. Sara Martín Alegre..... | 129 |
| <i>How to Train Your Dragon</i> (2010): A Lesson about Toxic Masculinity. Thu Trang Tran | 132 |
| <i>How To Train Your Dragon 2</i> (2014): A Disappointment and a Gay Viking. Cong (Jamie) Wang | 136 |
| <i>How to Train Your Dragon: The Hidden World</i> (2019): Reconciling Opposites. Ting Wang | 139 |
| <i>Tangled</i> (2010): The Unconventional Princess and her Bad Mother. Helena Zúñiga Centenero | 143 |
| <i>Brave</i> (2012): Real Changes and Symbolic Transformations. Silvia Gervasi | 147 |
| <i>Frankenweenie</i> (2012): Frankenstein as a Young Boy. Rubén Campos Arjona..... | 152 |
| <i>ParaNorman</i> (2012): Do Not Be Afraid of What is Different. Cristina Espejo Navas | 155 |
| <i>Wreck-It Ralph</i> (2012): Unexpected Loves and Friendships. Manu Díaz Inglés..... | 159 |
| <i>Ralph Breaks the Internet</i> (2018): Dealing with Toxicity. Maria Guallar Comas | 163 |
| <i>Frozen</i> (2013): Rewriting the Conventional Act of True Love. Naira López Alcázar | 167 |
| <i>Frozen II</i> (2019): Doing ‘The Next Right Thing’. Raquel Prieto Xufré..... | 171 |
| <i>Big Hero 6</i> (2014): The Future of Identity. Jessiah Azul Mellott | 175 |
| <i>The Lego Movie</i> (2014): In Praise of the Average Guy. Sara Martín Alegre..... | 178 |
| <i>The Lego Batman Movie</i> (2017): Postmodern Irony and Masculine Ideals. Jessiah Azul Mellott..... | 182 |
| <i>Inside Out</i> (2015): Gender Identity Perpetuated. Thu Trang Tran..... | 185 |
| <i>Moana</i> (2016): I Am Not a Princess! Cong (Jamie) Wang..... | 189 |
| <i>Trolls</i> (2016): The Happy Princess. Ting Wang..... | 193 |
| <i>Trolls World Tour</i> (2020): A Celebration of Diversity. Helena Zúñiga Centenero | 197 |
| <i>Zootopia</i> (2016): The Ambitious She-Bunny and the (Im)perfect Allegory. Rubén Campos Arjona..... | 201 |
| <i>Klaus</i> (2019): Kindness is Contagious. Silvia Gervasi..... | 204 |
| <i>Coco</i> (2017): Remembering the Lost Man. Sara Martín Alegre | 209 |
| <i>Onward</i> (2020): Brotherly Love. Sara Martín Alegre | 213 |
| Disclaimer and Creative Commons License | 216 |

Preface. Gender in 21ST Century Animated Children's Cinema: Slow Progress

The e-book offered here is the product of the activities carried out in the elective MA course 'Gender Studies: New Sexualities/New Textualities', which I have taught in the Autumn/Winter semester of the academic year 2020-21, within the MA in Advanced English Studies of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. A series of previous projects produced with students¹ convinced me of the suitability of the idea I had for this specific course: publishing a collective volume focused on how gender is represented in current 21st century Anglophone animated children's cinema.

For this project-oriented course and the subsequent e-book, I selected 50 English-language animated children's films, beginning with *Monsters Inc.* (2001) and ending with *Onward* (2020). The selection, now extended to 57 films, inevitably favors Disney and Pixar movies, but unlike other key monographic studies it also includes films by DreamWorks, Illumination Studios, Laika Studios, Blue Sky Studios and others. All the 57 films use English as their only or their main language, simply because we have studied them within a degree in English Studies and the selection depends on this circumstance. Otherwise, I would happily have included work on, for instance, Japanese studio Ghibli and its marvelous productions.

The essays here presented follow a chronological order, established in the hopes that my students and I would be able to show the positive evolution of gender representation in the 21st century as regards children's animated films. The only exception are the franchises; the sequels appear right after the first film instead than in the corresponding years for the sake of coherence. As the reader will see, this evolution has materialized though quite slowly, and without sufficient strength; hopefully, it will gain momentum soon enough. The selection has taken into account awards such as the Oscars but has inevitable left out some equally interesting films (such as *Corpse Bride*, the *Hotel Transylvania* franchise or *Chicken Run*), simply because we had limited room, and also because the many franchises have taken plenty of space. I have doubted whether to limit attention to the first film in each of them, but in some cases the evolution of the franchise (or its decadence, depending on the critics' views) has revealed interesting changes and a progression towards a better representation of gender issues, meaning a more inclusive one. This does not mean that I personally endorse all the films discussed with my students, just part of the list. The students have, in any case, expressed their own opinions freely about the quality (or lack thereof) of the films). On the whole, nonetheless, we do agree that all these films are consistently better than the films currently offered to adults; they have been made with great care and that shows on the screen. Some are amazing gems.

A *warning* about *spoilers*: in principle, this volume supposes that the essays will be read only after the reader has seen the corresponding film. This is not a guide to introduce readers to animated children's cinema based on reviews by the students, but

¹ See: Sara Martín Alegre (ed.), *Focus on the USA: Representing the Nation in Early 21st Century Documentary Film* (2020) <https://ddd.uab.cat/record/215815>, *Frankenstein's Film Legacy* (2019) <https://ddd.uab.cat/record/215815>, *Gender in 21st Century Cinema: 50 Titles* (2019) <https://ddd.uab.cat/record/206282>, *Reading SF Short Fiction: 50 Titles* (2016), <https://ddd.uab.cat/record/163528>; *Gender and Feminism: The Students' View* (2015, 2018), <https://ddd.uab.cat/record/129180>; *Charming and Bewitching: Considering the Harry Potter Series* (2014) <https://ddd.uab.cat/record/122987> and *Addictive and Wonderful: The Experience of Reading the Harry Potter Series* (2014), <https://ddd.uab.cat/record/118225>.

an academic volume intended to highlight any gender-related questions that the films raise, wittingly or unwittingly. We have not avoided the spoilers as it would make no sense to discuss gender without a full awareness of how each movie represents it. Most importantly, I have taught my students that the label Gender Studies refers to all aspects of gender, not only to women, which is why they discuss masculinity and LGBTBI+ issues as well.

This is a feminist book no doubt (and no apologies about it), but it is, above all, an anti-patriarchal volume written to raise general awareness about the need to make room for more variety on the screen. In general children's animated cinema is conservative in its values, as it appeals to the average family and aims at an international market (it may be surprising to learn, for instance, that beautiful *Onward* was banned from many Middle East cinemas because it has a very minor lesbian character who simply makes a comment about life with her girlfriend). It is over-optimistic to suppose that cinema's current patriarchal structure of production can offer a clear anti-patriarchal message. It is obvious that cinema (of any type) must incorporate more women of all kinds and LGBTBI+ persons to the ranks of the directors and the screen writers, and that those already in key positions (such as the many women producers) must do more to improve gender representation on both sides of the camera.

As the reviews quoted by the students show, in any case, since 2001 and particularly since the beginnings of the #MeToo movement in October 2017, the impatience generated by stereotyped gender representation has been growing. Some pro-feminist directors and writers are responding to that demand but what is needed, I would insist, is opening up cinema to other persons and other ways of narrating stories. Children are not articulate enough to express critically their opinions about the cinema offered to them, but they are much more aware than adults assume of what is missing in the stories presented to them, because they understand in which ways the persons present in their lives are or are not represented.

As the students have noted –and this is important, beyond the gender issues we raise here– if asked children would probably express their perplexity (or annoyance!) that films addressed to them usually focus on adults, or teenagers, and rarely on children themselves. Unfortunately, we had no chance to invite children to our discussions, which would have been great and much necessary to counteract the patronizing tone of many reviews. 'This is the type of simple plot only children enjoy' was a kind of negative comment that we came across too often, and it is about time we acknowledge that adults are not really the best suited persons to judge children's tastes. Hopefully, however, the adults in my class, including myself, have done our best to do children justice and to celebrate the films that are such an important part of any child's education in gender and in many other crucial matters.

Sara Martín Alegre
Barcelona, February 2021

Sara.Martin@uab.cat

@SaraMartinUAB

<http://gent.uab.cat/saramartinalegre>

The Joys of Teaching Literature

<http://blogs.uab.cat/saramartinalegre>

Monsters Inc. (2001): Society's Pressure and Women's Stereotypes

CREDITS

Directors: Pete Docter, David Silverman (co-director), Lee Unkrich (co-director)
Written by: Andrew Stanton, Daniel Gerson; story by: Pete Docter, Jill Culton, Jeff Pidgeon, Ralph Eggleston
Producer: Darla K. Anderson
Art direction: Tia W. Kratter, Dominique Louis
Editor: Jim Stewart
Music: Randy Newman
Main performers (voices): John Goodman (Sullivan), Billy Crystal (Mike), Mary Gibbs (Boo), Steve Buscemi (Randall), James Coburn (Waternoose), Jennifer Tilly (Celia), Bob Peterson (Roz), John Ratzenberger (Yeti), Frank Oz (Fungus), Daniel Gerson (Needleman & Smitty), Bonnie Hunt (Flint), Jeff Pidgeon (Bile)
Company: Pixar Animation Studios, USA
Runtime: 1h 32'



REASONS TO SEE *Monsters Inc.*

- It was nominated for the Best Animation Feature award at the Oscars in 2002.
- It offers a refreshing take on the typical children's fear of the "monsters in the closet".
- The film depicts an interesting dynamic between the two male main leads through the representation of their unique friendship.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *Monsters Inc.*

Monsters Inc. belongs to the beginnings of Pixar as an animation studio; it was only their fourth animation movie, after hits such as *Toy Story* (1995) and *Toy Story 2* (1999). The film's entertaining story, charming characters and great music earned it nominations for Best Animation Feature and Best Original Score in 2002. *Monsters Inc* was followed by other successful films from the same studio such as *The Incredibles* (2004) or *Cars* (2006), that helped to consolidate Pixar's successful name as one of the major studios of contemporary animation. In 2013 the sequel (or actually prequel) *Monsters University* was released.

As it is the case in most of Pixar's films, the story is original though in this case loosely based on children's typical fear of the monsters in the closet. The writers manage to read a conventional topic from a completely new perspective and create a fresh story in which the scared ones are not the children, but the monsters themselves, and in which the monsters' scary qualities are just a part of a job and not an intrinsic nature of the monsters' behavior. The film follows two monsters, top scarer James P.

'Sulley' Sullivan and his friend Mike Wazowski, as they are unwillingly involved in a series of events that will change their way of lives forever.

The story begins by showing us Monstropolis, the city where the monsters live, and explaining to us that the city is suffering from an important power shortage. This shortage, as we soon discover, is caused because children, the main energy source, are becoming more and more difficult to scare. Obviously, this is a serious problem for a city whose main energy supply comes from children's screams. Sulley and Mike both work at the main power plant; one day Sulley is getting out late from work when a human child about age three, considered toxic for the monsters, escapes her room and attaches herself to him. Completely terrified, Sulley tries without success to get rid of little Boo, until he is forced to carry her back into his and Mike's house. Confused and afraid, both agree that the best course of action is to return the little girl home before anyone discovers her, although this task will prove to be more complicated than they could have ever anticipated. During their quest, Mike and Sulley will realize that not only children are not toxic, but also that there is a much more effective method of solving their city's energy shortage: children's laughter is ten times more efficient than children's screams. In the end, Sulley and Mike manage to return the child safely home, and turn the scare factory into a fun factory, focused on creating energy from children's laughter.

There are many readings that could be offered about a rich film such as *Monsters Inc.*, depending on the approach. However, the gender issues in this film are most definitely worthy of analysis and will be the main point of analysis here. To start with, the main issue with gender in *Monsters Inc.* resides in the fact that there are practically no women who have an important role in the story. The most outstanding female representation comes from Boo, an infant too young to even speak. It is interesting, however, that the writers would choose a young girl like Boo as the central source of conflict in the film. Even in her young age, Boo proves herself to be brave and resourceful in ways only a three-year-old can be, referring to the big scary Sulley as "Kitty" and even playing a part in antagonist Randall's demise. Child or not, Boo is certainly a character we can look up to as a female human.

The other two main female representants in the film do ask for a further critical eye. As stated above, the factory in which the main protagonists work is completely male-dominated: as Jessica Birthisel puts it, "not only do they walk to work holding the type of stereotypical metal lunch boxes blue-collar men might carry, but men exclusively perform the central work of the factory" (346), though, of course, by men she means male monsters. Indeed, there are only two female monsters working at the factory, and both of them are relegated to secretarial roles (346). Furthermore, their roles in the film and the characters themselves are mostly stereotypes of women's representations. Celia is the jealous pretty girlfriend seeking to attract her boyfriend's attention, and Roz is a close instance of the typical witch in fairy tales, seen as threatening and disgusting for her external appearance and terrorizing the poor men that are not diligent enough to do their work on time. It is also interesting to remark that, even though the male monsters have diverse designs, there are little to no human qualities in their appearance; they "deodorize" themselves with smells such as "smelly garbage", so as to parody human hygiene and further establish their monstrous masculinity. On the other hand, both Celia and Roz present more anthropomorphic designs: Celia has an hourglass figure, with snakes as hair in allusion to Medusa, while Roz uses make-up and glasses and, unlike most male monsters that are either completely hairy or completely bald, has hair on the top of her head. Both also wear clothes, a luxury most of the male monsters (apart from some notable exceptions, such as Mr. Waterhouse) cannot seem to afford. All of these reasons make the lack of adult female characters really obvious, accentuated by the fact that the two existent women

seem to be heavily stereotyped and clearly designed to be more “human” than their male counterparts.

Another important point in the film is raised by the main characters themselves, Sulley and Mike, but especially by the former. Society has a series of values and expectations that are imposed upon its members simply because of their gender, their reputations, their physical appearances or even their jobs, and a city full of monsters is not an exception. Sulley is a perfect example of how these expectations do not necessarily need to match with a person’s (or a monster’s, in this case) real personality, but yet they are forced to act following these assumptions so as not to lose their places in society. As Rawls explains, “the appreciation of particular talents (...) and the success of an individual depend on what a society deems valuable” (in Meinel 76). In this case, Sulley, as the best scarer in Monstropolis and as a big and manly blue monster, seems to raise specific expectations that he needs to comply with in order to maintain his role as best scarer and his place at the factory. These presumptions are especially visible in the scene in which Mr. Waternoose forces Sulley to make a demonstration of his scaring capabilities for a group of students, a demonstration that he deems to be “not scary enough”. Forced to act in this way not to lose his place in the factory, Sulley terrifies Boo. Later on, when he sees himself from Boo’s perspective, Sulley realizes just how threatening his outward appearance is; an appearance that clashes greatly with Sulley’s caring and kind real persona but that has granted him his social position and the respect from his peers. In his review for the film, David Ansen compares Sulley with Buzz and Buddy from *Toy Story* and states that “Sulley has little bark and no bite”, describing him as a “bland” character (online). This shows that not only characters, but also viewers themselves, have certain expectations on characters just based on their appearances and gender, and are many times as disappointed as the characters in realizing that those expectations do not correspond with reality.

In contraposition to Sulley, an argument could be made about Mike and his unconventional representation of masculinity. Meinel raises an important point in his essay by describing the ways in which Mike’s character is portrayed as reversing gender expectations (88). This impression is enhanced by portraying Mike besides Sulley, who can easily be perceived as a stereotypical representation of masculinity. However, in the same way that there is more to Sulley than his appearance and the expectations that society has imposed upon him, there is more to be said about Mike than his apparent lack of power and his non-threatening demeanor. After all, it is thanks to Mike’s unconventional ways that the factory can go on in a different, healthier way after the events of the film are over; Mike is the one making Boo laugh, and without him the power shortage problem would most probably never have been solved. Thus, far from mocking it, the film celebrates Mike’s unconventionality, which is a fact that should also be taken into account while analyzing the type of masculinity he embodies.

Despite some exceptions, reviews for this movie are mostly positive. The truth is that, despite its flaws, most people would agree that *Monsters Inc.* is a really fun and entertaining quality film. It lacks female representation, but Sulley and Mike portray a perfect example of a healthy and charming relationship between two males, and Pixar’s film shows how unconventional masculinity seems to be the means by which society can progress instead of just being used as comic relief. All in all, *Monsters Inc.* is a well-loved film, and there are clearly many reasons why this is so.

Works Cited

Ansen, David. “*Monsters Inc* (review)”. *Newsweek.com*, 11 April 2001, <https://www.newsweek.com/movies-scare-heck-out-shrek-149411>

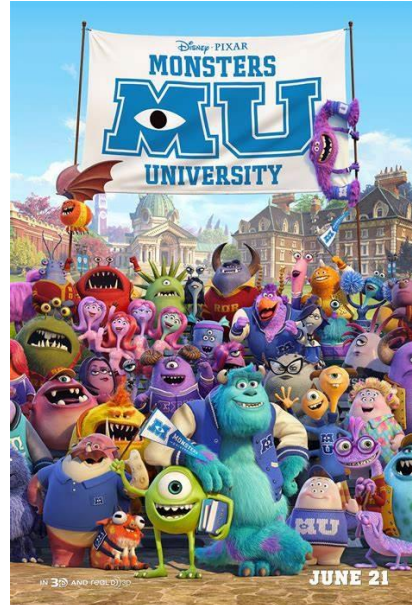
- Birthisel, Jessica. "How Body, Heterosexuality and Patriarchal Entanglements Mark Non-Human Characters as Male in CGI-Animated Children's Films". *Journal of Children and Media*, 8.4, 2014, 336-352.
- Meinel, Dietmar. *Pixar's America: The Re-Animation of American Myths and Symbols*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Cristina Espejo Navas

Monsters University (2013): Overconfidence and/versus Sacrifice

CREDITS

Director: Dan Scanlon
Written by: Dan Scanlon, Daniel Gerson and Robert L. Baird (also story)
Producers: Pete Docter and John Lasseter
Art direction: Ricky Nierva
Editor: Greg Snyder
Music: Randy Newman
Main performers (voices): Billy Crystal (Mike), John Goodman (Sullivan), Steve Buscemi (Randy), Helen Mirren (Dean Hardscrabble), Peter Sohn (Squishy), Joel Murray (Don), Sean Hayes (Terri)
Company: Pixar Animation Studios, USA
Runtime: 1h 44'



REASONS TO SEE *Monsters University*

- It is the prequel of *Monsters Inc* (2001), though it was released afterwards.
- For children in particular, watching it might help them question the ancient oral tradition approaching monsters as scary entities.
- Its analysis of friendship is particularly easy to follow by children. The nature of Sulley and Mike's friendship is, however, more complex than it may seem at first sight.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *Monsters University*

Monsters University (2013), though chronologically released after *Monsters Inc.* (2001) is its prequel and, as such, part of an extremely successful series of computer animation sagas released by Pixar (currently part of Walt Disney's emporium). Among its hits are the very first computer-based feature film *Toy Story* (1995), and also *Finding Nemo* (2003), *The Incredibles* (2004), and *Cars* (2006), to name but a few. *Monsters University's* original story, it must be noted, was nominated for Best Animated Film at the BAFTA Awards and the American Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy & Horror Films in 2014.

The film delves into the origins of Sulley and Mike's friendship and the time when they first met in university long before having become workmates as narrated in *Monsters Inc.* Scarers to be Mike and Sully manage to qualify for Monsters University and attend its prestigious Scare School. However, after both are rejected for Dean Hardscrabble's scarer program, Mike decides to participate in the Scary Games organized in the school as an ultimate attempt to be allowed to continue the course. Bullied and mocked, Mike –an extremely hardworking student who lacks the gift of

scaring– will have to accept popular Sulley into his inexperienced team. He is an advantaged yet overconfident student who believes that his innate ability to scare and his prestigious family name is enough to succeed in the monsters' industry. The two widely diverse characters will be forced to put aside their differences and learn how to cope with their teammates. In the process, Sulley and Mike learn a much more valuable lesson than any teacher in the school could ever teach them while true friendship unfolds during their stay in the campus.

Taking for granted that a children's animated film cannot tackle gender issues unless it has human characters in it would be a rather poor starting point if one's preparing to approach *Monsters University* at its whole. Even though the main messages conveyed refer to children in general, the fact that Mike and Sulley both represent two very different types of masculinity cannot be ignored. Whereas Mike seems to fail meeting many of the requirements and parameters of 'canonical' masculinity, Sulley is initially introduced as the dominant role model which –as can be expected– will prove to be far from any sort of perfection. Yet, the film does make reference to other interesting issues left in the background of the story such as references to sexual orientation, which are indeed included if only covertly. In order to define the main character, the film includes a scene in which Mike explicitly displays his heterosexuality by showing his disgust after having confused Sully's hand with a pillow and having slept on it during the night. Sulley, for instance, has a scene in which a group of Barbie-like campus girls instantly blush when greeted by him. Social class is likewise hinted at in the narrative. Sully has a high reputation in the school and even the faculty acknowledge it in front of the rest of the class. Sulley's father had also attended Monster University and had become an extremely successful scarer; his family name is in this way challenged in the movie as the plot develops and shows how Sulley's overconfidence fails to grant him the success he is so used to rely on. On the other hand, Mike's portrait in the movie displays many of the virtues adults try to impress on children: he is hard-working and an extremely devoted student, but at the same time the character also unveils other interesting concerns less commonly displayed in animated children's fiction such as bullying and the consequences of excessive self-demand.

Sulley's gender performance can be easily identified with that of the prototypical 'masculine' man (and more particularly with the role of the jock as the action takes place within a university campus). He is strong, handsome (for a blue monster with purple spots), popular, and the scion of a well-known family, too. On the contrary, green, one-eyed Mike is to be more closely identified with a middle-class background (as there are no references to any particular family origin) and appears to be a shallow performer as a man, being depicted as the *nerd*, in direct opposition to Sully's jock. The hierarchical relationship between these two characters is defined by contrasting parameters –such as assertiveness or its lack– that place one sort of masculinity over the other, thus stressing the existence of different masculinities and a “dominant masculinity” above all the rest (Robinson 63).

The tension between these two characters in terms of gender challenges the apparently obvious idea that the prototypical masculinity embodied in the character of Sulley is better than any other form of masculinity. In fact, the challenge posed takes such a scope that the answer provided surpasses any of the two options since both characters prove to be unable to get their goals if attempted without their mate's help. This is precisely what makes their relationship –and that with their teammates, too– worth exploring. Each of the two characters stand out on different gender parameters but neither of them can achieve their personal goal –meaning becoming a professional scarer– in isolation. While Sulley seems to carry the necessary natural gift to excel in any specific activity, he becomes a victim of his own excessive self-confidence. In

contrast, Mike excels at his ability to focus and work towards a goal, while emerging as a real natural leader able to take the best from any of those under his command. His excessive self-sacrifice, though, also limits his ability to perceive his real options and acknowledge these 'other' innate gifts. The narrative excels in the way this duo is able to recognize these abilities in each other and foster a true friendship. Actor John Goodman (Sulley's voice) declared that Mike and Sulley "work so well together [because] they're not completely formed monsters yet, they learn from each other. They learn how to adapt, how to let go of their pre-conceived notions of themselves and of the world. They're good for each other" (in Elias, online). However, the type of friendship depicted in the film seems not to go beyond the mere discovery of the true 'person' behind the social facade. The clichéd attempt to go beyond appearances and preconceptions in children's animated films is therefore an easy target for scholars such as Luke Greely who rightly argues that "in *Monsters University*, [...] meaningful friendship is only arrived at through dejection when more utilitarian forms have failed" (341). This is true in the film for Mike and Sully move from enmity to friendship not because of personal reasons but because of their innate impulses to climb the professional –and social– ladder.

It would be unfair to ignore other instances in the film with a clear gender content which might not necessarily please all viewers. Professions are particularly interesting in this respect. Whereas the School Dean and the teacher appearing at the beginning of the film are represented as female characters, other roles are more stereotypical. The technician in the scare factory –presumably an engineer– is a male. Five-eyed teammate Scott Squibbles' mother embodies the archetypal busy housewife; she is shown doing laundry at the background of a scene and with no dialogue at all. Finally, the campus cheerleaders –as it has been already mentioned– fall into probably the most stereotypical form of all. Greeley analyses the role of these female characters in the movie and states that Dean Hardscrabble is the only representation of female success in direct opposition to all other female characters who, like the rest of female students –including Scott Squibbles' mother– offer "little challenge to traditional Hollywood gender norms" (342). However, the character of the Dean should under no circumstances be interpreted as a feminist transgressor. The strictness in her manners as well as her lack of any emotional display blurs the potentialities of the figure and makes her fall into patriarchal parameters. J. R. Martin expressed that female stereotypes tend to reduce their role to the domestic sphere and that their success in the public sphere can only be achieved through the adoption of masculine qualities. The mechanics of the domestic and public sphere function this way "because some traits [such as aggressiveness, assertiveness, domination] which males and females can both possess are genderized; that is, they are appraised differentially according to sex" (76). In this sense, the Dean embodies the surrender of women to the values of neoliberalism by which competition is supposed to take the best of each individual at the same time as it still fosters gender inequality.

Whether these the ideas hinted so far trespass the screen and enter the collective imaginary is, at least, something to take into serious consideration. What is less difficult to state is that the straightforward message foreground by *Monsters University* regarding the value of true friendship among males can successfully reach its target audience, 21st century children who desperately need from roles which help them develop and express their deepest emotions.

Works Cited

Elias, Debbie Lynn. "*Monsters University* (review)". *Behind the Lens Online*, undated. <http://behindthelensonline.net/site/reviews/monsters-university/>

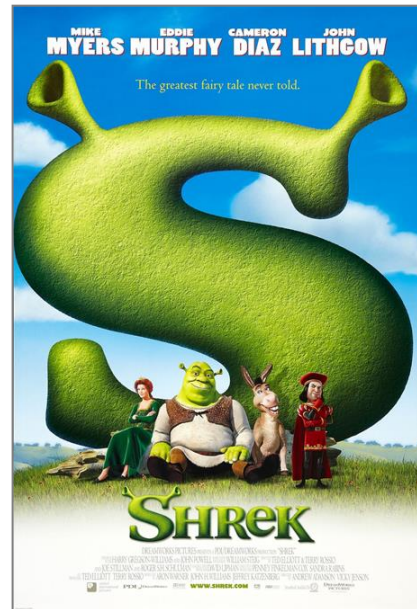
- Greeley, Luke. "Neoliberal Exclusion and the Fantasy of Competition: What are Children Learning from *Monsters University*?" *Educational Studies*, 54.3, 2018, 335-345.
- Martin, J. R. *Changing the Educational Landscape: Philosophy, Women and Curriculum*. Routledge, 1994.
- Robinson, Victoria. "Men, Masculinities and Feminism". *Introducing Gender and Women's Studies*, Diane Richardson and Victoria Robinson (eds.). Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, 55-71.

Manu Díaz Inglés

Shrek (2001): Alternative Beauty

CREDITS

Directors: Andrew Adamson, Vicky Jenson
Written by: Ted Elliott, Terry Rossio, Joe Stillman, Roger S.H Schulman. Based on the book by William Steig.
Producers: Aron Warner, John H. Williams, Jeffrey Katzenberg
Art direction: Guillaume Aretos, Sean Mullen (storyboard artist), Douglas Rogers
Editor: Sim Evan-Jones
Music: Harry Gregson-Williams, John Powell
Main performers (voices): Mike Myers (Shrek), Eddie Murphy (Donkey), Cameron Diaz (Princess Fiona), John Lithgow (Lord Farquaad),
Company: DreamWorks, USA
Runtime: 1h 30'



REASONS TO SEE Shrek

- It was the first film to win the Oscar for the newly established category of Best Animated Feature.
- The satirical look it takes at the traditional fairy-tales that animated films have covered for many years.
- The technical expertise of its computer-generated animation, which is very expressive, detailed and holds up very well for its age.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN Shrek

Shrek (2001) is the fifth film that DreamWorks Animation Studio produced and it is their second computer-generated animated film, following their first production, *Antz* (1998). While DreamWorks is currently known for its computer-generated animated films, back during the first days of the studio there was more experimentation with the techniques artists used. The studio produced then the traditionally-animated *The Prince of Egypt* (1998) and *The Road to El Dorado* (2000), their second and third films, and even created two other 2D animated films between *Shrek* and its 2004 sequel: *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron* (2002) and *Sinbad: Legend of the Seven Seas* (2003). Furthermore, DreamWorks created in collaboration with Aardman Studios stop-motion films during their first few years as well, such as *Chicken Run* (2000) and *Wallace & Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit* (2005). *Shrek* was produced during the SKG era of DreamWorks, when the studio was led by its founders: Steven Spielberg, Jeffrey Katzenberg, and David Geffen. Despite being produced at an early period in the rise of computer-generated animated features, *Shrek* was praised for its technical expertise

and was so massively successful that DreamWorks made the shift to exclusively producing films in CGI formats from *Shrek 2* onwards.

Unbeknownst to many, *Shrek* (2001) is based on an illustrated children's book titled *Shrek!* (1990) by William Steig. In contrast to the DreamWorks adaptation, Steig's humorous book deals with a fire-breathing monster that lives with his parents and is kicked out of their swamp when he comes of age. After eventually meeting a witch that tells his fortune and a talking donkey, Shrek begins then a quest to fight a knight and marry a princess even uglier than he is in order to live "horribly ever after". Lewis Roberts points out the major structural and tonal changes of the adaptation in comparison to the book by noting that "William Steig's book is anything but a Disney-esque, formulaic story, but the DreamWorks adaptations of it offer models of identity based on consumption and rooted in commodity culture, tales which seek to transform their viewers into consumers and even into commodities themselves" (2). Roberts also takes into account, though, that "while the films work to uphold and reinforce commodity culture, we should also ask how they might also provide moments of potential subversion and critique" (3).

In the film, Shrek, an outcast ogre that relishes his isolation from society, finds the swamp he owns swarmed by fairy-tale creatures that the tyrannical Lord Farquaad has exiled from his domain. Accompanied by a talking donkey as his guide, Shrek goes to Farquaad's castle in the city of Duloc and, in exchange for the right to evict the creatures from his home, he agrees to rescue the beautiful heiress Princess Fiona. She is locked up in a castle guarded by a dragon and Lord Farquaad wants to marry in order to become a king. Shrek and Donkey make their way to Fiona's castle and rescue her from the dragon, a female who falls in love with Donkey in the process. Fiona, who expected a charming prince instead of an ugly ogre to come to her rescue, initially refuses to accompany Shrek to Duloc but, as they journey together, she learns that he wants to be accepted as he truly is and she comes to care for him. As happens, Fiona is under a curse that transforms her into an ogress every night, and the curse can only be broken by a true love's kiss. She thinks that Shrek could accept her as she is, but through a misunderstanding they break apart and Fiona agrees to marry Lord Farquaad. However, Donkey helps Shrek realize that he and Fiona love each other, and he crashes the wedding, kissing Fiona and granting her "love's true form", which is, to everyone's surprise, that of an ogress. Shrek assures her of how beautiful she is, and they get married.

In his 2001 review of *Shrek*, film critic Roger Ebert wrote that "all the craft in the world would not have made Shrek work if the story hadn't been fun and the ogre so lovable. Shrek is not handsome but he isn't as ugly as he thinks; he's a guy we want as our friend, and he doesn't frighten us but stir our sympathy" (online). *Shrek* is a film that is generally viewed as subversive, but beneath the layers of the manifest ugliness of its protagonist there is a hero who is more stereotypical than it is usually assumed. Although Ebert's opinion of Shrek is very positive in this review, when taking a close look at Shrek's masculinity—especially in opposition to Lord Farquaad, the villain of the film—a problem arises: as an ogre Shrek can be aggressive and violent, and the film celebrates that. In the first half of the film, Shrek and his companion, Donkey, visit Lord Farquaad's castle in Duloc, and there the ogre fights (and easily knocks out) a large group of knights, making a show out of it as a cheery rock song plays in the background—clearly making light of Shrek's behavior. In contrast, Lord Farquaad is constantly ridiculed for his unmasculine behavior and appearance. The man is a villain that abuses his own power, but most of the jokes the film makes at his expense are about his short stature and how ridiculous he looks when he tries to do or say stereotypically princely/manly things, such as trying to woo Princess Fiona. While Shrek is undeniably a hero and Farquaad could be nothing but a villain, some of the intent

behind what makes the audience root for one character and dislike the other distorts the allegedly subversive nature of the film entirely, glorifying the figure of the strong, aggressive man and ridiculing the men that do not (or cannot) embody that figure.

On the other hand, the DreamWorks adaptation provides the widely praised subversion of the figure of the Disney-like princess in the person of Princess Fiona. A thin, stereotypically beautiful princess by day and an 'ugly' ogress by night, Fiona stands as the key subversive figure of the film. She initially embraces every fairy-tale ideal that has been thrust onto her, passively waiting in her tower for her prince charming to come rescue her. Yet, once she is rescued by Shrek instead, she slowly starts revealing a less delicate nature (exemplified by her gleefully cooking the eggs of a songbird she kills with her voice, or her proficiency in martial arts). Even though her ogress form is still considerably beautiful, with softened features in comparison to Shrek (who is not hideous by any means), she still has curvy body when transformed that radically separates her from the thin Disneyesque princesses she is compared to at the beginning of the film (*Snow White and Sleeping Beauty*). When Fiona receives her "true love's kiss" and transforms into her designated "true love's form", she is not turned back into the beautiful princess she expects to be, but into her ogress form, which Shrek finds more beautiful than any other. The message is clear: beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and the beauty that Fiona represents is certainly an alternative kind to the traditional one that audiences are used to. Every bit of the film's ending supports this subversion, as Martin Butler observes: "Apart from deviating from the standard of presenting a beautiful appearance as promoted by the 'Disney shop', the ogre couple also subverts the traditional notion of a prince's and a princess' central position in society by opting for a marginalized existence in the swamp, thus self-confidently living 'ugly ever after', as we learn from the storybook which 'closes' the movie" (68). Butler similarly states that the first *Shrek* film can be "regarded as questioning the Disneyfied 'rules' of bodily and behavioral representation" (68), which ties back to the potential of subversion and critique that Lewis Roberts saw in the film – a potential that, at least in terms of Fiona's character and her romance with Shrek, is met.

Shrek is a franchise that is very much concerned with gender, and the conversations that can be had around the first film alone are much broader than what has been touched on in this essay – other conversations about gender can revolve around the secondary characters and the villain, as they have much to offer in terms of gender issues as well. Whether through a negative glorification of toxic masculinity or a positive representation of unconventional bodies, *Shrek* is a film that, to this day, continues to open and facilitate debates about gender and the expression of the self beyond normative beauty, offering an interesting alternative beauty.

Works Cited

- Butler, Martin. "Re-Imagined Bodies and Transgendered Space: Sites for Negotiating Gender in the *Shrek* Movies". *Representations & Reflections: Studies in Anglophone Literatures and Cultures*, vol 4, Uwe Baumann, Marion Gymnich and Barbara Schmidt-Haberkamp (eds.). Bonn University Press, 2010, 59-78.
- Ebert, Roger. "*Shrek* (review)". *Roger Ebert.com*, 18 May 2001, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/shrek-2001>
- Roberts, Lewis. "'Happier Than Ever To Be Exactly What He Was': Reflections On *Shrek*, Fiona and the Magic Mirrors of Commodity Culture". *Children's Literature In Education*, 45.1, 2013, 1-16.

Maria Guallar Comas

Shrek 2 (2004): Not so Far, Far Away from Tradition

CREDITS

Directors: Andrew Adamson, Kelly Asbury and Conrad Vernon

Written by: Andrew Adamson (also story), Joe Stillman, J. David Stem, David N. Weiss. Based on the book by William Steig.

Producers: David Lipman, Aron Warner and John H. Williams

Art direction: Steve Pilcher

Editors: Mike Andrews, Sim Evan-Jones

Music: Harry Gregson-Williams

Main performers (voices): Mike Myers (Shrek), Eddie Murphy (Donkey), Cameron Diaz (Fiona), Julie Andrews (Queen Lillian), Antonio Banderas (Puss In Boots), John Cleese (King Harold), Rupert Everett (Prince Charming), Jennifer Saunders (Fairy Godmother)

Company: DreamWorks, USA

Runtime: 1h 32'



REASONS TO SEE *Shrek 2*

- With two nominations at the Academy awards, *Shrek 2* is an incredibly fun film that all audiences will enjoy. From its colorful, lively animation to its more mature comic subtexts, the film seems to have something for everyone.
- It presents very interesting reinterpretations of traditional fairy-tale characters everyone knows about, intermixed with a Hollywood-like parody of the realm they live in.
- The film relies on an excellent soundtrack and incredible musical scenes that every spectator, regardless of their age, will find memorable.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *Shrek 2*

Shrek 2 (2004) was released the same year DreamWorks Animation was established as a separate studio from DreamWorks Pictures SKG, founded in 1994. Preceded by *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron* (2002) and *Sinbad: The Legend of the Seven Seas* (2003), the sequel to *Shrek* (2001) was the company's first computer animated title, a technique that would also be used in all its successors, such as *Madagascar* (2005). With two nominations at the Academy Awards and six at the Annie Awards, *Shrek 2* can be considered a huge success, both in terms of critical recognition and audience acceptance.

Moving away from the original green grumpy ogre from William Steig's children's book *Shrek!* (1990), *Shrek's* sequel explores a series of (mis)adventures in which the protagonist's fit in society will be put to test. After a beautiful honeymoon, Shrek and Fiona return to Shrek's house in the swamp. Their idyllic life as newlyweds, however, is not only interrupted by Donkey's presence, but also by a royal invitation from Fiona's

parents, who want to celebrate her daughter's marriage at their castle in Far Far Away. Fiona convinces a reluctant Shrek to go, and Shrek's worst fears come true when, on reaching the castle, everybody stares at them in shock for being ogres. The King, also moved by prejudice, is very critical of Shrek and decides to team up with the evil Fairy Godmother to get rid of the ogre and marry Fiona to the Fairy's son, Prince Charming. Unaware of these plans, Shrek decides to seek Fairy Godmother's help to make Fiona happy but when the fairy refuses to intervene, he manages to steal a potion and becomes human. The Fairy Godmother decides to use this change to make Fiona believe that Prince Charming is Shrek, but Shrek crashes their party just in time to foil their plans and get his and Fiona's happy ending.

The *Shrek* franchise offers a reinterpretation and re-presentation of traditional fairy-tale characters and their roles in diverse plots and sub-plots. The subversion of these reimagined traditions, however, has been questioned by several scholars and critics. According to Elizabeth Marshall and Özlem Sensoy, in fact, *Shrek 2* "plays on rather than subverts fairy-tale conventions and plots" (152). While many cultural scripts are challenged throughout the film, the tendency to use parody and humor as a narrative device to introduce these unconventional instances diminishes its subversive effect. Therefore, the adult viewer is forced to question to what extent the film is defying traditionally patriarchal constructions or if it is simply portraying them to produce a comical effect. For instance, it would be hard to consider progressive and positive the portrayal of Doris, the transgender barkeeper, taking into account that she is Cinderella's *ugly* step-sister. She could have perfectly been Cinderella, but the film dismisses its one transgender character as the stereotypical, unflattering representation of a woman with very masculine and unattractive physical attributes. Furthermore, there is a scene when Pinocchio is mocked for wearing girls' underpants, enhancing the feeling that *Shrek 2*'s supposedly subversive representations ultimately reinforce normative ideas.

In terms of challenging traditionality, it is also important to discuss the portrayals of femininity and girl power. Marshall and Sensoy argue that *Shrek 2* is not that revolutionary in that sense either, for it "deploys girl power in the service of traditional heterosexuality" (158). Fiona is not the passive princess the audience encounters at the beginning of the first film, or in every Western fairy-tale. She is a physically strong ogre who practices martial arts, burps if she feels like it, and, most importantly, speaks her mind and makes her own life decisions. Marshall and Sensoy, however, read these indicators of power as being "used to compete for, and ultimately keep, her man" (158). Nevertheless, it can also be argued that, even though she still fits the "white middle-class norms of conventional heterosexual femininity" (158), Fiona definitely challenges the patriarchal role of the silent, passive female. It must not be forgotten that not only does she fight hostile villagers and rescues Shrek when he falls into a potentially deadly trap, but Fiona also makes the final decision regarding their return back to its original ogreish shape, thus reaffirming her choice of her own happy ending. In this aspect, Lewis Roberts claims that Fiona can be read as a constantly functioning double, a "border-crossing character who encompasses variously the binaries of hunter/hunted, princess/ warrior, rescuer/rescuee, beauty/beast, and human/ogre" (14).

Furthermore, in terms of representations of masculinity, *Shrek 2* does subvert the traditional roles of "ugliness" and "handsomeness", as Roberts notes. According to him, although the trickster-like transformations the male protagonists suffer are quite common in fairy tales –as Shrek's becoming human, Donkey a stallion or King Harold a frog– the *Shrek* franchise is distinctive for raising "issues of gender, courtship, and desirability" (14) through these transformations. These instances introduce possibilities for further character development and self-acceptance outside tradition and, even

though “most of the gains made by these border-crossing characters often serve to place them back under the patriarchal sway of commodity culture” (14), the fact that the film’s ultimate message regarding love and self-acceptance is linked to Fiona’s decision to remain an ogre, that is to say, to establishing non-stereotypical beauty as beautiful, is definitely subversive.

The film reviews for *Shrek 2* are generally positive and tend to praise the comical entertainment it provides for audiences of all ages. However, while some assert that it is just as enticing and funny as the first film, others claim that it is not as tradition-challenging as *Shrek*. One that belongs to the latter group is Angie Errigo, who writes for *Empire* that “in its execution of the tale of a determinedly antisocial ogre, *Shrek* (2001) was so disarmingly original that it astonished”. She claims that the genius of *Shrek* (2001) “was in its subversion of fairy tales and its cheeky mickey-take of Disney’s strictly sweet, clean magical kingdom” (online) and, although *Shrek 2* creates the opportunity to criticize celebrity life and ‘the cult of beauty’, “the satirical edge is so blunted it’s as dangerous as a plastic picnic knife” (online). This point of view seems to also be present in Roger Ebert’s critical review, where he asserts that while “*Shrek 2* is bright, lively and entertaining (...) it’s no ‘*Shrek*’” (online), in the sense that the sequel is much more earthbound than the original. In contraposition to Errigo and Ebert, Sonia Cerca states that *Shrek 2* is one of those films in which “the sequel is better than the original” (online). According to Cerca, even though it does not possess “the originality and freshness of the first film” (online) both the new characters and the notable performances by their voice actors are a valuable addition to the franchise.

In conclusion, one must not forget that *Shrek 2* is a film whose target are children and, while the franchise seems to have something for every age and its humoristic touches are definitely adult-oriented, in the end its main goal is to entertain, not to take a subversive stand. As stated before, even though the film attacks beautiful princes with insufferable personalities and defends a norm-challenging ogre as the true prince charming, its non-cisgender and non-patriarchal characters are there mainly for comic effect. Because of their less than subtle mockery, *Shrek 2*’s progressiveness must be asserted cautiously.

Works Cited

- Cerca, Sonia. “*Shrek 2* (2004) (review)”. *A Film a Day by Sonia*, 22 October 2017, <http://afilmadaybysonia.blogspot.com/2017/10/shrek-2-2004.html>
- Ebert, Roger. “*Shrek 2* (review)”. *Roger Ebert.com*, 18 May 2004, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/shrek-2-2004>
- Errigo, Angie. “*Shrek 2* Review”. *Empire*, 1 July 2004, <https://www.empireonline.com/movies/reviews/shrek-2-review/>
- Marshall, Elizabeth and Sensoy Özlem. “The Same Old Hocus-Pocus: Pedagogies of Gender and Sexuality in *Shrek 2*”. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 30.2, 2009, 151-164.
- Roberts, Lewis. “‘Happier Than Ever to Be Exactly What He Was’: Reflections on *Shrek*, Fiona and the Magic Mirrors of Commodity Culture”. *Children’s Literature in Education: An International Quarterly*, 45.1, 2014, 1-16.

Naiara López Alcázar

Shrek the Third (2007): Beyond the Humor

CREDITS

Director: Chris Miller, Raman Hui (co-director)

Written by: Jeffrey Price, Peter S. Seaman, Chris Miller, Aron Warner; story by: Andrew Adamson.
Based on the book by William Steig.

Producer: Aron Warner

Art direction: Peter Zaslav

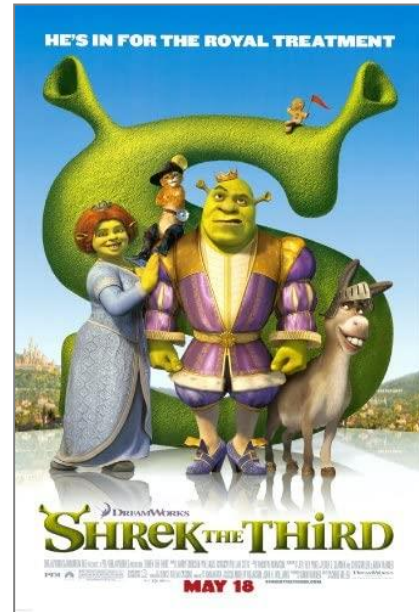
Editor: Michael Andrews, Joyce Arrastia

Music: Harry Gregson-Williams, Jared Lee Gosselin

Main performers (voices): Mike Myers (Shrek), Eddie Murphy (Donkey), Cameron Diaz (Princess Fiona), Antonio Banderas (Puss in Boots), Julie Andrews (Queen), John Cleese (King), Rupert Everett (Prince Charming), Eric Idle (Merlin), Justin Timberlake (Artie).

Company: DreamWorks Animation PDI/DreamWorks

Runtime: 1h 33'



REASONS TO SEE *Shrek The Third*

- It is suitable for all publics and combines easy-to-laugh-at scenes with irony, satire and darker jokes meant for older audiences. Different age groups can enjoy it from different perspectives and levels of understanding.
- It twists traditional tropes and fairy tale's stereotypes, mostly through the lens of satire.
- It states an important moral: what matters most is what you think of yourself because embracing who you are is what brings you closer to your own happy ending.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *Shrek the Third*

Shrek the Third (2007) was released at the same time as other well-known animated feature films such as DreamWorks' *Bee Movie*, Pixar and Disney's *Ratatouille* and *The Simpsons Movie* by Gracie Films. Nonetheless, *Shrek the Third* was the biggest box-office earner of them all. Eddie Murphy, who voices Donkey, won a Kid's Choice Award for Favorite Voice from an Animated Movie, and on top of that, the film won People's Choice Award for Favorite Family Movie. This third installment is a continuation of *Shrek* (2001) which is based on William Steig's book *Shrek!* (1990) and of *Shrek 2* (2004). Having fallen in love and embraced who they truly are in the first film, the beloved couple of ogres composed by Shrek and Fiona visit in the sequel her parents, the Queen and King of Far Far Away. Overcoming a series of obstacles set by the evil Fairy Godmother and her foolish son Prince Charming, Shrek and Fiona prove once again that love does conquer all.

Shrek the Third (2007) starts with the death of Fiona's father, King Harold the Frog, which makes Shrek automatically heir to the throne of Far Far Away. This is a perspective he does not relish since ruling a kingdom completely ruins any chance of a peaceful future in his beloved swamp. Along with Donkey and Puss in Boots, Shrek goes into a quest to find Arthur (Artie), the next in line to the throne, so that he becomes king instead. Before leaving, though, Fiona tells her husband that she's pregnant, which puts an enormous pressure on Shrek. Furthermore, Prince Charming decides to conquer Far Far Away with a group of marginalized villains, and he takes advantage of Shrek's absence to do so. Shrek and company return to save the kingdom but Prince Charming captures them, forcing Fiona and the other princesses to come to the rescue. Right at the peak of the battle, Artie puts an end to the conflict by convincing the villains to let go of all their grudges and live a happy life with him as their new king. Shrek eventually accepts the idea of fatherhood and lives happily ever after in his swamp along with Fiona and their adorable triplets.

Parenthood is one of the main gender issues that is tackled in *Shrek the Third* though all the concerns and fears which accompany new parenthood are oriented towards the figure of the father exclusively. Shrek feels indeed overwhelmingly anxious about his responsibilities as a soon-to-be father. According to Martin Butler, this movie delivers a strong "domestic discourse" in which "both characters adopt rather stereotypical positions in their debate on having children. In contrast to Fiona's keen desire to have a baby, her husband is highly skeptical of her idea and is tormented by a series of nightmares and 'horrible' visions of family life" (73). Such nightmares seem to point at Shrek's vulnerability and insecurities in the matter of new fatherhood. However, there is not a single instant in which Fiona's own insecurities or concerns are addressed. Even though both of them are entitled to such feelings, by avoiding Fiona's thoughts on motherhood the film could be implicitly hinting that whereas new fatherhood is something men should worry about, motherhood is regarded as an innate female state, as if there was an inner manual on how to be a mother inserted in women's brains. This idea very much connects with a review by an IMBD member who describes Shrek's attitude as that of "every expectant father in TV sit-com history" (online). Furthermore, Fiona's position inside their marriage is also stereotyped. There is this dialogue between Snow White and Fiona during Fiona's baby shower in which Snow White mentions how one of the benefits of having a baby-sitter is that "you'll have plenty of time to work on your marriage" (*Shrek III*), including keeping herself attractive, avoiding stretchmarks and other unnecessary remarks about a woman's body. This suggests that it is a woman's job to take care of the marriage, which is not a really progressive message to deliver. Nevertheless, it is true that the film seems to reconcile itself with the idea of parenthood, or rather fatherhood, by showing the audience some instances of Fiona and Shrek equally sharing their duties as parents.

Fortunately, *Shrek the Third* does succeed with its representation of unconventional characters and their behavior. To begin with, the prototypical princess role is challenged and successfully subverted by the presence of strong, independent princesses who do save the day and go to the rescue of Shrek and his friends. The film features some of Disney's most well-known princesses and presents them, at first, as rather shallow characters who only worry about their looks. However, there is a turning point in the film when, trapped in a tower, the princesses need to escape all by themselves since there is no one coming to their rescue. Fiona urges them then to "take care of business ourselves". They decide to tear out part of their fancy gowns and burn their bras in a rather revolutionary way, showing a self-determination which is at odds with their Disney's counterparts. As reviewer Brandy McDonnell claims, "the princesses are [the film's] saving grace. The comic actresses deftly turn the Disney animated standard of helpless and lovely damsels in distress on its head" (online). Such

representation is indeed necessary: it presents strong, healthy role models who might serve as inspiration, especially for little girls.

Shrek the Third also culminates its subversion of conventional gender representations by providing the audience with instances in which masculinity is challenged. The most relevant element concerns the figure of Artie as an unusual version of King Arthur. Far from being a physically exuberant knight in shiny armor, Artie possesses a much softer body and a thoughtful, complex personality which is directly opposed to Sir Lancelot, one of his classmates. While Lancelot represents the typical jock with big muscles and a much bigger ego, Artie becomes the object of his bullying because he is basically a nerd. As the film moves on, the audience can see how Artie develops into a more active figure that overcomes his insecurities and teaches the rest of the characters a lesson on self-love. Artie shows a positive vision of other representations of masculinity because he ends up being successful and deserving the crown of Far Far Away without changing who he really is. In fact, his sensible but also sensitive mindset, initially mocked by Lancelot, is what makes him a perfect king, thus implying that intelligence and sensitivity are more important than muscles and popularity. Other examples of deconstructed masculinities are shown by the end of the film, such as Captain Hook declaring in front of the whole kingdom his passion for growing daffodils. It is surprising, though, how the topic of these 'other' masculinities is systematically avoided by most of the reviewers, or, on the contrary, harshly criticized. Such is the case of Deborah Ross's review where she describes *Shrek the Third* as "hideously sentimental" (online), when it might be argued that the male characters' expressing their emotions and feelings is precisely a massively positive gendered element.

The film's approach to its two transgender characters, however, might not be deemed as appropriate. Doris and Mabel are Cinderella's two stepsisters. Doris first appears in *Shrek II* where she helps Prince Charming but she soon befriends Fiona and redeems herself. In *Shrek the Third*, she is part of Fiona's group of royal friends. Mabel is a new character that works in the Poison Apple as a bartender and whose relationship with her sister Doris is not very good because they belong to different worlds. By the end of the story, they seem to reconcile. These characters are voiced by male actors and they both present traits which are traditionally (and wrongly) gendered as either masculine or feminine (such as having a thick unibrow and stocky body, or wearing dresses and make-up, respectively). The *Shrek* franchise surprised everyone as it is one of the first, if not the only one, to include transgender characters in a children's movie. However, although the inclusion of two non-binary characters is something to applaud, attention should be drawn to how these characters are portrayed and tackled. In almost every scene in which Doris and Mabel appear, they are described as ugly; they are ridiculed by other characters, and their gender identity is questioned. Martin Butler claims that "representations of gender are still framed by a rather traditional fairy-tale plot that reinforces and perpetuates certain gender stereotypes and patterns of behavior" (72). In this regard, the film is obviously taking a step back as the inclusion of a non-binary character does not fulfil an inclusive purpose if it is mistreated.

All in all, one cannot be completely certain about the attitude which *Shrek the Third* tries to adopt towards gender issues. It would be reasonable to say that, although the saga generally tries to subvert fairy-tale stereotypes and social constructions of gender, the film stands half-way through as it does not seem to successfully reject the traditional misrepresentations of parental roles, and because of an evident mistreatment and ridicule of the transgender characters. Despite this, it is also true that the film dwells on positive and educational messages which are very much needed for both children and adult audiences. *Shrek the Third* proves that even the scariest of

ogres has a sentimental and soft side; that the princesses are no longer waiting for a savior, because the best way to save yourself is to take matters into your own hands; and that, as sensible Artie says, “the thing that matters most is what you think of yourself. If there’s something you really want, or someone you really want to be, then the only person standing in your way is you”. One thing is certain: there’s much more to *Shrek the Third* than just laughs and humor, and it shows.

Works Cited

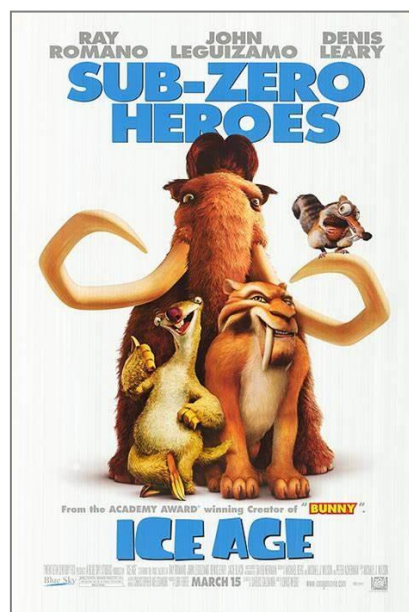
- Butler, Martin. “Re-Imagined Bodies and Transgendered Space: Sites for Negotiating Gender in the *Shrek* Movies”. *endered (Re)Visions: Constructions of Gender in Audiovisual Media*, Marion Gymnich, Kathrin Ruhl, Klaus Scheunemann (eds.). Bonn University Press, 2010, 59-77.
- Editor-299. “Once Vibrant Series Showing Signs of Middle Age (review)”. *Imdb.com*, 16 May 2007, https://www.imdb.com/user/ur11190785/?ref_=rw
- McDonnell, Brandy. “Princesses Save the Show in Third *Shrek* Film (review)”. *The Oklahoman*, 18 May 2007, <https://oklahoman.com/article/3055259/review-princesses-save-the-show-in-third-shrek-film>
- Ross, Deborah. “*Shrek* Goes Sippy (review)”. *The Spectator*, 30 June 2007, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/shrek-goes-sippy>

Alba Sánchez Ortiz

Ice Age (2002): An All-Male Story

CREDITS

Directors: Chris Wedge, Carlos Saldanha
Written by: Michael Berg, Michael J. Wilson (also story), Peter Ackerman
Producer: Lori Forte
Art direction: Brian McEntee
Editor: John Carnochan
Music: David Newman
Main performers (voices): Ray Romano (Manfred), John Leguizamo (Sid), Denis Leary (Diego), Goran Visnjic (Soto), Jack Black (Zeke), Diedrich Bader (Oscar)
Company: Blue Sky Studios and Twentieth Century Fox Animation, USA
Runtime: 1h 21'



REASONS TO SEE *Ice Age*

- This was the first film by Blue Sky Studios to be nominated for an Academy Award, and the studio's first feature film.
- The film has both comic relief and important sentimental moments which work well together.
- It is one of the few children's animated movies set in the prehistoric era, together with its sequels, *The Croods*' franchise and *The Good Dinosaur*.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *Ice Age*

Ice Age (2002) was Blue Sky Studios' first animated feature (it was followed by *Robots* in 2005) and it was the studio's only feature film to be nominated for an Academy Award in the category of Best Animated Feature until 2017, when *Ferdinand* received the same distinction. The second film of this franchise, *Ice Age: The Meltdown*, was not released until 2006, being eventually followed by *Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs* (2009), *Ice Age: Continental Drift* (2012), and *Ice Age: Collision Course* (2016). Although the four sequels did not have the same positive reception as the first one, the *Ice Age* franchise has become (as of writing) the third highest-grossing animated franchise, only behind *Despicable Me* (2010-) and *Shrek* (2001-). The company has also released seven short films connected with *Ice Age*, most of them focusing on Scrat, the clumsy saber-tooth squirrel.

In the film, the new ice age is quickly approaching, and all the pre-historic animals are preparing for a great migration to find warmer lands. Manny is a woolly mammoth who has no interest in migrating and just wants to be left alone. But when he saves Sid, a tree sloth, from two rhinos who want to kill him, things change. Soon the two new

friends find themselves involved on a quest to return a human child to his tribe, after the baby's tribe is attacked by a streak of saber-tooth cats. Diego, one of the members of the streak, is given the mission to kidnap the child and bring him to his leader as revenge against the human tribe. When Diego discovers that Manny and Sid are trying instead to take the boy to his family, he offers his help to find the human tribe (intending all along to lead them toward his streak). During the journey, however, the three of them bond and care for the baby to the point that Diego needs to decide whether to betray his new friends, or confront his streak and face the consequences.

When analyzing the film in terms of gender, the first issue one is bound to notice is the absence of females, whether they are human or animal. Similarly to *Monsters Inc* (2001), *Ice Age* (2002) is an all-male story; the three main characters –Manny, Sid, and Diego– are male, and so are the baby, the squirrel, the remaining members of the tribe, the saber-tooth cat streak, the rhinos, and even the dodo birds. The only females that appear in the film are the baby's mother –who dies at the beginning of the story– and two sloths with a couple of lines each. This is extremely common, according to a study run by Hare (2017), which surveys the presence –or lack thereof– of females in animated films, concluding that while all films had at least one male figure among the protagonists, 16% of the films had no females at all in their cast of characters.

However, this unrealistic lack of females, though unsettling, is not the main gender-related problem in *Ice Age* (2002); this is the stereotypical roles of the females that do appear. As previously mentioned, the only woman that appears in the film dies at the very beginning, sacrificing herself in an attempt to save her son. This overused trope of the selfless mother who gives up her life for her child can be found in other popular movies and books –from *Bambi* (1942) to the *Harry Potter* series (J.K. Rowling, 1997-2010). It perpetuates the idea that mothers have no life beyond their responsibilities as caretakers, and that their only worth comes from their ability to protect their children. On the other hand, there are the two –completely sexualized– female sloths, whose only role in the film is to act as potential love interests, or even sex objects, for Sid, who tries to charm them by parading the baby around. Furthermore, the body designs of these sloths are completely different from Sid's; they have breasts, long hair and eyelashes, and wear makeup. This representation of women can be extremely harmful, as it “reflect[s] ‘symbolic annihilation’ of women and girls (...) because they do not accurately portray a society in which women hold up half the sky” (Hare, 2017: 59), thus enforcing the idea that males are superior to females.

Reviews are quite varied; although most are positive, some complain about the outdated animation, the inaccuracy of the representation of pre-historic times, or the poorly-hidden, unrealistic moral of the story. However, most reviewers seem to either not notice the gender issues in the film, or choose to ignore them.

In his review, Freer points out that this idea of males taking care of children is used in other animated films, like *Monsters Inc* (2001), and more recently, in *Despicable Me* (2010). Placing males in this situation is often deemed “funny” in cinema, as their inexperience as caretakers leads to humorous scenes when they lose the child, struggle to hold it correctly, or even endanger its life. However, it makes one wonder if the reaction would be the same if the protagonists were females; would it still be funny if they put the child in danger, or would their carelessness and negligence be frowned upon? The whole premise of the film relies upon the fact that society perceives taking care of children as the woman's job, and therefore, placing males in this position will create comic effect.

Nonetheless, *Ice Age* does defy male gender roles and the idea of toxic masculinity in its depiction of Manny, “Romano's world-weary yet big-hearted mammoth – cold on the outside, warm on the inside. Just like the film itself”, according to Freer (online). At the beginning, Manny is presented as the epitome of conventional

masculinity; he is tough, invulnerable, and unapproachable. Throughout the film, the viewer learns that Manny actually feels lonely and wants a family, but he does not show his feelings. However, Manny develops as the story progresses, and his character arc reaches its turning point at the cave scene, when he allows himself to cry and be emotionally vulnerable in front of Sid and Diego, thus defying the idea that to be “masculine” a male needs to be cold and aloof. Scenes like this are extremely important and healthy for children, as it gives them an alternative to toxic masculinity, which teaches boys that men not to show any “weakness”, especially in front of other men.

The film’s stronger virtue is the relationship between its male protagonists, which goes from a predator-and-prey situation, to their being reluctant allies, next to becoming friends and finally to being a newfound family. In his review, Roger Ebert makes a light criticism on the unrealistic relationship between Sid and Diego, explaining that if predators became friends with their prey “evolution would break down, overpopulation would result, there would be starvation among the non-vegetarians” (online). However, it is this unrealistic relationship which is so beneficial for children – and boys, especially. The image of males being affectionate towards other males and learning to overcome their differences is not introduced often enough in children’s films, and in popular media in general. The fear of being considered “feminine”, or even of being labeled homosexual is something that often prevents boys and men from sharing their feelings and having healthy relationships with each other. Films like these teach boys that it is alright to be vulnerable and show affection, and it helps them unlearn many of society’s ideas about gender that are internalized during childhood.

Works Cited

- Ebert, Roger. “*Ice Age* (review)”. *Roger Ebert.com*, 15 March 2002, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/ice-age-2002>
- Freer, Ian. “*Ice Age* Review” *Empire*, 22 March, 2002, <https://www.empireonline.com/movies/reviews/ice-age-review/>
- Hare, Sara C. “Still No Jetpacks or Gender Parity: Animated Film from 1980 through 2016”. *Journal of the Indiana Academy of the Social Sciences* 20.1, 2007, article 7, <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/jiass/vol20/iss1/7>

Raquel Prieto Xufré

Ice Age 2: The Meltdown (2006): On the Meltdown of Gender Barriers

CREDITS

Director: Carlos Saldanha
Screenplay writers: Peter Gaulke, Gerry Swallow (also story), Jim Hecht (also story)
Producer: Lori Forte
Art direction: Thomas Cardone
Editor: Harry Hitner
Music: Will Edwards, John Powell
Main performers (voices): Ray Romano (Manny), John Leguizamo (Sid), Denis Leary (Diego), Seann William Scott (Crash), Josh Peck (Eddie), Queen Latifah (Ellie)
Company: Blue Sky Studios
Runtime: 1h 31'



REASONS TO SEE *Ice Age: The Meltdown*

- It deals with environmental issues such as global warming and animal extinction.
- It talks about important values such as facing your fears and embracing those who form your family.
- It includes several scenes with saber-toothed squirrel Scrat trying to take its slippery acorn which are really funny and entertaining to watch.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *Ice Age: The Meltdown*

Ice Age: The Meltdown (2006) is the sequel of popular movie *Ice Age* (2002) and was released in the same year as other well-known animated feature films such as *Cars* by Pixar and *Happy Feet* by Kennedy Miller and Animal Logic. Most reviewers have ranked it very poorly due to what they believe is a vague and dull plot, yet it still was the highest-grossing animated film in that year. In the previous installment, and after having lost their respective herds, Manny the mammoth and Sid the sloth meet and decide to work together to find the family of a human baby named Roshan. In their journey, they meet Diego, a saber-toothed cat who secretly plans to betray them but who grows attached to both the animals and the baby. In the end, they all return the human to his family and become a family of their own.

Ice Age: The Meltdown takes place several years after Roshan's rescue. Sid, Manny and Diego must abandon their peaceful lives at a bowl-shaped valley because it is about to be flooded due to global warming caused by natural climate change. During their voyage they encounter countless dangers, from unstable grounds to prehistoric predators. However, the worst obstacles which they must face are the ones that come from within: Manny's family trauma, Diego's fear of water and Sid's lack of self-esteem.

Thanks to each other and to new incorporations to the herd –Ellie, a mammoth that thinks herself a possum because she was raised by a family of that species, and her two possum brothers Eddie and Crash– this peculiar group of characters overcome their problems, bond even more with one another and expand their beloved family unit. At the same time, the funny prehistoric saber-toothed squirrel Scrat fights for his acorn and in doing so, accidentally saves the valley from the flood.

According to reviewer Claudia Puig, “*Ice Age: The Meltdown* succeeds on several fronts, most of them warm and fuzzy” (online). While this film makes it easy to have a good laugh and deals with important issues such as accepting who you are, facing your fears, letting go of the past, and embracing your (possibly blended) family, the way in which it tackles the issue of gender is, however, much more complicated to dissect. On the one hand, Manny’s conversation with Ellie about the need to save the species by engaging in reproduction is a clear example of how patriarchy objectifies the female figure with the excuse of “responsibility”. When Manny finally convinces Ellie that she is a mammoth and not a possum, he immediately tells her that now “we’ve got a chance to save our species”. Ellie takes this declaration very badly mostly due to how prompt and unsensitive his suggestion is, yet it is Manny’s insistence on the “responsibility” issue what sets Ellie off. In other words, this is basically stating that females including women should have sex because it is their responsibility and it serves to a greater good, but what puts the icing on the cake is that Ellie does not seem to be asked but rather is told to accept her role. She refuses to acknowledge Manny’s hint as a “duty” to be fulfilled and tells him that they won’t be saving the species “tonight or any other night”. This adds a humorous tone to the dialogue, yet one should not let this camouflage the patriarchal structure which operates behind the scene: sexuality and reproduction are often posed as an obligation for women, but not for men. Reviewer Peter Hartlaub wrote that, “Manny must face his loneliness, cautiousness and ultimately his dormant sexuality –especially after he meets a female mammoth” (online) but he fails to mention anything about the role the female mammoth plays in relation to this male dormant sexuality. On top of this, Manny tries to apologize without understanding why he should do it and deems Ellie’s indignation as an “overreaction”. One may notice that the word “overreacting” is frequently used by men to discredit women who, for any reason, might disapprove of their actions. Things are made worse when, at the end of this scene, it is Ellie who ends up apologizing for being a *drama queen* even though there is absolutely no need for her to do this and nobody expected her apology anyway.

On a much more positive side, gender is also tackled in the way the film challenges some tenets of traditional masculinity. Saber-tooth cat Diego could be considered the prototypical masculine figure due to his looks, his tone of voice, his manners and the way he behaves in relation to certain issues. For example, he refuses to acknowledge his fear of water and tries not to admit or show this to any other animal as if being scared was something one should be embarrassed to admit or even address. Through this fear, the film appears to be trying to challenge the generalized notion that male figures must be brave and protective at all times. Although Diego does not really alter radically that representation, as he very much embodies traditional masculine characteristics, his final acknowledgement of fear helps audiences to what is hiding behind traditional masculinity.

Sid, on the other hand, would be a clear example of a male character who does indeed challenge the traditional canons of masculinity. In fact, in some occasions he might be even read as the opposite of Diego. This may be the reason why Sid is used as Diego’s mentor, teaching him how to swim and, most importantly, how “all animals feel fear, it’s what separates us from, say, rocks. Rocks have no fear and they sink. (...) The point is that fear is natural”. In this sense, the film contrasts these two characters to

emphasize their differences in terms of masculinity, mostly in Sid's favor. Sid is a marvelous example of a male whose aptitudes are emotional intelligence and sensitivity. Despite being mocked by most of the characters in the film, he is rather witty and always has a useful piece of advice, yet this might be hard to perceive for younger audiences as Sid's qualities are always diminished by his clumsiness. Sid spends the whole movie trying to prove his self-worth as he himself considers that neither Manny nor Diego treat him as an equal member of the herd. Amy Biancolli even described him as a "self-loathing sloth" (online) which highlights Sid's feeling of rejection as a possible result of his own friends' dismissals. On this same note, there might be a connection between Sid feeling left out and the fact that he is the "odd" one in terms of his masculinity. This might explain why Sid's quest for respect brings him to act as a brave and athletic figure: as someone he is clearly not. To illustrate this, there is a scene in which Sid tries to save possums Crash and Eddie but he immediately bangs his head into a block of ice, loses his consciousness, and ends up being the one that needs rescue in the first place. Nonetheless, what makes him special, and this is something which could be reinforced by the end of the movie, is his ease when talking about his feelings and his willingness to help those around him to do the same. He proves how masculinity is not only what Diego or Manny represent and that there is a much softer, deeper and more thoughtful side of it which appears to be more needed today.

All in all, *Ice Age: The Meltdown* is a fantastic animated feature film that has a little bit of everything. It is funny, entertaining, emotional and dwells on positive representations of blended families and on the importance of being in a good state of mind, either by overcoming one's fears, a traumatic past or self-insecurity. Then again, the film does not seem to have a clear position in terms of gender as it approaches several issues from different perspectives. On the one hand, the scene about male and particularly female reproduction is tackled according to rather conventional conceptions, seen through Manny's point of view and Ellie's subsequent (over)reaction. It is true, though, that this would probably be overlooked by most children, but it is still something worth reflecting on. Luckily, this is counterbalanced by very positive representations of masculinity. Whether just by breaking down the prototypical male's barriers –like Diego– or displaying a complete opposite of what one understands as "manly" –like Sid– the film reinforces the positivity of other ways of being "masculine" which are very much claiming that feeling fear does not make you less of a "man" and that being soft, thoughtful and emotional is as valid as being brave, athletic and strong. At the end of the day, challenging traditional gender structures is not easy, but *Ice Age: The Meltdown* is surely getting there, melting the ice that and progressing along the way.

Works Cited

- Biancolli, Amy. "Ice Age 2: The Meltdown". *Chron.com*, 31 March 2006, <https://www.chron.com/entertainment/movies/article/Ice-Age-2-The-Meltdown-1575456.php>
- Hartlaub, Peter. "Manny the Mammoth's Hormones Heat up as Environmental Changes Bring 'Meltdown'". *SFGate*, 31 March 2006 <https://www.sfgate.com/movies/article/Manny-the-Mammoth-s-hormones-heat-up-as-2538222.php>
- Puig, Claudia. "Ice Age: The Meltdown Should Warm Viewers' Hearts Globally". *USA Today*, 30 March 2006, https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/movies/reviews/2006-03-30-ice-age2_x.htm

Alba Sánchez Ortiz

***Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs* (2009): Masculinity Crisis**

CREDITS

Directors: Calos Saldanha, Mike Thurmeier (co-director)

Written by: Michael Berg, Peter Ackerman, Mike Reiss, Yoni Brenner; story by: Jason Carter Eaton

Producer: Lori Forte, John C. Donkin

Art direction: Michael Knapp

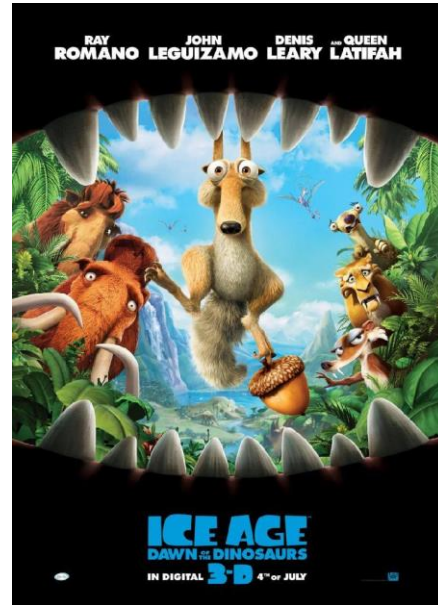
Editor: Harry Hitner, James Palumbo (co-editor)

Music: John Powell

Main performers (voices): John Leguizamo (Sid), Ray Romano (Manny), Queen Latifah (Ellie), Denis Leary (Diego), Tara Strong (Peaches), Chris Wedge (Scrat), Karen Disher (Scratte), Simon Pegg (Buck), Seann William Scott (Crash), Josh Peck (Eddie), Bill Hader (Gazelle)

Company: Blue Sky Studios

Runtime: 1h 27'



REASONS TO SEE *Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs*

- This is the most successful movie of the *Ice Age* franchise: it earned \$886.7 million worldwide, making it the highest grossing film from Blue Sky Studio.
- The sound design was supervised by two-time Oscar-Award-winner Randy Tom; he even paid visit to a refugee in Thailand to record elephants' sounds!
- This is the first *Ice Age* movie to be released in 3D with the presentation of colorful dinosaurs.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs*

Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs (2009) is the third movie in the animated *Ice Age* franchise which belongs to Blue Sky Studio; it was their fifth feature film. Preceded by *Ice Age* (2002), *Ice Age: The Meltdown* (2006), and followed by *Ice Age: Continental Drift* (2012), *Ice Age: Collision Course* (2016), *Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs* is the first *Ice Age* film to be released in digital 3D. It was released by 20th Century Fox on 24 July 2009 with a premiere shown nationwide at certain theaters on Father's Day in the USA. Despite receiving some mixed criticism for its scientific inaccuracy and adult humor, the movie proceeded to become a blockbuster success, grossing \$886.7 million worldwide, making it the highest-grossing film in the franchise, the highest-grossing film from Blue Sky Studios overall, and the second highest-grossing animated film at the time (behind *Shrek 2*).

After the events of *Ice Age: The Meltdown*, life starts to change for Manny and his companions. Manny and Ellie, having since become life partners, are expecting their first baby, which leaves Manny restless to guarantee the safest condition for when his infant arrives. Diego is afraid of becoming excessively laid-back and considers seeking

a more adventurous life. Meanwhile, the kind-hearted sloth, Sid, experiences a strong desire for parenthood that leads him to make the inadvertent decision to adopt an abandoned trio (or so he thinks) of Tyrannosaurus Rex eggs. Intent on keeping them against the wrath of their biological mother, Sid ends up being kidnapped and dragged into an unknown subterranean world full of dinosaurs and hostile creatures. The adventure begins when the herd tries to rescue him enlisting the help of a feral one-eyed weasel called Buck who is eagerly chasing a giant white dinosaur. Scrat, the saber-toothed squirrel still on the chase to clutch his dearest acorn, faces here potential intimacy with a female saber-toothed squirrel named Scratte.

The characters' development in *Ice Age 3* simultaneously perpetuates and subverts the idea of stereotypical gender issue in our society. Paige Schilt has described the strategy adopted by Blue Sky to address gender ideologies: "All the stuff dredging up from our collective cultural anxiety closet –changing gender roles, the anti-sociality of the nuclear family, alternative communities, homoeroticism– is, I would argue, kept in check by the film's policing of traditional gender roles" (online). She focuses on an instance of homosexual panic when Manny reluctantly tries to console his male friend Diego (at the request of his wife Elli). Manny's hesitation and his justification that "guys don't talk about guys' problems" occur by virtue of the conventionally assumed impression that male friends do things together rather than have "un-manly" conversation, whereas the basis of female friendship is discussing women's issues. Elli herself progressively conveys a subversive message by rejecting Manny's idea about how men are expected to act or express their feelings. A number of Masculinities Studies specialists, among them Victor Seidler, are encouraging men to talk to other men on the grounds that they need a space to support each other emotionally and to make sense of their biographies as men. This idea is supported by Manny's confirmation that "a punch to each other shoulder" equals to six-month therapy, which acknowledges males' need to be comforted by each other.

Criticism of the film tends to point towards the ingrained gender roles and heteronormativity. Regarding the former, Diego's struggle to shed his predator instinct leads to the dilemma of whether he should leave the herd to accomplish something bigger on his own. Diego is the presentative in the film of the traditional male figure whose mission is anything other than settling down for family. His supposition that a male's main achievement is a life of adventure pressures him to find his own identity alone. However, this character is progressively developed till the end of the movie when he realizes that adventure lies within family. Regarding the latter, researchers from Michigan University have identified how children movies and family entertainments promote heterosexual relationships and "construct the specialness of hetero-romantic love by holding in tension the assertion that hetero-romantic relationships are simultaneously magical and natural" (Martina nd Kazyak 325). This applies to the case of Manny and Elli, Scrat and Scatte and ironically Sid, the sloth in search to fulfil his need for "motherhood".

While observing Manny and Elli's expecting their new child as the blossom of love, Sid grows lonesome and adopts (or steals...) three dinosaur eggs to compensate for his lack of romantic relationship. From then on, Sid constantly refers to himself as "mom" or "mother" instead of seeing himself as a potential father. This reflects the ideology by which the nurturing instinct and behavior is solely associated with women in terms of patriarchal tenets; since men are supposedly useless to take care of babies then any male who does the job well can only be a woman/female. On its side, the portrayal of subplot about the couple Scrat and Scratte appears to be harmless until we take a closer look and see that Scratte is an embodiment of the objectifying gaze towards women (and females). According to Fredrickson and Roberts, the objectifying

gaze is defined as “visually inspecting or staring at a woman’s body or sexual body parts” and “Sexual objectification occurs when people separate women’s sexual body parts or functions from the entire person, reducing women to the status of mere instruments and regarding their bodies as capable of representing them” (178). The humor adopted in this subplot is clichéd and stereotyped in the sense that the female squirrel consistently and intendedly uses her sexual wiles to trick the male squirrel from his beloved acorn. This subplot portrays women/females as sexual objects and specifically describes Scratte as a mischievous lover who takes advantage of her sexual traits to realize her goals. This is also closely linked to the perpetuation of traditional heterosexuality which is “constructed through depictions of interactions between gendered bodies in which the sexiness of feminine characters is subjected to the gaze of masculine characters” (Martin and Kazyak 332). Besides, after she succeeds in establishing a relationship with Scrat, Scratte immediately starts bossing her ‘husband’ around. This message seems aimed at entertaining the audience by ridiculing and contrasting women’s image before and after marriage. However, this kind of humor is outdated and was never intended for children’s audience, as Schilt suggested in her review: “Mama, what are they doing?” my son asks. It’s a gag from the *Honeymooners* era, its gendered assumptions not quite legible to a 21st century boy with queer moms” (online).

Ice Age 3 actually faced considerable criticism for its adult jokes and inappropriateness towards young audience. Take the review by Mary Pols. “What’s really frustrating about the movie”, she wrote, “is how little attention it pays to its youthful audience. Beyond the cliff-teetering physical comedy, which always works –the acorn-loving squirrel Scrat returns, reminding us of the joys of old-fashioned voiceless animation– there is barely anything here that’s really meant for kids” (online). The movie is filled with crude and suggestive verbal humor about male organs, ranging from harmless to absolute disgrace. At the less extreme end, the zany character Buck replies when another character tells him “I’ve got your back”: “Your *back*? I would rather cover my front! That’s where the good stuff is!” Far more sexist and threatening is the comment when Buck claims to have turned a T-Rex into a T-Rachel with a sharp clam shell. Children may miss this character’s off-color jokes but parents are bound to be annoyed or embarrassed in asked for clarification.

Even though the *Ice Age* franchise has made considerable contributions towards reinforcing the idea of non-traditional family, it is still a long way from being a progressive series as regards gender. It is necessary for adults, parents and teachers to accompany our children and guide them through a key educational conversation in light of gender equality. Specifically, they should be encouraged to freely express their feelings, live being true to their own self and build respect towards others regardless of their gender status. If addressed in the right direction, each narrative could be beneficial to educate children about the misleading messages on gender that fictions intended for them send. *Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs* needs to be addressed in this way, with caution.

Works Cited

- Fredrickson, Barbara L. and Tomi-Ann Roberts. “Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women’s Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks”. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 21, 1997, 173-206.
- Martin, Karin A. and Emily Kazyak. “Hetero-Romantic Love and Heterosexiness in Children’s G-Rated Films”. *Gender & Society*, 23.3, 2009, 315-336.
- Pols, Mary. “*Ice Age* Review: Franchise Turns to Frozen Stereotypes”. *Time*, 30 June 2009, <http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1908017,00.html>

Schilt, Page. "Ice Age 3: Can a Queer Utopia be Built on Prehistoric Gender Roles?"
The Bilerico Project, 8 July 2009,
http://bilerico.lgbtqnation.com/2009/07/ice_age_3_can_a_queer_utopia_be_built_on_prehistor.php

Thu Trang Tran

Ice Age 4: Continental Drift (2012): A Prehistoric Odyssey

CREDITS

Directors: Steve Martino, Mike Thurmeier
Written by: Michael Berg, Jason Fuchs; story by: Michael Berg, Lori Forte
Producers: John C. Donkin, Lori Forte
Art direction: Nash Dunnigan
Editors: Christopher, Campbell, James Palumbo, David Ian Salter
Music by: John Powell
Main performers (voices): Ray Romano (Manny), Denis Leary (Diego), John Leguizamo (Sid), Wanda Sykes (Granny), Jennifer Lopez (Shira), Peter Dinklage (Captain Gutt), Queen Latifah (Ellie), Keke Palmer (Peaches), Aziz Ansari (Squint), Drake (Ethan)
Company: Blue Sky Studios
Runtime: 1h 28'



REASONS TO SEE *Ice Age 4: Continental Drift*

- Many celebrity voices appear in this installment of the series, including Drake, Nicky Minaj, Jennifer Lopez and Peter Dinklage.
- The 3-D technology is more advanced, making characters look more vivid and “real”.
- There are more female engaging characters, particularly Sid’s Granny and female saber-toothed cat Shira.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *Ice Age 4: Continental Drift*

Ice Age 4: Continental Drift is a sequel film of the *Ice Age* franchise produced by Blue Sky Studios in 2012. Blue Sky Studios was founded in 1986 by the employees from MAGI, a computer animation company which was hired by Disney to work on *Tron*. In 1998, Blue Sky Studios produced its first animated short, *Bunny*, which won the 1999 Oscar for Best Animated Short film. In the same year, the studio was sold to Twentieth Century Fox and next, in 2002, the first *Ice Age* film was released (in 3-D). Then in 2006 came the second sequel of the franchise, *Ice Age: The Meltdown*. Three years later, *Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs* was on. After *Ice Age: Continental Drift* in 2012, the fifth and last sequel *Ice Age: Collision Course* was released in 2016. Besides the *Ice Age* sequels, Blue Sky Studios has also made many brilliant animation movies, including *Horton (Dr Seuss’ Horton Hears a Who!)*, *Rio*, *The Peanuts Movie*, *Ferdinand* and *Spies in Disguise*. In 2013, the studio became a subsidiary of 20th Century Animation, a division of The Walt Disney Studios. Apart from full-length animation films, Blue Sky has also made many short films; most of these feature the clumsy prehistoric

sabre-tooth squirrel Scrat, the inspiration for the whole *Ice Age* franchise. Though the negative reviews of the *Ice Age* sequels never stopped, *Ice Age: Continental Drift* still had sizeable box-office takings, over \$877 million worldwide, making the film the winner of the ASCAP award as Top Box Office Film and the winner of a MovieGuide Award as Best Film for Families.

As the previous three films did, *Ice Age 4* still tells the adventure story of that special animal family we know as the herd, living in the ice age. When Scrat accidentally provokes a continental cataclysm by unleashing a storm, Manny is separated from Ellie and their daughter Peaches and stranded on an iceberg with Diego, Sid and his Granny but he promises that he will find a way to return home. *Ice Age 4* is thus a fun version of Greek Homer's epic, the *Odyssey*. The protagonist Ulysses (or Odysseus) drifts on the sea for more than twenty years before finally returning to his hometown to reunite with his wife and son. Mammoth Manny is also a Ulysses, separated from his wife and daughter due to the geological disaster and forced to start a journey home drifting at sea with his old partners. While crossing the ocean, the group are captured by the cruel pirate Captain Gutt and his crew, a childlike version of the Homeric monsters Ulysses comes across. However they manage to escape and Manny plots a plan to steal Captain Gutt's ship and return to his homeland in a dangerous voyage through the sea. The cruel pirates, however, seek revenge against Manny and his family and friends. In the end, Granny's Precious, a whale everyone assumed to be a figment of Granny's imagination, suddenly appears, and helps them defeat the pirates.

The *Ice Age* franchise has always been considered as a movie series for the whole family to watch focused on promoting the idea of that tender loving care is paramount. Since there are more female characters in *Ice Age: Continental Drift* than in the previous three movies, I'll discuss here how those characters are constructed and what effect they create when it comes to raising gender issues.

Manny and Ellie had their daughter at the end of last movie and in *Ice Age 4*, their beloved daughter Peaches has become a rebellious teenager who disagrees with everything her parents say. When she gets a crush on her handsome classmate Ethan, her father Manny and her mother Ellie show very different attitudes towards daughter's sexual education. Manny takes tough measures to limit Peaches' range of activities while Ellie is more patient. She doesn't interfere in the private talk between Peaches and Ethan. Instead, she waits until it's over and advises Peaches not to change for others. This movie mirrors thus the typical setting of a nuclear family, with the tough father and the patient mother. It seems that both men and women in the movies are simplified to reinforce the stereotype rather than change it. Probably the stereotyped characterization makes the story more easily understood but to some extent it may eliminate the possibility of breaking the frame and discovering new possibilities when it comes to children's education.

Besides Peaches, two new female characters are introduced, Granny and Shira, who contrast sharply. One day, Sid's estranged family suddenly appears in a very dramatic way leaving a senior lady in his hands –his Granny. Since she enters the stage, Granny leaves an impression of being stubborn and muddled occasionally. As the movie advances, it seems as if Granny may suffer from dementia because she always behaves oddly and gives irrelevant answers to questions. It is hinted that this is the reason why her family decided to get rid of her because a senior woman with dementia would be a big burden during the dangerous migration. In sharp contrast to Granny, Shira, the sabre-tooth cat who used to work as the first mate for the villainous Captain Gutt, is always competent and determined. However, it is surprising to see that these two females have quite different narrative arcs. Shira, always independent, finally finds her way back to the normal track away from piracy with the help of a male, the cat

Diego, while Granny who is always under the protection of other people, defeats villains and saves everyone's life. Many have argued that Shira, though constructed to be a strong female character is not in the end so interesting. In contrast, the characterization of Granny is highly praised by the critics, including the actor that voices her, Wanda Sykes. As James Berardinelli points out, Sykes "leaves an impression. Playing Sid's Granny, she has all the best lines and, delivered in the actress' inimitable sarcastic voice, Granny becomes instantly memorable. Almost as memorable as Scrat" (online). Although Shira, supposedly the cooler character, may let some of us down, Granny offers a unique outlook for girls and adult women: here is an aged woman, with dementia, who does as she likes and even saves her world.

Clearly, an ode to the eternal themes in animation movies like family, friendship, courage, teamwork, is sung in *Ice Age 4* with just one glitch: the friendship between Peaches and her molehog companion Louis is underestimated. Most of the male characters in *Ice Age Franchise* are constructed in a strong, powerful and competent way while Louis is an exciting exception. He is less assertive and more shy compared with other male characters, especially the handsome mammoth Ethan, Peaches' crush. Ethan is popular and always surrounded by his followers. Although Louis is not as strong as other carnivorous animals, he is still brave and defends Peaches from danger without any hesitation. Louis' characterization signals a new era where being strong and tough is not the only criteria to evaluate a man's masculinity (or a male's).

When *Ice Age 4: Continental Drift* was first screened, the reviews were split into two opposing extremes. Many critics argued that the visual effects are overloaded, and the story is bland, a sign of the franchise's exhaustion. As Mary Pols pointed out, "this *Ice Age* [movie] is just a collection of slapstick moments and fisticuffs, with pauses for Sid to regurgitate food into his paw and show it to everyone. The franchise is just going through the motions at this point, and even the animation feels by-the-numbers" (online). She argued that the twists and turns could be more fulfilling. Pols also complained that the conflict between Peaches and Manny, a typical father-teen daughter relationship, is constructed in a very perfunctory way. When they inevitably quarrel "While Peaches learns to regret her harsh words, Manny comes to realize he needs to trust his capable child more, just as Marlin did in *Finding Nemo*, even if *Ice Age* lacks the wit and loveliness of spirit that made *Nemo* so special" (online).

Nonetheless, this movie has its own merits. There are several funny moments which cannot be missed. Kyle Smith highlights one: when Manny talks about his teenage daughter's rebelliousness, "the next thing you know, she's piercing her trunk" (online). Scrat goes to "Scrat-lantis", a heaven full of acorns, which of course he unfortunately destroys. Adults tend to use a patronizing approach to children's tastes but reviewer Andrew Gniiffke praises the film, indicating that "The great story and the perfect animation not only inspire children, who are wooed with tons of *Ice Age* merchandising in the context of the film. Older or young at heart viewers should also enjoy the film, as it offers numerous references to other films such as *Pirates of the Caribbean* or *Braveheart*" (online). Hopefully, the film will appeal to children's best feelings, and not just to their desire for merchandise, with its celebration of family and friendship.

Works Cited

- Berardinelli, James. "*Ice Age: Continental Drift* (United States, 2012)". *Reel Views*, 11 July 2012, <https://www.reelviews.net/reelviews/ice-age-continental-drift>
- Gniiffke, Andres. "Cinema: *Ice Age 4* – When Dad Slips away from Their Pubescent Daughter". *5vier.de*, 2 July 2012 <https://5vier.de/kino-ice-age-4-wenn-papa-die-pubertierende-tochter-entgleitet-75168.html>

Pols, Mary. "Ice Age: Continental Drift: Franchise is Officially Frozen". *Time*, 12 July 2012, <https://entertainment.time.com/2012/07/12/ice-age-continental-drift/>
Smith, Kyle "Latest Ice Age Doesn't Drift far from Formula". *New York Post*, 13 July 2012, <https://nypost.com/2012/07/13/latest-ice-age-doesnt-drift-far-from-formula/>

Cong (Jamie) Wang

Ice Age: Collision Course (2016): Celebrating Romance

CREDITS

Directors: Mike Thurmeier, Galen Tan Chung (co-director)

Written by: Michael J. Wilson, Michael Berg, Yoni Brenner; story by: Aubrey Solomon

Producers: Lori Forte

Art direction: Michael Knapp

Editor: Renato Falcao

Music by: John Debney

Main performers (voices): Ray Romano (Manny), Denis Leary (Diego), John Leguizamo (Sid), Simon Pegg (Buck), Wanda Sykes (Granny), Jennifer Lopez (Shira), Queen Latifah (Ellie), Keke Palmer (Peaches), Jessie J (Brooke), Adam DeVine (Julian), Jesse Tyler Ferguson (Shangri Llama)

Company: Blue Sky Studios

Runtime: 1h 34'



REASONS TO SEE *Ice Age: Collision Course*

- To complete the whole series of *Ice Age* movies (so far...). Despite the bad reviews, this is as entertaining at least as the previous sequels.
- As usual, for the quality of the animation, here extended to the outer space scenes with acorn-crazy Scrat
- For the weasel Buck, voiced by British actor Simon Pegg. He is partly adorable and partly insufferable, but does carry the whole show on his shoulders quite well.

REPRESENTING GENDER IN *Ice Age: Collision Course*

There is a general consensus among reviewers of *Ice Age: Collision Course* that the fifth installment in Blue Sky Studios' popular series is an unwelcome addition to the franchise and a clear sign of its decadence. The announcement of a sixth film, *Ice Age: Adventures of Buck Wild*, to be released in 2022 (possibly on Disney+) reveals a strange case of stubbornness on the side of creators and distributors which raises the question of why they keep on churning these movies. An easy answer to that question is that, despite the negative reviews, all the *Ice Age* films have done well at the box office, much more so abroad than in the domestic US market. The other is that, as reviewer Jason Bailey writes, even though "it's abundantly clear" that *Ice Age* depends on "a thin premise full of one-note characters voiced by peaked-in-the-'90s personalities", the franchise is "familiar, and familiarity is king in family filmmaking –and filmmaking in general" (Bailey online). As he adds, the main function of the new film is to keep young kids entertained for 90 minutes by offering them characters they are

already familiar with and a fast-moving plot that glues them to their seats. In this modest aim, franchises aimed at children are not, in the end, as different as superhero or action-movie franchises aimed at adults. Arguably, they are even better.

The premise of *Ice Age: Collision Course* is, to say the least, whacky. After accidentally liberating an alien spaceship from the ice, saber-tooth squirrel Scrat finds himself in outer space. His madcap handling of the ship as he chases his acorn causes a colossal asteroid to aim for Earth. The weasel Buck (a minor character in *Ice Age 3*) discovers a buried monument by an ancient civilization that describes the possible devastating effects of the crash, comparing it to the one that extinguished the dinosaurs. He sets then on a frantic mission to save all the animals by convincing Manny's herd that they need to use a volcano to launch the magnetic remains of previous meteorites in the hopes of deflecting the incoming killer asteroid. The problem is that Buck is being chased by three nasty dino-birds, carnivores evolved from the survivors of the previous extinction, and he needs to convince Shangri Llama's followers to relinquish the asteroid crystals that keep them forever young. Add to these troubles mammoth Manny's problems to bond with his future son-in-law Julian, saber-cats Shira and Diego's doubts about becoming parents and sloth Sid's problems to find true love, and you get a movie that defends as the rest of the franchise does the values of family, (heterosexual) love, friendship and cooperation across species.

Writing for a family oriented website, reviewer Adam Holz argues that what children may appreciate, "and what mostly redeems this film from the being just another animated movie with too many butt jokes, is its positive emphasis on family. Getting married, working through marital conflict, loving your children well and learning to let them go are all important themes here" (online). That a theme is important in a movie does not mean, however, that the treatment it receives is adequate. This is why reviewer Susan Wloszczyna refers to Manny's new dilemma ("he doesn't think his happy-go-lucky son-in-law-to-be, Julian (Adam Devine), is good enough for daughter Peaches (Keke Palmer)") as a motif "as old as time itself, or at least TV's first family sitcom" (online). In fact, even though this is lost in the movie among the many subplots, what saves the animals from extinction is Julian's perseverance in the face of Manny's constant rejection, and his request that the older mammoth trusts him at a risky point. The problem is that neither children nor adults can be much interested in Manny's stubborn dislike of the likeable Julian, or in his wife Ellie's ugly ruses to prevent their daughter Peaches from moving away once she marries. The same goes for Shira and Diego's doubts about having babies, on the grounds that they might be scared by them (as if the babies would not be sabre-tooth cats, too). As for Sid, his pairing off with pretty Brooke feels hard to explain –as a character wonders when she declares her unconditional love, "seriously? That guy?" At least Granny (whose name turns out to be Gladys) does get a second chance at having a sexual life, though her transformation into her younger self thanks to a fountain of eternal youth is a bit ageist, since it suggests that only the young (and attractive) can enjoy love and sex.

This means on the whole that whereas the first film of the franchise dealt with friendship among males by narrating how Manny, Diego and Sid bonded for life beyond their many differences once the films started focusing on them as more adult characters the romantic clichés have been gradually transforming the series into a far more traditional narrative of diminishing interest. The motif of Manny forgetting his wedding anniversary is just plain boring, whereas his attitude towards Peaches' romantic life is best described, in Ellie's own words, as that of a sociopath. Ellie herself, usually the voice of reason, puts absurd pressure on her daughter to stay near her parents and even though the young mammoth shows herself quite capable of handling the dangers that might come, she is nevertheless presented throughout the film as totally dependent on Julian. Possibly realizing that Manny and Ellie's family life is not

that interesting, then, the script piles many action and humorous gags on top of it (some of them of a not too elegant nature), besides the subplots concerning Buck.

As the announced sixth film suggests, Blue Sky Studios seems quite interested in the weasel Buck. Actually, even though as it may be imagined *Ice Age: Collision Course* ends with Peaches and Julian's wedding, thus celebrating romance, Buck appears to be the main protagonist. It is hard to say, however, what is intended with his characterization, particularly as regards gender. Other animals, like the dino-birds, are given a much more transparent arc concerning this kind of issue. Thus, scrawny dino-bird Roger manages to convince his alpha male father and his hefty sister that they should listen to Buck's warnings about the asteroid and help him instead of eating him. The message that 'weak' sons may stop a father's bullying and make valuable decisions, however, is partly lost among the hullabaloo of the frantic-paced action. In comparison to Roger's clear-cut mission in the film, it is, nevertheless, difficult to assess Buck's own function. He has as many touches of Bugs Bunny as of Captain Jack Sparrow (in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise) and is as capable of singing an aria as of nursing a pumpkin as if it was his baby. Buck even cross-dresses, which seems to send the message that he is there for fun of any kind. Perhaps, Buck's free spirit and strange antics are there simply to break the domesticity trapping the other main characters, and that is in itself a comment on the evolution of the franchise. Whereas opossum brothers Cash and Eddie already provided comic relief and still do in this fifth installment, it appears that this relief is not sufficient, hence Buck's more prominent role in this film and in the next one. We will see then whether Manny, Diego and Sid become secondary characters and their love life secondary concerns.

To sum up, *Ice Age: Collision Course* is by no means the best film in the franchise but it is neither a disaster, despite its limitations. It needs to be watched in a childlike spirit, enjoying the amazing animation, the whacky plot and the zany humor. Its treatment of gender issues is certainly disappointing in its trite domesticity and in its celebration of conventional romance; also, particularly jaded in Manny's approach to his daughter Elli's adulthood. There is not any intention to provide viewers with a fresh approach to these issues at all, which is in itself a sign of franchise fatigue. Yet, Buck's hyperactive, cartoonish characterization suggests that there might be a way out of convention by going to the very roots of animation, offering children a combination of cleverness and craziness. This, while by no means admirable or inspiring, feels at least liberating in comparison to what the other main characters have become as conventionality traps them. Buck, in short, is cool in ways Manny, Diego, and Sid no longer are.

Works Cited

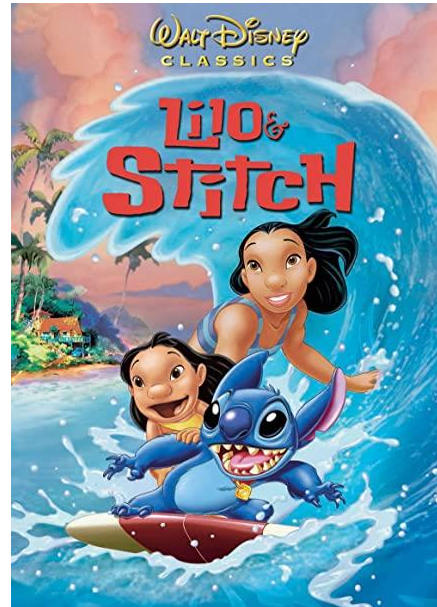
- Bailey, Jason. "*Ice Age: Collision Course* and the Flat Familiarity of Family Franchises". Flavorwire, 22 July 2016, <https://www.flavorwire.com/584816/ice-age-collision-course-and-the-flat-familiarity-of-family-franchises>
- Holz, Adam R. "*Ice Age: Collision Course*" (review). Plugged In: Focus on the Family, July 2016, <https://www.pluggedin.com/movie-reviews/ice-age-collision-course/>
- Wloszczyna, Susan. "*Ice Age: Collision Course*" (review). RogertEbert.com, 22 July 2016, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/ice-age-collision-course-2016>

Sara Martín Alegre

Lilo & Stitch (2002): Disney's Most Overlooked, Feminist Film?

CREDITS

Directors: Dean DeBlois, Chris Sanders
Written by: Chris Sanders, Dean DeBlois
Producer: Clark Spencer
Art direction: Ric Sluiter
Editor: Darren T. Holmes
Music: Alan Silvestri
Main performers (voices): Chris Sanders (Stitch), Daveigh Chase (Lilo), Tia Carrere (Nani), David Ogden Stiers (Jumba), Kevin McDonald (Pleakly), Ving Rhames (Bubbles), Kevin Michael Richardson (Gantu), Zoe Caldwell (Councilwoman), Jason Scott Lee (David), Miranda Paige Walls (Edmonds), Amy Hill (Mrs. Hasagawa)
Company: Walt Disney Pictures, Walt Disney Feature Animation, USA
Runtime: 1h 25'



REASONS TO SEE *Lilo & Stitch*

- This film has one of the most memorable soundtracks in the Disney canon, with five songs by Elvis Presley.
- It has gorgeous visuals based on the use of watercolor backgrounds, a technique which had not been used for decades. This is rare and bold in the era of CGI (computer generated images) dominated films.
- The celebration of the sisterhood between Lilo and Nani.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *Lilo & Stitch*

Lilo & Stitch (2002) –preceded by the financial failures of *The Emperor's New Groove* (2000) and *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* (2001), and soon followed by another financial failure of *Treasure Planet* (2002) (Corliss 2002)– received mostly positive reviews and was nominated to an Oscar for Best Animated Feature at the 75th Academy Awards. Released on the same day as Steven Spielberg's science fiction action film with Tom Cruise *Minority Report* (2002), *Lilo & Stitch* tied with it in the box-office tally (Vincent 2002). It was, then, a remarkable commercial success, spawning a franchise with three sequel movies and three television series. Also, the soundtrack album of this film, containing two original songs written by Mark Keali'i Ho'omalulu and Alan Silvestri (the film's composer) and five songs from Elvis Presley, sold more than one million copies.

A monster, labelled Experiment 626, is created to wreak havoc by mad scientist Dr. Jumba in an illegal genetic experiment on another planet. 626 is sentenced to be exiled to a remote area but he escapes and lands on Earth, specifically in Hawaii. In order to avoid being captured by Dr. Jumba and by local Agent Pleakley, 626 pretends

to be a dog and gets adopted by a little girl Hawaiian girl, Lilo Pelekai, who is being raised by her older sister, Nani, after their parents died in a car accident. Lilo re-names 626 Stitch. The two develop a close bond during their time together which causes Stitch to reconsider and later defy his outrageously destructive nature in order to keep his new family together. At last, Stitch, working with Dr. Jumba and Agent Pleakley, manages to rescue Lilo from their alien opponents and they start together a bigger new family on her beautiful island.

Lilo & Stitch is, in terms of character design, undoubtedly an exceedingly much more progressive film than most Disney works. To begin with, there are no white female characters in this film. Lilo's body still has baby fat rather than that of miniature young adult body, as Disney's typical little girls are. She has a keen interest in taking photos of obese tourists on the beach, tacking them to the wall of her bedroom to celebrate their gorgeous fatness, which, indeed, shatters the traditional norm viewing obesity as a health hazard or a lower-class marker. Lilo's sister, Nani, a woman of color like her and of larger size (that is, with thick thighs and a bit of a belly), also escapes the feminine ideal identified as a sexual object. In addition, the film presents a planet full of aliens with bodies that are beyond imagination, including Stitch, who has four arms and a row of spikes on the back.

Do all these features make *Lilo & Stitch* the perfect film valuing all colors, shapes, and body sizes with no prejudice? The answer is regrettably no. Scherman observes that "Stitch is the 'test-tube baby' that didn't turn out to be at all what its creator had hoped, and as such is being discarded" (23), not only by his own society of diverse body types but by human society. Stitch has to pretend to be a dog to be adopted. Lilo's explanation of Stitch's strange appearance is that "he used to be a collie before he got ran over". Deviant bodies are still described as something unnatural and unfortunate, which "allows for the understanding that inaccessibility too is a misfortune and not necessarily an injustice" (Scherman, 23). What follows next is far worse. Stitch is required to be a "model citizen" under threat by a social worker, who warns she will take Lilo away from Nani if he does not act normal. When he shows his extra arms and spikes to Lilo, Stitch again gets abandoned (at least for a time), which reinforces the toxic idea that everyone should hide their true selves and be identified as normal people to be socially accepted.

In any case, reviews of this film tend to be hugely positive with praise focusing on the diverse body images, the display of female characters in workplaces, and the celebration of sisterhood, with a few criticizing its failure to normalize the deviant body. It is not surprising that a huge amount of people are convinced that *Lilo & Stitch* is Disney's most underrated animated movie. "The visuals are gorgeous" a satisfied spectator writes, "the backgrounds are beautifully faded watercolors" and "for once, we get real, flawed (and therefore all the more loveable) people –not the usual perfect Disney princesses" (Gogoshka_1, online). Seen from this perspective, the film is unquestionably innovative, up to the present. It even includes a cross-gender role, Agent Pleakley, who disguises himself in a woman's outfit in order to get closer to Stitch. One night, off-duty Pleakley puts the wig on, sees himself in the mirror, and finds himself quite comfortable looking pretty. On seeing this, instead of laughing at Pleakley, his partner Dr. Jumba hints that he also would like to try the wig on and so he does. This is encouraging compared to most male characters who are always being mocked because of being too feminine in Disney films.

Reviews about Lilo's sister, Nani, tend to be divided between those who see her as an angry female character (mostly written by men) and those who point out that she is a real woman (mostly written by women). As Ashani Jodha argued, "she was honestly one of the most real women Disney has ever presented. Nani had a budding romance with her coworker, David, but their relationship never took center stage to the

story's message or its core" (online). The nineteen-year-old girl works hard to raise her little sister, Lilo (aged six), trying to keep her broken family together and at the same time, bearing the burden of the grief of losing both parents. She sets a great example for little girls by showing that it is absolutely normal for girls to lose their temper sometimes rather than play the traditional role of submissive and silent females. Likewise, Nani proves that girls have the right to fight for what they truly cherish instead of waiting for a prince to rescue them. In *Lilo & Stitch*, "something even more beautiful was how it (romance) was never painted as a dire necessity or an underlying impression to succeed in life" (Jodha, online).

As Jodha claims, "Adding another element of feminist power to the list, *Lilo & Stitch* also carries the influential theme that women can be leaders and strong authoritative figures" (online). This film portrays females at a variety of workplaces as well as males doing household chores. We can see an old lady a running vegetable and fruit stand, a female managing a coffee shop, and a female lifeguard, let alone the alien president, the most powerful woman "leading a galaxy". Nani's struggles to make a living and at the same time defend her right to keep Lilo's custody. The central message sent to little girls is that they are free to pursue and also capable of achieving their own goals and there is so much more to cherish, such as sisterhood and friendship, other than the romantic relationship.

Reviewers are divided when it comes to David, Nani's love interest. Some criticize this male character because he falls into an ideal category with his perfect male body, while others see him as a man lacking masculinity. David is, above all, an easy-going man who does not dramatically lose his sense when in Nani's presence and who is comfortable with his dumb hairstyle and his clumsiness. Still, his main grace is that he is always supportive and does care for Nani. David even finds Nani a job after being turned down by her, and comforts her and Lilo in a very tender voice after they have a bad day. Perhaps this is what divided the critics: the mixture of his masculine look and his less traditionally masculine behavior.

While most films targeting children convey toxic messages regarding physical attractiveness showing girls desperate for romantic relationships, *Lilo & Stitch* recognizes the value of all bodies and honors friendship, sisterhood, and family. Quoting lines repeated in the film, "Ohana means family. Family means nobody's got left behind. Or forgotten". This film also embraces differences and queerness with the atypical happy ending showing Stitch, Jumba, and Pleakley fully accepted into Lilo's non-normative family. All in all, *Lilo & Stitch* brings ohana "to its extreme: even aliens are part of our larger family. We do not have to 'fit in' to fit in" (Scherman, 27). This is why it is Disney's most overlooked, feminist film.

Works Cited

- Gogoschka_1. "Disney's Most Underrated Animated Movie". Imdb.com, 27 March 2019, https://www.imdb.com/review/rw4747595/?ref=tt_urv
- Jodha, Ashani. "11 Life Lessons *Lilo & Stitch* Taught Us". *Bustle*, 7 May 2016, <https://www.bustle.com/articles/157684-11-liberating-lilo-stitch-life-lessons-about-women-identity>
- Scherman, Elizabeth Leigh. "Monsters Among Us: Construction of the Deviant Body in *Monsters, Inc.* and *Lilo & Stitch*". *The Universe is Rated G: Science Fiction in Children's Film and Television*, Ryan Neighbors and Sandy Rankin (eds.). McFarland Press, 2010, 15-30.

Ting Wang

The Powerpuff Girls Movie (2002): Groundbreaking Superheroines

CREDITS

Director: Craig McCracken

Written by: Charlie Bean, Lauren Faust, Craig McCracken, Paul Rudish, Don Shank; story by: Charlie Bean, Craig McCracken, Amy Keating Rogers, Paul Rudish, Don Shank, Lauren Faust. Based on the TV series created by Craig McCracken

Producer: Donna Castricone

Art direction: Mike Moon, Genndy Tartakovsky

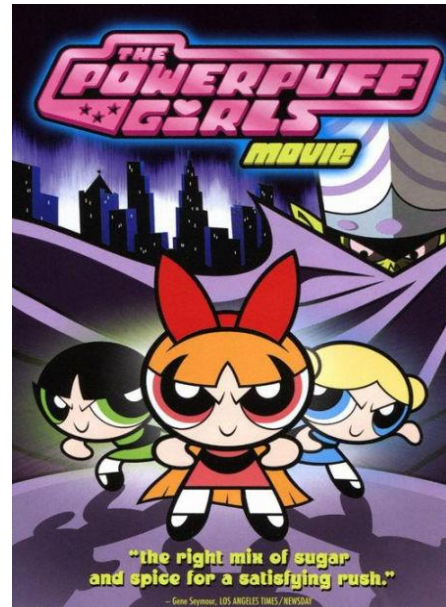
Editor: Rob Desales, Joel Valentine

Music: James L. Venable

Main performers (voices): Cathy Cavadini (Blossom), Tara Strong (Bubbles), Elizabeth Daily (Buttercup), Roger Jackson (Mojo Jojo), Tom Kane (Professor Utonium)

Company: Cartoon Network Studios

Runtime: 1h 13'



REASONS TO SEE *The Powerpuff Girls Movie*

- This movie is Cartoon Network Studios' first and only theatrical film so far and an adaptation from its very popular TV series, created by Craig McCracken (here also the film director).
- This film presents three little girls (Blossom, Bubbles and Buttercup) as action heroes, taking the center stage and engaging in physical battles.
- McCracken's film provides a strong sense of sisterhood and cooperation as the little girls work together to defeat their enemy despite their different personalities.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *The Powerpuff Girls Movie*

The Powerpuff Girls Movie (2002) was produced by Cartoon Network Studios and released theatrically by Warner Bros. Pictures. This film was preceded by *The Flintstones: On the Rocks* (2001) and followed by *Billy and Mandy's Big Boogey Adventure* (2007). However, these animated films were made for television whereas *The Powerpuff Girls Movie* was released in cinemas. The movie was based on the Cartoon Network animated television series of the same title created by Craig McCracken and broadcast from 1998 to 2005 (in 2016, a reboot was launched, only with moderate success). The film serves as a prequel to the TV series, explaining the origin of the Powerpuff Girls, how they became the guardians of the city of Townsville, and how their relationship with their archenemy Mojo Jojo started.

The city of Townsville is run by villains and criminals. In this desperate situation, Professor Utonium decides to create the perfect little girl to try to improve the city's mood. He gathers for that all the necessary ingredients: "sugar, spice, and everything

nice". However, during the elaboration process his lab assistant, a chimpanzee named Jojo, accidentally drops a flask of Chemical X onto the concoction causing a big explosion. As a result, the experiment produces not one but three little girls with superpowers: Blossom, Bubbles, and Buttercup. On their first day of school, the three sisters play a game of tag but, excited by the game and inexperienced with their superpowers, the girls end up destroying the city. After the accidental destruction of Townsville, the girls are rejected and treated as freaks while the Professor is arrested for creating them. Devastated, Blossom, Bubbles, and Buttercup find Jojo on their way home. The chimpanzee has also been affected by the Chemical X and has now superintelligence. Mojo Jojo takes advantage of the vulnerable state of the girls and convinces them to help him carry out his plan, which he claims will give the girls back the affection of their fellow citizens. The following day, the girls discover Jojo's original intention to rule the world with other apes and realize the damage they have caused by helping him. Overwhelmed, they exile themselves to an asteroid in outer space. Nonetheless, they inevitably hear the chaos on Earth and decide to go back to save the world and defeat Mojo Jojo. After their glorious victory, the girls accept the Townsville Mayor's request to use their superpowers to protect the city from crime and injustice.

Potts claims that the three sisters challenge "the notion that stereotypically feminine qualities like sweetness and innocence cannot coexist with toughness" (6). She also states that the Powerpuff Girls appeal to most viewers because they provide "positive female media images that are not based on sex appeal" (1). Blossom, Bubbles and Buttercup have, in fact, very androgynous bodies, similar to those of rag dolls, with round heads and extremely wide eyes. Lisa Hager explains that McCracken drew them in such a way so that they can be girls without being sexual objects for male fantasies. Hager argues, like Potts, that the Powerpuff Girls revise the definitions of girlhood within mainstream American popular culture by challenging the main ideals of feminine strength, sexuality, and agency. In fact, as we can see in the film, these characters are not just cute and sweet little girls; they are also extremely strong, powerful, and completely independent persons when it comes to defeating their enemy. Hager claims that although these superheroes embody conventional girlhood features with their "cute dresses and Mary Jane-style shoes, and pastel colored bedroom"(63), they also challenge stereotypical notions of gender as they "repeatedly demonstrate more physical and mental strength than all of the men and almost all the women on the show" (64). According to her, this peculiar combination makes available a new version of cool for girls "by being simultaneously cute as little girls and cool as physically violent superheroes" (64). It is true that this innovative representation of the girl superhero could offer little children new positive role models regarding female figures, but only provided the violence is accepted as just a cartoonish gimmick.

The Powerpuff girls' incredible skills place them in a position of extreme power; however, they must obey adult authority, mainly that of their 'father' Professor Utonium. This situation could be contemplated as controversial because although the girls reach a high level of independence, they are still subjected to a male character who is, besides, their maker without being their biological father. Following this way of thinking, we could interpret that, in reality, the girls do not completely break with their assigned gender roles as female characters. This double personality as superheroes and little girls is the reason why despite being lawless when they use their powers and destroy the city, they eventually act within the law protecting Townsville from villains and maintaining justice. Hager remarks that the chemical X is an essential ingredient for the girls to overcome the established boundaries that define them as little girls. In fact, the Professor's goal in his experiment is just to create a perfect little girl with the addition of Chemical X being just an accident. Hager suggests that this accident and the powerful element that turns the girls into superheroes implies that female nature must be

radically altered to be truly super-heroic. That is why the author ends concluding that though “these little girl superheroes offer a compelling, though momentary counternarrative that spectacularly redefines what it means to be a girl and a heroine in American culture” (75), their story needs to be read with caution.

Reviewer Stephen Holden, claims that what makes the Powerpuff Girls so appealing is their resemblance to everyday children: “They’re wildly energetic, competitive and (sometimes dangerously) impulsive. But they also learn from their mistakes and their instincts are good” (online). The fact that the protagonists are both ordinary and extraordinarily little children makes the film very attractive and provides it with truly entertaining, humorous scenes. Nevertheless, what no doubt makes the movie most appealing is McCracken’s presentation of little girls as extremely powerful superheroes with the ability to cause brutal violence, a rather uncommon characterization in children’s animated movies. The more skeptical reviewers of McCracken’s film tend to focus, precisely, on the excessive violence appearing in the movie. Among them, Tim Goodman notes that “*The Powerpuff Girls Movie* comes off slightly darker and even more violent than the series itself” (online). It is true that we can see violence throughout the film, however, there is nothing traumatizing; everything is considerably exaggerated, and cartoonish, so it is not harmful for little children. Furthermore, the violence and aggressiveness of the film are counteracted by the positive messages that it conveys regarding the effectiveness of cooperation and the call to face problems instead of running away from them. The aggressiveness exerted by the girls was, anyway, very controversial and raised strong criticism when the movie was released. However, we could wonder whether viewers would have been scandalized at the same level if the sisters had been boys. Violence would have been probably accepted more easily since children’s animated fictions starring violent male characters are traditionally better tolerated.

The Powerpuff Girls Movie, in short, portrays an alternative superhero model for little girls. The film presents three very young sisters playing the role of action heroes with extremely mighty superpowers and engaging in physical battles with their enemies. Blossom, Bubbles, and Buttercup defeat Mojo Jojo not only by using their strength, intelligence, and incredible speed, but also by exercising harsh violence to fight their archenemy’s army. Therefore, although this may sound controversial, the film shows that a combination of sweetness and violence is possible, providing a new definition of cool girlhood and challenging stereotypical gender roles through these unconventional tiny superheroes.

Works Cited

- Goodman Tim. “More ‘Power’ to ‘em (review)”. *SFGate.com*, 28 January 2012, <https://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/More-Power-to-em-2801283.php>
- Hager, Lisa. “Saving the World Before Bedtime: *The Powerpuff Girls*, Citizenship, and the Little Girl Superhero”. *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* 33.1, 2008, 62-78.
- Holden, Stephen. “They Have a Tantrum, Then Save the World (review)”. *The New York Times*, 3 July 2002, <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/07/03/movies/film-review-they-have-a-tantrum-then-save-the-world.html>
- Potts, Donna L. “Channelling Girl Power: Positive Female Media Images in *The Powerpuff Girls*”. *Studies in Media & Information Literacy Education* 1.4, November 2001, 1-9.

Helena Zúñiga Centenero

Finding Nemo (2003): A Little Drop in the Big Ocean

CREDITS

Directors: Andrew Stanton, Lee Unkrich (co-director)

Written by: Andrew Stanton (also story), Bob Peterson, David Reynolds

Producer: Graham Walters

Art direction: Randy Berret, Anthony Kristov, Robin Cooper, Ricky Nierva

Editor: David Ian Salter

Music: Thomas Newman

Main performers (voices): Albert Brooks (Marlin), Ellen Degeneres (Dory), Alexander Gold (Nemo), Willem Dafoe (Gill), Brad Garret (Bloat), Allison Janney (Peach), Austin Pendleton (Gurgle), Stephen Root (Bubbles), Vicky Lewis (Deb/Flo), Joe Ranft (Jaques), Bill Hunter (Dentist), Lulu Ebeling (Darla)

Company: Pixar Animation Studios, USA

Runtime: 1h 40'



REASONS TO SEE *Finding Nemo*

- Its wonderful portrayal of the friendship between a male and a female protagonist that departs from worn out clichés and unnecessary romantic interests.
- For depicting fatherhood in a realistic, non-stereotypical way that manages to avoid falling into the same old clichés of fatherly ineptitude.
- Its unusual and incredibly rich underwater setting and its astounding attention to detail.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *Finding Nemo*

With an overwhelmingly positive critical reception and a 99% reported approval rating in *Rotten Tomatoes*, *Finding Nemo* (2003) became an absolute hit right after its release. Developed by Pixar Animation Studios and distributed by Disney, the film saw the light of day in the middle of a bitter struggle between the two companies, which ended in a not too favorable resolution for the smaller studio when it was acquired by Disney in 2006. *Finding Nemo* is, thus, one of Pixar's last productions as an independent studio, one they can be very proud of, as its critical success was eventually ratified when the film won the Academy Award and the Saturn Award for Best Animated Film, among many others accolades.

Set in an unusual and incredibly rich underwater environment, the movie follows the story of Marlin the clownfish in his quest to rescue Nemo, his only son, who has been taken by a human diver and imprisoned in a dentist's fish tank. The opening scene of the movie reveals the tragic origins of this single parent family. Marlin and his wife Coral have just moved to an anemone on the edge of the reef bordering open sea,

as they are expecting and need more room for the many children that will join the family when their eggs finally hatch. This blissful prospect finds an abrupt end in the jaws of a preying barracuda. Although both Coral and Marlin put up a valiant fight, the mother and the eggs are eventually swallowed up by the predator, leaving Marlin and a single, damaged egg as the only survivors. Although the massacre takes place off screen, its implications become painfully apparent for Marlin and the spectator when he regains consciousness to meet a deserted house and the single surviving egg. Understandably, Marlin goes on to become an overprotective father with anxiety issues who keeps young Nemo always within fin distance.

The film narrates the adventures of both father and son, as they both embark on a quest to reunite with the other when little Nemo is lost. On the one hand, Marlin finds the courage to leave the reef behind and penetrate the vast, unknown sea in search of his only son. In his journey, he enlists the help of the ever oblivious and always lovable Dory, a reckless blue tang with memory problems. Her help provides the key to finding Nemo, as her mysterious ability to read English and her unexpected bouts of sudden insight contribute to tracking little Nemo to Sidney, where he is kept captive. On the other hand, Nemo establishes a curious relationship of trust with the other prisoners in the fish tank. This bond of mutual support and encouragement becomes fundamental in Nemo's development, as it is through it that he learns to face obstacles with courage and bravery despite his own shortcomings (one of his fins is smaller than the other). After facing countless dangers –amongst which are a trio of well-meaning but irredeemably carnivorous sharks, a minefield, sea's darkest depths, a humongous smack of dangerous jellyfish, and a flock of murderous seagulls– Marlin and Dory finally reach Sidney and reunite with Nemo. The trio then start their journey back home, having acquired through their adventures and many perils a better understanding of themselves and the others.

A story of this scope and magnitude raises several interesting points, three of which I would like to analyze, namely those of parenthood, gendered friendship, and self-acceptance. While the film seems to start with the same old cliché of the mother's death (going back to 1942 *Bambi*), it does indeed a great job of depicting a type of fatherhood that is not, contrary to what one would expect, riddled with ineptitude and comedic relief. Setting aside the biological aspects of real-life clown fish (the males can become female if the alpha female dies), the film chooses to portray Marlin as distinctly male through voice acting and dialogue references, as he is always presented as Nemo's father, and therefore, clearly delineated as a masculine character. Marlin's masculinity, however, seems to be firmly rooted in his own fatherhood, which defines not only the narrative thread of the movie but also his very own development. As a result, this character manages to break free from a tradition of maleness based on strength, bravery, bulging muscles, fights for honor and the eventual acquisition of the female as a trophy (Brydon, 2009: 131). Marlin's small body, overprotective attitude, and anxious demeanor, however, are not necessarily presented as alternative, desirable traits. While justified in his paranoia, his behavior smothers Nemo's eagerness to experience the wonders of the world by himself, as the school scene exemplifies at the beginning of the film. If anything, these traits are there to be overcome and play the part of the set of necessary flaws that any character worth its salt must face in order to achieve a meaningful development, as Marlin's continually does throughout his journey, often aided by Dory's well-meaning and spot-on remarks.

It is precisely in the evolving friendship of these two characters where lies one of the film's greatest achievements. While most of Disney's earlier releases (and not so early, if we consider *The Lion King* (1994) and *Toy Story* (1995)), have a heterosexual romantic relationship at the center, or at least as part of their plot, *Finding Nemo* manages to draw a swaying and inspiring portrayal of a friendship without ever hinting

at the possibility of romance between Marlin and Dory. This is particularly relevant for two reasons. While representations of friendship are by no means new to this film, *Finding Nemo* successfully presents children, its target audience, with a positive model of male-female friendship, thus widening the representation of this key developmental aspect in the life of any individual. At the same time, this emphasizes the importance of cooperation and same-level interaction; the characters act and make sacrifices for each other not because there is an end goal to achieve (i.e. winning the girl), but because of their bond of mutual trust and respectful confidence.

This bond is especially important to understand the theme of self-acceptance presented in the film, as it is through Dory and their joint adventures that Marlin finally comes to terms with the fact that Nemo must eventually outgrow his protection and start living on his own terms. Throughout the film, Nemo's smaller fin is the source of Marlin's anxiety, as he believes that it makes his son unfit to face the dangers and challenges of the external world. While his intentions are good, "Marlin, as the protective father concerned about Nemo's success, worries and smothers Nemo to the point of alienating him" (Preston 57). Interestingly, this alienation is dispelled by the welcoming and including attitude of Nemo's classmates, all of whom share their own differences with him in order to make him feel part of the group, rather than singling him out (Preston 57). This is particularly relevant not only within the film, but also for all those children moviegoers who might have felt excluded for not conforming to the norm or not fulfilling the expectations set upon them. Thus, Nemo's small fin is presented as simply part of his body and not a debilitating or alienating trait to be concealed from public view or public knowledge.

Reviewers such as Roger Ebert seem to be at least moderately aware of the film's potential narrative novelty. While praising the film for its powerful and enthralling visual display of the coral reef, Ebert does not fail to mention that the children "may appreciate another novelty: This time the dad is the hero of the story, although in most animation it is almost always the mother" (online). Although his second claim is debatable, his remark on the protagonist is still in point. Others, such as Stephen Holden, focus on the representation of the humans, specifically children, and our troubling interaction with marine life through the characterization of Darla, the dentist's awful eight-year-old niece, whom he describes as "a savage little monster who has been known to take a baggie containing a fish and shake it violently" (online) with fatal consequences for the fish. Whether the public needs yet another representation of an annoying little girl with braces, with all its negative implications, is, at the very least, debatable, but at least this goes to show that the question of our relationship with the other living beings on the planet is raised... and not in very positive light.

It should be clear by now that *Finding Nemo* is a gorgeous film that derives its success not only from its astonishing and mesmerizing visuals, but also from its positive representations of fatherhood, friendship, and bodily acceptance. However, it remains to be seen whether *Finding Nemo*'s little drop of positive representation will be enough to mitigate the effects of other, not so desirable stereotypical representations rampant in the ocean of today's media and entertainment.

Works Cited

- Brydon, Suzan G. "Men at the Heart of Mothering: Finding Mother in *Finding Nemo*". *Journal of Gender Studies*, 18.2, June 2009, 131-146.
- Ebert, Roger. "*Finding Nemo* (review)". *Roger Ebert.com*, 30 May 2003, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/finding-nemo-2003>

Holden, Stephen. "Vast Sea, Tiny Fish, Big Crisis (review)". *New York Times*, 30 May 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/30/movies/film-review-vast-sea-tiny-fish-big-crisis.html>

Preston, Daniel L. "Finding Difference: Nemo and Friends Opening the Door to Disability Theory". *The English Journal*, 100.2, November 2010, 56-60.

Rubén Campos Arjona

Finding Dory (2016): Disability and Gender Issues

CREDITS

Director: Andrew Stanton, Angus McLane (co-director)
Written by: Andrew Stanton (also story), Victoria Strouse
Producer: Lindsey Collins
Art direction: Bert Berry, Craig Foster, Don Shank
Editor: Axel Geddes
Music: Thomas Newman
Main performers (voices): Ellen DeGeneres (Dory), Sloane Murray (young Dory), Albert Brooks (Marlin), Hayden Rolence (Nemo), Ed O'Neill (Hank), Kaitlin Olson (Destiny), Ty Burrell (Bailey), Diane Keaton (Dory's mom), Eugene Levy (Dory's dad)
Company: Pixar Animation Studios, USA
Runtime: 1h 41'



REASONS TO SEE *Finding Dory*

- The film depicts a supportive network of family and friends. Dory's determination to find her parents proves the strong sense of belonging that she feels despite her short-term memory loss. Love, affection, respect and loyalty are just some of the main values of *Finding Dory*.
- The representation of disability. Both visible and non-visible, or in other words, physical and mental disabilities are a central component in this story.
- The message promoted. In a way, this film tells a story about a group of friends with different conditions who find a way not only to simply survive, but to succeed. In both *Finding Nemo* and *Finding Dory*, Dory's motto is: "Just keep swimming". It can be interpreted as an exhortation to be stronger than any physical or mental obstacle and do not let difficulties overwhelm you.

REPRESENTING GENDER IN *Finding Dory*

Finding Dory (2016) and its prequel *Finding Nemo* (2003) represent a turning point in the depiction of female characters in Pixar's films. When the female fish Dory appeared for the first time on the screen in 2003, she distinguished herself to the point that Haseenah Ebrahim noted that she "substitutes for the more frequent male sidekick" (46). Indeed, she asserts that until the release of *Brave* (2012), Pixar "had relegated girls to the backseat of supporting roles" (46). The attention paid to Dory, together with Elastigirl from *The Incredibles* (2004), Eve from *WALL-E* (2008), and Jesse the cowgirl in *Toy Story 2* (1999), provides a precious insight into the perception of the role of female protagonists. Furthermore, *Finding Dory* seems to break the traditional scheme of children's films, in which the storytelling finds its better expression

in the conflict with an antagonist that threatens the protagonists and their beloved. Journalist Peter Hartlaub asserts that Pixar's "greatest storytelling achievement may be the ability to create scenarios so complex and recognizable that the narrative doesn't require a villain. As in *Inside Out* and *Finding Nemo*, the battle in *Dory* isn't to overcome a bombastic evil foe, but to unlock resources in the hero, and to find help from others" (online).

Dory is a friendly blue tang fish who suffers from severe memory loss. When she is still a child, she is separated from her parents. She keeps looking for her family for years, not knowing where or when the tragic separation occurred. Gradually, her worst nightmare comes true and she forgets them. In the flashback of the previous film, *Finding Nemo*, the adult Dory accidentally swims into the clown-fish Marlin, who is looking for his missing son Nemo. One year later, Dory has one of her flashbacks and suddenly remembers her parents. She remembers that they lived at the Jewel of Morro Bay across the ocean in California. Dory realizes that they are still out in the ocean; therefore, she sets out to find them. However, her short-term memory loss represents an obstacle. Marlin and Nemo take part in this thrilling adventure, but during their journey, Dory hears a mysterious voice and, confused, she swims off to follow it. She is then rescued by two humans, who take her to the Marine Life Institute. There she meets the seven-legged octopus Hank, who makes a deal with her: he will help her to find her parents if she will give him her fin tag. The tag will allow him to go to Cleveland aquarium, where he will be able to enjoy a peaceful life of solitude. By the end of the film –thanks to the octopus who reluctantly befriends Dory, the whale Destiny and the beluga Bailey– Dory successfully reunites with her long-forgotten parents, Marlin and Nemo, and finally gains the courage to rely on herself.

Even though all of the major (and favorite) characters have disabilities –Dory has short-term memory loss, Nemo has a shortened fin, Marlin suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, Hank is an octopus with seven tentacles, Destiny is a near-sighted whale, and the beluga Bailey has some problem with his echolocation– the film struggles to present difference. The inclusion of disability does not guarantee recognition on the part of the audience nor accuracy of representation on the part of the filmmakers. Many critics reveal what the audience, children in particular, had missed, that is a conscious recognition of disabilities –or even better, different abilities– of the characters featured in the film.

The film begins with the adorable voice of Little Dory who calls out the audience. "Hi, I am Dory", she says while the screen remains black. Her image only fills the screen when she mentions her disability and mentions that "I suffer from short term memory loss". Dory's introduction, thus, foregrounds her disability as an essential part of her identity. Her cognitive problem permeates all of her experiences to the extent that her entire identity, being Dory, is about being disabled. What is noteworthy is that Dory does not simply *have* short-term memory loss; but that, according to her words, she *suffers* from it. This idea is reinforced by the exclamation that she makes when she is not able to remember: "Don't be such a Dory, Dory!" On a deeper level, that exclamation means that Dory suffers from being herself. She feels different, she feels wrong and, in conclusion, she does not want to be 'a Dory.' Her problem is characterized as an affliction, a source of anxiety and shame, which demonstrates how pervasive and severe the negative characterization of her disability is.

The joyful and heart-breaking reunion with her parents is spoiled when Dory breaks down in a tearful apology: "I'm sorry! I know I've got a problem. I know, and I'm so sorry, and all this time I've wanted to fix it –and I can't, and I try– I try, but my thoughts –they leave my head, and ideas change, and I've forgotten you– and I'm so sorry!" With these words, Dory expresses her frustration with not being able to remember and also her guilt for their separation, which she blames on her disability. In

this moment, we understand that Dory has internalized her different ability as a 'problem' that she is not able to 'fix' despite her great efforts. The film's subsequent narrative tries to alter this negative perception of disability, showing how Dory is able to accomplish incredible feats (such as to find her parents) *because* of her short-term memory loss, and not *in spite of* it. To some extent, this adventure represents Dory's journey to accept her disability and to show that being 'a Dory' is valuable. Marlin realizes that Dory's short-term memory loss does not make her incapable; in fact, he recognizes that Dory –because of her different ability– is much better suited to spontaneous problem solving than he is. Disability becomes a valuable tool and, so, when Nemo and Marlin are in trouble, they both wonder "What would Dory do?" making a sort of mantra out of this question. Dory's disability becomes valuable, but this change does not represent a wholly positive celebration of Dory and her different abilities. The attempt to subvert prejudice is not always effective, and this is made explicit when Marlin wonders aloud about how Dory is so good at getting through difficult situations. Nemo's reply is: "I don't think she knows, Dad. She just does". They think that Dory's intellect has nothing to do with her success.

A critical analysis of the character of Marlin, the male clownfish, shows that sometimes he embodies the social biases against disability that unfortunately are still dominant in our society. The harsh tone of his condemnations against Dory –and other secondary characters such as the female bird Becky– reveals his tendency to express the prejudice with accusations of incapability. Unfortunately, despite the film's promise of tolerance and inclusive messages, the story actually tends to perpetuate prejudice when it infantilizes Dory and reinstates stereotypes of people with disabilities. Dory's gender may affect the implications of her infantilization. Dory is a female character, and her vulnerability and mild nature often attract Marlin's overreactions and need for control. Of course, Marlin's demeaning and critical attitude toward female characters may be questionable. It is hard to say to what extent his behavior is correlated to gender issues; however, it is still worth mentioning.

Fiona Whittington-Walsh explores this topic in her essay on representations of people with physical and mental disabilities in film. She argues that "films with a disability theme are metaphorical, stigmatizing individuals with such characteristics as: innocent and child-like; savants; isolated and pathologised; self-sacrificing saviours; asexual and dependent" (696). However, Whittington-Walsh argues that, while the features of innocence and infantilism are attributed to male characters, "women that have a mental illness or are deaf or blind are seen as a sexual object by society, therefore making those female characters desirable" (702). Apparently, Dory's disability challenges this pattern since her disability is the main reason of her infantilization and desexualization. What characterizes Dory is her childlike naivety. The film stresses her difficulty to interact with adults, implying that she does not have the same capabilities. At the end of the film, Dory's parents accompany their daughter to school, stressing her lack of autonomy and suggesting how Dory is still dependent on them. She attends the same class as Nemo, who is only in his second year of schooling. Actually, Dory innocently misunderstands Marlin's words, and thinks that Marlin and Mr. Ray are letting her be a class helper instead of a student. In this way, the film displays the dichotomy between the attempt to promote an innovation in the role of female characters in animated children's cinema and the tendency to depict them as weak females who rely on the support of someone else. Even though the aim of the story seems to be the recognition of Dory as capable and successful, the film still presents her as a child, and the tension between these two representations of Dory remains unresolved.

Another important element related to gender issues in *Finding Dory* is the presence of what the audience assumes is a same-sex couple. In one of the main

scenes, we see two women standing together with a baby stroller. Speculation about whether this is a lesbian couple started spreading immediately after the release of the trailer. This news coincided with the call for Disney/Pixar to include lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender characters in other of their films. With the announcement of Disney's *Frozen 2*, fans called for filmmakers to give Queen Elsa a partner with the hashtag '#GiveElsaAGirlfriend' (the hashtag '#GiveCaptainAmericaABoyfriend' was also popular on Twitter). When *Finding Dory* was released, a *Guardian* journalist asked co-director Andrew Stanton if the couple depicted onscreen was indeed a lesbian couple. He neither confirm nor denied it, but simply said that "they can be whatever you want them to be. There's no right or wrong answer" for, he added, "we have not asked that of any of the couples in any of our shots in any of our movies" (Lee online). Producer Lindsey Collins concurred. There is no conclusive evidence one way or another, but if rumors are correct, this would be the first same-sex couple in a Disney/Pixar film. A minor yet significant innovation.

Works Cited

- Ebrahim, Haseenah. "Are the 'Boys' at Pixar Afraid of Little Girls?" *Journal of Film and Video*, 66.3, 2014, 43-56.
- Gleiberman, Owen. "Film Review: *Finding Dory*". *Variety*, 10 June 2016, <https://variety.com/2016/film/reviews/finding-dory-review-ellen-degeneres-albert-brooks-pixar-1201791897/>
- Hartlaub, Peter. "*Finding Dory*: It Takes an Ocean to Make a Worthy Sequel". *SFGate*, 16 June 2016, <https://www.sfgate.com/movies/article/Finding-Dory-brings-the-fish-tale-to-a-new-8133528.php>
- Klinowski, Stacie. "*Finding Nemo, Finding Dory, Finding Ourselves: How and Why We Teach Our Children to Think About Disability*". BA Honours thesis. State University of New York, 2017. https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/honorscollege_eng/25/
- Lee, Benjamin. "No Right or Wrong Answer on *Finding Dory*'s Lesbian Couple, Say Filmmakers". *The Guardian*, 9 June 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/jun/09/finding-dory-lesbian-couple-disney-gay-characters>
- Whittington-Walsh, Fiona. "From Freaks to Savants: Disability and Hegemony from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1939) to *Sling Blade* (1997)". *Disability & Society* 17. 6, 2002, 695-707.

Silvia Gervasi

The Incredibles (2004): Conventuality and Rebellion

CREDITS

Directors: Brad Bird
Written by: Brad Bird
Producer: John Walker
Art direction: Ralph Eggleston
Editor: Stephen Schaffer
Music: Michael Giacchino
Main performers (voices): Craig T. Nelson (Bob Parr /Mr. Incredible); Holly Hunter (Helen Parr/ Elastigirl); Samuel L. Jackson (Lucius Best/ Frozone); Jason Lee (Buddy Pine/ Syndrome); Spencer Fox (Dashiell 'Dash' Parr); Sarah Vowell (Violet Parr); Elizabeth Peña (Mirage); Brad Bird (Edna 'E' Mode); Eli Fucile (Jack-Jack Parr); Bret 'Brook' Parker (Kari)
Company: Pixar Animation Studios, USA
Runtime: 1h 55'



REASONS TO SEE *The Incredibles*

- The film won two Oscars in 2005: one for Best Animated Featured Film of the Year, and one for Best Achievement in Sound Editing.
- The film's main message is to bring everyone's talents to light and not to hide one's uniqueness.
- The great emphasis on family love, and how difficulties become easier while tackling them together with other people.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *The Incredibles*

Pixar was already recognized as one of the most important animation studios when *The Incredibles* (2004) was first released in cinemas, thanks to films such as *Toy Story* (1995), *Monsters Inc.* (2001), or *Finding Nemo* (2003). Brad Bird's film narrates an original story based on the main protagonist's mid-life crisis, but with a superhero flavor. The story follows Bob Parr as he deals with his everyday life and his longing for his past days as the superhero Mr. Incredible, until he realizes that his life with his family is an adventure on its own and he needs to appreciate it as such. *The Incredibles* was a great success, being awarded two Oscars and a nomination for the Golden Globe award in 2005, opening the path for the eventual release of its sequel in 2018.

In the movie's world, superheroes have fallen out of favor. After some incidents in which Mr. Incredible is even sued for saving a man from committing suicide, society starts rejecting superheroes, who are forced to live the rest of their lives in anonymity. Mr. Incredible, now plain Bob Parr, goes on to enjoy his new married life with Elastigirl, now plain Helen Parr. Fifteen years later, a no longer young Bob works in the insurance business and thinks of his exciting days as a superhero as the best time of his life. He

and Helen have three children (Violet, Dash and the baby Jack) and all of them are forced to hide their superpowers. However, after being fired from his terribly boring job, Bob sees a new chance opening up for him when he receives an invitation to resume his job as a superhero. He jumps at the chance and leaves home, though he lies to his wife telling he is attending a conference. For some time Bob leads a double life as a family father and as a superhero doing covert missions. Nevertheless, his plans crumble when Bob discovers that he has been secretly employed by a villain enemy, Syndrome, who then kidnaps him. Helen discovers the truth but resolves nonetheless to rescue Bob. Once he is free, the parents and the two oldest children get into a decisive battle to save the city from Syndrome's villainous plans, ultimately regaining the citizens' broken trust on all superheroes.

Despite its superhero motive, the word conventional seems adequate to describe many of the gender issues relating to this film. In a manner similar to how Syndrome wishes to make everyone equal so that there is no one above the rest, the depiction of gender roles in the film seems to have been made purposefully conservative so that there are no rogue elements rising above others. The really interesting question to discuss, then, is up until which point *The Incredibles* really is conservative, and to what extent do the characters rebel against these conventionalities. As Meinel points out, "the animated film draws on nineteenth-century notions of marriage" (170), further highlighting the normative ideas of family which the film seems to perpetuate. He observes that even the family's superpowers are proof of their normativity: both strength and speed are considered to be powers more closely related to aggression than elasticity and invisibility, which could be considered closer to the idea of nurturing. Hence, Bob is strong and Dash fast, whereas Helen is flexible and Violet can disappear. Their superpowers are, thus, close aligned to traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity (174).

Besides, Helen seems to be widely perceived as being happy with her status as a housewife, which is not questioned, whereas Bob is dissatisfied with his job at an insurance company. James Berardinelli points out in his review that Helen has adjusted better than Bob to domestic life as if this was a logical step for a previous female superhero (online), and he is not the only one. The film's main question, as reviewer Marc Savlov puts it, is rather whether "men can settle down without neutering their internal superheroes" (online), without any question about whether women can do the same. Actually, Helen's discontent with her domestic life and her frustrated expectations are occasionally visible, especially in the contrast between Helen's relaxed and powerful aura when she goes back to her superhero job and her constant frustration in her dealings with Bob and her children at home. This does not mean that Helen cannot be a powerful superhero and a housewife at the same time; rather, the question is why it is taken for granted that Helen is satisfied with her current way of life whereas Bob is not when *both* are former superheroes. While Helen does not make her discontentment as vocal as Bob's, it is clear that the nostalgia of her old days is not lost on her either. The film, however, does not focus so prominently on it.

If there is, then, one character in the film that can be said to challenge conventionality, that is Helen. She was able to change and blend into the general population when she was asked to, once the Government decided to ban superheroes, but when she comes across the possibility of returning to her hero life it becomes obvious that she missed the role as much as Bob. After a well-placed speech by designer Edna Mode part about who she is and what she is capable of doing, Helen regains a strength she thought lost and flies to rescue her husband. This chance shows Helen's true inner strength and her rebellion against the film's normativity; she finally asserts her will to stand beside her husband, not to be left behind again. When he

rescues him, she is clear enough: “You’re my husband. I’m with you for better or worse”.

Another female character challenges her conventional role: Mirage, the villain’s perfect love interest, manages in the end to recover her autonomy and make her own decisions. After realizing that Syndrome would risk her life at a gamble without the slightest regret, Mirage decides that she is worth more than what Syndrome can offer her. In the end, this will lead to her decision to abandon Syndrome and work against him to help the Parr family save the city. Both her and Helen are examples of how, despite the normative environment they are living in, it is possible to make their own decisions and act on their beliefs, even when they are in direct contradiction to those of their male partners. Nevertheless, in contrast to Helen and Mirage positive characterizations, we are briefly introduced to black superhero Frozone’s wife, Honey Best. In a very short scene, when she is not even seen but only heard, Honey becomes the perfect example of a stereotypical nagging wife we are supposed to make fun of. Thinking his superhero prime is over, Honey has stored away her husband’s suit. When he frantically asks for it, she attaches more importance to their evening date than to the robot then destroying the city to Frozone’s despair. The scene is written for comic relief but that again returns us to the question of up to which point does *The Incredibles* really challenges gender stereotypes.

While his wife fights for her family and to recover her old self, Bob has his own battles to fight. The loss of his previous abilities becomes obvious to him when he finally discovers that the new villain Syndrome is the former young adoring fanboy Buddy he had discredited in his glory days. However, as Gillam and Wooden argue, it will be precisely because of Syndrome that Bob will be able to recover his masculine identity (5). Buddy started admiring Mr. Incredible’s strength and sense of duty, regarding him as a reference and a model to look up to, when he was himself a clever but rather small and physically weak child. Because of Mr. Incredible’s rejection that admiration turns into resentment, and Syndrome becomes the polar opposite of Mr. Incredible: not a superhero, but a mega-villain who bases his main strength not on physical power but on the intellect. Yet still they both coincide on the importance of working alone: Bob for fear of exposing his family to danger, and Syndrome for lack of trust towards his partners, Mirage being the prime example. As Gillam and Wooden further argue, only when Mr. Incredible finally accepts the help of his family can he rise as a new man, and as the real hero of the story (6). Once his narrative mission to trigger Mr. Incredible’s full return is over, Syndrome can finally be eliminated, effectively putting an end to his threat. In the end, Syndrome and his unconventional villainous masculinity are defeated stressing that the film’s conventionality is indeed its major driving force.

All in all, *The Incredibles* received mainly positive reviews, which attest to the film’s capacity to be fun and entertaining while at the same time highlighting the importance of family and teamwork. Even though in the end the film portrays mostly conventional roles for its characters, some of them manage to break through the limits of normativity and rebel against it, even if in the long term conventionality still wins the day and turns everything back to its supposed place.

Works Cited

- Berardinelli, James. “*The Incredibles*” (review). *Reel Views*, undated <https://www.reelviews.net/reelviews/incredibles-the>
- Gillam, Ken and Shannon R. Wooden. “Post-Princess Models of Gender: the New Man in Disney/Pixar”. *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 36.1, Spring 2008, 2-8.
- Meinel, Dietmar. *Pixar’s America: The Re-Animation of American Myths and Symbols*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Savlov, Mark. ““*The Incredibles*” (review). *Austin Chronicle*, 5 November 2004, <https://www.austinchronicle.com/events/film/2004-11-05/the-incredibles/>

Cristina Espejo Navas

Incredibles 2 (2018): The Female Breadwinner as Superhero

CREDITS

Directors: Brad Bird
Written by: Brad Bird
Producer: Nicole Paradis Grindle and John Walker.
Art direction: Josh Holtsclaw
Editor: Stephen Schaffer
Music: Michael Giacchino
Main performers (voices): Craig T. Nelson (Bob Parr/Mr. Incredible), Holly Hunter Helen Parr/Elastigirl), Sarah Vowell (Violet Parr), Huck Milner (Dashiell Parr), Catherine Keener (Evelyn Deavor), Bob Odenkirk (Winston Deavor), Samuel L. Jackson (Lucius Best / Frozone)
Company: Pixar Animation Studios, USA
Runtime: 1h 58'



REASONS TO SEE *Incredibles 2*

- It is the sequel of *The Incredibles* (2004) and the 20th highest-rated animated film of all time in the review site Rotten Tomatoes.
- It truly presents a superhero female character as the main protagonist.
- Despite being just nominated for Best Animated Feature Film at the Oscars, it was awarded the Best Animated Female distinction at the EDA Female Focus Award for Helen Parr.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *Incredibles 2*

After releasing sequels for well-known titles such as *Toy Story* (1995), *Monsters, Inc.* (2001), or *Cars* (2006), Pixar Animation Studios launched yet another sequel for its 2004 hit *The Incredibles*. With other franchises almost exhausted, *Incredibles 2* (2018) was released at a convenient time for the company's play-safe strategy while its parent company Disney re-made many of its most iconic animated films as live action versions (such as *Dumbo* or *Aladdin*, released in 2019). Despite having only been nominated for Best Animated Feature at the Oscars –its prequel was awarded Best Animated Feature and Best Edited Sound– *Incredibles 2* seems to have earned high praise by reviewers and the recognition of social-conscious associations such as the Alliance of Women Film Journalists or the legendary National Board of Review.

Despite the fourteen years between the two films, the story continues from the previous film's final scene in which the Parrs end up defeating the villain Syndrome. The enormous material losses caused by the mission make the Government decide to shut down the Superhero program. This way the Parrs –as well as all other

superheroes– are forced to return to their ‘normal’ lives after having been made officially illegal as a superhero family. The film introduces next Winston Deavour, a wealthy businessman interested in hiring the superheroes for a mysterious private project which he and his sister, Evelyn, are trying to launch and which presumably aims at the restoration of their public trust. Elastigirl is chosen for the first mission due to her ability to do her job without casualties, which mightily disappoints Mr. Incredible, who had taken for granted he would be hired. The company run out by the Deavour siblings, who became orphaned after their parents were killed due to their close relationship with superheroes, turns out to actually have a very different mission in view. Virtually managed by Evelyn (and her puppet minion the Screenslaver), the company’s actual aim is the ultimate illegalization of all superheroes in the world. Following Helen’s lead, all members of the Parr family get involved in the unmasking of the company’s true goal and the eventual restoration of the superheroes’ public image.

The film’s narrative delves into several gender issues such as parenthood, the pursuit of a professional career or the education of the children, to name but a few. Although the film is supposed to be built equally around Mr. and Mrs. Parr –all major events in the film have one or the other directly involved– there is a clear focus on the female protagonist. Elastigirl (aka Helen Parr or Mrs. Parr) is in this respect more than just a mere main female character. All reviewers coincide in the prominent role awarded to Helen: “It’s Elastigirl’s time. While all family members have their moments, the film’s A-story definitely belongs to [Holly] Hunter’s Elastigirl” (Sorrentino, online). Her appointment by the Deavor siblings to complete their first mission not only projects her own image as a superhero but also sets aside the traditional well-built strong handsome superhero embodied by Mr. Incredible. This role reversal is not done at the expense of his humiliation, however, but very elegantly presented as an illustrative exercise in wearing someone else’s shoes, more particularly one’s partner’s.

This way, the viewer is delighted with the too long hidden superhero nature of the working wife and mother Helen, and with the loving character of the stay-at-home father Bob, who must work out how to cope with all types of household affairs and, in particular, the emerging, uncontrolled and disrupting powers of baby Jack-Jack. Mr. Parr –as the delegate in the film for all men– experiences a role reversal that questions the established gender hierarchy and places women at the foreground, a change that some scholars claim is at the basis of what has been coined the ‘masculinity crisis’. Ringrose and Epstein go beyond this claim and note that “the representational politics around girls’ achievement” –by which women are more and more valued according to their professional success and performance in the public domain– blames feminism for triggering such an “economic change and ensuing masculine ‘crisis’ with women as the unique benefactors” (156). The film uses these ideas and pours into the character of a jobless hero all sort of domestic hardships to strengthen his sense of displacement. Its finale, though, gladly foreshadows the possibility for men to reconcile with this new paradigm as Mr. Parr seems to finally manage to control not only the children, but also the household.

But that’s not all. The focus on the female in this movie exceeds Elastigirl with a plot embracing all the female characters by giving them a personal voice of their own. Not only does Helen make her opinion count and be respected against her husband’s, but all other female characters also claim their right to make their own decisions. “Elastigirl gets to be the face of heroism” (Cummings, 30) to the extreme that she directly addresses her female battle buddies: “Girls, come on... Leave the saving of the world to the men? I don’t think so”. Her daughter, Violet, is a teenager who flirts with a schoolboy and takes the leading role in their meetings. Edna, the fashion designer, lives on her own and congratulates herself for having rightly chosen not to have kids and, therefore, not being limited by motherhood. Even villain Evelyn stands out as the real

operator behind the project that she and her brother –a workaholic who completely fails to acknowledge he is literally being manipulated by his cunning sister– are running.

Evelyn, of course, embodies the dark side of modern 21st century womanhood, in direct opposition to Helen Parr. Pixar's first female villain is primarily depicted as a source of deceitfulness and harmful knavery through her ability to initially show herself as extremely lovable and friendly before being unmasked and have her true malicious nature displayed. Evelyn is introduced as a tormented character that has not been able to overcome her parent's death (as a result of a late response on the part of superheroes) and has ever since devoted all her anger and efforts to fight the rising of superheroes. Childless, single and unhappy Evelyn can also be read as a failed woman. Unlike Helen, she has not managed to direct her gifted mind towards a 'correct' goal – namely the establishment of a family like Helen's– and has fallen into the realm of patriarchal villainy for which she is eventually arrested and put in jail. The dangers of not abiding by the established roads for women are here craftily shown.

The narrative reinforces this discourse by placing a male character –Mr. Parr– within the domestic sphere, thus, illustrating on the one hand Mr. Parr's inability to function as an ordinary 'hero' and, on the other hand, the constraints of such a stereotyped masculinity. Bob's displacement in the film is, to a certain extent, problematic as it produces ambivalent responses. As Suzan G. Brydon states, "the fact that mothering, as performance, is embraced and engaged in by a stereotypically gendered man in *Incredibles 2* is [...] *incredible*. [...] One might argue what there is to celebrate in the fact that Pixar has not allowed this to occur in over nearly a decade since the release of *Finding Nemo*" (9). So, the question to be posed at this point necessarily has to address the shortage of representations of domestic masculinities in children's animated films. Despite the fact that this movie breaks with this regrettable absence, it is likewise reasonable to argue that Bob unfairly benefits from a more than questionable portrayal as a 'pioneer'. His efforts to work out how to manage the household while looking after the children –including a toddler who needs 24h attention– are in his case way better rewarded yet these are the very same efforts Helen has been making for so long and that so little credit have reported to her.

One of the biggest achievements in Helen's design is her ability to successfully face the work-home dilemma many present-day women experience. Unlike her husband –who can't understand his wife's indecision before Deavour's proposal– Elastigirl constantly balances her professional aspirations with the welfare of the Parr family, thus stressing her unwavering commitment to his role as wife and mother. This is a crucial element in the film as it unveils the mechanics of the glass ceiling. Mr. Incredible's reaction to his wife's hesitation suggests that, in her position, he would not hesitate to put work before family. The whole scene, in fact, displays the way gender is influenced by the socioeconomic and family responsibilities of individuals. Harry Brod analyses how these inequalities emerge stating that "It is not just that women face a glass ceiling that hinders their advancement, while men need to walk up the stairs on their own. Rather, men are on a glass escalator that propels them through that ceiling. While it is true that a talented and energetic woman may be able to break through the ceiling, it is equally true that a man need only be average to move upward on the escalator" (171-172). Helen is extraordinarily efficient –not simply an average professional– being comfortable in her two roles as motherly Mrs. Parr and womanly Elastigirl, as it is easy to grasp throughout the whole film. The audience learns how much she enjoys her profession in a very illustrative scene when she can no longer constrain herself to her role as a mother. After an exciting day as a superhero away from home, Helen is ready to go to bed but first phones her husband and, after some compulsory questions regarding the children and the house, she explodes in joy while telling Bob how exciting the mission she has been assigned is. The frustration Mr.

Incredible experiences at home contrasts with the enormously rewarding tasks his wife is carrying out. Not only has she taken over the position Mr. Incredible expected to occupy but she has also proved to be an outstanding provider for the family; her new income and social benefits allow the Parrs to move into a cutting-edge automated luxury mansion, which presumably would have never been possible if their roles had not been reversed. Bob, in this sense, becomes here a victim of the Parrs' conventional marriage as they both decided that only one would be in charge of providing the household, thus, leaving the already fallen hero with no other option than becoming a house husband.

Being the new breadwinner, though, has some costs for the mother. Elastigirl must accept that her professional career can only develop at the expense of some aspects of her family life. Thus, at the end of the film, right after Evelyn is defeated, Helen realizes she has missed that her own baby son has developed multiple powers. She must accept the loss of this parental experience and others that might come due to the obvious incompatibility of some aspects of family life with her new professional responsibilities. No matter how brief and subtle this moment is in the movie, the cost of being the new 'head of the family' is exposed. Even so, *The Incredibles 2* is a manifest improvement on the far more traditional roles of Bob as breadwinner and Helen as homemaker offered in the first film and, as such, a welcome advance thinking both of the not-so-young members of the audience and the children in it.

Works Cited

- Brod, Harry. "Studying Masculinities as Superordinate Studies". *Masculinity Studies & Feminist Theory. New Directions*, Judith Kegan Gardiner (ed.). Columbia University Press, 2002, 161-175.
- Brydon Suzan G. "'I've Got to Succeed, So She Can Succeed, So We Can Succeed': Empowered Mothering, Role Fluidity, and Competition in Incredible Parenting". *Social Sciences*, 7.215, 2018, 1-12.
- Cummings, Kaitlyn A. "Same Image, Different Lens: Revisiting the Critical Reception of Two Different Generations of Cinematic Superheroism". *Panic at the Discourse: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 1.1, 2019, 20-36.
- Ringrose, Jessica and Debbie Epstein. "Gender and Schooling". *Introducing Gender and Women's Studies*, Diane Richardson and Victoria Robinson (eds.). Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, 144-159.
- Sorrentino, Mike. "*Incredibles 2*: Elastigirl Shines in Charming Pixar Superhero Sequel (review)". *Cnet.com*, 17 June 2018, <https://www.cnet.com/news/incredibles-2-review-pixar-makes-superheroes-fun-again/>

Manu Díaz Inglés

Cars (2006): Learning to Slow Down

CREDITS

Directors: John Lasseter

Written by: Dan Fogelman, John Lasseter, Joe Ranft, Kiel Murray, Phil Lorin, Jorgen Klubien; story by: John Lasseter, Joe Ranft, Jorgen Klubien

Producer: Darla K. Anderson

Art direction: Jean-Claude Kalache, Jeremy Lasky

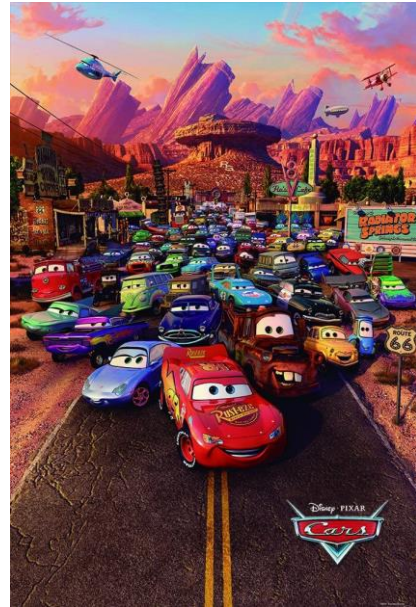
Editor: Ken Schretzmann

Music: Randy Newman

Main performers (voices): Owen Wilson (Lightning McQueen), Paul Newman (Doc Hudson), Bonnie Hunt (Sally Carrera), Larry the Cable Guy (Mater), Cheech Marin (Ramone), Tony Shalhoub (Luigi), Guido Quaroni (Guido), Jenifer Lewis (Flo), Paul Dooley (Sarge), Michael Wallis (Sheriff)

Company: Pixar Animation Studios, USA

Runtime: 1h 57'



REASONS TO SEE *Cars*

- It was the first installment of one of the highest-grossing animation franchises of all time, currently placed at the 11th highest spot in box-office earnings.
- It presents an attention to detail when it comes to the vehicle models that appear on-screen which appeals to anyone that is a fan of cars, the racing world, or both.
- For the voice cast that comprises well-known talents such as the actor Owen Wilson (playing Lightning McQueen), Paul Newman (playing Doc Hudson in his last acting role) and the comedian Daniel Lawrence Whitney aka Larry the Cable Guy (playing Mater).

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *Cars*

Cars (2006) is one of the earliest films in the history of Pixar Animation Studios, specifically it is the seventh feature film they created. The studio had seen success since their first CGI animation film, *Toy Story* (1995), whose director, John Lasseter, also directed *Cars*. *Cars* was also the first film that the studio produced after Disney bought Pixar, following a very tumultuous relationship after the deal the two companies made in 1991 for Pixar to produce three feature-length films that Disney would distribute and own the rights to. This made *Cars* the first Pixar film to be branded as a Disney-Pixar production in its promotional material.

Cars is an original story set in a world that is inhabited solely by talking vehicles, a vast majority of them being cars of all types. Lightning McQueen, a brazen race car and the rising star in the racing world, aims to win the final race of the Piston Cup. However, he finishes in a three-way tie against old veteran Strip "The King" Weathers and hostile

competitor Chick Hicks. A tiebreaker race in California is scheduled for one week later but McQueen's selfish and impulsive behavior has him part with Mack, the truck transporting him, and end up in Radiator Springs, an isolated desert town that no one but its inhabitants care for. McQueen is desperate to get to California to be able to sweet-talk the prestigious Dinoco team to sponsor him after The King retires, but he accidentally destroys the road of Radiator Springs and is assigned community service to fix it before leaving town, a sentence passed by town doctor and judge Doc Hudson and the town lawyer Sally. McQueen is very reluctant to do the job first, and he does it lousily, but he slowly bonds with the town cars, especially Mater, a friendly tow truck, and Sally, with whom McQueen forms a budding romance. Slowly but surely, he learns to think about the vehicles that surround him instead of focusing only on himself, finishes a beautiful road for the town, and accepts every lesson that Doc Hudson (a retired race car that had a bad crash during his career and disappeared from the public eye afterwards) has taught him. Lightning eventually reaches California thinking he is alone, but his friends from Radiator Springs show up and support him throughout the race, which he willingly loses to help The King cross the finish line after he crashes. Thus, he learns the lesson that not everything is about winning, which leads him to reject the Dinoco sponsorship, preferring to stick with the humbler people that he started with.

In *Post-Princess Models of Gender: The New Man in Disney/Pixar*, Ken Gilliam and Shannon R. Wooden describe Lightning McQueen at the beginning of the film as “unambiguously alpha”, claiming that despite not having achieved the success he craves “his ambition and fierce competitiveness still clearly valorize the alpha-male model” (4). *Cars* presents this alpha-male Lightning McQueen as someone that is individualistic to a fault, a selfish character that does not bother to look at his surroundings and only thinks about himself. He is portrayed as an impulsive youth that only thinks about speeding up; his main goal in life is to become the very first rookie to win the Piston Cup, thus being the fastest car in racing history, both inside the racing tracks and outside.

A reading of McQueen's individualistic nature can thus be made linking it directly to his masculinity and the alpha-male features that Gilliam and Wooden describe. There are certain kinds of behavior that are not seen as socially acceptable for the Western male, such as expressing vulnerability or the need for help. McQueen's first downfall happens in the race that serves as an opening for the film when he refuses the much-needed help of his crew, as he is set on finishing the race on his own (yet another achievement that he wants under his belt alongside being the youngest champion of the cup). Due to his refusal to let his crew change his tires, he is forced to slow down at the end, ending the race on the three-way tie that drives the plot of the film. This is the flawed Lightning McQueen that *Cars* first presents but who, as the movie progresses, goes through a character arc that makes him grow and mature.

After the race that opens the film, the self-destructive nature of his personality is quickly made apparent as his crew abandons him and McQueen realizes that he has no friends to spend his time with. This lonely realization does not start his character development, however, as his selfishness and disregard for the needs of Mac, his transporter truck, land him in Radiator Springs. Initially, McQueen loathes the town, especially when he is forced into community service which, as Gilliam and Wooden argue, emasculates him, as “His own ‘horsepower’ (as Sally cheerfully points out) is used against him when literally put in the service of a nominally feminized figure valued for the more ‘feminine’ orientation of service to the community” (4). However, Mater and Sally teach him how to appreciate the beauty of Radiator Springs, and through his friendship with the inhabitants of the town and the mentorship that former race car Doc Hudson offers him, McQueen learns how to slow down.

There is an underlying message here about the importance of community and appreciation for the legacy and way of living of older generations, but the message that is most closely connected to McQueen's masculinity is that of the importance of working as a team. In "The Portrayal of Gender and Race in *Cars* Trilogy", Nurhadianty Rahayu maintains that *Cars* is "focused on the brave and confident Lightning McQueen's journey from being an arrogant and selfish rookie to be mature, caring part of a team's work" (82). This is something that is shown at the climax of the film (the tiebreaker race in California), when McQueen pulls ahead of the race thanks to his friends from Radiator Springs showing up, especially with Doc Hudson acting as his crew chief. Not only does McQueen accept the help that his friends offer him, but he even gives up his win to help veteran racer The King cross the finish line of his last race, actively stripping away the alpha-male qualities that he started with to choose community and selflessness instead. It is important to note, however, that the message of the film and its execution was scrutinized by some critics for not thinking of its target audience enough. For example, Olly Richards says that "With a core message about getting out of the fast lane and enjoying the slow scenic route, it's a story designed for a middle-aged man, not a sugar-fueled pre-teen for whom the fast lane is never fast" (online).

When discussing Lightning McQueen and his growth as a character, the role that Sally, his love interest, plays in it, cannot be ignored. Sally is the town lawyer and the owner of a motel, a fully-realized female car that has a degree of maturity that McQueen sorely lacks –something that creates a dynamic between these two characters that goes beyond a simple budding romance: she becomes another kind of mentor for him. She is the character that teaches him how it feels to take slow rides through the roads to appreciate the simple act of moving outside of competition, and she also teaches him the beauty and charm of Radiator Springs. The role that she has as a character outside of this mentorship is minimal, and the romance between the two characters is sudden and underdeveloped. McQueen is attracted to Sally at first sight and she seems to fall for him as soon as he properly does the work he has been asked to do and finally thanks her (despite the fact that he disrespected her and the town that is so dear to her). As a female character in the film, Sally is presented as someone independent with a completed character arc; however, that still goes through an underdeveloped romance with the male protagonist. Her character is trapped between two harmful ideas: being the perfectly developed female character that has no flaws, which leaves no room in the story to explore her growth, and being a love interest of the main character just by virtue of being a female character that exists near him, all in spite of a lack of substantial development between them outside of the mentorship that she gives him to help further his character development.

In conclusion, *Cars* is a film about a flawed protagonist that aspires to be an alpha-male but crashes down in his frantic race for success. When he is forced to slow down, he learns the value and beauty of teamwork and community. However, the intense focus on Lightning McQueen's character development and the deconstruction of the alpha-male model he initially represents works to the detriment of the main female character, Sally. Thus, Pixar's *Cars* shows a remarkable message about positive masculinity, but the missteps it makes in terms of its female characters cannot be overlooked.

Works Cited

Gillam, Ken and Shannon R. Wooden. "Post-Princess Models Of Gender: The New Man In Disney/Pixar". *Journal Of Popular Film And Television*, 36.1, 2008, 2-8.

Rahayu, Nurhadianty. "The Portrayal of Gender and Race in *Cars* Trilogy". *Atavisme*, 22.1, 2019, 75-87.
Richards, Olly. "Cars Review". *Empire*, 27 July 2006, <https://www.empireonline.com/movies/reviews/cars-review/>

Maria Guallar Comas

Cars 2 (2011): An Unconventional Spy, a Conventional Love Interest

CREDITS

Directors: John Lasseter, Bradford Lewis (co-director)

Written by: Ben Queen; story by: John Lasseter, Bradford Lewis, Dan Fogelman

Producer: Denise Ream

Art direction: Bert Berry, Jay Shuster

Editor: Stephen Schaffer

Music: Michael Giacchino

Main performers: Larry the Cable Guy (Mater), Owen Wilson (Lightning McQueen), Michael Caine (Finn McMissile), Emily Mortimer (Holley Shiftwell), Eddie Izzard (Sir Miles Axlerod), John Turturro (Francesco Bernoulli), Thomas Kretschmann (Professor Z), Bonnie Hunt (Sally)

Company: Disney Pixar Animation Studios, USA

Runtime: 1h 46'



REASONS TO SEE *Cars 2*

- It is a nice follow-up to the first film, having been nominated for a Golden Globe in the category of Best Animated Feature Film.
- Like every Pixar film, it is a visual masterpiece. The animation is so realistic that sometimes it even makes you forget that you are watching an animated car race and not a real one.
- The espionage plot resembles live action film storylines such as the famous James Bond franchise. However, *Cars 2* (2011) reinvents this tradition by putting in its center an unexpected, unconventional protagonist.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *Cars 2*

Cars 2 reached the cinemas in 2011, five years after the first installment of the franchise. It is the twelfth animated feature film made by Pixar Animated Studios, and the fifth to be released after the company's acquisition by The Walt Disney Company in 2006. The film's project was first announced in 2008, alongside *Up* (2009) and *Brave* (2012), and all three were released as 3-D films. In artistic terms *Cars 2* (2011) could be considered quite a flop when compared to its predecessors, the mesmerizing *Up* (2009) and the successful *Toy Story 3* (2010), for it only managed to get a nomination for Best Animated Feature Film in the Golden Globes. Furthermore, it received mixed reviews both from critics and general audiences, although the general response tended to be more negative than positive.

Regarding the plot, after another successful racing season, now four-time Piston Cup champion Lightning McQueen returns to Radiator Springs to spend some time

with his friends. However, when Italian formula race car Francesco Bernoulli challenges McQueen to participate in a new competition in Europe called the World Grand Prix, McQueen accepts and decides to bring his friends along so they can be his team, Mater included. The competition, created by Sir Miles Axlerod, intends to promote a new environmentally friendly fuel called Allinol. Alongside this, there is a spy subplot in which agents from different parts of the world, mainly American and British, are trying to uncover a potentially dangerous criminal organization, based in an oil rig, that plans to launch an attack during the competition. Due to a series of misunderstandings, Mater is dragged into this espionage plot and ends up being the key piece to solve who is the mastermind behind the accidents occurred during the competition, saving his best friend Lightning McQueen from a horrible death. In the end, Mater and his spy colleagues reveal that Axlerod had planned for Allinol to fail in order to disgrace the idea of an environmentally friendly fuel, so he could potentially win tons of money with the crude oil he secretly possessed.

Although the world of the *Cars* franchise appears to be inhabited only by diverse means of wheeled transport, both the vehicles' physical appearance and plot are constructed on the basis of notions of gender and, up to a certain extent, on tenets of patriarchal heteronormativity. As academic Nurhadianty Rahayu argues, the cars present certain anthropomorphic features that clearly show "which characters have male traits and which ones [are] female" (76-77). Those who are most evidently gendered, however, are the female cars. When taking a look at the females' character designs, it can be appreciated that most of them are very polished, feminine curvy cars, with thicker eyelids complete with eyeliner that the male cars do not wear. Besides, even though in the male cars there are no physical attributes that might be read as stereotypically sexualized, there is a certain clash of car cultures presented in the film through the two main race cars, Lightning McQueen and Francesco Bernoulli. American and European cultures clash when McQueen, an all-American NASCAR car, encounters Francesco Bernoulli, the Italian Formula-1 racing car. Bernoulli acts as McQueen's opposite both in terms of appearance and personality, and his "open wheels", complimented by most of the female cars that appear in the film, are used to enhance McQueen's insecurities as a male.

On the other hand, it is interesting to reflect on the fact that the villain, the creator of the 'dangerous' eco-friendly fuel Allinol, is a British male four-wheel car. What at first sight could be interesting from an eco-critical point of view ends up being relevant also in terms of gender, as it is a reality that the ones who are most reticent to adapt in order to stop environmental catastrophes such as climate change are patriarchal men, extremely powerful people who are not eager to stop profiting at the Earth's expense. In their book, Shannon R Wooden and Ken Gillam claim that Axlerod's desire to "unscrupulously profit from non-sustainable resources" (74) not only "fuses fossil fuels with masculinity" (74) but also with "American identity" (74) (even though, as noted, Axlerod is British and voiced by Sir Michael Caine). According to them, green energy is displayed as "unpatriotic, disloyal and effeminate" and, even though the heroes discover Axlerod's plan and, thus, he fails, "the film executes his plan to perfection" (74).

While Rahayu states that the *Cars* trilogy portrays its female characters as "independent and smart" (76), the insignificant role that female cars have been given in *Cars 2* (2011) should be criticized. Firstly, Sally, McQueen's sweetheart and a character who seemed to have a story to tell in the first film, is reduced to being a background character that only appears to compliment Bernoulli's looks. Taking into account that the film revolves around a race, Sally appears to have been assigned just the role of cheerleader, like the grids girls at the service of the racers and whose voice the audience does not get to hear. In addition, Holley Shiftwell's possible character

development is eclipsed (and slowed down) by Mater's incompetence. The audience is told that Shiftwell, a British agent, has always dreamed of being a spy, and she definitely seems to have the required competences. However, she is not a field agent, but works behind the desk and, even though she would have made a certainly better job than Mater, it is Mater who gets the leading role in the espionage plot. In this aspect, *Cars 2* (2011) seems to follow action and spy film conventions presenting women as the love interest for, even though Mater and Holley do not have any romantic scene in the film, she is still made to fall in love with him when he saves the day. The whole idea of a romance between them seems somewhat forced, so one might wonder to what extent Holley was put there to reassert Mater's heterosexuality. In the end, female cars seem to be there only to assist males rather than to have their own voices and stories, which evinces that *Cars 2* (2011) perpetuates the scant presence females have not only in the racing industry, but also in action films.

Most reviewers remark the film's lack of depth. For example, Mark Droulston writes that while *Cars* (2006) is "a nostalgic story about the loss small-town American values in the face of increased modernity", *Cars 2* (2011) "is completely devoid of depth and subtlety" (online). He argues that the film lacks a plot worth exploring and wonders why Pixar decided to make the sequel. Interestingly, he notes that, while *Cars* (2006) might be considered a failure, it still made around eight billion dollars in merchandising. Therefore, Droulston concludes that "*Cars 2* is a film created not as an artistic endeavour, but to feed ancillary markets" (online). Peter Bradshaw agrees with this statement in his review for *The Guardian*, where he says that "lots of different car characters for toys and branded merchandise" (online) might be the reason as to why a film with such a dull storyline exists. Furthermore, Bradshaw questions to what an extent Mater was the right choice as protagonist. He claims that "Mater finds himself at the centre of this new movie, out of his depth and emotionally vulnerable. He is the star, but doesn't have really anything funny or interesting to say or do" (online). While he works perfectly fine as the funny side-kick, Mater appears to lack the complexity needed to carry the main role of a feature-length film. Nevertheless, it is difficult to assert if he is too simple to sustain a richer narrative or if the problem is that the writers could not find a good narrative arc. It is interesting, however, to see that the same seems to happen to Lightning McQueen, for his only realization throughout the sequel is the same he had in the first film regarding his acceptance of Mater's extravagant personality. On a somewhat more positive note, Linda Holmes argues that *Cars 2* is worth watching because "Pixar is still Pixar" (online), in the sense that the movie is at least imaginatively and beautifully animated. Furthermore, she claims that what seems to be "glaringly absent" from the film is not what little kids like about Pixar, but "the story sophistication and substance that is disproportionately important to the adult Pixar audience" (online).

In conclusion, it is not easy to assert to what extent *Cars 2* (2011) should be considered as a failure but, in the words of Holmes, it is not necessarily that it is bad, but just ordinary. And, when talking about Pixar, "ordinary seems deeply disappointing" (Droulston, online). In terms of gender analysis, nonetheless, the film presents an almost all-male storyline that appears to perpetuate the stigma around female inclusion and active participation in action/espionage non-animated films.

Works Cited

- Bradshaw, Peter. "Cars 2 – Review". *The Guardian*, 21 July 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/jul/21/cars-2-review>
- Droulston, Mark. "Such a Disappointment". *Imdb.com*, 22 June 2011, https://www.imdb.com/review/rw2447704/?ref=tt_urv

- Gillam, Ken and Shannon R. Wooden. "Post-Princess Models of Gender: The New Man in Disney/Pixar". *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 1.1, 2008, 2-8.
- Holmes, Linda. "Cars 2": Unfortunately, It's Just about Cars". *NPR*, 24 June 2011, <https://www.npr.org/2011/06/24/137346135/cars-2-unfortunately-its-just-about-cars>
- Rahayu, Nurhadianty. "The Portrayal of Gender and Race in *Cars* Trilogy". *Atavisme*, 22.1, June 2019, 75-87.

Naiara López Alcázar

Cars 3 (2017): The ‘New Man’ and the Forgotten Woman in Old America

CREDITS

Director: Brian Fee

Written: Kiel Murray, Bob Peterson, Mike Rich; story by: Brian Fee, Ben Queen, Eyal Podell, Jonathon E. Stewart

Producers: John Lasseter, Kevin Reher

Art direction: Bert Berry

Editor: Jason Hudak

Music: Randy Newman

Main performers (voices): Owen Wilson (Lightning McQueen), Cristela Alonzo (Cruz Ramirez), Chris Cooper (Smokey), Nathan Fillion (Sterling), Larry the Cable Guy (Mater), Armie Hammer (Jackson Storm)

Company: Pixar Animation Studios, USA

Runtime: 1h 42’



REASONS TO SEE *Cars 3*

- To see a distinctly American film that appeals to a specific audience far different than the rest of the Pixar catalogue.
- To continue the famous trilogy that has sold tens of billions of dollars in merchandise.
- To complete the character arc of the enormously successful and hyper competitive American hero, *Lightning McQueen*.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *Cars 3*

Cars 3 is the latest, and potentially final installment in the wildly popular Pixar franchise. Despite being, according to Rotten Tomatoes, the third lowest rated franchise in Pixar’s catalogue, the series has established itself commercially through massive amounts of merchandising and a rabid fanbase. A distinctly American franchise, *Cars* has been defined both in its story and its real world production by American idealism as well as American greed. The world of *Cars* is largely unexplained and often confusing. Why would a world full of cars look exactly like the human world? What do these living cars have doors for? Pixar does not offer an official explanation as to how automobiles replaced humanity. Nonetheless, the films are grounded in the reality of American automobile culture, where people *are* their cars, and now where cars are people.

By being more or less directly analogous to the American NASCAR community, *Cars* found an audience and identity that the creators probably did not initially intend. NASCAR, as an American subculture is notoriously Southern, conservative, white, and

working class. This does not seem a likely subject matter for Pixar, which has demonstrated a distinctly liberal mindset throughout its very successful history. As it happens, John Lasseter, the Pixar mastermind and writer/director for the first two films in the series, grew up watching and loving American racing (Mandel online). Instinctively, it seems, Lasseter and company wrote the 2006 original to be deeply American, not only centering around a hyper masculine athlete, but settling into an idyllic little American town that got left behind. The conservative American ideals combined with the authentic NASCAR experience created a following that generated some 10 billion dollars in revenue by the release of the sequel (Chmielewski online). *Cars 2*, also written by Lasseter, does not follow up, however, on these themes at all, seeming to misunderstand the original's success. The plot goes distinctly international and pushes a green energy message that surely would not appeal to the NASCAR crowd. Finally, *Cars 3* seems to understand the contradictions of the last two films and Pixar engineers with it a film that should appeal both to its base and to the typical Pixar audience. In any case, while much more well received than its predecessor, *Cars 3* fails in delivering anything like a clear moral. It is a mess of half-hearted character development, conservative American ideals, and somewhat progressive ideas about gender. The fundamental problem of the film lies in this confusion. The film's climax centers around female empowerment but neglects to put any focus on the female character. It has something to say about men growing old gracefully but can't get past its own competitive American spirit. And it wants to fit into the progressive messages of the Pixar catalogue but can't shake off its conservative set dressing.

Cars 3 follows the series hero Lightning McQueen into old age, as a new generation of super cars takes over his sport. He begins to lose and in pushing himself, gets in a serious crash. His team is acquired by a new, modern company who will attempt to keep him relevant, starting with a young female trainer (Cruz Ramirez) with unorthodox methods. The two go through several odd adventures with mixed results, but after settling their differences, become close along the way. McQueen makes a deal with his new boss (Sterling) that if he does not win the upcoming race, he will retire. At the big race, McQueen has some early success, but during a pause in the action makes the big decision to have Cruz substitute in for him and finish the race. She starts off nervously, but uses the skills she learned during her time training with McQueen to defeat the trash talking next generation rival, literally flipping over him and taking first place. Everyone celebrates, and because McQueen's deal to win is technically fulfilled, the two start life anew, both as professional racers.

The film opens with a return to the iconic opening of the first film, on a blank screen, inside the mind of an athlete: "I am speed. One winner, 42 losers. I eat losers for breakfast... Did I used to say that". This is the first step in self-awareness for the film and a reminder that Lightning has evolved over the course of the series. As Ken Gillam and Sharon Wooden argue in their article "Post Princess Models of Gender: The New Man in Disney/Pixar", the studio is in the business of promoting a new and modern model of masculinity, or what they call the "New Man": "From the revelation of the alpha male's flaws, including acute loneliness and vulnerability, to figurative emasculation through even the slightest disempowerment, each character travels through a significant homosocial relationship and ultimately matures into an acceptance of his more traditionally "feminine" aspects" (2). This is true of the first film. Lightning does indeed go through the change seen in many Pixar protagonists from talented and arrogant to humble and friendly. Mater is perhaps even the homosocial relationship that pulls him towards femininity. In *Cars 3*, however, our protagonist has already developed into a "New Man", and yet still lives quite earnestly in the hyper competitive, alpha male world of American sports. Despite Pixar's efforts to imbue the plot with a moral lesson, and McQueen's protests, "the racing is the reward!", the fact remains that in the racing

world, if you are not a winner, you are a loser. As Will Ferrell's characters says in *Talladega Nights*, another film lampooning NASCAR culture, "If you ain't first, you're last!"

This undeniably American sentiment is backed up continuously by the supporting characters. Thus, when Brick Yardley, a random veteran racer, is fired he protests "Hey, I had two wins last year..." In a similar vein, Cal is continuously bullied and openly mocked throughout the film for not being good enough. He is the first to retire. Sally, the supportive girlfriend (who only pops up for motivating speeches) jokes with McQueen that she's going to move on to the next rookie "and forget I ever knew you". Jackson Storm is described by the female reporter with rather sexual undertones. Even Cruz, the halfhearted focus of a feminist finale, treats McQueen like a geriatric individual far beyond sexual consideration. She is then treated poorly for being "just a trainer" and only given value when she inexplicably wins the final race. The attempted message is clearly that when a man can no longer be the best, and apparently becomes impotent, that the solution is for him to become a mentor. But the film, and the series, never refutes the underlying racing culture. If you are not the winner, you cannot be good. In a world where racing is not an aspect of your life, but literally what you are built for, there can be no separation from competition. The only answer is to pass on competition to the next generation. This model of masculinity runs consistently throughout the series. It is, however, theoretically undercut by the finale, where the female Cruz is given the opportunity to win the race.

This attempt at gender inclusivity does not feel authentic, for many reasons. The first being that the film clearly doesn't want to talk about the fact that Cruz is a woman or a female (whatever that means in car world). The old female racer Louise Nash confirms that there was some sort of feminist revolution (as well as car racism?) when they reflect on the past, but Cruz is only acknowledged as female directly by Storm when he tries to intimidate her calling "Heyyy. Costume Girl!" In essentially the only backstory she receives, Cruz monologues about how she wanted to be a racer growing up only to find out that "I didn't belong". It is never stated that this is because she is female but she notes that "The other racers looked nothing like me... They were bigger and stronger and so... confident". The choice is clearly made to stay away from overt identity politics, but dipping their tires into a progressive plot without committing to it leaves the story very confused. A review from Yolanda Machado summarizes the problem quite well: *Cars 3* feels "Less Pixar-like and more like an attempt to gently ease middle America into acceptance, female empowerment and diversity, but just as long as it happens on the male lead's terms". As she adds, Cruz Ramirez, though a very skilled trainer, is constantly ignored by McQueen: "She is only allowed to have something if a male allows her to have it, this includes confidence, acknowledging her skills, and even, chances to speak up for herself. Ladies, this is not what girl power is" (in Dickey online).

There is no realistic possibility, either, of a truly feminist sequel involving Cruz Ramirez as the star. She was not given enough personality and backstory to set up a film for herself and she was treated mostly as a joke, as the ineffectual stereotype of a modern feminist woman, who does yoga and listens to motivational tapes. A conservative audience would more than likely reject a film with her as the proper lead; *Cars*, incidentally, also already unsuccessfully tried centering a film around a comic relief character with Mater in the second film in the trilogy. In attempting to appease a conservative audience while still pushing a progressive message, Pixar fails to be feminist, fails to be progressive, and fails to tell its ongoing tale of the "New Man" (Gillam and Wooden). What it does succeed in, is reaffirming the traditional American story of success over everything else. Back to the good ol' days when boys could be boys.

Aging is a reality, though a strange focus for a children's film. It is true that men are valued for their ability to be dominant, that they are relentlessly encouraged to be at the absolute extremes of their field. It is true that it is tough to accept when it is time to move to a new phase in life, and that you will likely lose respect along the way. *Cars 3* is authentic in its insistence on competition and its portrayal of McQueen's struggle. But, Pixar cannot push its idea of the "New Man" and teach young boys to be gentler and kinder while celebrating traditional American ideals. Men are celebrated when they are at the top. This is a driving force for all of society. And yet, Pixar is encouraging men to slow down, treat others kindly, take care of the people around them, be a role model. Just so long as you win.

Works Cited

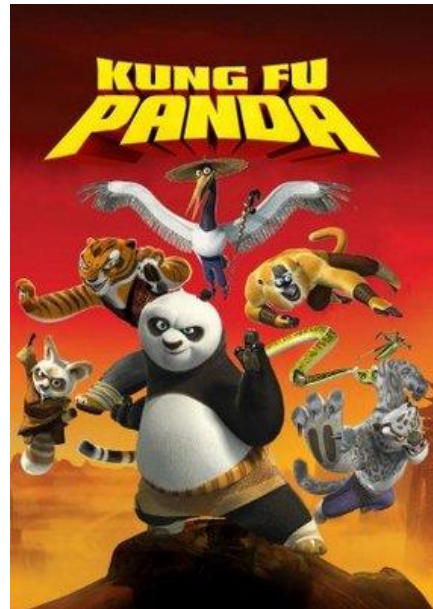
- Chmielewski, Dawn, and Rebecca Keegan. "Merchandise Sales Drive Pixar's *Cars*' Franchise". *Los Angeles Times*, 21 June 2011, www.latimes.com/business/la-xpm-2011-jun-21-la-fi-ct-cars2-20110621-story.html
- Dickey, Josh. "*Cars 3* Reviews Prove How Desperately We Need More Female Film Critics". Mashable.com, 12 June 2017, mashable.com/2017/06/12/cars-3-reviews-female-movies-film-critics/?europa=true
- Gillam, Ken and Shannon R. Wooden. "Post-Princess Models of Gender: The New Man in Disney/Pixar". *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 36.1, 2008, 2-8.
- Mandel, Dutch. "A *Cars* Is Born: John Lasseter and a Team of Pixar Pros Create an Animated Automotive Movie That Should Live Forever". *Autoweek*, 28 May 2006, www.autoweek.com/news/a2066326/cars-born-john-lasseter-and-team-pixar-pros-create-animated-automotive-movie-should/

Jessiah Azul Mellott

Kung Fu Panda (2008): A Big Fat Stereotype?

CREDITS

Directors: Mark Osborne, John Stevenson
Written by: Jonathan Aibel, Glenn Berger; story by: Ethan Reiff, Cyrus Voris
Producer: Melissa Cobb
Art direction: Tang Kheng Heng
Editor: Clare Knight
Music: John Powell, Hans Zimmer
Main performers (voices): Jack Black (Po), Dustin Hoffman (Shifu), Angelina Jolie (Tigress), Jackie Chan (Monkey), Lucie Liu (Viper), Seth Rogen (Mantis), David Cross (Crane), Ian McShane (Tai Lung)
Company: DreamWorks Animation, USA
Runtime: 1h 32'



REASONS TO SEE *Kung Fu Panda*

- The amazing cast of voice actors who bring the story to life.
- The exciting action scenes and its extremely action-packed plot.
- Its representation of strong and fierce female characters.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *Kung Fu Panda*

Kung Fu Panda (2008) is the first of three films in the franchise of the same name, created by DreamWorks Animation. Following *Bee Movie* (2007) and preceding *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa* (2008), *Kung Fu Panda* was a great success, and it was nominated for an Academy Award and for a Golden Globe in the category of Best Animated Feature Film. Its sequel, *Kung Fu Panda 2*, was released in 2011, and was followed by the third and last installment in the franchise, *Kung Fu Panda 3*, which was released in 2016. The franchise also includes five short films and two animated series.

In Chinese-inspired *Kung Fu Panda* Po is a panda who has always dreamed of learning kung fu and becoming a warrior, although his adoptive father, the goose Mr. Ping, wants him to take over the family business, a noodle restaurant. When Master Shifu, the famous kung fu master, learns that the dangerous Tai Lung has escaped from prison, he decides it is time to choose a new Dragon Warrior. Po is excited to see the ceremony in which the Dragon Warrior is to be chosen and, in his desperation to get in, he ends up completely disrupting the event. Everyone expects the Dragon Warrior to be one of the Furious Five, the most famous kung fu warriors in China. However, when the time comes, Master Oogway unexpectedly chooses Po. Po, then, needs to learn in a very limited amount of time what most kung fu fighters learn in a

lifetime, while also enduring the jokes and harsh criticism of Shifu and the Furious Five. Despite Shifu's numerous attempts to make him quit, Po eventually learns that what he needs in order to become the Dragon Warrior has been within him all along.

Fatherhood is one of the most important themes in *Kung Fu Panda*. It is presented through three adoptive father-child relationships: Mr. Ping and Po, the racoon Shifu and the snow leopard Tai Lung, and Shifu himself and Tigress. Chen discusses the subject of adoption in depth, taking special notice of Po's relationship with his adoptive father, which he calls "an allegory for transracial adoption" (5), as Po is a giant panda, and Mr. Ping is a goose. Mr. Ping is portrayed as the traditional Chinese father: the owner of a noodle shop whose only dream is to pass down his business to his only son. Po, on the other hand, is a more Americanized character who represents Western values (Wang), and he has no interest or appreciation for his father's noodle shop, dreaming instead of becoming a kung fu warrior. However, this is not enough to strain their relationship, as Mr. Ping eventually accepts the fact that his son has a different destiny than the one he had planned for him, and in his support of Po, ends up giving him the key knowledge to becoming the Dragon Warrior.

There is a certain reversion of stereotypical gender roles in Mr. Ping's character, as he is given what society would deem "traditionally motherly" attributes; he fusses about Po not eating enough, worries about his future, and encourages him to believe in himself. This extremely positive representation of single fatherhood acts as an antithesis of Shifu's relationship with his adoptive children; if Mr. Ping is the epitome of the loving, caring father, Shifu represents the other side of the coin. After Tai Lung's betrayal, Shifu blames himself for having been blinded by his pride and his affection for his son. From then on, Shifu's approach to fatherhood becomes much tougher and stricter, as he does not allow himself to form emotional bonds with his adoptive daughter, Tigress, or with the rest of his disciples. In this way, Shifu exemplifies the harmful idea that to display affection is to show weakness, a classic tenet of toxic masculinity which affects real boys and men in modern society. This belief is challenged later on through Shifu's relationship with Po, with whom he eventually forms a fatherly bond as their training progresses. However, Shifu's and Tigress's issues are never resolved, leaving the healthy relationships exclusively to the males.

The film has received negative critiques for its unrealistic and over-used moral: "believe in yourself, and everything will be possible", or what Chen denominates "'the belief in belief', or rather, 'in nothing'" (5). Hard work takes a back seat in this film, as it is dismissed in favor of a well-intentioned but flimsy message about self-confidence, which, though also important, is not a believable route to achieving one's goals. Furthermore, through this idea that Po becomes the Dragon Warrior through sheer confidence and self-acceptance, the Chinese tradition of kung fu is Westernized and trivialized, making "the real China vanish before our eyes" (Greene 14). Chung shares this view, stating "this 'hollowing out' of the figure of the kung fu master thus decontextualizes and dehistoricizes the tradition of martial arts" (Chung 30). This stance poses the question of whether this use of Chinese traditions and practices can be considered cultural appropriation, as the film's producer, directors and writers are non-Chinese. This trivialization of kung fu also creates a gender imbalance, as Po is chosen as Dragon Warrior over Tigress, the leader of the Furious Five, who is clearly the superior kung fu artist. This situation in which an unqualified male is promoted over a qualified female is reminiscent of the current issues with gender inequality in the area of employment, especially considering the fact that all of the positions of power in the film are occupied by males –Po, Master Shifu, Master Oogway, Commander Vachir, and even Tai Lung.

Despite its faults, the film shines in its depiction of the two female characters: Tigress and Viper, two of the members of the Furious Five. While Viper is presented as

a more stereotypically feminine character, wearing red lipstick and pink flower pins on her head, Tigress is not given what Hollywood considers to be traditionally feminine attributes; in fact, she has no visible gender indicators at all, her voice (that of Angelina Jolie) and her name being the only clue the audience is given about her femaleness. The two characters, regardless of their display of conventional femininity, are portrayed as strong and fierce and as equals to their three male counterparts in the Furious Five. Moreover, their body designs are a far cry from the overly sexualized images of other females in animated fiction. This can be observed most clearly in Tigress's character design, which simply is that of a tiger standing upright, no sight of breasts, a small waist, or long hair. In fact, Chen goes as far as to call her "asexual", later pointing out that she and Po are not love interests in the film. Although calling Tigress "asexual" due to the lack of stereotypical feminine traits is quite a stretch, the fact that there is no objectification of the female body is a quite positive aspect of the film.

Lastly, the issue of body positivity and fat shaming is perhaps the most controversial aspect of *Kung Fu Panda*. Traditional ideas of masculinity are discarded as the stereotypical image of the tall, muscled hero is replaced by a big, fat panda. However, this representation of different body types is not entirely positive; although it introduces a fat protagonist and it preaches about the importance of self-acceptance, the film is filled with fat jokes and bullying that is never addressed nor resolved. It is true that Po eventually learns to accept himself and does not need to change in order to be a hero, but this acceptance of his weight comes solely from him, never from the other characters. Reviewer Natalie Wilson considers that *Kung Fu Panda* reinforces rather than challenges fat stereotypes in its portrayal of Po, who is funny, clumsy, and an emotional eater, all of them attributes that are often associated with overweight people in cinema. Other reviewers, like Yoni Freedhoff, acknowledge the fact that there might be a well-meaning message of body positivity in the film, but that the events that lead to that conclusion do more harm than good, especially since the film is directed at a highly perceptive, sensitive audience. In conclusion, this representation of Po as a fat main character is neither entirely positive, nor entirely negative; it is a double-edged sword, as it ultimately teaches children that a person's weight does not determine their worth, but it does so through the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes.

Works Cited

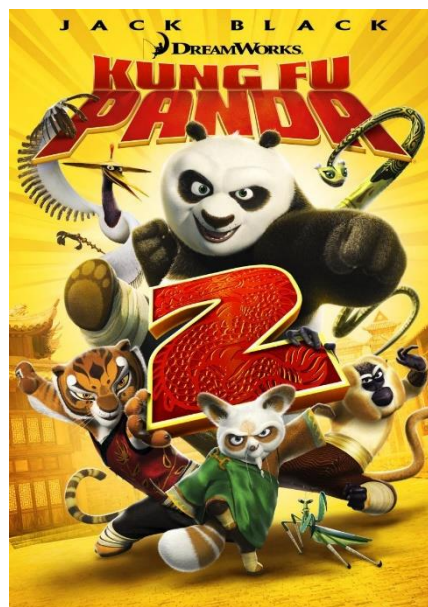
- Chen, Fu-Jen. "Adoption, Cynical Detachment, and New Age Beliefs in *Juno* and *Kung Fu Panda*". *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, 19.2, July 2017, 1-8.
- Chung, Hye Jean. "*Kung Fu Panda*: Animated Animal Bodies as Layered Sites of (Trans)National Identities". *The Velvet Light Trap*, 69, 2012, 27-37.
- Freedhoff, Yoni. "Lessons I Learned From Watching *Kung Fu Panda*". *Weighty Matters*, 30 June 2008, <http://www.weightymatters.ca/2008/06/lessons-i-learned-from-watching-kung-fu.html>
- Greene, Naomi. "The Pendulum Swings... and Swings Again". *From Fu Manchu to Kung Fu Panda: Images of China in American Film*. Hong Kong University Press, 2014, 1-16.
- Wang, Chenjun. "The Western Gaze in Animation: A Case Study of *Kung Fu Panda*". *Journal of Content, Community & Communication*, 6.3, June 2017, 3-12.
- Wilson, Natalie. "What If Fat Jokes and Cultural (Mis)Appropriation Weren't Considered So Darn Cute? A Review of *Kung Fu Panda*". *Professor What If*, 21 June 2008, <https://professorwhatif.wordpress.com/2008/06/21/what-if-fat-jokes-and-cultural-misappropriation-werent-considered-so-darn-cute-a-review-of-kung-fu-panda/>

Raquel Prieto Xufré

Kung Fu Panda 2 (2011): The Martial Art of Gender

CREDITS

Director: Jennifer Yuh Nelson
Screenplay writer: Jonathan Aibel, Glenn Berger
Producer: Melissa Cobb
Art direction: Tang Khen Heng
Editor: Maryann Brandon, Clare Knight
Music: John Powell, Hans Zimmer
Main performers (voices): Jack Black (Po), Angelina Jolie (Tigress), Dustin Hoffman (Shifu), Gary Oldman (Shen), Jackie Chan (Monkey), Seth Rogen (Mantis), Lucy Liu (Viper), David Cross (Crane), James Hong (Mr. Ping), Michelle Yeoh (Soothsayer)
Company: DreamWorks Animation, USA
Runtime: 1h 30'



REASONS TO SEE *Kung Fu Panda 2*

- It has plenty of visually impressive action scenes which make the film entertaining.
- It displays detailed and crafted landscapes and scenery from ancient China.
- It includes a beautiful soundtrack by musician and composer Hans Zimmer, who also created the music for *The Lion King* (1994) and *Gladiator* (2000) among many others.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *Kung Fu Panda 2*

Kung Fu Panda 2 appeared for the first time in cinemas in May 2011, three years after the release of the first installment, *Kung Fu Panda* (2008). It is commonly said that sequels are never any good, but *Kung Fu Panda 2* might be an exception to that rule. While the first installment was a clear success for DreamWorks, this sequel surpassed it, not only in terms of plot –according to most reviewers– but also in terms of box-office takings. *Kung Fu Panda 2* was the highest-grossing movie of the whole franchise, and surpassed other animated features of the same year, such as *Cars 2*, *Puss in Boots*, or *Rio*. It was also nominated to several awards, becoming the winner of two Annie Awards for Best Directing and Best Production Design in a Feature Production.

In *Kung Fu Panda* (2008) Po, a lazy and clumsy panda, is unexpectedly chosen to become the Dragon Warrior. He initiates a journey of self-discovery and hard work to prove to everybody that he can learn the art of Kung Fu, and that he is indeed a worthy fighter. Making friends along the way, Po finally develops surprising fighting skills and defeats China's great enemy and Master Shifu's old disciple the snow leopard Tai Lung. In this second installment, Po and his fighting companions the Furious Five have settled into a peaceful life helping and saving the citizens of the Valley whenever this is needed. Everything changes when a new enemy plans to rule over China. Shen, an evil

Peacock, was exiled from his kingdom by his own parents, the Emperor and Empress, due to his violent and authoritative nature. Traumatized by his family's rejection, Shen decides to invade China with a fist of iron. The Furious Five try to stop him, but Po complicates things as he is unable to reach what Master Shifu calls "inner peace". Throughout the story, Po remembers some flashbacks from his childhood in which he sees his biological parents giving him up to save his life. Thanks to the seer Soothsayer, Po discovers that Shen exterminated all the pandas in China because of a prophecy that foretold his defeat by a black and white warrior. By knowing where he comes from and what he is destined to do, Po learns to accept who he is, which leads him to finally reach his inner peace and do what he knows best: saving China once more.

Kung Fu Panda 2 has received mostly positive critiques by reviewers who have argued that it has just the right amount of everything a children's movie ought to include: action, fun, outstanding graphics, an enlightening message, and on top of that, some gender issues dealt with from a progressive and modern perspective. To begin with, the main protagonist of the film is an unconventional male hero who proves that one can be a chubby, clumsy and sensitive panda and still become an incredibly powerful kung fu warrior. As reviewer Paul Asay claims, "Po is eminently likable here, just for the record –a more realistic hero for those of us who don't always look the greatest or have the correct words. He's a regular panda trying to do the right thing. Is he willing to die for the good cause in which he believes? Yes –but he'd prefer not to" (online). By making Po so relatable, the film seems to challenge traditional representations of heroism, by which princes and superheroes never commit any mistake, in favor of ordinary, perfectly imperfect characters. Moreover, Po is not only far from perfect, but he also shows a caring, soft side which contraposes the masculine ideals that are usually associated with male heroes.

Just as Po subverts some of these ideas, Tigress becomes his equivalent and challenges stereotypes associated to female characters. For example, her features are designed from a neutral perspective in the sense that her "female" physical traits are not exaggerated the way other female characters in other children's animated movies are, usually sexualizing the figure of the woman. In fact, one can only tell that Tigress is female through her voice (courtesy of Angelina Jolie), so her appearance is indeed a progressive step in animated movies for children. In terms of personality, hers is cold, strong and hard-core, which again challenges the traditional femininity or softer representation of female characters just as Po challenges the idea of toxic masculinity. They both share almost all the scenes in the movie, and this has been analyzed from opposite points of view. To some, Tigress will always be a step behind Po in terms of power and because of this the film falls into the recurring plot device dictating that whenever there is a strong female character, there must be a strong(er) male one, coincidentally or not. However, the film also seems to insist on celebrating a healthy kind of friendship between male and female, with no further romantic intentions beyond being genuine friends. In this way Po and Tigress contribute to the modern debate on masculinity and femininity.

Similarly, the representation of fatherhood through the character of Mr. Ping becomes another way in which the film tries, or in this case rather manages, to question gender assumptions. When compared to other father figures from different animation films, it is easy to see how the goose Mr. Ping greatly exceeds the expectations. No longer are fathers portrayed as impressive, strict, serious and *unfeeling* and no longer are they contrasted to usually sensitive and more permissive mothers. Mr. Ping is a loving and caring single parent. He formed his family just because he wanted to, showing thus that the 'maternal' instinct is, in fact, paternal as well, or parental. In some instances, in fact, his behavior might be easily described as that of a mother. Identifying Mr. Ping with the notion of motherhood instead of fatherhood could be a result of the

thousands of misrepresentations on TV of fathers who either do not know how to take care of a child, or who do so in a comical context and by no means take the task seriously. Luckily for the younger generations, Mr. Ping embodies a completely different version of fatherhood, one that feels right. According to reviewer Richard Propes, with its introduction of “other” types of families. Propes claimed that, “[it] may very well register even more satisfyingly for those with traumatic childhood and/or coming from adoptive backgrounds, for whom the film's themes about overcoming the past and learning how to redefine family will be especially powerful” (online). The fact that Mr. Ping makes the decision to become the head of a single-parent family certainly speaks for itself. Nowadays, many children belong to these new parental units with a single parent, divorced parents, adoptive parents, same-sex parents, etcetera. Arguably, these new families have been generally underrepresented on film and TV, so it is important to draw attention to and normalize these alternative family units, just as the film is doing.

Kung Fu Panda 2 includes, nonetheless, other stereotyped gender issues which are not so often dwelled on by the reviewers but that are important to mention all the same. For example, it briefly uses the recurrent figure of the self-sacrificing mother, which always strikes a nerve, or the also typical group of all-male villains who are ugly, brutish and evil. Nevertheless, and on the other hand, the main villain Shen is an interesting figure to explore in terms of masculinity because he represents a new conception of villainy which moves from physical strength to the intellect. *Collider* reviewer Bill Graham argued that while Tai Long “was capable of single-handedly defeating the Furious Five, Shen has no such skill. Considering he is a peacock; I had my doubts about his ability to fight to begin with. Luckily, they didn’t try and sell him as an overly powerful fighter but instead a thinker” (online). Animated movies have started to redefine their villains by pointing at their brains instead of their brawn. In this case, peacocks are not the most imposing in the animal kingdom, yet Shen is in many ways more perturbing than for instance his feline predecessor. There is an uncanny element in Shen’s eyes and the way he moves which compensates for his less than imposing appearance at first glance. His traumatic experience also improves the presentation of villains as not only mere antagonists but as rounded characters who have a past as well as the heroes. Shen is a non-conventional villain in terms of appearance, but he is disturbing and quite dangerous at the same time. He poses a big threat for the Furious Five even though he is not physically strong, but because he is intelligent and a good strategist. The film then presents a different conception of villainy which is quite terrifying and which, even more importantly, moves away from the idea that villains should be macho men who just know how to throw punches and kicks.

All in all, *Kung Fu Panda 2* (2011) does an outstanding job of exploring different gender constructions and offering them to younger audiences in order to raise awareness and to give them visibility. With its ordinary hero who tries his best without pretending to be perfect, its strong female character who escapes the norms of femininity, its loving single-dad who is not afraid to shout “I love you” to his son, the powerful chosen one or its evil peacock whose twisted mind opens a whole new dimension for the notion of villainy, this second instalment of the *King Fu Panda* franchise offers an interesting insight into gender and leads the way for future movies to try and challenge conventional stereotypes the way it does.

Works Cited

Asay, Paul. “*Kung Fu Panda 2*: Movie Review”. *Plugged In*, May 2011, <https://www.pluggedin.com/movie-reviews/kungfupanda2/>

Graham, Bill. "Kung Fu Panda 2 Review". *Collider*, 26 May 2011, <https://collider.com/kung-fu-panda-2-review/>

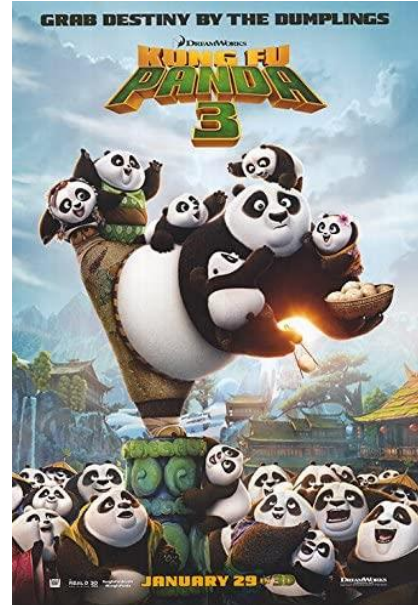
Propes, Richard. "Kung Fu Panda 2: a Review". *The Independent Critic*, May 2011, https://theindependentcritic.com/kung_fu_panda_2

Alba Sánchez Ortiz

Kung Fu Panda 3 (2016): A Valuable Lesson

CREDITS

Directors: Jennifer Yuh Nelson, Alessandro Carloni
Written by: Jonathan Aibel, Glenn Berger
Producer: Melissa Cobb
Art direction: Max Boas
Editor: Clare Knight
Music: Hans Zimmer
Main performers (voices): Jack Black (Po), Bryan Cranston (Li), Dustin Hoffman (Shifu), Angelina Jolie (Tigress), J.K. Simmons (Kai), Jackie Chan (Monkey), Seth Rogen (Mantis), Lucy Liu (Viper), David Cross (Crane), James Hong (Mr. Ping)
Companies: China Film Group Corporation, Oriental DreamWorks (in association with), China/USA
Runtime: 1h 34'



REASONS TO SEE *Kung Fu Panda 3*

- This is the first major Hollywood animated children movie to be co-produced with a Chinese studio.
- The production team has carried out extended research to ensure the authenticity of the elements regarding Chinese culture represented in the film.
- The voice cast features some curious star guests, including Angelina Jolie's and Brad Pitt's children as three of the young pandas in the movie.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *Kung Fu Panda 3*

Kung Fu Panda (2016) is the third installment in the animated *Kung Fu Panda* franchise which was produced by DreamWorks Animation and distributed by 20th Century Fox. It is the sequel to 2008's *Kung Fu Panda* and 2011's *Kung Fu Panda 2*, both of which were nominated to an Academy Award as best Animated Features. The movie was co-directed by Korean-American Jennifer Yuh Nelson and Alessandro Carloni; Nelson was the first Asian woman to have single-handedly direct an animated movie (*Kung Fu Panda 2*). This third installment earned a record \$57.79 million on the Chinese mainland in just three days after its launch. During the production, tremendous amounts of research is reported to have been carried out in order to ensure the authenticity of the Chinese cultural elements, especially the production team's visit to a panda sanctuary in Sichuan province that features in the film.

In this third story, the Dragon Warrior and protagonist, panda Po faces off General Kai, a villainous undead warrior from the spirit realm. This cantankerous bull aims to steal the "chi" or life force from the most powerful kung-fu masters to establish his own army; this will serve his plans to end Master Oogway's legacy. Kai returns to the mortal

realm so as to find his ultimate opponent –the Dragon Warrior that as Oogway has warned will stop Kai. Meanwhile, master Shifu insists that Po should strike out on his own and encourages him to become the best he can be. Po reunites with his long-lost biological father Li and the duo travel to the Pandas' Secret Village where he finally meets his own kind. To stand the chance to stop his all-powerful enemy Kai, Po first has to harness the essence of his own existence to train his fun-loving, clumsy panda relatives into being the ultimate kung-fu fighting machine. He also learns the value of families: those you grow up in (for Po is the goose Mr Ping's adoptive son) are just as important as those you are born into.

One of the most prominent lessons in the *Kung Fu Panda* franchise is, precisely, the idea of transracial (or rather transspecies) adoption and family values. In this third installment, DreamWorks has delved into the inevitable struggle of an adoptive child to meet its biological parents through the character development of the protagonist, Po. The story starts with Po as a confused soul in search of self-identity following his need to accept his own unique self. Po stands for all the transracial adoptive children who, at some point in their life, develop the need for belonging and the need to share common features with people who look like them. This is portrayed by how excited Po is the first time he meets and embraces other pandas and notices the similarities they share in appearance. However, they soon realize that some differences hinder Po's attempt to become "one of them" due to his different upbringing. The important lesson Po teaches us is that, sometimes, nurture is stronger than nature, that we cannot detach ourselves from the family we grow up in. We can combine our inherited genetic identity with our cultural identity without having to constrain ourselves to fit either.

In the final scene when Po encounters the villain Kai, he finds the answer to his own incessant question: "Who am I? Am I the son of a panda, the son of a goose, a student, a teacher? It turns out, I am all of them. I am Dragon Warrior". This multiple self-perception subverts the idea of living up to social expectations or a presumed set of ideologies and motivates instead individuals to accept their own identities. This empowering message, which praises the search for identity with some old-fashioned self-reflection, is a valuable lesson for anyone trying to figure out their niche in today's society. It is simply presented a strategy for self-knowledge that can work for people with different backgrounds, on a variety of different levels.

Moreover, the movie explores the journey that adoptive and biological parents take to come together, which is often a sensitive and challenging encounter in real life contexts. Mr. Ping, the goose dad, is Po's adoptive single father and, when he sees that Po needs to meet his biological family, he starts fearing that Po is about to leave him. He feels abandoned and ignored by observing the new bonding between his own son and his "real" biological dad, Li Shan. However, Ping chooses not to interfere in this inevitable process of helping Po to make sense of his real identity. McGiverin has pointed out that most of Ping's on-screen time is used to encourage, congratulate and emotionally support Po, and still leave him to explore this new side of life despite the fear he feels of losing his son, for despite a "moment of weakness (...) he is learning and evolving as a father" (online). This emotional portrayal seems calculated to elicit the sympathy of families with transracial adoptive parents bringing up their children in complex situations as their journey entails a critical task to support the children's cultural socialization. According to Simon and Roordar "Parents who adopt transracially need to plan how they are going to raise their children (...) A transracial child needs someone who can see what he or she sees, someone the child can identify with (...) Regardless of what color the foster or adoptive parents are, of they are committed to being good parents, they must pursue and maintain cultural bonds for their child" (359).

In our modern society where the notions of traditional family get redefined, there are different and complementary ways of being a father. *Kung Fu Panda 3* itself can be said to shed light on a prospective family trend: platonic parenting. According to Traverso and Robbin, platonic parenting or co-parenting refers to people who are not romantically involved but decide to raise a child together. Even though the adoptive dad Mr. Ping and biological dad Mr. Li may not be defined as partners, they end up cooperating to support, care for and share the same responsibility regarding their beloved only son: Po. One of the fathers, Li, fills the customary 'male' role as he teaches Po how to have fun and accompanies him on the path of mastering "The Force" even though he was absent when his son emotionally needs him the most. The other father, Ping, though also a male takes the role of the traditional mother in accordance with Chinese and Asian culture. An unwritten rule exists in Chinese culture by which the mother is responsible for cooking and serving food, and the way in which Mr. Ping express love to his son is through the stomach. He always wants to make sure that Po is full and well-fed which of course also connects with his being a cook by trade. Ping unconditionally believes that his son can achieve whatever he puts his mind into and feels proud of him for who he already is. After their initial misgivings, the two dads overcome their differences by honestly expressing their misunderstandings and deficiencies in parenting to reach their shared goal which is in the best interests for Po. In the midst of a growing appraisal of the traditional family, then, DreamWorks has set another example of alternative family values defending that it is absolutely fine to have two dads joined by a platonic friendship as what matters most is their love and affection.

Works Cited

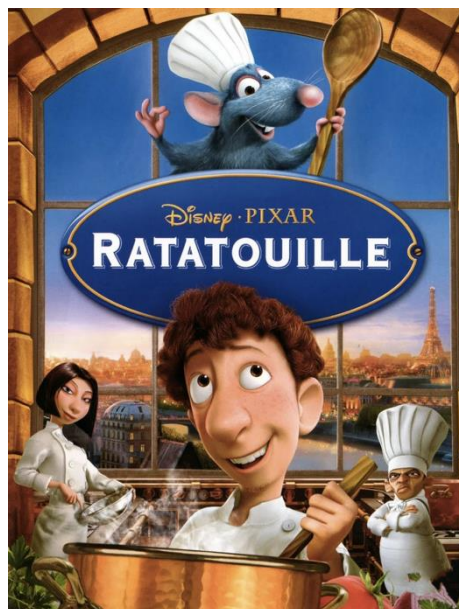
- McGiverin, Kyle. "The Day a Talking Goose Reminded Me What Family Means". *The Mister Kyle*, 31 January 2016, <https://themisterkyle.wordpress.com/2016/01/31/the-day-a-talking-goose-reminded-me-what-family-means/>
- Simon, Rita J. and Rhonda M. Roorda. *In Their Own Voices: Transracial Adoptees Tell Their Stories*. Columbia University Press, 2000.
- Traverso, Vittoria and Jake Robbins. "Is 'Platonic Parenting' the Relationship of the Future?" *BBC Future*, 19 December 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20181218-is-platonic-parenting-the-relationship-of-the-future>

Thu Trang Tran

Ratatouille (2007): Of Men and Rats in the Kitchen

CREDITS

Directors: Brad Bird, Jan Pinkava (co-director)
Written by: Brad Bird; original story Jan Pinkava, Jim Capobianco, Brad Bird
Producers: Bradford Lewis, Galyn Susman
Art direction:
Editor: Darren T. Holmes
Music by: Michael Giacchino
Main performers (voices): Patton Oswalt (Remy), Ian Holm (Skinner), Lou Romano (Linguini), Brian Dennehy (Django), Peter O'Tool (Anton Ego), Brad Garrett (Gusteau), Janeane Garofalo (Colette)
Company: Pixar Animation Studios, USA
Runtime: 1h 51'



REASONS TO SEE *Ratatouille*

- The animation technology in this film is developed to the top. Audiences can enjoy the different textures of the food presented, the fur on the rats' bodies, the hair on human beings, the water flow and the glossy kitchenware.
- This film gives a vivid description about cooking and French cuisine, it is a banquet for the foodie, the gourmet, and all people interested in the culinary art.
- The beautiful scenes in Paris including the Eiffel Tower, the Seine and other classic street views.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *Ratatouille*

Ratatouille (2007) is a masterpiece produced by the famous Pixar Animation Studios. The director, Brad Bird, is one of most successful professionals in the animation industry. After graduation, Bird first worked for Disney but he was fired because he expressed his open dissatisfaction with the upper management. In 1989, he helped to start *The Simpsons*, extending the original one-minute short clips to the current twenty-minute episodes. As a director, besides *Ratatouille*, Bird's works include two of the films in *The Incredibles* franchise (2004, 2018), and live-action films such as *Mission: Impossible - Ghost Protocol* (2011) and *Tomorrowland* (2015). Bird has also participated in other Pixar movies, including *WALL-E* (2008), *Up* (2009), *Toy Story 3* (2010), *Brave* (2012), *Monsters University* (2013) and *Inside Out* (2015). *Ratatouille* grossed over \$600 million globally and earned major awards such as the Oscar for Best Animated Feature Film (also reaping three other nominations), the Best Animated Film award in the Golden Globes and Best Animated Film in the BAFTAs.

The plot revolves around little rat Remy and Linguini a rooky apprentice in a classy French restaurant in Paris. Little rat Remy has an unparalleled talent for smell.

He doesn't want to live a life in the garbage dump but has the dream of becoming a five-star chef. By chance, he meets Linguini, apprenticed at top restaurant Gusteau's. This clumsy apprentice is shy by nature and has no talent for cooking. When his clumsiness has Chef Skinner almost fire him, he and Remy form a peculiar alliance: Remy hides in Linguini's chef hat to operate the cooking. With Remy's help Linguini not only becomes a new genius chef and wins the love of beautiful, talented colleague Colette, but also thwarts Skinner's conspiracy to prevent him from claiming his legacy as Gusteau's secret son. The sudden success makes Linguini feel a little overwhelmed, so he decides to get rid of his puppet status and drive Remy out of the kitchen. The success of the restaurant attracts the attention of the demanding food critic Anton Ego. He is ready to test Linguini's craftsmanship and reevaluate the restaurant while former chef Skinner tries to expose Linguini's secret. Finally, Remy recruits his family to help Linguini overcome Ego's challenge. They please Ego but the restaurant is forced to close because the City authorities find rats there. However, with Ego's help Linguini, Remy and Colette open the more modest restaurant that makes them truly happy.

Ratatouille was very well received, with Remy attracting much praise. As Roger Ebert wrote, "All of this begins as a dubious premise and ends as a triumph of animation, comedy, imagination and, yes, humanity. What is most lovable about Remy is his modesty and shyness, even for a rat. He has body language so expressive than many humans would trade for it" (online). James Berardinelli also spoke highly of the vivid animation, highlighting a chase scene through the streets of Paris, as a great instance of the then rather new CGI animation: "This sequence is so exquisite that it's almost impossible to believe it was conceived and realized within a computer. The single noteworthy quality of *Shrek the Third* was its animation, and *Ratatouille* has topped it" (online). Sonia Cerca, however, indicated that the supporting characters "have little characterization and development, the most uninteresting probably being the villain, Skinner, the chef at Gusteau's who is not happy with Linguini's success as he is jeopardizing his plans for the restaurant". As she adds, "the great thing is that the messages the film delivers never feel forced. But, most important, it's a beautiful ode to the art of cooking" (online).

The main theme of *Ratatouille* is not very different from other animation films which praise friendship, courage and self-acceptance. However, a comment by Colette, the only female chef in Gusteau's, and her actions reveal a significant gender issue. During the first conversation between Linguini and Colette, the female chef presents a very tough attitude. She pins Linguini's sleeve down with a knife and asks him "How many women do you see in this kitchen?", which makes Linguini stutter in confusion. Pinning his other sleeve with another knife Colette complains: "Only me. Why do you think that is? Because *haute cuisine* is an antiquated hierarchy built upon rules written by stupid, old men. Rules designed to make it impossible for women to enter this world. But still I'm here! How did this happen?" That's another question that poor Linguini cannot answer so Colette pins the sleeve with a third knife, and answers for him: "Because I am the toughest cook in this kitchen! I have worked too hard for too long to get here, and I am not going to jeopardize it for some garbage boy who got lucky! Got it?"

The phrase 'glass ceiling' could explain the reason why Colette maintains such a hostile attitude. The glass ceiling is a metaphor to illustrate how difficult it is for females at the top to get more advanced positions in the work arena, no matter how competent they are. Ever since this issue was first raised by feminist activists in 1978, the glass ceiling metaphor has been widely used. As Colette tells Linguini, there are some industries which are dominated by men, in them an invisible barrier prohibits women from advancing. In the movie, the world-wide known Chef Gusteau, a man, publishes cuisine books and has his own TV show. Ironically, in reality, mothers instead of fathers

do most cooking in the family. In 1993, the U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences published a report to explain why the glass ceiling persists regardless of women's having the equivalent educational backgrounds of men. One of the reasons are stereotypes which still persist today. According to a recent Gallup poll, "A majority of Americans perceive women to be more emotional and men to be more aggressive than their opposite sex" (Newport online). When it comes to getting promotions, employers are influenced by gender stereotypes. Pull the camera back to the Gusteau's kitchen, to see that although the other male chefs are not as qualified as Colette, she is supposed to be too emotional to endure the frantic pace of *haute cuisine* kitchen work. The best chefs and sharpest critics are all men and, although the film sides with Colette, there is little a single female chef can do against so many powerful male characters. That she and Linguine abandon *haute cuisine* is, then, both a defeat and a happy ending as Colette chooses to go her own way with him.

The leading character in this movie, Remy also presents intriguing features. Even though he is a mouse, Remy has been suppressed by the patriarchs in his family to a certain extent (and as the ends shows not even he can escape the desire for affirmation from the patriarchal society). The film promotes human cooking civilization, but it also replicates the patriarchal restraints that need to be broken in Remy's life. Remy's father and brother oppose his pursuit of his dream because of who he is. Yet, according to Laure Murat, "Remy [the rat] is also queer to the extent that he troubles the heteronormativity symbolized by his father and brother" (142), who "mock Remy's slight frame" (142) and what they perceive to be his snobbery. Remy's difference, Murat notes, "is not described as a form of gayness; his queerness is an 'otherness' that goes beyond gender or (a)sexuality, though the slightness of his frame suggests a stereotypical image of the gay male in the eyes of heteronormative masculinity" (142). As a male rat that enjoys cooking, "Remy's presence in the kitchen leads to a queering of essentialist norms" (142). Murat further points out that, compared to the males' characterization in the movie, the two female characters are constructed as viragos. One is Mabel, the elderly woman briefly seen shooting the rats away rifle in hand. The other, of course, is Colette with her acid language and her riding a black motorcycle. Murat concludes that "If traditional gender roles remain relatively undisturbed in *Ratatouille*, then the way in which the film queers notions of ethnicity and national identities is deserving of further consideration. *Ratatouille* is an American film about French cuisine and a frankness that queers both American and European stereotypes about identities and national cultures" (142).

Remy's role in this national queering is, however, very odd. The narration at the beginning of the movie states clearly that "The most delicious cuisine in the world is French cuisine; the most exquisite restaurant is in Paris; the one who cooks best is Auguste Gusteau (a French chef)". This opening remark is full of hegemonic values that Pixar's film handles ambiguously. To begin with, the exquisite French cuisine is apt for a few refined palates. In the eyes of children, mothers may be the best cooks; in the eyes of students who stay up late, a bowl of instant noodles in the middle of the night has already risen to the level of heavenly cuisine. Chef Gusteau is known for his slogan "Everyone can cook" but critic Anton Ego interprets that his true meaning is not that "everyone can be a great artist but that a great artist can come from anywhere". Remy, the humble great artist, is thus helping to maintain snobbish values (the film would have been different if he had been interested, for instance, in Asian street food). In a way, then, his father and his brother are right and Remy, despite being a rat, is a supporter of classist cooking. We still feel sympathy for him because Remy is so talented and such a small figure on the human social pyramid. He stands for all the boys who may be the best, with incredible talents, but are hindered by their education or background

from succeeding in a world which belongs to another social class, and for which they need the likes of clumsy Linguini.

Actually, Linguini is the most ridiculous character in the movie as he has no growth compared with the other characters. Despite having good external assistance (Colette and Remy), an excellent place to learn, and perhaps the genes to become a chef (after all, he is Gusteau's son), he still does nothing. In the early stages, he even loses his temper with his girlfriend Colette and then drives away his little helper Remy. Even at the end of the movie, his only merit is that he uses the money from selling Gusteau's restaurant to support himself with the new bistro. When Linguini first joins Gusteau's as a sweeper, he secretly stews soup, which suggests that the plot could have narrated how he becomes a great chef following Remy's teaching of new cooking skills. Yet, he just learns to serve food on roller skates. And if we assume that Linguini truly appreciates Remy, we might even be wrong. His feelings for Remy are pragmatic and demanding, not really those of a true friend.

It is for all this hard to see what ambitious, hard-working Colette sees in Linguini and why he is the film's protagonist at all. Perhaps the only explanation is that the very idea of a cooking rat is so odd that Remy could not head the film alone. Comparing man and rat, however, there is no doubt that the rat is the more interesting of the two males –what this says about young men like Linguini is up for the audiences to decide.

Works Cited

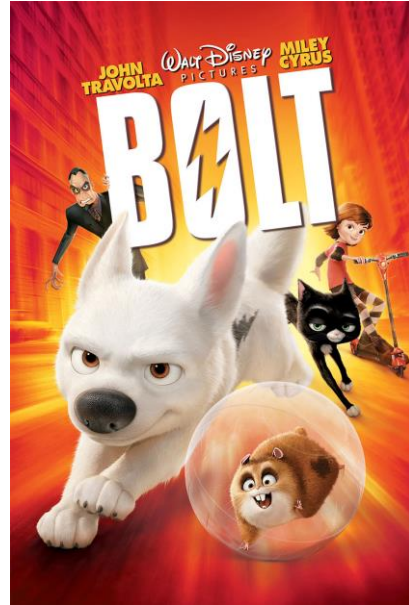
- Berardinelli, James. "Ratatouille (United States, 2007)". *Reel Views*, 30 August 2007, <https://www.reelviews.net/reelviews/ratatouille>
- Cerca, Sonia. "Ratatouille (2007)". *A Film a Day by Sonia*, 26 August 2018, <http://afilmadaybysonia.blogspot.com/2018/08/ratatouille-2007.html>
- Ebert, Roger. "Waiter, There's a Rat in my Soup". *Roger Ebert.com*, 30 August 2007, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/ratatouille-2007>
- Murat, Laure. "What's Queer about Remy, *Ratatouille*, and French Cuisine?" *What's Queer about Europe? Productive Encounters and Re-Enchanting Paradigms*, Mireille Rosello and Sudeep Dasgupta (eds.). Fordham University Press, 2014, 136-147.
- Newport, Frank "Americans See Women as Emotional and Affectionate, Men As More Aggressive: Gender Specific Stereotypes Persist in Recent Gallup Poll". Gallup.com, 21 February 2001, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1978/americans-see-women-emotional-affectionate-men-more-aggressive.aspx>

Cong (Jamie) Wang

Bolt (2008): Journey to the Authentic Self

CREDITS

Director: Byron Howard, Chris Williams
Written by: Dan Fogelman, Chris Williams
Producer: Clark Spencer
Art direction: Paul Felix
Editor: Tim Mertens
Music: John Powell
Main performers (voices): John Travolta (Bolt), Susie Essman (Mittens), Mark Walton (Rhino), Miley Cyrus (Penny), Malcolm McDowell (Dr. Calico), Nick Swardson (Blake), Greg Germann (The Agent), James Lipton (The Director), Randy Savage (Thug), Kari Wahlgren (Mindy), Grey DeLisle (Penny's mother)
Companies: Walt Disney Animation Studios, Walt Disney Pictures
Runtime: 1h 36'



REASONS TO SEE Bolt

- This film is the doggy version of the *Truman Show* and *Toy Story*.
- It is a 3D movie with good CGI (computer generated images) visuals.
- It has emotional music, nominated for a Golden Globe Award for Best Original Song ("Lightning Bolt" by Jake Bug).

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN Bolt

After the Disney Renaissance in the early 90s, the Disney Animation Studio presented a string of films that were both commercially and critically disappointing, generally considered to be inferior to Pixar's productions. Many pointed out in the mid-2000s that "Disney Animation has been in dire need of a revamp for several years" (Gilchrist, online). With its acquisition of Pixar in 2006 and the appointment of John Lasseter as the chief creative officer, Disney began to consider computer-animated projects. It was during that time that *Bolt* (2008) was released in theaters. The film was only a moderate box-office success but earned Disney the highest critical acclaim since *Lilo & Stitch* (2002).

Bolt was first called *American Dog*. Chris Sanders, an established Disney animator who created numerous popular characters (e.g. Mulan, Stitch), was in charge of the project about "a Hollywood dog star who gets lost in a desert" (Holson, online). However, after Lasseter's intervention in this project, Sanders left Disney and "went on to become a director at DreamWorks Animation" (Giardina, online). Chris Williams and Byron Howard then took over the film and changed it into the doggy version of *The Truman Show* and *Toy Story*. *Bolt* was nominated for an Academy Award and a Golden

Globe Award, both in the category of Best Animated Feature, losing both to Pixar's *WALL-E*.

Bolt opens with a series of hair-raising action sequences, in which a dog thus named uses his incredible superpowers (super-speed, super-strength, and "superbark") to fight his enemies, protect his human owner little Penny and save her father from the villain Dr. Calico. However, this is not real life as Bolt believes. Dog and girl are actually heroes in a popular action TV show shot in California. Everybody knows this except for Bolt, who is busy safeguarding Penny from peril, leaving him no room for doubt. Thinking Penny has been kidnapped, Bolt steps out of the set and accidentally ships himself to New York. He starts then a journey across the whole country, accompanied by new friends (the hamster Rhino, the she-cat Mittens), to find her and save her as he copes with the sudden loss of his superpowers. Humbled, Bolt needs to come to terms eventually with the truth about his life. In the closing scenes, *Bolt* sends us a touching message: even though they share different values, it is still possible for Bolt, Mittens, Rhino, Penny, and her mother to create a loving community.

Bolt is basically a story of a self-discovery. The lead character, Bolt, like Buzz-light-year in *Toy Story* and Truman in *The Truman Show*, does not understand who he is (an ordinary dog not a superdog) nor the nature of his life (a TV fiction). Bolt firmly believes that he has superpowers even when thrown into the real world of New York but needs to accept that his authentic self is not what he assumed it to be. What drives Bolt's character development is his loyalty to his human owner, Penny, though their relationship feels odd because audiences know she is just an actor playing a role. At any rate, *Bolt* celebrates the love between girl and dog though as Potter pointed out in her review there is at the center this movie "an explicit concern with human demands on animal performance" (online). Bolt's constant state of stress and willingness to risk his life for Penny are just elements of a TV show made for entertainment but for him they are real, which shows how deep his exploitation is and how his true self is defined by human interests.

In any case, the depiction of the human-animal bond is quite traditional: Penny is depicted as a little girl who is helpless and in need of protection and Bolt as her constant rescuer. Throughout the TV show Penny's father is absent and, therefore, Bolt acts as "a metaphorical parent" (Potter) replacing the missing man. The gender norm suggesting that it's a father's duty to be protective of their children, especially their little girls, is thus reproduced. In real life outside the show, Penny's mother offers another negative portrait of dependence. She is caring and gentle, but submissive when dealing with Penny's overbearing agent, a man who only listens to himself. Towards her daughter she also keeps a rather exploitative stance. When Bolt is lost, she comforts her helping with the lost dog's search but the mother soon tries to persuade Penny to continue the show with another dog.

Mittens, the she-cat, is the most unconventional character in this film. She is strong, smart, independent, and "grounded in reality" (thecoolkat1995, online). Mittens is not likable in the first place. She is selfish, she blackmails pigeons for a living and seems to keep a distance from everyone trying to get close to her. During her journey to Hollywood with Bolt, Mittens starts, however, to enjoy his company. She teaches him how to be an ordinary domestic stray dog, beg for food, play with balls, and to get his head out of a driving car. They have great fun. Nonetheless, Bolt decides to leave Mittens and Rhino and get back to Penny. Hurt, Mittens reveals her story and how she was abandoned by a human family. In another scene, Mittens says to Bolt that "this is what humans do. They always pick the cute ones. The ones that look like you, Bolt" whereas the rest are either never picked up or abandoned. Despite her hatred of human beings from her past experience, Mittens regains her faith in humans seeing the sorrow on Penny's face when she acts with the new dog playing Bolt. Mitten actually

plays the most important role in getting Bolt and Penny reunited. She tells Bolt, dejected by seeing he has been replaced, that Penny's love for him is true and how much Penny misses him. In the end, Mittens becomes a member of their family. It's not hard to imagine what tremendous courage it takes her to return to a life of domestication.

Works Cited

- Giardina, Carolyn. "Siggraph: Chris Sanders Talks *Croods 2*, *Dragon 2* and Why He Love Animated Sequels". *Hollywood Reporter*, 22 July 2013, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/behind-screen/siggraph-chris-sanders-talks-croods-590389>
- Gilchrist, Todd. "*Bolt* Review: Disney Debuts an Animated Adventure That's Promisingly Pixar-ish". *IGN*, 22 November 2008, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2008/11/22/bolt-review-6>
- Holson, Laura M. "He Runs That Micky Mouse Outfit". *New York Times*, 4 March 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/04/movies/04hols.html>
- Porter, Pete. "Journeys toward an Authentic Self". *Society and Animals: Journal of Human-Animal Studies*, 11.4, 2009, 368-375.
- thecoolkat1995. "*Bolt* (2008) Review". *The Cool Kat 1995*, 4 January 2018, <https://thecoolkat1995.wordpress.com/2018/01/04/bolt-2008/>

Ting Wang

WALL·E (2008): Beyond Artificial Life

CREDITS

Director: Andrew Stanton
Written by: Andrew Stanton, Jim Reardon; story by: Andrew Stanton, Pete Docter
Producer: Jim Morris
Art direction: Bert Berry, Anthony Christov, Jason Deamer, Mark Cordell Holmes, Robert Kondo
Editor: Stephen Schaffer
Music: Thomas Newman
Main performers (voices): Ben Burtt (Wall-e, M-O, robots), Elissa Knight (Eve), Jeff Garlin (Captain), Fred Willard (Shelby Forthright, BnL CEO), MacInTalk (AUTO), Sigourney Weaver (Ship's Computer)
Company: Pixar Animation Studios, USA
Runtime: 1h 38'



REASONS TO SEE WALL·E

- It is a very original and tender story which nonetheless criticizes serious contemporary issues such as massive consumerism, corporate power and human environmental impact.
- The film won the Oscar to Best Animated Feature Film of the Year in 2009 among many other awards and nominations.
- The animation art, from concept to final version is a masterpiece, making the film visually outstanding with beautiful scenes.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN WALL·E

A film by Andrew Stanton, the director of *Finding Nemo* (2003), *WALL·E* (2008) is a computer-animated science-fiction film produced by Pixar Animation Studios and released by Walt Disney Pictures. Preceded by *Ratatouille* (2007) and followed by *Up* (2009), *WALL·E* is Pixar's ninth film. The movie was immediately praised for its outstanding animation and innovative themes and contributed to the continued success of Pixar Studios at the end of the 2000s decade. Stanton's film won the Oscar for Best Animated Feature Film in 2009 and was nominated to five more categories in the Academy Awards including Best Writing in an Original Screenplay and Best Achievement in Music Written for Motion Pictures. Furthermore, *WALL·E* also managed to be the winner for Best Animated Film in both the Golden Globes and the BAFTA Awards among many other prizes and nominations.

In the film, set nearly 700 years in the future, planet Earth has become an uninhabitable wasteland. Due to the high levels of toxicity produced by unrestrained consumerism and environmental neglect, human beings have had to be evacuated to gigantic star liners in outer space. In this devastated world, Wall·e, is the only waste

allocation robot that remains operational. His duty is to clean up the humans' mess while they are in exile. One day his monotonous routine of compressing and stacking trash is broken with the arrival of Eve, a much more advanced robot sent to Earth to find signs of sustainable life. The two robots start connecting but their short relationship is suddenly interrupted when Eve is collected by a rocket and sent back to the star liner Axiom. Fearing what will happen to her, Wall-e clings to the rocket and follows Eve into outer space. On board the Axiom, a ship fully controlled and maintained by serving robots, human beings move around in hoverchairs, without performing any kind of action. Because of their extreme sedentarism men and women have degenerated into a state of dangerous obesity and paralysis. Wall-e and Eve collaborate with the captain of the ship and other defective robots in order to defeat Auto, the captain's robotic assistant who remains loyal to the secret no-return directive declared by humans centuries ago. When Auto is finally deactivated, the Axiom sets course to Earth, where robots and humans work together to regenerate the planet.

When analyzing the film, it is impossible not to categorize Wall-e and Eve in terms of gender. Reviewer Mellissa Hughes argues that "despite the names Wall-e and Eve, these two characters are predominantly genderless" (online). However, regardless of their being non-humaniform robots, it is easy for the spectator to recognize the protagonists' gendered identity through their voices, mannerisms and design, with straight lines for Wall-e and curves for Eve. Brittany Long claims that gender can be distinguished in the robots through their physical appearance, noting that Wall-e is "noticeably disproportionate and not taken care of, suggesting a masculine gender" (12). Furthermore, she also mentions that male bodies are usually not anatomized or objectified to the extent female bodies are. Unlike Wall-e, "Eve's features establish her as more atheistically pleasing" and "she appears to be better maintained" (13), hence feminine. In fact, Eve's shining white body contrasts with Wall-e's rusty and dirty frame. Long defends that the fact that Eve is "properly maintained" supports the notion that "females should be concerned with their appearance" (13). In the case of Eve, her gendered characterization is directly identified through her name, which refers to the Biblical narrative. Some critics even remark that Eve's shape looks like a human womb. Eric Herhuth demonstrates the point by paying attention to a crucial scene of the movie: "In a key sequence in this first act, Wall-e shows Eve a plant that he found, which satisfies Eve's programmed search (she literally puts the plant inside her hollow body), signals a shuttle from the Axiom and reduces Eve to a catatonic state" (57). Hughes also agrees with this interpretation, stating that when Eve places the plant inside her womb, "she falls silent, having fulfilled her reproductive duties" (online).

Despite their limited speech, the robots' gender representation can also be perceived through their behavior. For instance, throughout the film Eve tends to correct and scold Wall-e for his inadequate conduct in the Axiom. This way, Eve is depicted as a motherly figure to Wall-e. Furthermore, Wall-e is indeed portrayed as childlike which according to Long "places Eve in a nurturing role" (14). Wall-e's childish behavior can be observed through his curious personality. He is constantly picking up objects from the ground to add to his collection, and he gets very excited when he shows them to Eve. Apart from that, gender can as well be associated to the robots through the tasks and jobs they perform. Long claims that Wall-e's job compacting trash is depicted as long, tedious and physically demanding, while Eve's task to find sustainable life on Earth seems to be quick and effortless. This distribution of tasks is highly based on stereotypical gender roles. Besides, the categorization is not only seen in the protagonists but also on the other robots of the Axiom. For example, the female robots carry out caring and beauty tasks, they are teachers and hairdressers. In contrast, the male robots' work requires more physical activity since they are responsible for the

maintenance of the ship. They can also occupy higher professional positions, such as Auto, who is the captain's assistant and the one who is really in charge of the Axiom.

Herhuth observes as well that the “spontaneous emergence of robot life does not provide lasting space for alternative personalities and societies to emerge; instead, it perpetuates particular norms –liberal desire and heterosexuality– without acknowledging their cultural particularity” (58). Setting two robot protagonists in a fictional post-apocalyptic world gave Andrew Stanton a wide range of possibilities to explore different types of characters, social relationships and ways of living. However, the director opted for the robots to adopt and reproduce cultural norms from the past. In the film, Stanton preserves traditional values and normative forms of desire and sexuality that are exemplified in the relationship between Wall-e and Eve. In fact, Wall-e learns about human relationships watching countless times *Hello, Dolly!* Through this musical film Wall-e forgets his directive “where he is without memory of family, identity or norms, and develops a heterosexual version of normativity” (58). Thus, when Eve reaches Earth, Wall-e courts her assuming she can feel the same way about him. Barrosse, another reviewer, suggests that Wall-e develops a male gender identity imitating Cornelius Hackl from the *Hello, Dolly!* film as “he identifies closely with this character” (online).

According to Herhuth, the malleable state of the robots' directives, allows them to act beyond their programmed duties and choose the objectives they want to pursue. This enables Wall-e first to shift from compacting and stacking trash to performing other activities such as collecting objects, decorating his refuge and watching *Hello, Dolly!*, and then to fall in love with Eve and to follow her to outer space. The author states that “this capacity for desire is reinforced by the empty bodies featured in both robots” (57). This new ability of desiring is not only present in Wall-e but also in Eve, who decides to help Wall-e go back to Earth, and in other rogue robots. The faculty they possess to change their directives and choose what they want to pursue, in short, makes the robots resemble humans. Paradoxically, it is Wall-e's development and adoption of human characteristics that brings back humanity to the passengers of the Axiom. By choosing a robot that acquires sentience and other human qualities as a protagonist, the film raises the question of what is human and highlights the ethical dilemmas that emerge from the relationships between humans and robotic entities. The film seems to convey the idea that the end of human life as we know it will not come from a war between humans and artificial life, but rather from an overreliance on machines run by AIs which could threaten human autonomous action and social intimacy on Earth. Herhuth argues that this is illustrated in the film with the hyperbolic situation of the Axiom where humans “are presented as bored and sedentary, and as infantile in mind and shape” (56), and everything is in the hands of robots who “carry out the labor necessary to maintain the ship and the society” (57).

To conclude, as we have seen *WALL·E* is a beautiful film with its spectacular art animation and visuals. However, it seems that the outstanding animation disguises the more conservative aspects of the movie. Although *WALL·E* deals with serious issues such as massive consumerism, human environmental impact, and the overreliance on automatic machines, the film limits Wall-e and Eve subjecting them to stereotypical gender roles. Thus, the movie emphasizes traditional values, failing to transgress normative forms of desire and sexuality and to explore alternative personalities and social relationships that could emerge from the characterization of robots in a fictional futuristic world.

Works Cited

- Barrosse, Roman Voytko. "Is Wall-E Male or Female?". *Medium*, 25 June 2018, <https://medium.com/s/story/wall-e-eve-the-great-gender-debate-407befd7d932>
- Herhuth, Eric. "Life, Love, and Programming: The Culture and Politics of *WALL-E* and Pixar Computer Animation". *Cinema Journal*, 53.4, Summer 2014, 53-75.
- Hughes, Mellissa. "*Wall-E* Review: From a Feminist's Perspective (review)". *Mellissa Hughes*, 7 July 2008, <https://mellissahughes.com/2008/07/07/wall-e-review-from-a-feminists-perspective/>
- Long, Brittany. "Creating Gender in Disney/Pixar's *Wall-E*". BA Honors Dissertation, East Tennessee University, 2011, <https://dc.etsu.edu/honors/149/>

Helena Zúñiga Centenero

Coraline (2009): Lost in Adaptation?

CREDITS

Directors: Henry Selick

Written by: Henry Selick. Based on the book by Neil Gaiman

Producers: Claire Jennings, Bill Mechanic, Mary Sandell, Henry Selick

Art direction: Phil Brotherton, Lee Bo Henry, Tom Proost, Dawn Swiderski

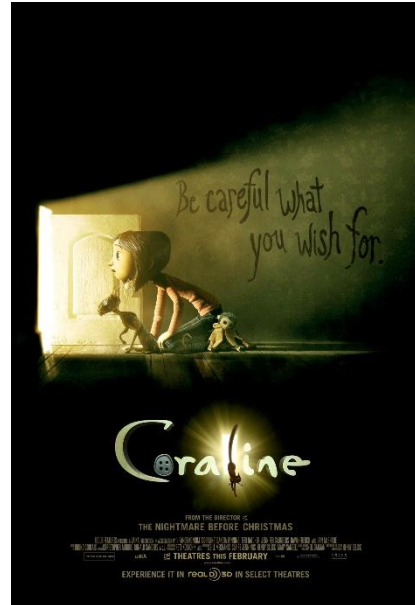
Editor: Christopher Murrie-Green, Ronald Sanders

Music: Bruno Coulais

Main performers (voices): Dakota Fanning (Coraline Jones), Teri Hatcher (Mel Jones/Other Mother/Beldam), Jennifer Saunders (Miss April Spink/Other Spink), Dawn French (Miss Miriam Forcible/Other Forcible), Keith David (The Cat), John Hodgman (Charlie Jones/Other Father), Robert Bailey Jr. (Wyborne 'Wybie' Lovat), Ian McShane (Mr. Sergei Alexander Bobisky/Other Bobinsky)

Company: Laika, USA

Runtime: 1h 40'



REASONS TO SEE *Coraline*

- It is a decent adaptation of Neil Gaiman's eponymous novel.
- Selick's film tells the inspiring story of a brave girl who isn't afraid to get her hands dirty to do the job of saving herself and others.
- Its surreal atmosphere brought to life through a masterfully executed application of the stop-motion animation technique.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *Coraline*

Coraline (2009) is a stop-motion animation film that sets itself to achieve the daunting task of adapting Neil Gaiman's eponymous Gothic novel for children published in 2002. With generally positive reviews across most critical platforms, *Coraline* put Laika on the map as a key studio and set it on a trajectory of critically successful feature films that lasts to this day. *Coraline* itself managed to garner several awards after its release, amongst which the BAFTA Children's Award for Best Feature Film and the Annie for Best Music in an Animated Feature Production stand out.

Coraline's plot follows the adventures of a young girl of the same name whose family has just decided to move to a god-forsaken place in the middle of Ashland, Oregon. Her loving but oblivious parents, Charlie and Mel Jones, are very busy working on their garden catalogue and have no time to spare for Coraline, who decides to take the matter of her entertainment into her own hands and sets off to explore her new home. It is then when she meets the other inhabitant of the Pink Palace: Ms. Spink and

Ms. Forcible, a pair of British sisters obsessed with the past glories of their youth, Mr. Bobinski, an old circus performer with a group of jumping mice and Wybie, a socially awkward young boy with a mysterious black cat. After some time wandering around, Coraline finally discovers a small door on the wall of the living room that takes her to a world of dark and dangerous wonders. This is inhabited by mirror versions of her parents and neighbors, who look like an idealized version of themselves except for the unsettling detail of having buttons for eyes. In this place, her Other Mother and her Other Father have all the time in the world to care for her and shower her with presents and delights, which Coraline welcomes gladly. Coraline's initial elation is quickly extinguished, however, when she realizes that the strange entity posing as her mother is actually an evil creature known as the Beldam, who kidnaps children and feeds on their love until nothing but their empty husks is left. Coraline embark then on a quest to save the lost souls of the children that came before her and free her parents from the Beldam's yoke, after kidnaps them too. Using her cunning and intellect, and the invaluable assistance of her strange but well-meaning neighbors, and above all of Wyborn, Coraline eventually manages to set the lost souls free, rescue her parents and defeat the wicked Beldam once and for all.

While it would be tempting to focus on the differences and similarities between novel and film, which exist and are there to be explored, this is beyond the scope of this essay. For that reason, the analysis will center around the character of Coraline as an example of a brave and cunning little girl, the depiction of parenthood and the controversial inclusion of the character of Wyborn (or Wybie), who happens to be totally absent from Gaiman's novel.

From the very beginning, Coraline is presented as an independent, curious child with a thirst for exploration. Faced with her parents' inability to focus their attention on her, she sets off to explore her new home and surrounding woods in an attempt to combat boredom, which, as we have seen, eventually leads her to find the door to the other world. It is quite clear, hence, that Coraline is a very capable individual with the agency and ability to set her own goals and make her own decisions. While it is uncommon to have little girls as protagonists, it is even more uncommon for them to be self-driven and obstinate, as the long tradition of female representation that other companies such as Disney have helped perpetuate suggests. Selick's film shifts the focus from passivity and agreeableness to action and assertiveness, as Coraline may even be read as obnoxious within the film's own context, as her hard-working mother, Mel Jones, manifests quite covertly at some point: "Will you stop *pestering* me if I do this for you?" (emphasis added).

As some critics suggest, this reading may also find purchase in adult moviegoers, as Coraline is not necessarily found to be an agreeable character. Reviewers such as Roger Ebert chose to focus on the superficially negative aspects of the film's characters, as his description of Coraline clearly illustrates: "She's unpleasant, complains, has an attitude and makes friends reluctantly" (online). Although Ebert recognizes that she is a rare protagonist indeed, his review mentions these aspects of Coraline's personality as negative traits, and not as personality aspects that help to make of her a believable character. Helen O'Hara, however, recognizes these traits as an antidote to the Disney princess syndrome when she points out that it is precisely the combination of being "smart, funny and ultimately very courageous" (O'Hara) and her apparently less desirable traits that make Coraline Jones a well-developed character.

What matters here, however, is not so much how likable Coraline is as a character, but where these reactions come from: what may annoy adults so much about the character is, precisely, what may attract the younger audience, since Coraline's demands and assertive attitude are not born from capricious whims, but from a need to satisfy her deep curiosity and restless intellect. While some scholars

rightly point out that Selick's film adaptation alters the nature of Coraline's journey (Myers 251), which is only understandable seeing how Gaiman's source material is a much more introspective adventure, Coraline's value as a female role model cannot be denied, as her many daring actions and clever occurrence attest to.

Coraline's development as a character is inextricably tied to her relationship with her working parents, Mel and Charlie Jones, both writers who work from home. Although both parents are present throughout the narrative, it is the mother, Mel Jones, who is given the leading role in the family, with Charlie deferring most of the decision making to her, and as a result, all the responsibility that comes with it. While it would be tempting to shift the conversation towards motherhood and speak only about the relationship between Coraline and her mother, that would somehow preclude the possibility of this family model existing as a valid one. Whether this apparent imbalance of authority is desirable or not in any type of bond is, of course, debatable, but removing one of its participants from the conversation because roles are not traditionally or equally distributed would be harmful and simplistic.

Not surprisingly, this shift in power dynamics has been read and decried as castrating and deeply troublesome in regard to female representation (Foreman 3), as it would seem to suggest that the film perpetuates the very common trope of the nagging and castrating wife. This, coupled with the overtly exaggerated depiction of this bond in the Other World (the Other Father is under the absolute control of the Other Mother), would seem to shine a negative light on female representation as presented in the film. It is important to remember, however, that the Jones' depiction as a nuclear family has its roots in reality: these power dynamics do exist in commonplace families, which further problematizes the narrow reading previously presented. Does every mother who holds authority suffer from the nagging wife syndrome? Or is this simply another, very valid power configuration within the family dynamics? While Coraline's parents may not be perfect, they are *real* and caring. Although it is true that Selick's depiction of parenthood seems quite in accordance with contemporary times, the discussion should perhaps focus on how Selick seems to capitalize on adult fears to offer a rather simplistic critique of modern life without offering any alternative other than "spend more time with your child so it doesn't feel neglected". And seeks dangerous imaginary parents...

Before analyzing the character of Wyborne, it is important to make one thing clear: his presence in the film is totally unnecessary and superfluous. This is a very strong statement indeed, one that is, nonetheless, supported by Selick's own words, since he devised the character for Coraline to "share her thoughts with and create a little more conflict" (in Jones 188). As a result, Coraline's agency and development are necessarily affected and not always in the best of ways, since in the film there are more people to do the same things Coraline did by herself in Gaiman's novel. Having said that, and so as not to reproduce whatever negative critiques about the character have already been articulated (see Curtis), the fact remains that Wyborne is a character that *exists* within the film and he is not going anywhere. It is, then, worth analyzing him in the way he is presented, for, whether one wants it or not, his peculiar and awkward ways do represent an uncommon masculinity to be perhaps picked up by other children moviegoers. While he shares some common traits with Coraline (he is also a curious and avid explorer), it is Coraline who eventually does all the heavy-lifting and moves the plot forward (as it should be, since this is her story after all), which leaves Wybie to occupy the position of the occasional sidekick or help lender. As far as masculinity is concerned, Wybie seems to be brave when bravery is required, but never in such a way that would overshadow Coraline's own merits or aptitudes, as they learn to work together throughout the film. It is not incidental that they save each other in

multiple occasions, building thus a healthy relationship of friendship between a girl and a boy, which is something there can never be too many of.

It is never easy to analyze a children's film, particularly when such films counts with the double-edged blessing of being based on such excellent material as that of Neil Gaiman's. While no adaptation can claim to perfectly encapsulate the spirit of the source material, that doesn't mean we should stop trying to bring to life our most beloved characters and stories. Whether Coraline's soul became the captive of Selick's cinematic vision or the character found new ways to express itself through the screen is for all of you to judge. Whatever the case, the film remains a very enjoyable and at times controversial adaptation... as all adaptations should be.

Works Cited

- Curtis, James M. "Why Were You Born? An Analysis of the Anti-Feminist Implications of the Film Adaptation of *Coraline*". *Gender Forum: An Internet Platform for Gender and Women's Studies*, 57, March 2016, 1-10.
- Ebert, Roger. "A Beautiful Film about Several Nasty People". *Roger Ebert.com*, 4 February 2009, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/coraline-2009>
- Foreman, Adrienne. "A Fantasy of Foreignness: The Use of Race, Ethnicity, and Gender to Solidify Self in Henry Selick's *Coraline*". *Red Feather Journal*, 3.2, Fall 2012, 1-15.
- Jones, Stephen. *Coraline: A Visual Companion*. Titan Books, 2009.
- Myers, Lindsay. "Whose Fear Is It Anyway?: Moral Panics and 'Stranger Danger' in Henry Selick's *Coraline*". *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 36.3, 2012, 245-257.
- O'Hara, Helen. "Coraline Review". *Empire*, 25 March 2008, <https://www.empireonline.com/movies/reviews/coraline-review/>

Rubén Campos Arjona

Monsters vs. Aliens (2009): Deconstructing Tradition

CREDITS

Director: Rob Letterman, Conrad Vernon

Written by: Maya Forbes, Wallace Wolodarsky, Rob Letterman, Jonathan Aibel, Glenn Berger; story by: Rob Letterman, Conrad Vernon

Producer: Lisa Stewart

Art direction: Scott Wills, Michael Isaak

Editor: Joyce Arrastia, Eric Dapkewicz

Music: Henry Jackman, Hans Zimmer

Main performers (voices): Reese Witherspoon (Susan Murphy/Ginormica), Seth Rogen (B.O.B), Hugh Laurie (Dr. Cockroach Ph.D.), Will Arnett (The Missing Link), Kiefer Sutherland (General W.R. Monger), Rainn Wilson (Gallaxhar), Stephen Colbert (President Hathaway), Paul Rudd (Derek Dietl)

Company: DreamWorks Animation, USA

Runtime: 1h 42'



REASONS TO SEE Monsters vs. Aliens

- *Monsters vs. Aliens*, a DreamWorks film, radically distinguishes itself from the patriarchal dynamics of previous Disney/Pixar's films and their male-centered and male-dominated narratives.
- This was DreamWorks Animation's first feature film to be directly produced in a stereoscopic 3D format instead of being converted into 3D after completion.
- It is an homage to '50s sci-fi movies filtered through 21st-century 3-D technology and new approach to gender issues.

REPRESENTING GENDER IN *Monsters vs. Aliens*

Monsters vs. Aliens (2009) is a computer animated science fiction film, produced by DreamWorks Animation and distributed by Paramount Pictures. Although not successful enough to be followed by a sequel, the film started a franchise consisting of a short film, *B.O.B.'s Big Break*, two television specials, *Mutant Pumpkins from Outer Space* and *Night of the Living Carrots*, and a television series with the same name. *Monsters vs. Aliens*, furthermore, was the first attempt in DreamWorks' plans to release all of its animated film in 3D. The innovation lies in the fact that it was the studio's first feature film to be directly produced in a stereoscopic 3D format instead of being converted into 3D after completion. Leaving aside technology, according to Molly Hassell what makes *Monsters vs. Aliens* peculiar is "its radical departure from the patriarchal storylines of previous films, ranging from male-centered and male-dominated narratives of *Ants*, *The Prince of Egypt*, *Chicken Run*, and *Shrek* to the comparatively more recent and androcentric *Flushes Away*, *Bee Movie*, *Madagascar*, and *Kung Fu Panda*" (32).

Susan, a girl from Modesto in California, is struck by a meteorite on her wedding day to local weatherman, Derek. The meteorite is made of a little-known element called Quantonium, which causes her to grow into a 50-foot giantess. Susan is then snatched by the federales and transported to a top-secret facility, where the US Government renames her Ginormica. The top-secret Government prison holds other monstrous creatures, who have been languishing since the 1950s, including Dr. Cockroach, a mad scientist turned by his own experiments into a hybrid cockroach/human; B.O.B, an indestructible gelatinous blob; the Missing Link, a prehistoric fish-ape hybrid; and Insectosaurus, a grub transformed into a 350-foot monster. Meanwhile, Earth is invaded by a robot, sporting one big eyeball in the middle of its head. The master of the robot is the alien Gallaxhar, who is attacking San Francisco to get the Quantonium. General W.R. Monger (i.e. 'warmonger') and the President of the United States are helpless to deal with this threat and in desperation release the crew of monsters to save Earth from the aliens.

This brief summary of the plot makes explicit DreaanWorks' homage to '50s sci-fi movies, since the monsters are all references to original creatures that starred in actual 1950s B-movies. The main character Ginormica is inspired by Nancy Fowler Archer, the lead character in *Attack of the 50 Feet Woman* (1958) and its 1990s TV version. The two women grow to giant size because of an alien encounter, but the two transformations lead to completely different outcomes. Nancy's giant size allows her to take mortal revenge against her cheating husband and his mistress; Ginormica's mutation, in contrast, is revelatory of a new self-awareness as an individual and as a woman. As for the other characters, B.O.B. is a reference to *The Blob* (1958), a film whose main character is a gelatinous alien life-form that consumes everything in its path as it grows and grows. The Missing Link is inspired by the strange prehistoric beast that lurks in the depths of the Amazonian jungle and that a group of scientists tries to capture and bring back to civilization for study in the film *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954). Dr. Cockroach is a reference to *The Fly* (1958), in which a scientist has a horrific accident when he tries to use his newly invented teleportation device. Finally, Insectosaurus is a reference to the Japanese Kaiju film *Mothra* (1961); this monster is typically portrayed as a colossal sentient larva or caterpillar. It has also appeared as a recurring character in the *Godzilla* franchise.

Science fiction as a genre usually presents a world radically different from our own and uses different tropes (such as radioactive growth, the mad scientist, the evil alien dictator, the Government conspiracy, etc.) in order to contrast the world of imagination to the real one. According to Zirange, "Science Fiction uses a 'novum' (a new thing) as a device to present the 'difference' or 'otherness' from the world of reality" (1). In other words, this genre contains new elements that question the conventions with the aim of deconstructing tradition and reconstructing alternatives. This aim is successfully achieved by *Monsters vs. Aliens*, a film that can be considered "subversive" in its narrative "because it maximizes the potential of science fiction to challenge prevailing ideologies by critiquing pervasive traditional ideologies in children's media", among them "gender role conservatism and the centrality of heterosexual romance in women's lives" (Hassel, 34).

Initially, Susan participates in the patriarchal project by defining herself entirely in relation to her husband-to-be, Derek. In the process of annihilation of her own identity she is simply labelled "the weatherman's wife", and deprived of any personal pursuit and ambition. After Susan's transformation, Derek decides to break the engagement (and Susan's heart) selfishly claiming that "I'm not looking to get married and spend the rest of my life in someone else's shadow. And you are casting a pretty big shadow". This assertion reveals that Derek is a self-centered man who does not wish to be married to someone who could overshadow his career. His rejection, however, has a

positive outcome since it reinforces Susan's independence: it makes her understand how much more she has accomplished by herself without holding Derek's hand and reasserts her confidence. Understood in this way, Susan's mutation (the 'novum' in the story) involves a significant transformation, which is not only empirical, but also ontological, since it turns her from the passive, beautiful heroine of the standard fairy tale ideology to an independent and strong-willed woman, no less beautiful but also colossal and immensely powerful.

Science-fiction narratives often alter our culturally and socially constructed gender roles and, therefore, they allow for the creation of characters that do not conform to our traditional vision. In the case of *Monsters vs. Aliens*, the monsters experience gender confusion as the result of the contact with the feminine 'otherness' embodied by Ginormica. This contact challenges the way in which they have internalized their identities until that moment. In particular, it is worth focusing on the evolution of Link and Bob. The former's predecessor the monster featuring in *Creature from the Black Lagoon*— is traditionally depicted as a masculine character who embodies the typical patriarchal values of dominance, virility, and power; this is why he is typically seen carrying in his arms the woman he kidnaps. When Susan first arrives at the secret prison, Link tries to seduce her by lifting weights and exhibiting his muscles, as a demonstration of his physical strength. However, after the defeat of the robot, when Susan/Ginormica has shown her impressive physicality and her 'self-determination' in the free choice of her own acts without external compulsion, Link feels threatened and rather dejected. About this, Cockroach exclaims, "Oh poor Link. After all that tough talk, you were *out-monstered* by a girl. No wonder you are depressed" (my italics). Another character that experiences gender confusion is B.O.B. He often confuses his life and feelings with those of Susan, showing the impact and influence that she has on her monster friends. Later, when B.O.B meets Susan's mother and having heard from Susan about Derek, he exclaims, "Oh, Derek! I missed you so much! Thinking that we'd be together again. It's the only thing that got me through prison! I love you! I love this man". B.O.B actual conversation with a woman appears to make him confused about gender and its social functions.

These two examples of internal gender dissonance "transform genre and plot conventions and disrupt the naturalized alignment of sex, gender, and sexuality" (Unsigned, online). Moreover, even though the members of Susan's crew are male-coded in the film—in the sense that they are voiced by male actors—they are also oppressed by a male-dominated system embodied by the military and the Government. It is worth mentioning the way in which *Monsters vs. Aliens* plays with the depiction of the US Army and its leader, General W.R. Monger. Both the General and the US Army represent the embodiment of the patriarchal power of the USA, marking the interrelationship between patriarchy and militarism. General Monger imprisons Ginormica and her male friends, forcing them to live a piteous life only to ask for their help at his convenience. The scene in which the General, introducing Ginormica as a possible tool to fight against the alien attack, holds up his hands representing her breast size to describe the girl is emblematic of sexist his behavior toward women.

Ultimately, the parody of the US Army and its power provided in *Monsters Vs. Aliens* can be interpreted as an attack on "the archetypical counterinsurgency discourse on protection" (Olsson, 164) that implies the problematic relationship between violence, legitimacy and political order. According to this ideology, the highly coercive forms of military operations led by the American nation are in part justified by the claim that the use of force might allow establish civil security. This discourse is inextricably linked to the ideology of American exceptionalism, which has characterized the history of the country since the Puritan settlement. This notion has often been employed in order to depict America as the nation in charge of defending and

promoting fundamental values such as liberty and democracy. From this belief and from the need to identify an antagonist that threatens to subvert social order –an external enemy that generates danger and necessitates defense– the USA have developed what Richard Hofstadter calls a ‘Paranoid Style’ in politics, that is the tendency toward paranoia, panic, and conspiracy theories in political discourse that describes America as a nation perennially under attack. What *Monsters vs. Aliens* contributes to this view is the idea that the defense of the realm against real enemies may one day fall on the hands of those rejected by American patriarchy, from women to strange male monsters.

Works Cited

- Hassel, Holly. “Susan Murphy, Ginormica, and Gloria Steinem: Feminist Consciousness-Raising as Science Fiction in *Monsters vs. Aliens*”. *The Galaxy Is Rated G: Essays on Children’s Science Fiction Film and Television*, R. C. Neighbors and Sandy Rankin (eds.). McFarland, 2011, 31-52.
- Hofstadter, Richard, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays”. *Harper’s Magazine*, November 1964, <https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/>
- Olsson, Christian. “Legitimate Violence in the Prose of Counterinsurgency: An Impossible Necessity?” *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 38.2, 2013, 155-171.
- Unsigned. “Gender Identity in Feminist Science Fiction English Literature Essay”. *UkEssays*, November 2018, <https://www.ukessays.com/essays/english-literature/gender-identity-in-feminist-science-fiction-english-literature-essay.php?vref=1>
- Zirange, Rajaram Sitaram. “Futuristic Dystopias as Feminist Protest in Angela Carter’s Fiction”. *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, 2.2, June 2011, 1-4.

Silvia Gervasi

The Princess and the Frog /Tiana (2009): A Missed Opportunity

CREDITS

Directors: Ron Clements; John Musker

Written by: Ron Clements; John Musker, Rob Edwards; story by: Ron Clements, John Musker, Greg Erb, Jason Oremland. Based on the book by E.D. Baker

Producer: Peter del Vecho

Art direction: Ian Gooding

Editor: Jeff Draheim

Music: Randy Newman

Main performers (voices): Anika Noni Rose (Tiana); Bruno Campos (Prince Naveen); Keith David (Dr. Facilier); Michael-Leon Wooley (Louis); Jennifer Cody (Charlotte La Bouff); Jim Cummings (Ray); Peter Bartlett (Lawrence); Oprah Winfrey (Eudora); Terrence Howard (James); Jennifer Lewis (Mama Odie); John Goodman ('Big Daddy' La Bouff)

Company: Walt Disney Animation Studios, USA

Runtime: 1h 37'



REASONS TO SEE *The Princess and the Frog*

- To finally meet the first African-American Disney princess.
- With its hand-drawn animation, the film is a beautiful return to Disney's roots.
- The story presents a traditional fairy-tale, set in the 20th century, with some interesting twists.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *The Princess and the Frog*

After the technological improvements that allowed Disney to move into 3D animation, *The Princess and the Frog* (2009, a.k.a *Tiana*) stands out for its traditional hand-drawn designs, purposely reminding the audience of the old Disney classics. Released in 2009 after films such as *Bolt* (2008) or *Wall-E* (2008), *Tiana* re-introduced traditional animation to a new generation already used to the new styles. However, *The Princess and the Frog* became the lonely reminder of a different time, as computer-animated styles prevailed also in big Disney hits such as (2013) and *Moana* (2016).

The story, also reminding us of the classics, is a spin on a fairy-tale novel by E.D. Baker, *The Frog Princess* (2002). As the title suggests, the plot tells the story of a princess that, in her wish to escape her marriage to a prince she does not love, decides to kiss an enchanted toad wishing it would turn into a prince, only for her to be transformed into a frog instead. Nevertheless, the original concept of the enchanted prince turned into a frog comes from a much earlier time, possibly Medieval if not Roman, and is known in particular thanks to a tale by the Grimm brothers titled "The Frog King; or, Iron Henry" (1812). In the Grimms' tale, a princess is playing with a golden ball, and when it falls into a well the Frog Prince returns it to her, hoping to be

transformed back to human. However, the most notable difference between the two concepts is that the kiss is never a factor in the original tale; instead, the prince returns to his human form, quite surprisingly, when the princess throws him against a wall.

Unlike the protagonist in both the novel and the tale, Tiana is not a born princess; in fact, she is a lower-class African-American girl living in 1920s New Orleans, who only dresses as a princess in her best friend's Charlotte costume parties. Unlike her pampered, white friend, Tiana is a strong, level-headed woman; she does not believe in fairy tales and is convinced that hard work is the only magic that will help her achieve her dreams. Thus, she is happy to work tirelessly all day waiting tables, in hopes to achieve one day the dream of opening the restaurant she and her father always desired. In direct contrast with Tiana, Prince Naveen wants easy money to keep living his easy life. For this, he has resigned himself to marrying Tiana's best friend, Charlotte, in the hopes that she will help him restore his fortune. However, he is tempted and ultimately falls for The Shadow's Man scheme, being transformed into a toad and supplanted by his servant, Lawrence. Desperate for a solution, he believes Tiana to be a princess and asks her for a kiss, promising her a restaurant in return. The twist comes when instead of Naveen turning into a human, Tiana is transformed into a frog. Tiana and Naveen escape together and end up in the swamp, where they start their journey to become human again. In the end, they manage to defeat The Shadow Man just in time, and turn back to humans thanks to their marriage. This makes Tiana a true princess, thus returning the newly married to their human forms.

The questions of progressive representation are probably the most relevant in *The Princess and the Frog*. After all, Tiana is the first African-American Disney princess, and as such she bears a heavy responsibility on her shoulders. Thus, the issues of gender and race go hand in hand in this film; Tiana is not only represented by her identity as a woman, but as an African-American. Unfortunately, it is precisely her characterization as an African-American princess (or more accurately, her lack thereof) that has created the greatest controversy surrounding this film. Tiana is not a princess by birth, and she spends too much time as a frog: those are the two main counterarguments to *Tiana's* progressive discourse. Of course, the connotations of making the first African-American princess a frog are also controversial; as Gehlawat states, not only does Tiana "hop around as a frog" as black actors were often forced to do in the past but her ties with "animality" seem to tie "her dreams of success with a lack of intelligence and reason" (418). The fact that Tiana is reduced to being a small, green animal while white Charlotte continues to be presented as the stereotypical image of the Southern belle and as a true American princess also plays an important part in Tiana's already dubious representation. Thus, despite the apparent progress that comes from Tiana finally becoming the first black princess, there are factors that may question that supposed progression and that need to be considered.

There are also positive aspects to Tiana's character, even though in the end we are still forced to question whether she can be truly independent or not. Stephens describes Tiana as "one of the most intellectually strong and independently minded female heroines Disney has ever created" (99), especially in comparison with Disney's first generation of princesses. Indeed, Tiana will not let anything distract her from her ultimate objective, her restaurant; but not even her strong character can elude the traditional fairy tale romance present in all Disney princess movies. As Morris states in his review, "the way she resists the fantasy formula is admirable, but ultimately (and disappointingly) futile" (online). Despite all her disinterest in romantic relationships, she still ends up marrying Naveen. Furthermore, it is thanks to her friend Louis' final intimidation of the landowners that they finally accept Tiana's money for her beloved restaurant and not thanks to her own efforts. This raises serious doubts about whether Tiana's work was really that rewarding in the end. The question of whether Tiana's

dream is accomplished because of her work or because of Disney's magical happy ending touch is one that is difficult to answer, but that also raises the issue of up until which point Disney seems to want to create a truly independent protagonist in this movie.

Likewise, Tiana's marriage to Naveen is also put into question by critics such as Lester, who considers that Naveen's mixed race and European origins might be a way of subverting "male black power to uphold the standard of white supremacy" (300). One might wonder whether making the main couple in the film completely black was too wide a step for Disney, or whether Disney was actually trying to represent an interracial marriage. Similarly, and in contrast to Tiana's African-American heritage, Charlotte is described by Moffit as a way of asserting that the black body can only exist by contrasting it to a white character, no matter how flawed (473). Thus, Charlotte's white presence further overwhelms Tiana's blackness (473). This problem is enhanced by the fact that, in many ways, Charlotte is presented as the real princess of the movie: she is the one whom Naveen intends to marry, she is rich and from a high class, though in many ways she certainly represents what Morris considers a "lurid joke" on Disney princesses (online). A group of African-American mothers, who did not see the joke, confirmed in frustration that their daughters were receiving the wrong message that Charlotte was the true princess of the story (Moffit and Heather 66). All in all, Tiana's forced, unjustified comparison and contrast with the non-black characters appears to be a strategy to make the audience forget about Tiana's own blackness.

The arguments against the film's dubious progressive trends continue with Tiana's character design. Not only is she contrasted with her beautiful white friend, but Tiana possesses what Moffit refers to as "appealing physical features that allow her to be palatable to diverse Disney audiences" (478). Tiana was created to appeal to "mainstream audiences", which meant a softening of her African traits (478). It is no surprise that, when asked about the conventional concepts of beauty and princesses, the group of African-American mothers Moffit and Heather interviewed answered that "to be a princess, one must be young, fair, rich, and white" (68). The conventional ideas about princesses, mainly promoted by general culture and companies such as Disney, include their representation as beautiful white women wearing flowy gowns and crowned by a beautiful tiara. Forgoing Tiana's own background she is given the conventional image of a Disney princess, gown and tiara included. The elements representing African-American culture in the film, albeit beautiful, are mostly stereotyped representations that make the film appealing to a mainstream audience, but that lack accuracy and do not delve into the richest part of this culture.

In conclusion, although it is a beautiful film, *The Princess and the Frog* is not as progressive as it may appear, or as it could have been. Despite being black, Tiana is still a clear representation of the traditional white princess, and still follows the same path in the story that all the previous princesses tread. Even in the achievement of her dream we are led to question whether this happened because of her hard work. Thus, while *Tiana* was a step in the right direction, there is still no princess film that satisfies African-American audiences, supposing a princess film is what African-American women truly need to empower themselves.

Works Cited

- Gehlawat, Ajay. "The Strange Case of *The Princess and the Frog*: Passing and the Elision of Race". *Journal of African American Studies*, 14 May 2010, 417-413.
- Moffitt, Kimberly R. "Scripting the Way for the 21st-Century Disney Princess in *The Princess and the Frog*". *Women's Studies in Communication* 42.4, 2019, 471-489.

- Moffit, Kimberly R. and Heather E. Harris. "Of Negation, Princesses, Beauty, and Work: Black Mothers Reflect on Disney's *The Princess and the Frog*". *The Howard Journal of Communications*, 25, 2014, 56-76.
- Morris, Wesley. "*The Princess and the Frog* (review)". *The Boston Globe*, 11 December 2009.
http://archive.boston.com/ae/movies/articles/2009/12/11/a_measured_leap_for_disneys_princess/
- Lester, Neal A. "Disney's *The Princess and The Frog*: The Pride, the Pressure, and the Politics of Being a First". *The Journal of American Culture* 33.4, December 2010, 294-308.
- Stephens, Jena. "Disney's Darlings: An Analysis of *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled*, *Brave* and the Changing Characterization of the Princess Archetype". *Interdisciplinary Humanities* 31.3, Fall 2014, 95-107.

Cristina Espejo Navas

Up! (2009): Alternatives to a Retirement Village

CREDITS

Directors: Pete Docter, Bob Peterson (co-director)
Written by: Bon Perterson, Pete Docter; story by:
Pete Docter, Bob Peterson, Tom McCarthy
Producer: Jonas Rivera
Art direction: Daniel Lopez Muñoz
Editor: Kevin Nolting
Music: Michale Giacchino
Main performers (voices): Edward Asner (Carl
Fredricksen), Christopher Plummer (Charles Muntz),
Jordan Nagai (Russell), Bob Peterson (Dug / Alpha),
Delroy Lindo (Beta), Elie Docter (Young Ellie)
Company: Pixar Animation Studios, USA
Runtime: 1h 36'



REASONS TO SEE Up!

- It is specifically designed to please audiences of any age.
- It includes one of the most moving opening sequences in children's animated history which lasts only 4 minutes but tells all of Carl and Elli's romance.
- It tackles real-life concerns of, in particular, elderly people.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN Up!

Up! (2009) belongs to the end of an era in which Pixar films were not specifically designed to be turned into future franchises. Up until its release in 2009 only *Toy Story* (1995) had been the object of a sequel (in 1999), which is to a certain extent understandable as it was a truly indisputable world success for being not only the first entirely computer-animated feature film so far but also Pixar's first step into the major animation studio scene. Right after its release the company enacted a safe business strategy which sparked the production of well-known sequels such as *Toy Story 3* (2010), *Cars 2* (2011) and *Monsters University* (2013). *Up!*, Pixar's first 3-D film, was directed by Pete Docter (director of Oscar-award nominee for Best Animated Film *Monsters, Inc.* 2001) and Bob Peterson, a key figure behind all major Pixar studios achievements since its foundation back in 1994.

This original story –initially titled *Helium*– was developed based on the idea of how a person could enter the realm of fantasy in an attempt to escape from an unbearably harsh real world which, to a certain extent, permeates the whole film narrative. As the gripping opening 4-minute sequence narrates, elderly, widowed Carl Fredricksen has spent an idyllic life with his wife, Ellie, until an illness put an end to their long, happy marriage. Pressured by the construction of a new set of buildings hemming in their property and deemed a social peril after being sentenced for having attacked

one of the construction workers, the now retired balloon salesman keeps refusing the idea of leaving his home and going to a retirement village. Tired, Carl decides that a colossal bunch of balloons and helium bottles will be enough for him to literally lift his house and travel in it to Paradise Falls in Venezuela, Ellie's dream trip. Little Russell, a Boy Scout trying to gain his last badge by assisting an elder person is accidentally trapped in the house and he accompanies the protagonist in a journey which takes them to meet the well-known adventurer Charles Muntz. He, now also an elderly man, has spent all his life trying to find evidence of the existence of an ancient creature he once was accused of fabricating. As it can be expected, both Carl and little Russell ultimately manage to save Kevin (as Russell calls the creature) from Muntz's captivity.

The narrative covers the process of ageing of a married couple and the achievement of the ultimate dream of one of its members. The unexpected twist in the story is that, contrary to what statistics show, it is the husband who outlives the wife, thus, framing the old man as the ultimate hero in the movie for his late wife's sake. According to Ageing Studies scholar G. D. Rowles, Carl's relationship with the notion of 'home' is to be analyzed from a triple perspective for not only has he spent his whole life with the same person but he has also done it in the same city and in the same house. His *physical insideness* is being literally destroyed by the unstoppable growth of his city and by the swallowing of small private properties like his by the building of bigger residential areas, as Carl himself experiences with the constant noise of bulldozers. Such changes trigger a consequent *social insideness* with the rest of the neighborhood already dislocated –Carl is literally the last of the owners to be 'removed'. Finally, and most importantly, our hero is bound to experience an *autobiographical insideness* due to the more than likely imminent loss of the property and, therefore, the physical location where his most beloved memories have been crafted.

Following the cliché of extreme romanticized love –one of the few points on which most film reviewers agree– Ellie and Carl meet in childhood, marry, get a house, struggle with everyday problems, plan but fail to have a family and manage to grow old together. All in just the four minutes of the opening sequence, a preamble that is "such a penetrating thing of beauty that it could exist on its own as a lovely short film". (Baumgarten online). The movie succeeds in tugging the viewer's heartstrings regardless of their age; this is what made *Up!* be so well received by the general public. Its remarkable success comes from the fact that all topics covered in the film are real-life problems wisely selected to call the viewers' attention, particularly the adult audience who has so long been ignored by children's films screenwriters. After getting married in a ceremony in which the two families can barely stand each other, the couple formed by Carl and Ellie can only afford to buy a ruined house that they have to fix by themselves. Their dream to become explorers –more particularly Ellie's desire to visit the Paradise Falls in Venezuela someday– is continuously interrupted by unexpected (yet realistic) daily expenses; they have to repair their car, pay for hospital bills (as Ellie suffers a miscarriage) and also repair the house after a tree falls on the roof. Ellie's eventual death does not prevent Carl from facing further headaches. His property is targeted by a construction company and eventually lost.

Ellie carries a significant part of the gender issues in the movie. Little Ellie is presented as a boyish little girl eager to go out and look for adventures. Being as she is, the character helps to undo the stereotype of the pinkie cute blond girl who only likes playing with dolls and baking cakes with mum, which too often has monopolized the depiction of girls in children's films. Ellie is brave –in fact more than her husband to-be – and is not ashamed of leading the action and acting as a real team-leader; she grants Carl access to her adventure club and controls their agenda. Her role in the marriage is worth analyzing in this regard as, despite eventually conforming to the standards of western 20th century low middle-class women, she breaks with the tradition of the

loving housewife subjected to the husband's domination. Ellie is seen painting and even using a saw to cut wood to fix their new home –wearing the wedding dress is not an inconvenience for her; the couple both read, sweep the floor, clean the dust and wash their windows together leaving no room for any scene with her doing any housework in isolation. Their marriage is presented as a role model on which male and female are presented as reliable equals (both officially by being married and formally by sharing all sorts of duties). Their marriage mirrors “a world that has already conceded that men and women are equal” and that “what is socially rather than naturally constructed can be socially challenged and changed” (MacInnes, 326-327). Ellie's contribution to physically repair the couple's bedraggled home not only places her on an even position but also frees the male counterpart from his 'obligation' to provide her with a roof.

Ellie's husband Carl also casts some light on the portrayal of 'non-dominant' masculinities, yet the term itself is open to discussion. Little Carl is introduced as a boy with little chances to end up conforming to the 'expected' gender parameters of masculinity; he is introspective, shy, good-natured, oversized and weak, just like his adventure-mate to-be, Russell, who clearly fails to portray the image of the manly young Boy Scout. The importance of a character like Russell in this movie is rooted in the fact that he unexpectedly ends up experiencing a most thrilling adventure. The representation of masculinity is, however, most clearly exposed by the presence of villain Charles Muntz who functions as a mirror image of the main character. Muntz is built on a parallel type of masculinity which, contrary to what is portrayed in Carl, embodies the very essence of the 19th and early 20th century adventurer or explorer. He is handsome, brave, fearless and with a very acute sense of honor (Meinel, 139) which has driven him to live a never-ending adventure. Homey Carl, despite initially sharing the same dreams, rejects this type of masculinity by choosing a much more ordinary life accompanied by his wife and the small adventures offered in the city. The clash between these two portraits of masculinity takes place in any case after Ellie's death when Carl recovers his boyish dreams and determines to experience an adventure as the ultimate act of love for his deceased partner. Whereas Charles is moved by his imperialistic impulse and the need to regain his social status, Carl is driven by emotional dispositions which first make him initiate *his own* adventure to finally –only after completing *his* journey –wrap it up with little Russell's.

There is yet, another utterly unexpected figure which connects with the stereotypes of masculinity or, rather, maleness: Alpha, the villain's dog. Strong, strict, fearful and born a natural leader, Alpha rules Muntz's pack of dogs and poses one of the major threats in the story. As his name shows, he embodies an almost perfect version of the canonical masculine parameters expected in that sort of role, except for one: his voice. Striking as it might seem, all dogs in the film have the ability to speak thanks to a collar invented by Muntz. Alpha's collar malfunctions and makes his voice sound high-pitched (thus, feminine), which leads the dog to lose his status as leader of the herd and turns him into the target of all sorts of mocking by his dog peers. Not until he is granted again his macho voice is his status recovered and respected by the rest of the pack.

Up! is a must-see film (although not particularly for its portrayal of gender, yet it is an issue which cannot go unnoticed) first for the beautiful and elegant manner in which the story blends the dreams of two characters that belong to different generations and, secondly, for the powerful anecdotes so tenderly yet realistically described in the story and so able to reach all audiences from the primary school boy to the retired grandparent.

Works Cited

- Baumgarten, Marjorie. "Up (review)". *The Austin Chronicle*, 29 May 2009, <https://www.austinchronicle.com/events/film/2009-05-29/up/>
- MacInnes, John. "The Crisis of Masculinity". *The Masculinities Reader*, Stephen M. Whitehead and Frank J. Barrett (eds.). Polity, 2004, 321-333.
- Meinel, D. "Empire Is Out There!? The Spirit of Imperialism in *Up* (2009)". *Pixar's America: The Re-Animation of American Myths and Symbols*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 139-161.
- Rowles, G. D. "Place and Personal Identity in Old Age: Observations from Appalachia". *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 3.4, 1983, 299-313.

Manu Díaz Inglés

Toy Story 3 (2010): A Genderless Inheritance

CREDITS

Directors: Lee Unkrich

Written by: Michael Arndt; story by: John Lasseter, Andrew Stanton and Lee Unkrich.

Producer: Darla K. Anderson

Art direction: Daniel Arriaga, Robert Kondo, Daisuke 'Dice' Tatsumi

Editor: Ken Schretzmann

Music: Randy Newman

Main performers (voices): Tom Hanks (Woody), Tim Allen (Buzz Lightyear), Joan Cusack (Jessie), Ned Beatty (Lotso), Don Rickles (Mr. Potato Head), Michael Keaton (Ken), Wallace Shawn (Rex), John Ratzenberger (Hamm), Estelle Harris (Mrs. Potato Head), John Morris (Andy), Jodi Benson (Barbie), Emily Hahn (Bonnie), Blake Clark (Slinky Dog)

Company: Pixar Animation Studios, USA

Runtime: 1h 43'



REASONS TO SEE *Toy Story 3*

- This is the third installment of one of the most beloved Pixar franchises, and it caters to both the children in the audience and to the adults that grew up watching the first two films (1995, 1999).
- It is the third animated film to receive an Academy Award nomination for Best Picture.
- Its stunning visuals and animation techniques, especially when it comes to the visually unique portrayal of the toys and the materials they are made of.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *Toy Story 3*

Toy Story 3 (2010) is the third installment of one of the highest grossing animated franchises of all time. It was released eleven years after *Toy Story 2* (1999), which is a huge gap in between films, especially considering the much smaller gap between the second film and the first *Toy Story* (1995). The reason for this is the troubled relationship between Disney and Pixar after they signed a seven-film deal in 1991 that stated that the rights to the characters and any sequels pertaining to these films were owned by Disney. As per these terms, when the rocky relations between the companies suggested a possible split, Disney started production on *Toy Story 3* independently from Pixar, putting Circle 7 Animation in charge. The movie was to be directed by Bradley Raymond, and the final version of its script (written by Jim Herzfeld) focused on Buzz Lightyear, who malfunctioned along many other of his models and was shipped to Taiwan to get fixed. However, when Disney bought Pixar in 2006, Circle 7 Animation was shut down and the production of the film was transferred to Pixar. They scrapped

the Circle 7 Animation script and came up with the new one. Lee Unkrich, who had previously co-directed *Toy Story 2* along John Lasseter, was put in charge as the director of the project, and *Toy Story 3* as we know it entered production and finally released in 2010.

Andy, the toys' original owner, is seventeen years old and about to move out of his childhood home to go to college. Attached to his old toys, he decides to store them in the attic and bring Woody, his favorite, to college with him. However, through a misunderstanding, his mother ends up donating his toys to Sunnyside Daycare. Every toy but Woody is ready to make a new life there alongside the warm and loveable toys of the daycare and their leader, a teddy bear named Lots-O'-Huggin' Bear (aka Lotso). Woody manages to leave, but a little girl named Bonnie finds him on the street and takes him to her home, where he meets a toy named Chuckles that once knew Lotso and warns him about how bitter and oppressive the bear became after his owner replaced him. Not everything is as nice as it seemed in the daycare facility; when Andy's toys are left to the youngest children they play with them very roughly and mistreat them. When the toys realize that Andy did not mean to throw them away as they had initially thought, they decide to go back to his house. Lotso, however, has set up a structure of authority by which he decides which toys get mistreated and which do not, and he does not allow anyone to leave. It is up to Woody to concoct a plan and break them out. They go through many hurdles (including a near-death experience) but they eventually succeed, overthrowing Lotso's regime in Sunnyside Daycare and returning to Andy's home. Andy, thanks to a subtle incentive from Woody, decides to donate all his toys to Bonnie, who gives them all a loving new home. After a heartfelt goodbye to his beloved childhood toys, Andy parts with Woody, Buzz, and the others, and goes to college.

The *Toy Story* franchise often appeals to the nostalgia of the older viewers, and that is especially true of the third and fourth instalment of the series, which were released with enough of a time gap for the children who spent their childhood with the first two films to have grown up in the process. There has been a generational shift in the decade-long pause between the second and third film, and that is something that is clearly reflected in the core story-line of *Toy Story 3*. Andy is now in his teenage years and, about to enter young adulthood, he passes down his toys to Bonnie, a young child as he was in the first movie. As film critic Philip French puts it, "In the course of the film Andy and his toys develop in different ways as he passes on to a further stage in his life, understanding that his old, somewhat battered, deeply faithful companions are best cared for by a younger generation" (online). This understanding comes in the very last scene of the film, in which he meets Bonnie, the little girl that is to inherit his beloved toys, and lovingly tells her about each toy individually, handing them down with visible bittersweetness. This is a heart-warming scene about parting with one's childhood, a reluctant farewell to all of its joys.

However, there is an added layer to this scene concerning the gender of both Andy and Bonnie; more specifically, the fact that Andy, a boy, is passing his toys down to a little girl, and that the film takes no issue with this. Some could say it is a given that toys are genderless objects, but many of them (if not most of them) are obviously crafted with a target gender in mind and this is something that the *Toy Story* franchise has not shied away from. Most of the little girls in the films that came before Bonnie were shown to play with highly feminine dolls that were usually marketed to girls. For example, Andy's sister, Molly, is the owner of the Barbie doll in the house. In the first film, there is also a little girl named Hannah who finds Buzz Lightyear and, in order to play with him as she likes, dresses him up in a frilly pink apron and calls him Mrs. Nesbit, thus feminizing one of the male heroes of the film. In "Are the 'Boys at Pixar Afraid of Little Girls?'," Haseenah Ebrahim describes this incident as a "humiliation" and

complains that Woody “rushes in to rescue Buzz –the damsel in distress!– from the indignity of being dressed in drag, seated at a girl’s tea party” (48).

In *Toy Story 3* itself, Ken (Barnie’s companion male doll) makes his first appearance and he quickly becomes the butt of the jokes because of his ‘feminine’ qualities, as other toys constantly mock him for being a girl’s toy that enjoys fashion and has a sensible, delicate nature (even though Lotso, the villain of the film, is a fluffy pink teddy that smells like strawberries and no one makes fun of him for that). This gendered dimension of toys and whom they are meant for has always been present in *Toy Story*, which is why the character of Bonnie is innovative. From the very moment where she gets her hands on Woody, she is shown to have a very similar play-time mentality as Andy, imagining the exciting kind of adventure with her toys that Andy himself opens the film with. Furthermore, when Andy hands his toys down to her, there is not a single mention about the fact that he is giving her ‘boy’s toys’ and she does nothing to feminize his toys in the way that Hannah does in the original *Toy Story*. Assigning a gender to children’s toys can greatly limit which toys people deem socially acceptable for their kids to play with, and that kind of attitude can make children miss out on things that could make them happy. The seamless transition of the toys in the film from Andy to Bonnie contradicts that, and I believe that is a highly positive stance.

Furthermore, *Toy Story 3* challenges some of the toxic notions of its own past with the character of Buzz and his budding romance with cowgirl Jessie. This romance is very much in the background of the film, only alluded to every now and again while the main plot progresses without halting. It is a romance where Buzz seems to be pining for Jessie, often feeling flustered by her mere proximity. It is a tender and innocent approach to romance, once that is contradicted by Buzz himself when he is accidentally switched into his ‘Spanish mode’, which turns him into a stereotypical Hollywood rendition of an Inigo Montoya-like Spanish male. His romantic approaches towards Jessie suddenly turn from nearly non-existent to assertive and cheesy, going as far as trying to woo her with an impromptu flamenco solo dance routine. Jessie enjoys Buzz’s ‘Spanish mode’ and even dances along with him during the credits, so this could be considered a subversion of the romance tropes that feature an aggressive male and a meek female, especially since Jessie is not meek at all. Neither she nor Buzz seem to abide by stereotypical parameters of gender when it comes to their romance, which was not always the case with Buzz. In “Post-Princess Models of Gender: The New Man in Disney/Pixar”, Ken Gilliam and Shannon R. Wooden describe Woody and Buzz (among other Pixar protagonists) as alpha-males in the beginning of their first film, and the approach to romance that is taken in that first instalment of the franchise is, as Gilliam and Wooden put it, a competition “for the affection of Bo Peep, who is surprisingly sexualized for a children’s movie” (6). That toxic competition between males for the affection of a female third has been long forgotten in *Toy Story 3* in favor of a romance of a more wholesome nature –not in spite of the ‘Spanish mode’ parody that follows it for a portion of the film, but even because of it, as that incident only highlights the healthy and consensual feelings that Buzz and Jessie bear for one another.

Toy Story 3 is not a film without its flaws in terms of gender. The mocking of Ken’s masculinity is a problem, as it is showing rejection of less traditional types of masculinity to children. However, the film nails some of its portrayals of gender with the romance between Buzz and Jessie and with Bonnie, the little girl, inheriting Andy’s toys. These portrayals of gender could have a positive impact on the generation of children that will grow up with these newer *Toy Story* films, and that cannot be overlooked.

Works Cited

- Ebrahim, Haseenah. "Are the 'Boys' at Pixar Afraid of Little Girls?" *Journal of Film and Video*, 66.3, 2014, 43-56.
- French, Philip. "Toy Story 3 (review)". *The Guardian*, 18 July 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/jul/18/toy-story-3-film-review>
- Gillam, Ken and Shannon R. Wooden. "Post-Princess Models Of Gender: The New Man In Disney/Pixar". *Journal Of Popular Film And Television*, 36.1, 2008, 2-8.

Maria Guallar Comas

Toy Story 4 (2019): There is a New Sheriff in Town, and She is Female

CREDITS

Director: Josh Cooley

Written by: Andrew Stanton, Stephany Folsom; story by: John Lasseter, Andrew Stanton, Josh Cooley, Valerie LaPointe, Rashida Jones, Will McCormack, Martin Hynes, Stephany Folsom

Producers: Mark Nielsen, Jonas Rivera, Galyn Susman

Art direction: Craig Foster, Daniel Holland, John Lee, Albert Lozano, Laura Phillips

Editor: Axel Geddes

Music: Randy Newman

Main performers (voices): Tom Hanks (Woody), Tim Allen (Buzz Lightyear), Annie Potts (Bo Peep), Tony Hale (Forky), Keegan-Michael Key (Ducky), Madeleine McGraw (Bonnie), Christina Hendricks (Gabby Gabby), Jordan Peele (Bunny), Keanu Reeves (Duke Caboom), Ally Maki (Giggle McDimples), Joan Cusack (Jessie), Wallace Shawn (Rex), Blake Clark (Slinky Dog), Bonnie Hunt (Dolly), Kristen Schaal (Trixie)

Company: Pixar Animation Studios, USA

Runtime: 1h 40'



REASONS TO SEE Toy Story 4

- It won 52 awards, including one Oscar for Best Animated Feature Film. The hyperrealist animation is astonishing and this factor, in addition to a novel plot that explores what happens to toys when they are no longer wanted, makes the film definitely worth watching.
- The new characters are a wonderful addition to a saga that has not stopped reinventing itself, from the delicious Forky to the delightful Duke Caboom, voiced by Keanu Reeves.
- The return and transformation of Bo Peep into a modern heroine is not only noteworthy, but also a sign of how times have changed since the release of the first *Toy Story* film in 1995.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN Toy Story 4

Toy Story 4 (2019) is one of the latest films released by Pixar Animated Studios, and the first one to reach the cinemas after Pete Docter, screenwriter of the two first *Toy Story* films, officially became Pixar's Chief Creative Officer. He did so after the dismissal of John Lasseter, the director of these two films, due to accusations of sexual misconduct during the #MeToo and Time's Up movements. The fourth film in the *Toy Story* franchise was preceded by the highly anticipated *Incredibles 2* (2018), the highest grossing film in Pixar's history, and followed by *Onward* (2020), a remarkable film which sadly has not received much attention due to its release during the Covid-19

pandemic. Interestingly, *Toy Story 4* (2019) managed to surpass *Toy Story 3* (2010) in its box office gross, thus becoming Pixar's second most successful motion picture. In terms of awards, apart from getting the Oscar for Best Animated Feature Film, it is also worth mentioning that this is the only film franchise to have multiple wins in the Critic's Choice Movie Award for Best Animated Feature, as all four *Toy Story* films have won this category in their respective editions.

The story begins with the toy team's attempt to rescue their owner Andy's remote-controlled car from being lost forever in a rainstorm, following the events of *Toy Story 2* (1999). Just as they finish, however, Woody witnesses Bo Peep, his sweetheart, being donated to a new family. He has the opportunity to go with her, but decides to remain loyal to his owner. Nine years after this incident, Woody finds himself no longer being Andy's favorite toy, but his new owner Bonnie's toy-in-the-closet. In an attempt to feel he still matters, Woody decides to sneak into Bonnie's backpack and accompanies her to kindergarten orientation. There, he rescues a few craft materials from the trash and Bonnie creates a toy with them, Forky. Surprisingly, as it is no longer trash, but a toy, the spork comes to life, but it still thinks it is trash and belongs to the bin, which causes a few funny scenes to occur in which Woody has to rescue Forky from throwing himself away. When Bonnie goes on a road trip with his parents, Woody assigns to himself the sole role of Forky's caretaker and, after having to walk to the humans' next stop because Forky jumps from a window, Woody meets something he thought he would not see again: Bo Peep's lamp. This leads Woody and Forky to sneak into an old pawn-shop, where Forky is taken hostage by Gabby Gabby, a rather sinister doll who is defective and wants Woody's speaking mechanism to replace the faulty one she has. In the end, Forky's rescue will not only involve Bo Peep's fabulous return as an independent toy, but also Woody's realization that he has to learn to trust and also to move on.

There seems to be a certain degree of skepticism among the general audience and critics regarding the logic of producing another sequel after the very conclusive ending of the franchise's third installment. However, many assert that they were surprised positively. In this aspect, Claire Miller Colombo reveals there were rumors which speculated that the Academy would not give the Oscar to *Toy Story* if they decided to make a fourth installment though, in the end, they did. Colombo argues that, apart from the astounding animation, the plot brought a deeper meaning to the saga and, thus, the storyline was deemed worth exploring. In her own words, what is remarkable about *Toy Story* is that every installment manages "to outgrow the context that once defined it and to move toward something bigger" (26) which, in turn, Colombo argues is the very "nature of a [living] creature" (26) as she sees the franchise.

With this statement, Colombo establishes a certain parallelism between the *Toy Story* franchise and the lives of some of its protagonists, who, in this film, appear to outgrow their purpose as a toy. Moving along these lines, Lois Kuznets writes that, in narratives that involve inanimate objects becoming living beings, these objects "embody [the] human anxiety about what it means to be 'real' –an independent subject or self rather than an object" (2). Although this statement was not written about *Toy Story* per se, it can perfectly be applied to the franchise and, more concretely, to its newest installment. *Toy Story 4* (2019) not only expands the notion of 'what being a toy' means, but also shows that a toy's purpose in life is not necessarily limited to their duty to a child. More than ever, as Lewis Roberts states, the plot is concerned "with the fluctuating identities of toys as both beings and property" (418). If *Toy Story 3* (2010) brought Andy's toys a new happy ever after with their new, younger owner Bonnie, *Toy Story 4* (2019) explores what happens when this repetition of the cycle is not what the protagonists expected, and perhaps not enough to fulfill a toy's life.

In *Toy Story 4* (2019), Pamela Hutchinson claims, the heroes enter “a matriarchal regime worthy of a gender-flipped franchise reboot” (83). Woody, Andy’s long-time favorite toy, finds himself in a room where he is no longer the one who calls the shots. He has lost his ‘favorite toy’ status and, therefore, his authority as ‘sheriff of the room’. This disempowerment is made evident in a scene when Bonnie removes the sheriff badge and places it on Jessie, the cowgirl. This act is definitely interesting because it appears to indicate one thing: the obsolescence of the leading male character. Bonnie, in contrast to Andy, might be representing the younger audience’s wishes to see strong, independent and assertive female characters such as Jessie and Bo Peep in leading roles. Moreover, this factor seems to also be present in Woody’s deep nostalgia and, in contrast, in Bo Peep’s determination to overcome all obstacles and achieve the future she wants to live. The male character seems to be stuck in the past, while the transformed and very modern female lead appears to be more than ready for the future. Throughout the film, Woody will learn from his female peers that “there is a world of adventure for ‘lost toys’ beyond the once apparently infinite realms of the toy box” (83), thus realizing that, perhaps, he was more lost than those who he had previously catalogued as ‘lost toys’.

The reviews also tend to highlight the striking difference between Woody and Bo Peep. For example, Jen Chaney writes for *Vulture* that Woody, in his stubbornness to insert himself “into a situation where he is no longer needed” (online), resembles a male baby-boomer. When Bonnie begins orientation at kindergarten, she is told by her father she cannot bring any toys with her. Nevertheless, Woody insists that she will need a friend and sneaks into Bonnie’s backpack. Here, Woody is not only deliberately ignoring the father’s rules and the toys’ advice, but he is also failing at accepting that, if Bonnie really needed a friend, she would probably not choose him. Because of this, Chaney argues that the film is depicting “a real-life phenomenon in which older men refuse to step aside so that a new generation can step up, take charge, and prove that they are capable of running the show” (online). In fact, Woody does precisely this to Bo Peep later on, when he refuses to follow her plan to rescue Forky and his inability to accept and follow orders from others compromises the whole mission.

Regarding Bo Peep, Inkoo Kang claims that she is “the film’s greatest delight and most original creation” (online). Bo Peep, who did not appear in the third installment, has returned not as Woody’s mere love interest, but as her own ‘person’. As Kang asserts, hers is such a rare case to see in films because, on the one hand, her character depth has expanded enormously and, on the other hand, her “journey does not feel secondary” (online). From being a passive, conventionally beautiful and delicate “trophy for male cinematic heroism” (online) in the first films, Bo Peep returns as a transformed toy who has moved beyond the need for ownership from a child. Her radical change of clothes, from a puffy skirt to practical trousers, shows how ready she is to see and live in the world outside a child’s bedroom. She has already suffered some setbacks and her broken ceramic arm reminds the audience of her physical fragility, but, although “her current existence is very possibly precarious”, the film makes very clear that “it is hers to lead” (online).

Finally, Alex Abad-Santos insists on the franchise’s capacity to constantly outdo itself, to make each installment “feel new” (online). In the case of *Toy Story 4* (2019), Abad-Santos states that “Bo Peep (...), a road trip and a truly frightening villain” succeed in conveying this feeling of novelty that many sequels lack. Gabby Gabby, the first female villain of *Toy Story*, evokes in her looks and manners the trope of the evil doll found in terror films such as *Annabelle* (2014). In the end, however, as Kang suggests, Gabby Gabby is not so much a villain, but a “warped-mirror version of Woody –a doll that will do anything to be held and cherished” (online).

In conclusion, *Toy Story 4* (2019) manages to yet again reinvent a twenty-four-year-old franchise forcing its protagonists to go beyond a child's room and not only face the world, but also acknowledge obsolescence. In turn, both characters and audience are faced with the complex question of what being a toy, and being alive, means.

Works Cited

- Abad-Santos, Alex. "Toy Story 4 Finds the Beauty and Joy in Saying Goodbye". *Vox*, 13 June 2019, <https://www.vox.com/2019/6/13/18668903/toy-story-4-review-woody-buzz-goodbye>
- Chaney, Jen. "Toy Story 4 Is a Movie About Getting Older and Getting Out of the Way". *Vulture*, 21 June 2019, <https://www.vulture.com/2019/06/toy-story-4-is-sending-a-message-to-baby-boomers.html>
- Colombo, Claire Miller. "The Oscars Recognize Woody's Evolution - Toy Story Grows Up". *Christian Century*, 137.6, 2020, 26-29.
- Hutchinson, Pamela. "Toy Story 4 (Review)". *Sight and Sound*, 29.8, 2019, 83.
- Kang, Inkoo. "Toy Story 4 Escapes the Curse of the Feminized Sequel" *Slate*, 22 June 2019, <https://slate.com/culture/2019/06/toy-story-4-bo-peep-female-characters-gender-flip-sequels.html>
- Kuznets, Lois R. *When Toys Come Alive: Narratives of Animation, Metamorphosis, and Development*. Yale University Press, 1994.
- Roberts, Lewis. "'It's a Dangerous World out There for a Toy': Identity Crisis and Commodity Culture in the Toy Story Movies". *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 45.4, 2017, 417-437.

Naiara López Alcázar

Megamind (2010): Incels and Purpose

CREDITS

Director: Tom McGrath
Writers: Alan Schoolcraft, Brent Simons
Producers: Lara Breay, Denise Nolan Cascino
Art direction: Timothy Lamb
Editor: Mike Andrews
Music: Hans Zimmer, Lorne Balfe
Main performers (voices): Will Ferrell (Megamind), Brad Pitt (Metroman), Tina Fey (Roxanne Ritchi), Jonah Hill (Tighten), David Cross (Minion), Bernard (Ben Stiller)
Company: Pixar Animation Studios, USA
Runtime: 1h 35'



REASONS TO SEE *Megamind*

- To see a surprisingly intelligent critique of superheroes and superhero culture.
- To see an early representation of the 'incel' in a children's animated movie.
- To get a fairly nuanced take of the classic nature vs. nurture debate.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *Megamind*

In 2010, twin movies were released, two animated films about supervillains with 'minions' that learn to give up their evil ways and fight for good. Competing film studios often see the same spec script or the same concept, and race to put out a film before the other. In this case, Illumination's *Despicable Me* was the winner, with a summer release that earned it \$543 million worldwide and launched a franchise that has implanted squeaky yellow pill-shaped Minions into our brains forever. *Megamind*, the Pixar twin, coming four months later, made a respectable \$321, but has largely been forgotten. This is unfair since *Megamind* is just as good, if not better than its more successful twin, and was, perhaps, even ahead of its time. *Megamind*, starring the iconic Will Ferrell as the titular supervillain, and directed by Tom McGrath, received slightly less critical acclaim than *Despicable Me*, won no significant awards, and generated very little merchandising or long term enthusiasm. It does not have the cuteness or warmth of *Despicable Me*, or its marketability. It does, however, tell a story that is accessible to children, entertaining for adults, and is extremely topical in the 2020s. That is because *Megamind* is one of the first Hollywood stories clearly being told about the figure of the "incel".

The film centers around the Superman analogue Metro Man and the supervillain Megamind, pitted against each other by destiny from birth and raised in opposite

circumstances. Routinely being foiled by Metro Man, Megamind one day accidentally kills his rival and achieves the goal that he was only half-heartedly working towards. He takes over the city, and along with his sidekick Minion, he has everything he ever wanted. However, he quickly realizes that having no rival is boring and leaves him without purpose. After speaking in disguise with his love interest, reporter Roxanne Ritchie, Megamind decides to create a new hero to face off against, using a super gun to accidentally give superpowers to Ritchie's lazy cameraman Hal, the aforementioned 'incel'. Megamind fails to mentor Hal (styling himself Titan), whose rejection by Roxanne makes him resentful and villainous. Through Megamind's new secret relationship with Roxanne, he starts to see the light and becomes a force for good. While Hal/Titan tries to destroy the city in a spurned, jealous rage, it is revealed that Metroman was in hiding and had faked his death to get out of his responsibilities as a superhero. Together, he and Megamind defeat Titan and take back his powers. Megamind then becomes the new hero of Metro City and starts a relationship with Roxanne while Metroman stays in retirement and Hal goes to prison.

Roxanne Ritchie, notably, is the only female character in the film. The hyper competent reporter and love interest of all three leading men has no observable weaknesses or faults. She is functioning as something like Mother Nature in this film, not as a character with any personal growth, but as the arbiter of these men and their worth. This role for female characters is pretty ubiquitous in stories, especially in superhero worlds. The implications of this are complicated and rather outside the scope of this essay, but we will take it for granted that men are constantly trying to live up to an ideal that women enforce. This power to judge is something like the power of sexual selection, and men are working and building themselves to win that race. In a children's animated film that is parodying Superman, this seems an unlikely message, but despite making fun of the tropes of *The Man of Steel*, *Megamind* takes the idea of masculinity quite seriously. This is set up fairly explicitly with the introduction of each man. Megamind and Metro Man are the classic embodiment of nature versus nurture, as the two are aliens who escape to Earth as infants. Baby Metro Man's pod accidentally knocks Megamind's into a prison to be raised (comically) by all-male inmates, while Metro Man is raised by a loving heterosexual family. Megamind, clearly, is born to be bad, and as the soundtrack pointedly tells us with the song "Bad to the Bone". As the film goes on, Megamind and Metro Man are revealed to be more complex than their identities as superhero and supervillain, but it is on Hal the incel where the debate is settled.

Hal is shown immediately to be lazy, awkward, unkempt, and completely unable to communicate or connect with his work colleague Roxanne Ritchie. He is, and was clearly designed to be, a classic incel. The term 'incel' was coined in 1993 by a female student who self-identified as an "involuntary celibate", and who wanted to connect with other lonely people. According to Google trends, the term did not arise in popular discourse until the Spring of 2018, long after *Megamind* had been released and forgotten. The term by then referred much more specifically to an online community of American young men who feel disenchanting with the world and blame women for their misery. More specifically, and apropos of Hal, the term is connected to several American mass shooters who have connected themselves to the incel community. It is a troubling topic for many, as these men have fallen through the cracks of society, are threatening to women, and have branched out into many different internet subcultures such as 'The Red Pill', and become associated with terms like 'black pills', 'ragecels', and even the alt-right. Intriguingly, the journal article "Incels, Compulsory Sexuality, and Fascist Masculinity" connects the problem to fascist ideologies and a sex-obsessed culture, which are linked in their insistence on traditional masculinity. (Kelly & Aunspach 147) The authors, however, don't provide much of a solution, reporting that "one

common facetious response to incels has been to suggest that if only we can find them girlfriends, the problem would go away” (148). This is commonly understood to be fundamentally incorrect, but it must be noted that the premise of *Megamind*, and many, many films (even *Beauty and the Beast*) does indeed suggest that a woman’s love can and will redeem any incel.

Hal’s problem throughout the movie is his mistaken understanding of how he is failing to be attractive to women. Incels frequently believe that their poor genetics are an insurmountable obstacle to their having any success in society (Van Brunt and Taylor). Hal, upon receiving his superpowers and becoming Titan tells Roxanne, “Now there’s nothing keeping us apart!” He believes that his new superhero physique not only allows them to be together, but assumes that she will be delighted to be with him. His entitlement is disgusting to her, though, and he is surprised when Roxanne rejects him. “But I have powers. I have a cape. I’m the good guy!”, he protests, to which Roxanne responds, “You are a good guy, Hal. But you don’t understand”. The scene leading up to this rejection is fairly shocking for a children’s animated film. Hal, upon receiving his powers, is immediately clingy, arrogant, and entitled, picking up Roxanne against her will and almost letting her die multiple times, acting out the flight scene around the city that Spiderman or Superman might take with their respective love interests. The scene, however, plays quite violently, as a physical or even sexual assault. Titan becomes the classic “nice guy” who thinks he deserves women because he cares more than other men, yet turns aggressive as soon as they are rejected. He clearly does not care about Roxanne, but cares only about being accepted and appreciated by society, of which she is, in his mind, the judge and jury. Yet, he does little to deserve the positive judgement he craves for. To begin with, he doesn’t want to work. After being rejected, Titan uses his powers to steal, and despite being able to fly, still sits in his apartment playing video games and eating pizza. Megamind has set him up to be the hero; his nature, in theory, has changed, but nurturing him fails. “I only took the gig to get the girl”, he declares, and since she has rejected him, he turns to nihilism and villainy.

As this is developing, Megamind is undergoing his own transformation, overcoming his lack of nurturing by posing as a handsome, intelligent looking museum curator, or, as Titan calls him, an “intellectual dweeb”. Roxanne’s interest in the new Megamind shows that he actually does have something to offer the world, and he is of course redeemed by the end of the film. He “gets the girl” even with his villainous past, emo wardrobe, and giant blue head. The message is, of course, that love can redeem, that being a good person is far more important than looks, and, very importantly, that purpose is what makes a man. Megamind and Metro Man both have enormous talent, but what separates Megamind from the fake hero that Metro Man is, is that he is constantly driven by purpose. His descent from villainy begins when he loses that purpose and has to find it again. Hal, in contrast, has no purpose, even when given all the talent in the world. This is a great message for a children’s movie, and delivered with subtlety, even if it is a little too adult to garner the audience it deserves.

There is, nonetheless, an underlying problem in the film’s message, and one that society at large takes for granted and this is that Hal is irredeemable. The man who cannot succeed deserves to fail. He must be lazy, arrogant, and hostile. His nature must be fundamentally corrupt. It isn’t that Hal is an unrealistic character: America, and the world have seen the very real consequences of rejecting these men. But Hal is not given the nuance that Megamind and Metro Man receive. When he is broadcasting his attempted murder of Roxanne, she tells him “I know there’s still good in you, Hal” and he replies “You’re so naive, Roxie. You see the good in everybody, even when it’s not there”. This is classic incel stuff. We have already seen in this movie that villains are

redeemable. Yet, the only ending Hal/Titan gets after losing his powers is to repeat the Michael Jackson lines from prison “I’m bad. I’m bad. That’s right”.

In a film that understands what men need, and that lets the villain Megamind redeem himself even though he had been terrorizing the city for years, Hal does not get any growth or compassion. He will probably die in prison. The film, and society, does not want to look at these men. Think of Arthur Fleck, the title character in 2019’s *The Joker*, a film that garnered a lot of controversy for sympathizing with an incel at all. Most do not care, or refuse to acknowledge that people like Arthur and Hal are alone and suffering. They are creepy, ugly, uncomfortable, probably dangerous. The kindness that Roxanne gives Hal is not given to real-life incels. It is assumed that if they are given any power, they will turn into villains. There is nothing to be done for them, these wretched men. It is a growing problem in our society, though perhaps not a new one. But as long as these men cannot even be looked at, we will continue to nurture supervillains.

Works Cited

- ADL, “Incels (Involuntary Celibates)”. *Anti-Defamation League*, n.d. www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/incels-involuntary-celibates.
- Brunt, Brian Van and Chris Taylor. *Understanding and Treating Incels: Case Studies, Guidance, and Treatment of Violence Risk in the Involuntary Celibate Community*. Routledge, 2021.
- Kelly, Casey Ryan and Chase Aunspach. “Incels, Compulsory Sexuality, and Fascist Masculinity”. *Feminist Formations*, 32.3, 2020, 145–172.

Jessiah Azul Mellott

Despicable Me (2010): From Evil Mastermind to Loving Father

CREDITS

Directors: Pierre Coffin, Chris Renaud
Written by: Cinco Paul, Ken Daurio; story by: Sergio Pablos
Producer: John Cohen, Janet Healy
Art direction: Eric Guillon
Editor: Gregory Perler, Pam Ziegenhagen
Music: Heitor Pereira, Pharrell Williams
Main performers (voices): Steve Carrell (Gru), Miranda Cosgrove (Margo), Dana Gaier (Edith), Elsie Fisher (Agnes), Jason Segel (Vector), Russell Brand (Dr. Nefario), Julie Andrews (Gru's Mom)
Company: Illumination Entertainment, USA/France
Runtime: 1h 35'



REASONS TO SEE *Despicable Me*

- The film is genuinely funny and it has a remarkably dark humor.
- It is one of the few children's films, together with *Megamind*, with a villain as a main character.
- It is the film where the Minions phenomenon originated.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *Despicable Me*

Despicable Me (2010) is the first installment in the *Despicable Me* franchise produced by Illumination Entertainment and owned by Universal Pictures. This consists of four films (as of writing): *Despicable Me* (2010), *Despicable Me 2* (2013), *Despicable Me 3* (2017), and the prequel, *Minions* (2015). The fifth installment, *Minions: The Rise of Gru*, will be released in 2021. At the time of writing, *Despicable Me* is the 15th highest-grossing film franchise in the world, and the highest-grossing animated franchise, followed by *Shrek*. Other notable films produced by Illumination Entertainment are *The Secret Life of Pets* (2016), and *The Grinch* (2018). The original idea for this film was developed by Sergio Pablos –creator of *Klaus* (2019)– under the title *Evil Me*. The rights for the film were then bought by Chris Meledandri, who had been a producer for 20th Century Fox, when he decided to create his own studio, Illumination Entertainment (as part of Universal Pictures). Sergio Pablos remained involved in the project, becoming executive producer.

Felonius Gru's dream is to be the greatest villain of all time, but after someone else steals the Great Pyramid of Giza, he realizes that he will have to plan an even bigger heist in order to be considered the best evil mastermind. His plan is to get a shrinking-ray gun, fly to space in his rocket ship, and steal the biggest prize of all: the

Moon. However, Gru needs funding in order to enact his evil scheme, and he requests the money from the Bank of Evil, which turns him down until he can actually produce the shrinking gun. In order to steal the gun from Vector (his new archenemy), Gru adopts three little girls –Margo, Edith and Agnes– from the local orphanage, where they had been forced to work selling cookies from house to house. His plan is to create cookie-looking robots that the girls will sell to Vector, and which will work as spies for him, allowing him thus to enter the house undetected and steal the gun. However, as Gru carries out his evil plan, he starts caring for the girls, and soon he will have to choose what matters more, his plan or having a family.

When analyzing *Despicable Me* in terms of gender, Gru's characterization is one of the first elements that one is bound to notice; not only is he a villain placed in the position of the main character, but he is also given the role of a single father –a figure somewhat akin to Dr. Doofenshmirtz in Disney's animated TV show *Phineas and Ferb* (2008). Johanson points out in her review that although the idea of a villain in the role of the hero is refreshing after so many superhero films, it is clear that Hollywood avoided portraying Gru as a genuinely evil character and gave him cartoonish features so as not to make the film too dark for a young audience: "because Hollywood doesn't have the nerve to make an ultradark horror movie about a sympathetic psychopath, that supervillain-as-hero movie would have to be a comedy" (online). Nonetheless, the fact that Gru is a villain at the beginning is undeniable, even if the same cannot be said of him at the end of the film.

Gru undergoes a transformation from cold villain to loving father, and the way in which his character development is presented throughout the film is reminiscent of Manny in *Ice Age* (2002). Both male characters, who used to be cold and aloof, and were unable to express their feelings, end up forming a connection with other characters and learn to grow emotionally and to care about other people. Like Manny, Gru dismisses the idea that males must be tough and invulnerable, and allows himself to display affection towards his adoptive daughters, particularly thanks to Agnes' naïve and charming approach to him as her new dad. In this way, he strays away from conventionally masculine behaviors, rejecting the attitudes that society encourages and deems acceptable for men, as only through distancing himself from society's idea of masculinity is he able to become a caring father for the girls.

As it has been previously mentioned in the analysis of other films in this volume, the depiction of men –or males– as caretakers of children in order to create comic relief seems to be an extremely popular trope in animated children's films. However, the portrayal of Gru as a single father, although intentionally humorous, raises awareness about real issues that single parents often face, and provides representation for unconventional families. At one point in the film, for instance, Gru's professionalism is put into question after he adopts the girls, as there is an assumption that his responsibilities as a single father will not allow him to carry out his job properly. This is a real issue that many single parents face, and although it is most often seen in single mothers –and mothers in general– than in fathers the fact that it is introduced to some extent in this film is commendable.

However, not everything is positive in the portrayal of the world's favorite villain, as his initial behavior and attitude towards the girls are quite problematic. At one point in the film, Gru is described as "scary" by Edith and Agnes, which poses an interesting question: can Gru be considered a good father if his own children are afraid of him? Are fathers supposed to be scary? In this sense, the movie could be considered controversial, for it seems to normalize a relationship in which the father figure inspires fear, at least initially. In fact, one of the humorous aspects of the film is Gru's whole demeanor towards his new adoptive daughters; he feeds them candy, lets them play with torture devices, and makes them sleep in bomb-beds. All of this is obviously

designed to make the audience laugh. However, taking this behavior into consideration, and added to the fact that he adopts the girls with the sole purpose of using them as a tool in his evil plan, one must wonder if Gru is any different from Miss Hattie, the orphanage owner. Miss Hattie is portrayed as an evil lady who mistreats children and exploits them to make a profit, a parody of *Annie's* Miss Hannigan (1977). There seems to be, therefore, a parallelism in Gru's and Miss Hattie's behavior, but whereas Miss Hattie's actions are portrayed as child abuse, Gru's are presented as the justifiable actions of an adorably grumpy father with a childhood trauma (Gru's mother does not love him). This apparent double standard might be related to the fact that the caretaking of children is often seen as a woman's responsibility, and society finds it less acceptable to see a woman treating children poorly. Despite the film's attempts at levity regarding Gru's behavior towards the girls, Pattie Moore mentions in her review that "there are some concerns about the girl's experiences with their orphanage and Gru that could be triggering for many children" (online).

Miss Hattie, however, is not the only negative mother figure in *Despicable Me*, as Gru's relationship with his own mother is the reason why he is unable to form bonds with people, and it conditions his relationship with his daughters at first. Marlena Gru is an emotionally detached mother, who has been constantly reminding her son from infancy that he is a failure. As a result, Gru spends most of his life striving to be remarkable, and to achieve his mother's approval, which is one of the reasons why he plans to steal the Moon. At the end of the film, Marlena tells her son that she is proud of him; however, there is no sign of development in their relationship throughout the film, and this acknowledgment is completely sudden and unexpected, giving the character of Marlena little depth. In his article on *Despicable Me*, journalist A. O. Scott suggests that Gru's issues with his mother only serve to make him less threatening, complaining that the film's idea of evil is "a man with a pointy nose, an exotic accent and a turtleneck sweater who wants to snatch the Moon because his mommy never loved him enough" (online).

Being acknowledged by his mother, however, is not Gru's only reason to craft his evil plan. In fact, his scheme only takes shape after a younger villain, Vector, steals the Great Pyramid of Giza, causing chaos across the globe. Gru, therefore, decides to steal the Moon in order to assert his masculinity, which has been threatened by this younger, better villain. This is quite interesting, as nerdish looking, pot-bellied Vector is not what society would deem a conventionally masculine man –in appearance or behavior– whereas Gru is bigger, more assertive and, in short, more manly.

Finally, one of the most positive gender issues in *Despicable Me* is the portrayal of Gru's adoptive daughters: Margo, Edith, and Agnes. Contrary to other films, in which little girls are depicted as silly and interchangeable, each of the girls is given a unique personality: Margo, the oldest, is affectionate and fiercely protective of her sisters, while also being extremely sarcastic; Edith is the most assertive, and is even interested in the torture devices and experiments; Agnes, the little one, is quite eccentric but absolutely adorable. What is more, they are portrayed as persons to learn from, helping Gru become a better person, and as Johanson claims "keep[ing] the mad-science insanity that is Gru and his life silly and sweet and grounded and satisfyingly poignant" (online).

Works Cited

- Johanson, MaryAnn. "Despicable Me (review)". *Flick Filosopher*, 7 July 2010, <https://www.flickfilosopher.com/2010/07/despicable-me-review.html>
- Moore, Pattie. "Despicable Me – Review". *Transfiguring Adoption*, 24 July 2019, <https://transfiguringadoption.com/despicable-me-review/>

Scott, A. O. "Lunar Toons and Cookie Capers". *New York Times*, 8 July 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/09/movies/09despicable.html>

Raquel Prieto Xufré

Despicable Me 2 (2013): Despicable Gender Issues

CREDITS

Director: Pierre Coffin, Chris Renaud
Written by: Cinco Paul, Ken Daurio
Producers: Janet Healy, Chris Meledandri
Art direction: Eric Guillon
Editor: Gregory Peter
Music: Heitor Pereira, Pharrell Williams
Main performers (voices): Steve Carell (Gru), Kristen Wig (Lucy), Benjamin Bratt (El Macho), Miranda Cosgrove (Margo), Elsie Fisher (Agnes), Dana Gaier (Edith), Russel Brand (Dr Nefario), Moises Arias (Antonio).
Company: Illumination Entertainment, USA/France/Japan
Runtime: 1h 38'



REASONS TO SEE *Despicable Me 2*

- It has unique characters who can make you laugh uncontrollably, particularly the Minions, here in two versions –one yellow, one purple.
- It includes a variety of songs, from radio hits to original tunes.
- It is a movie that all kinds of audiences can easily understand and enjoy.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *Despicable Me 2*

Despicable Me 2 was released in the Summer of 2013 and was very well received by the critics. After the success of the first instalment in 2010, the audience set high expectations on this movie, which were generally met. The movie was nominated for Best Animated Feature and Best Original Song in the Academy Awards but lost both of them to Disney's *Frozen*. However, *Despicable Me 2* received the People's Choice Award for Favorite Family Movie as well as several nominations. The third installment *Despicable Me 3* (2017) and the sequel *Minions* (2015) featuring the minions as the main film stars have also been released; a second Minions movie is currently in the making.

Despicable Me (2010) dealt with the rivalry between Gru and Vector to steal the Moon and become the greatest villain in the world. As a means to get what he wanted, Gru decided to adopt three amazing little girls who changed his life forever: Margo, Edith, and Agnes. After realizing that his job as a dad was greater than anything else, Gru eventually gave up on his quest for the Moon, defeated Vector, and decided to be the greatest dad in the world instead. In the sequel, Gru has wonderfully adjusted to life as a parent and as a jelly maker. However, his daughters seem obsessed with the idea

that he should date someone; little Agnes in particular struggles with her Mother's Day recital because she doesn't have a mum (and she misses having one). Eventually, Lucy Wilde, an agent from the Anti-Villain League, becomes Gru's partner in his new job: discovering who stole a dangerous substance that turns living beings into mutants. Meanwhile, the Minions (Gru's funny yellow helpers) start disappearing because Eduardo, the owner of a Mexican restaurant who also happens to be a villain known as El Macho, is kidnapping them to create an alternative Minion version; this is purple, even crazier and truly evil. When Gru finally realizes what El Macho is doing, he tries to stop him, while dealing with other concerns such as his new feelings for Lucy and Margo's teenage love life (she has a crush on Eduardo's teen son Antonio). Despite her professional skills, Lucy is kidnapped, but Gru along with his family rescues her, defeats El Macho and uses an antidote to bring back the crazy purple Minions to their yellow selves. In the end, Lucy and Gru get married, Agnes is delighted to have a mum, and all live happily ever after.

Despicable Me 2 (2013) is an animated feature film that combines lessons about love, being a good person, fatherhood, and family all sprinkled with humor and action. Although this film is addressed mostly to children, it tackles several gender issues which might strike as odd in a production for little ones. To begin with, the positive message on single parenthood which was delivered in the first film of the franchise gradually disappears throughout this second instalment. There is a repetitive and constant insistence on Gru's finding a wife that can also work as a mother for Margo, Edith and Agnes. While finding love is not negative at all, the need for a woman in Gru's life is given a great deal of attention, and jeopardizes the message from the previous film where Gru was seen as a qualified father who can manage a household on his own. *Despicable Me* (2010) showed an unconventional but successful kind of family unit which many children nowadays can relate to. In contrast, the sequel deals as film critic Betsy Sharkey notes with "The pressures of being a single father. The realization that despite everything, your kids still long for a mom" (online) and seems to imply that no matter how hard a father works to provide a loving family for his children, the lack of a maternal figure will always be there, waiting to be filled in. This lack is emphasized by Agnes, who no longer seems to drool over her wonderful dad, but now worries about what to say for her recital on Mother's Day. Even one of Gru's neighbors, an irrelevant character in terms of plot, is obsessed with the idea of Gru dating. The film is clearly taking a step back regarding the notion of parenthood as it is firmly re-establishing a conventional heterosexual family unit formed by a mother and a father.

The conventional treatment of Lucy's and Margo's plotlines further contributes to the regression of the movie in terms of gender stereotyping. On the one hand, Lucy is first presented as an intelligent, independent and resourceful woman who also happens to be a strong secret agent in the Anti-Villain League. However, she suddenly becomes a mere love interest for Gru. On top of that, she needs rescuing when she is in fact presented as an expert spy in the first place. She then turns into the typical damsel in distress who waits patiently to be saved and ultimately marries the prince. As reviewer Scott Meldenson phrased it, "this leads to little more than (again) stripping a major female character of all independent agency after *boys* get involved" (online). On the other hand, and along the same lines, smart Margo also falls into a traditional plot device which has been a major theme in most romantic teen comedies. She happens to fall in love at first sight with the typical cool kid from school despite not having anything in common with him, a crush which can only (and actually does) lead to heartbreak. Besides the fact that it is a completely unnecessary subplot that does not add anything especial to the main story, Margo and Antonio are just not fit for each other. It is clear from the way they are portrayed throughout the movie that Margo only likes him for his looks, and that there is not a real connection between them. The film could have

escaped this old-fashioned pattern by, perhaps, having matched Margo with someone who actually corresponds to her interests and personalities. As Meldenson further notes, whereas Lucy, “a terrific female character (...) ends up being a token love interest for the male lead (...) the smart/capable oldest daughter ends up losing her brains over a random boy” (online), which in a nutshell summarizes the conventionalities regarding these two female characters.

Finally, the representation of masculinity in this movie also seems to fall into traditional gender stereotypes. First of all, the antagonist El Macho is a highly exaggerated character, especially in relation to his Mexican traits which are very much associated to the traditional idea of masculinity. El Macho is designed, as his name suggests, as the typical macho man. He has got plenty of body hair, a robust torso, tattoos, and is also “depicted drinking snake poison, crushing the shot glass with his teeth, breaking through a wall, and overall demonstrating an inhumane, savage, and threatening masculinity” (Khrebtan-Hörhager and Avant-Mier, 14). It is precisely the idea of the “threatening masculinity” that is emphasized through this character. Secondly, teenager Antonio is another male figure who might be categorized within the same masculine category as El Macho. In this case, Antonio embodies a generalized negative perspective on male adolescents, especially if they fall into the popular kind. He is portrayed as a womanizer who mercilessly jumps from one girl to another and whose major ability is to flip his hair every three seconds. This is a rather shallow representation of a young boy which is also typically used in TV series for young audiences.

Last but not least, and although he usually does an amazing job with the girls, Gru sometimes fails to offer a completely progressive version of masculinity because he enters in the dynamics of the more traditional type. Khrebtan-Hörhager and Avant-Mier interpret Gru’s new job in the Anti-Villain League as a way to regain his identity and, they add, masculinity (13) because this offers him an escape from his domestic role. While Gru does not seem preoccupied with the idea of domesticity, this argument still makes sense to some extent. Furthermore, Gru problematizes his role as a kind, caring father when he tries to prevent Margo from dating boys. The overprotective parent who does not want his daughter to meet boys is an old-fashioned idea which is rooted in a patriarchal system that children’s movies should abandon. The fact that this fatherly overprotectiveness usually happens with daughters but never happens with sons is self-explanatory.

Overall, it may be said that the gender issues that appear in *Despicable Me 2* (2013) are regressive because the film does not seem able to avoid falling into traditional conventions such as the need for a prototypical family unit, the use of the damsel in distress, the “good girl loves bad boy” plot device, and the representation of masculinity in an archaic way. Nonetheless, and gender issues aside, it is still an entertaining movie, with a nice soundtrack, absolutely hilarious scenes, and the cutest characters in children’s animation.

Works Cited

- Khrebtan-Hörhager, J. and R. Avant-Mier. “Despicable Others: Animated Othering as Equipment for Living in the Era of Trump”. *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 46.5, 2017, 441-462.
- Meldenson, Scott. “Review: *Despicable Me 2* Is Despicably Generic”. *Forbes*, 1 July 2013, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/scottmendelson/2013/07/01/review-despicable-me-2-is-despicably-generic/>
- Sharkey, Betsy. “Review: *Despicable Me 2* Takes Refreshing Risk with Grown-up Themes”. *Los Angeles Times*, 3 July 2013,

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/moviesnow/la-et-mn-despicable-me-2-20130703-story.html>

Alba Sánchez Ortiz

Despicable Me 3 (2013): The Redeemed Villain and His Villainous Other

CREDITS

Director: Kyle Balda, Pierre Coffin, Eric Guillon (co-director)

Written by: Cinco Paul, Ken Daurio

Producers: Janet Healy, Chris Meledandri

Art direction: Olivier Adam

Editor: Claire Dogson

Music: Heitor Pereira, Pharrell Williams

Main performers (voices): Steve Carell (Gru), Kristen Wig (Lucy), Miranda Cosgrove (Margo), Elsie Fisher (Agnes), Dana Gaier (Edith), Trey Parker (Balthazar Bratt), Steve Coogan (Fritz / Silas Ramsbottom), Julie Andrews (Gru's Mom)

Company: Illumination Entertainment, USA

Runtime: 1h 29'



REASONS TO SEE *Despicable Me 3*

- To follow one more adventure of the former villain Felonius Gru, here trying to persuade his long lost twin Dru from staying on the bright side.
- To enjoy the antics of the Minions, immersed in their own prison movie and villainous plans.
- To follow the delightful subplot of little Agnes's hunt for a real unicorn.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *Despicable Me 3*

Despite having garnered a nice number of award nominations (among them one to the Annie as Best Animated Feature), *Despicable Me 3* is the kind of sequel that, while not embarrassingly bad, leaves viewers hoping there will not be a further installment in the franchise. Unfortunately, the open ending suggests that there might yet be another Gru film, even though experience suggests that the only current franchises that have more or less successfully navigated the fourth movie bar are *Toy Story* and *Ice Age*. *Despicable Me 3* is entertaining enough, offering a good number of hilarious gags and a few sweet moments, but feels shallow in comparison to the first two sequels. This shallowness is due partly to the unsteady mixture of its too many subplots and mainly to the questionable decision of focusing on Gru's so far unknown twin Dru and their relationship, rather than on –as it should be expected– Gru's new role as a husband married to Anti-Villain League co-worker Lucy.

The script, again by Cinco Paul and Ken Daurio, deals simultaneously with Gru's confrontation with villain Balthazar Bratt and his bonding with his twin Dru, with subplots about Lucy's efforts to be a good mother for her husband's adoptive daughters Margo,

Edith, and Agnes and about the Minions' antics, here connected to an accidented escapade motivated by their strike against Gru's refusal to ever play villain again. The story begins when Bratt, a former 1980s child TV star whose career ended when he hit puberty, adds to his post-celebrity career as a villain a heist to steal a colossal diamond. Gru fails to stop him, for which he is fired from the Anti-Villain League by his inflexible new boss Valeria da Vinci; daring Da Vinci to fire her too, Lucy also loses her job. With hardly any time to consider their options, Gru receives news that, unlike what he had always assumed, his father, a villain known as the Bald Terror did not die when he was a child. He and his mother divorced, each taking a twin under their care. Now that their father is dead, Dru invites Gru and his family to his Mediterranean mansion, with the hopes of teaming up with him and continue in their father's footsteps. Gru sees in Dru's naïve approach to villainy a chance to steal the diamond back from Bratt and thus regain his lost job. He proceeds, without telling Lucy, causing the enraged Bratt to attempt to steal most of Los Angeles, a crisis which Gru and Dru need to solve together.

Reviewer Peter Sobczynski, who has a very negative view of *Despicable Me 3*, stresses that there is little in this plot that might appeal to children, particularly as regards Gru's concerns about his job or his bonding with the not too interesting Dru. "Moreover", he notes, "the whole Balthazar character is liable to baffle and confuse them more than anything else since he is a joke inspired by popular culture trends of an era long before they were even born" (online). The obsession with the 1980s (which strongly recalls Ernest Cline's novel hit *Ready Player One*, adapted for the screen by Steven Spielberg) feels indeed out of place. It can only appeal to those born in the mid-1960s to early 1970s, a demographic even older than the target audience's parents. The idea of a villain intent on wreaking havoc for having been rejected by his former exploiters as a child may be an interesting comment on the derailed lives of so many Disney TV stars but since the script needs room for Dru it remains underdeveloped.

At the same time, the subplot of the missing twin feels jaded and a poor response to the problem of how to deal with the next phase in Gru's family life. Grierson complains that "Where once Gru's supervillain-with-a-heart-of-gold dichotomy was appealing, his transition to a dutiful father and husband plays out blandly" (online) though the problem is, rather, that this transition is hardly present in the film. Dru's presence also raises questions that, once more, while interesting are left unexplored. One is who was their father, the Bald Terror, as a man and what kind of career did he have as a villain. The other is why Dru, who has been supposedly raised by this man, is such a poor villain and needs Gru's further training. The mystery of why Dru is so rich also remains unaddressed and we never know whether his wealth comes from his father's exploits or from the family business (raising pigs...).

The focus on the twin brother subplot serves, then, to avoid addressing the issue of what kind of marriage Gru and Lucy have. The scene in which she chides her husband for not telling her about the plans to storm Bratt's fortress with Dru (which ultimately requires her professional intervention) suggests that she controls the relationship. Yet, as far as their new family is concerned, the film seems only interested in Lucy's new role as a mother. "There's sneaky, sly stuff here", reviewer Abad-Santos writes, "as the movie explores the difference between being liked and being a good mother, what it's like to be a new member of an already established family, and how that's different (or not so different) from being adopted" (online). The problem is that this exploration is limited to a truly awkward subplot by which Margo's suggestion that Lucy should be able to be more controlling results in the girl's accidental engagement to an unappealing fat village boy. This is played for jokes as Margo is only twelve (so is the boy) and the engagement is the result of a traditional festival in the backward generically Mediterranean village where Dru's mansion is located. The scene of Lucy's

confrontation with the boy in question and her mother is painfully grotesque as the enraged woman and her son, an ugly parody of an inexistent rural culture, are told off by a woman who represents, as it can be easily seen, cultural prejudice and even xenophobia. Lucy is not here protecting Margo as much as shaming another culture, no matter how backward. The same embarrassing feeling in the representation of women in this film is generated by the very brief appearance of the Anti-Villain League's new boss, the virago Valerie Da Vinci. The problem is not only that her first act consists of violently dismissing her predecessor but that the script considers it a source of humor that she has a sexy body but an ugly face.

Finally, some attentions must be paid to the Minions, here acting unusually in defiance of Gru's orders and deciding not only to strike against his decision to abandon villainy but to strike on their own and perhaps find a new master. The Minions, who appear to be creatures created by Dr. Nefarious from scratch to serve Gru's needs as a villain, have been read as a subversive group because of their irreverent sense of humor, uninhibited behavior (including frequent cross-dressing) and general craziness. Since all are male and fond of each other, there have been suggestions that they should be read as gay, or at least pro-gay. Director Pierre Coffin himself (one of the Minions' voice actors) confirmed, however, that "the masculine-only nature of the Minions owes to their all-around cloddishness. 'Seeing how dumb and stupid they often are, I just couldn't imagine Minions being girls'" (in Verhoeven online). This is a sad comment on masculinity, without really being a positive comment on femininity, that puts a damper on the general perception of the Minions as much more than just a running gag (in the style for instance of *Ice Age's* saber-tooth squirrel Scrat).

All in all, then, *Despicable Me 3* appears to shy away from the topics it should have addressed –the dynamics of Gru and Lucy's marriage, their joint task as parents–to concentrate on an unfocused treatment of masculinity which sends no particularly strong message. Gru's firm decision to abandon villainy is never really questioned, nor is his loyalty to Lucy and the girls and, although this appears to be positive, the lack of a true crisis makes the former villain's new life routine instead of an achievement. Besides, the very idea of the secret twin and the open ending, with Dru insisting on becoming a villain, hints at an unsolved anxiety about what kind of masculinity is really thrilling: that of Gru on the side of goodness or that of Dru on the side of badness. If the series continues we might see next Gru chasing his former self by chasing Dru, in a sort of Jekyll and Hyde fashion suggesting that not all is well in the family man who used to be a despicable villain. Perhaps that is a kind of redemption that can never be truly complete.

Works Cited

- Abad-Santos, Alex. "Despicable Me 3 is Everything Good and Bad about the Franchise in One Messy Package". *Vox*, 1 July 2017, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/6/28/15877890/despicable-me-3-review>
- Grierson, Tim. "Despicable Me 3" (review). *Screen Daily*, 27 June 2017, <https://www.screendaily.com/reviews/despicable-me-3-review/5119445.article>
- Sobczynski, Peter. "Despicable Me 3" (review). *Roger Ebert.com*, 29 June 2017, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/despicable-me-3-2017>
- Verhoeven, Beatrice. "'Minions' Creator Pierre Coffin on Why None of His Animated Little Yellow Helpers Are Female". *The Wrap*, 10 July 2015, <https://www.thewrap.com/minions-creator-pierre-coffin-on-why-theres-no-female-characters-in-the-animated-hit/>

Sara Martín Alegre

How to Train Your Dragon (2010): A Lesson about Toxic Masculinity

CREDITS

Directors: Dean DeBlois, Chris Sanders
Written by: William Davies, Dean DeBlois, Chris Sanders. Based on the books by Cressida Cowell
Producer: Bonnie Arnold
Production designer: Kathy Altieri
Editor: Maryann Brandon, Darren T. Holmes
Art Director: Pierre Olivier Vincent
Music: John Powell
Main performers (voices): Jay Baruchel (Hiccup), Gerard Butler (Stoick), America Ferrera (Astrid), Jonah Hill (Snotlout), Christopher Mintz-Plasse (Fishlegs), Craig Ferguson (Gobber), Kristen Wiig (Ruffnut), T.J. Miller (Tuffnut)
Company: DreamWorks Animation Studios, USA
Runtime: 1h 38'



REASONS TO SEE *How to Train Your Dragon*

- The movie won ten Annie Awards including Best Animated Feature and was nominated at the 83rd Academy Awards. John Powell's award-nominated music for *How to Train Your Dragon* is considered his best work among his extensive history with DreamWorks film.
- It is completely entertaining, and the story incorporates several valuable life lessons including loyalty, teamwork, compassion and empathy.
- The movie is full of emotional moments and touching storylines about friendship and coexistence between different species.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *How to Train Your Dragon*

How to Train Your Dragon (2010), produced by DreamWorks Animation, gained considerable commercial success, earning the company nearly \$500 million worldwide. The film was nominated to the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature and Best Original Score at the 83rd Academy Awards. It also won ten Annie Awards, including Best Animated Feature. The two sequels, *How to Train Your Dragon 2* and *How to Train Your Dragon: The Hidden World*, were released in 2014 and 2019 respectively. Following the success of their predecessor, both sequels were widely acclaimed and considered box office hits, apart from inspiring plenty of popular franchise-related merchandise.

DeBlois and Sanders' movie is loosely based on a series of twelve children's books of the same title written by British author Cressida Cowell. The books are set in an imaginary Viking realm and explore the experiences of the protagonist, Hiccup, in

his adventurous, obstacle-ridden journey to Becoming a Hero, the Hard Way. The first book was released in 2003 and the last one was published in 2015. By then, the series had reached sales of over seven million books around the world. In the film Hiccup is a teenage Viking living on an imaginary island called Berk, whose citizens continually fight against dragons that are believed to threaten the life of their town. As the son of Viking chief Stoick, Hiccup is expected to become a real Viking and contribute to their combat against the copious plague of dragons. However, small, clumsy Hiccup needs to compensate for his less than manly features –including his inability to confront any murderous animal– and desperately seeks to earn respect from his fellow Vikings. Hiccup's world is turned upside down when he inadvertently captures an injured Night Fury, the most notorious dragon and a member of a species which no Viking has ever been able to capture or see up close. Rather than slaying the dragon, however, Hiccup helps Toothless to overcome his disability (the dragon is missing a tail fin) and they eventually become friends. Eventually, Hiccup discovers the truth about other dragon species, which are not at all what the Vikings have always believed them to be.

How to Train Your Dragon seeks to deliver the message that there is a path forward for a hypermasculine community like the Vikings, and that it involves kindness and ingenuity. The boy Hiccup is great as an example of brain over brawn, and of what it takes to push society forward through non-traditional gendered thinking. In this movie, Hiccup is advocating for non-normative masculinity in a patriarchal world full of toxic masculinity. It is obvious that he is under constant pressure to assume his role in Viking patriarchy and he is unhappy because his body and his personality are different. His turning point is the moment when he risks his chance of finally getting some credit, and his own life, to release the Night Fury dragon. Hiccup decides to follow his inner voice and what his heart believes to be right. In Wade's word, "He goes from being a someone who knows what he is supposed to do but is unwilling to do it (which is to kill the dragon) and therefore gets into all kinds of trouble, to someone who knows that what he was supposed to do (be big and strong and fight and kill) was wrong and will go to all kinds of quiet lengths in order to stay on the path he knows is right" (online). Hiccup's major success comes, then, from holding his own course firmly, even when facing the rejection of his own father. It is clear in any case that patriarchal individuals, whether men or women, lack empathy for the animals they hurt: "In the film, the humans have reached a sort of terrible equilibrium in their endless war against the dragons. The bloodshed has gone from being something regrettable that the Vikings need to do in order to survive to being a way of life that they take pride in" (Mulkerin, online). The valuable underlying lesson is that the real antagonist and the real dragon is toxic masculinity. The plot, then, is not about training dragons but rather about training men to cure themselves of obeying masculinity's stereotypes and a structured manhood that is negative. A recurring theme throughout *How to Train Your Dragon* franchise is that *machismo* contains the source of most conflicts and problems in the world, whereas the ultimate solution lies in embracing empathy.

One of the most interesting aspects is the reversed gender roles that Hiccup and her friend Astrid play. While Hiccup is portrayed as a rational, thinking and contemplative teen boy, Astrid is more intuitive and takes up a much more physical, active role. The lesson which the film teaches is that the obligation to conform to their gender attributes and consider these natural inclinations does not work; it is simply much better to accept each character's personality traits in order for them to be successful. Thus, on the one hand, "kick ass chick" Astrid "is shown as the only person in the class with a natural inclination for practice dragon slaying and does so with cunning and physical strength. She embodies what it means to be a Viking in their world" (Lynn, online). On the other hand, "Hiccup's father wants him to be a

dragon slayer simply because that's what men do, even though it's clearly making Hiccup miserable" (Mulkerin, online). As this reviewer adds "Cultural inertia has been perpetuating this system for so long that it becomes invisible, but it's slowly killing everyone trapped within it. What makes Hiccup a hero is that he's able to put an end to the conflict with the dragons, and he does it not by killing them, but by befriending them".

In spite of these subversive ideas regarding what masculinity must be like and the valuable lesson the movie helps to convey, some feminist critics have expressed their disappointment as the female characters are not developed to their full potential. There is not much involvement of the female characters in general and their roles are trivial to the story line. Specifically, there is the main girl/love interest, Astrid, but she still does not manage to assume a critical role in the Viking society, losing it to the protagonist Hiccup. Adult women are present in the Viking society portrayed, but they are not critical to the story line. Also, Hiccup's family consists of him and his father, as his mother apparently passed away at some point in Hiccup's life. Jason Porath, an animator that worked on the film and who describes his failed effort to make Astrid more prominent, notes that, in any case, having a strong female character is not enough: "The history of the animation industry is a graveyard of films that overreached. There were tons of movies produced with unconventional female leads that didn't connect with audiences: *Coraline*, *Princess Mononoke*, *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*" (online). In fact, to make matters worse, the other main female character is the evil dragon, the only female dragon and also the reason Hiccup ultimately loses his foot. Defeated at the end, Red Death is portrayed to be a genuinely malicious and cruel creature, as opposed to the rest of the dragons, males merely lead by animal instinct.

In the end, as Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat noted, *How to Train Your Dragon* leads to a big battle in which Hiccup and Toothless prove their warrior mettle and their capacity for violence, presented as 'good violence' against evil: "Although it is touching to see the loving relationship that develops between the boy and the black dragon, it is quickly overshadowed by battle sequences in which these two become heroes. Supposedly this victory over a super gigantic dragon will end the warfare that has been the central dimension of Viking life. Every viewer will have to decide for him- or herself whether the new peace between the dragons and the Vikings will last (we split on this in our household)" (online). Pacifism, clearly, is not an option when you have a big dragon threatening your village. However, this situation leads to an intriguing question about whether the relationship between boy and dragon lies just in mutual interest, or whether they can genuinely co-exist as friends. The last scene tends to suggest the later possibility, but only after Hiccup loses his lower left leg. As McReynolds comments in her reading their "matching disabilities" turn Hiccup and Toothless into complements of each other in a "prosthetic relationship": "Previously, Toothless was reliant on Hiccup in order to perform as a dragon, and now Hiccup must rely on Toothless to perform as a Viking" so that "together, they are whole" (e-book). There is then hope that men and dragons can be reconciled in a mutually beneficial new relationship.

Works Cited

Brussat, Mary Ann and Frederic. "An Animated Feature about a Boy Making Friends with His Community's Enemy, the Dragon". *Spirituality Practice*, n.d., <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/films/reviews/view/20339/how-to-train-your-dragon>

- Lynn, A. "Good Effort: *How to Train Your Dragon*". *Nerdy Feminist*, 27 March 2010, <http://www.nerdyfeminist.com/2010/03/good-effort-how-to-train-your-dragon.html>
- McReynolds, Leigha. "Animal and Alien Bodies as Prostheses: Reframing Disability in *Avatar* and *How to Train Your Dragon*". *Disability in Science Fiction: Representations of Technology as Cure*, Kathryn Allan (ed.). Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 115-127. E-book.
- Mulkerin, Claire. "Things Only Adults Notice in *How to Train Your Dragon*". *Looper*, 15 November 2019, <https://www.looper.com/175201/things-only-adults-notice-in-how-to-train-your-dragon/>
- Porath, Jason. "Astrid Deserved Better: An Animator's Quest to Make DreamWorks Feminist—From the Inside". *The Mary Sue*, 7 November 2016, <https://www.themarysue.com/make-dreamworks-feminist-again/>
- Wade, Juliette. "Some Gender-related Thoughts about *How to Train Your Dragons*". *Talk to You Universe*, 10 December 2012, <http://talktoyouuniverse.blogspot.com/2012/12/some-gender-related-thoughts-about-how.html>

Thu Trang Tran

How To Train Your Dragon 2 (2014): A Disappointment and a Gay Viking

CREDITS

Directed by: Dean DeBlois
Written by: Dean DeBlois. Based on the books by Cressida Cowell
Produced by: Bonnie Arnold
Music by: John Powell
Cinematography by: Gil Zimmerman
Film Editing by: John K. Carr
Art direction by: Michael Necci; Zhaoping Wei
Main Performers (Voices): Jay Baruchel (Hiccup), America Ferrera (Astrid), Cate Blanchett (Valka), Gerard Butler (Stoick), Craig Ferguson (Gobber), Djimon Hounsou (Drago), Kit Harington (Eret)
Company: DreamWorks Animation Studios, USA
Runtime: 1h 42'



REASONS TO SEE *How to Train Your Dragon 2*

- The advanced 3-D technology makes the main characters more vivid and real; here they are slightly older with notable physical differences.
- Many stars voices appear in this instalment of series, including Cate Blanchett, Gerard Butler and Kit Harington.
- The varied dragons with different colors and shapes. The baby dragons appear for the first time.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *How to Train Your Dragon 2*

How To Train Your Dragon 2 is the second sequel film of the *How To Train Your Dragon* franchise produced by DreamWorks. The first film *How To Train Your Dragon* (2010) and the others in this franchise, including *How to Train Your Dragon: The Hidden World* (2019) are loosely based on a series of twelve children's books (2004-2015) written by British author Cressida Cowell. The books are set in a fictional Viking world and focus on the experiences of the protagonist, the boy Hiccup, as he overcomes great obstacles on his journey to Become a Hero, the Hard Way. By 2015 the series had sold more than seven million copies around the world. Besides the three franchise films, there are also a few short films based on which DreamWorks published six early reader books, though they were not written by Cressida Cowell. There are also two animated TV series: *DreamWorks Dragon* (2012-18) and *DreamWorks Dragons: Rescue Riders* (2019-). *How To Train Your Dragon 2* received as many compliments as the previous one and had box-office takings of over \$600 million worldwide. In 2015, it

was nominated to an Oscar as Best Animated Feature Film and became the winner of Best Animated Feature Film award in the Golden Globes. The film also won the Annie Award in that category, and in five other categories, apart from four nominations.

How To Train Your Dragon 2 continues the adventure of Hiccup and his friend dragon Toothless, whom he befriended after curing him of an injury. After five years, the lives of the Berk Island residents have completely mixed with those of the dragons. The island is now a paradise where Vikings and dragons coexist peacefully. However, growing up means responsibility and Hiccup must find out who has been training the dragons to survive. In order to find the answer, Hiccup and the loyal Toothless begin their adventure, but the results are beyond their expectations. On the one hand, Hiccup discovers that the mysterious dragon trainer is his own mother Valka, who has been missing for many years; on the other hand, the powerful Drago and the dragon hunter Eret are allied to threaten the peace between people and dragons on Berk Island. In order to protect their beloved dragons, Astrid, Gobber, and all his other Viking buddies (Snotlout, Fishlegs, Tuffnut and Ruffnut) help Hiccup, his father and the leader of the tribe Stoick and his mother to fight the threat. During the fierce battle, Stoick dies protecting Hiccup from Toothless who falls under the influence of the villain Drago. Finally, Hiccup gains Toothless back and together they defeat Drago.

The female characters play a quite important in *How To Train Your Dragon 2*, among which Astrid is eye-catching but disappointing. Astrid, who is about Hiccup's age, has always been portrayed as an unconventional girl, who is very brave and ambitious and far from being shy. She's definitely one of the favorite characters most girl fans cherish, as it can be seen by how many wear her costume at comic cons and draw pictures about her. So it is not a surprise that spectators may find it disappointing that Astrid is not named chief in *How To Train Your Dragon 2* because in the previous episode she already presented the determination and capacity which her boyfriend Hiccup, Stoick's heir, lacks. According to Jason Porath, "despite being a bigger badass than protagonist Hiccup by almost every conceivable measurement" Astrid "was relegated to the 'girlfriend' role. She would cheer on Hiccup, tell him how cool he was, and even, after getting captured, spend an entire scene telling the bad guy just how bad Hiccup was going to kick his butt. She didn't even ride her own dragon in the third act" (online). In *How To Train Your Dragon 2*, Astrid has done a job as a 'qualified girlfriend', encouraging the protagonist to follow his heart and rewarding him with a kiss after her 'hero' defeats the villain.

Other reviewers, however, argue that the affection that Astrid shows Hiccup without any hesitation is a good signal of feminism. As MaryAnn Johansson pointed out, Hiccup's relationship with his girlfriend, Astrid, is that of a "fellow dragonrider and all-around adventurer. There is no third party here threatening to come between them; there is no doubt about the strength of their partnership. And partnership it is, one based on devotion and trust between equals. Astrid is never a damsel in distress to be rescued by him... or at least not any more than Hiccup is a dude in distress to be rescued by her!" (online). Johansson also notes that Astrid freely expresses her affection for Hiccup: "I wish this were not so rare as to be worth noting, but at least a basic feminist foundation is starting to sneak its way back into mainstream movies" (online). Nonetheless, this is not enough because the time has changed and girls are entitled to do more than "twisting a braid into their boyfriends' hair" as Johansson notes. Jason Porath, who worked for the production team of *How To Train Your Dragon 2*, sent his co-workers "pages and pages of feminist critique" asking why Astrid is not the chief; he was given a quite absurd answer by one of the top executives: simply because the focus is supposed to be on protagonist Hiccup, which indicates the limitation both of DreamWorks and of the whole industry. The boundary seems advanced but actually in a controlled range operated by the patriarchal system.

Most male characters in this episode fall into boring conventions. Stoick, a stubborn father, has high expectations about his son and heir Hiccup, from whom he has concealed that his mother still lives; at least, he keeps a deep affection towards Valka for more than ten years after she left him because they had arguments about how to deal with dragons. Hiccup, as an imperfect protagonist, defeats the villain simply because he is the protagonist. However, fellow Viking Gobber becomes a surprise when he comes out of closet in a pretty obscure and subtle way. In the scene where Stoick and Valka finally get together after years separated and confess their affection to each other, what Gobber tells Hiccup gives much food for thought: “This is why I never married. This and one other reason”. Actor Craig Ferguson ad-libbed the second line and director Dean DeBlois kept it because “it’s such a hand-off line that I think for the older members of the audience, it’ll take them a moment to realize, like, ‘Did he just say what I think he said?’”(in Labrecque, online). According to DeBlois, who is himself gay, “[The movie] treats it like normalcy, and that’s what I really like about it. (...) I know there are probably a few people whose feathers it will ruffle, but you can’t worry too much about that. Particularly in 2014. It’s so prevalent out there, in TV shows and movies. It’s the norm, as it should be. I’m proud of it. It contributes to the daring and progressive quality of the storytelling of this [planned] trilogy” (in Labrecque, online).

Society is progressing, and it welcomes diversity more than before. As DeBlois indicates most homosexual people at least in Western countries are living a life as normalized as that of heterosexual people and any differential treatment should be eliminated. Mainstream animated movies have existed for a very long time to finally allow such a gay character a Gobber to appear on the screen. In fact, according to Jeff Labrecque, Gobber isn’t the first gay character in a mainstream animated movie; Mitch (voiced by Casey Affleck) was a gay dumb jock in 2012’s *ParaNorman*, though “Some social conservatives had a problem” with him (online). It’s still great to have a gay character that has nothing to do with stereotypes even though Gobber only played a small role in the movie. The real breakthrough will happen when someone like Stoick is gay, not someone like Gobber. Or when a woman like Astrid can sit on the chief’s throne and ride a dragon freely to fight against villains with her boyfriend as a sidekick instead of waiting at home for the hero to return back.

Works Cited

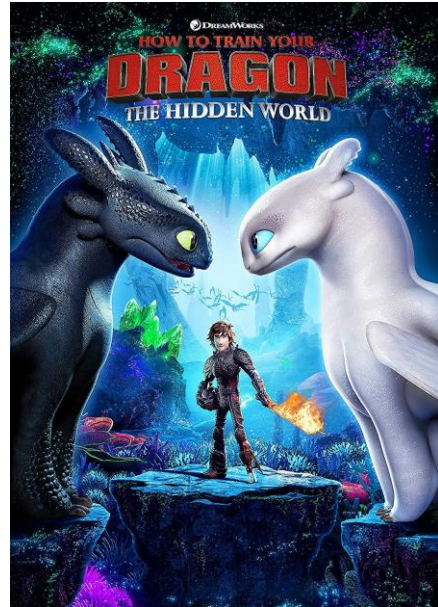
- Johansson, MaryAnn. “*How to Train Your Dragon 2* Movie Review: Flying Higher”, *Flick Philosopher*, 26 June 2014, <https://www.flickphilosopher.com/2014/06/train-dragon-2-movie-review-flying-higher.html>
- Labrecque, Jeff. “*How to Train Your Dragon 2*: Is Gobber Really Gay?”. *Entertainment*, 15 June 2014, <https://ew.com/article/2014/06/15/how-to-train-your-dragon-2-gobber-gay/>
- Porath, Jason. “Astrid Deserved Better: An Animator’s Quest to Make DreamWorks Feminist—From the Inside”. *The Mary Sue*, 7 November 2016, <https://www.themarysue.com/make-dreamworks-feminist-again/>

Cong (Jamie) Wang

How to Train Your Dragon: The Hidden World (2019): Reconciling Opposites

CREDITS

Director: Dean DeBlois
Written by: Dean DeBlois. Based on the books by Cressida Cowell
Producer: Bonnie Arnold, Brad Lewis
Editor: John K. Carr
Music: John Powell
Main performers (voices): Jay Baruchel (Hiccup), America Ferrera (Astrid), F. Murray Abraham (Grimmel), Cate Blanchett (Valka), Gerard Butler (Stoick), Craig Ferguson (Gobber), Jonah Hill (Snotlout), Christopher Mintz-Plasse (Fishlegs), Kristen Wiig (Ruffnut), Kit Harington (Eret), Justin Ruppel (Tuffnut)
Company: DreamWorks Animation Studios, USA
Runtime: 1h 44'



REASONS TO SEE *How to Train your Dragon: The Hidden World*

- This is the final chapter of the trilogy, focusing on growing up and letting go, which may leave the audiences pretty emotional.
- This film is visually sophisticated, even better than the last two of this franchise.
- The voice cast is stellar. Hiccup's mother, Valka, is voiced by Cate Blanchette.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *How to Train your Dragon: The Hidden World*

The trilogy *How To Train Your Dragon* is based on Cressida Cowell's book series of the same name. Just like the other series produced by DreamWorks Animation, such as *Shrek*, *Madagascar*, and *Kung Fu Panda*, the films were all commercial successes and won a variety of awards. The first film of this franchise was co-directed by Chris Sanders and Dean DeBlois, who previously worked together on *Mulan* (1998) and *Lilo & Stitch* (2002). The last two were directed only by Dean DeBlois himself. As the final chapter of the series, *How to Train Your Dragon: The Hidden World* was the fifth highest-grossing animated film of 2019. It was nominated for Best Animated Feature at the 92nd Academy Awards but lost to *Toy Story 4*. Over the fifteen years between *Toy Story* and *Toy Story 3* (2010), Pixar evolved from a modest computer animation studio to a giant in the industry, while over the nine years from *How To Train Your Dragon* to *How to Train Your Dragon: The Hidden World*, DreamWorks endured a troubling time and was ultimately sold to NBCUniversal.

In the film, the Vikings continue to rescue the captured dragons and bring them back to Berk Island, where Hiccup manages to build a utopian dragon haven with the help of Astrid and his mother, Valka. Berk soon becomes overpopulated with dragons

and Hiccup feels the need to find the Hidden World, the legendary home of the dragons. In the meantime, Toothless falls in love with a Night Fury, which is used as bait to lure him by a notorious dragon slayer named Grimmel. Faced with the threat from the dragon-trapper, Hiccup decides to leave Berk, their only home, with all the Vikings and their dragons to find the mythical Hidden World. However, their plan is revealed and they get into a fight with Grimmel. The Vikings and their dragons win the war in the end. Hiccup finally makes up his mind to let Toothless go and all the other Berkians bid farewell to their beloved dragons when they fly to the Hidden World.

When speaking of the Viking Age, we all tend to have the impression that it was a male-dominant world and this is so in this franchise, too. Though there are several female characters, they never step into the center of the stage. This lack of principal female roles and the tendency to present women in a traditional way have long been the problem not only in animated films. Still, not enough attention has been drawn to these issues by reviewers and critics.

At least, it comes as natural (yet necessary) to portray women as strong and confident fighters since the story takes place in a violent Viking world. Taking a close look at these females, Astrid, Valka, the twin sister Ruffnut, and the Light Fury dragon, neither of them is close to the typical waiting-to-be-rescued Disney princesses. They are positioned as the main subversive characters in this film in terms of both character design and capability. They wear confident smiles and have equal competence with males when riding dragons or fighting their common enemies. However, as Tasha Robinson argued in her review, it seems that currently most strong female characters exist in all kinds of films simply for marketing considerations: “Bringing in a Strong Female Character isn’t actually a feminist statement, or an inclusionary statement, or even a basic equality statement if the character doesn’t have any reason to be in the story except to let filmmakers point at her on the poster and say ‘See? The film totally respects strong women’” (online).

All the females in *How to Train Your Dragon: The Hidden World* encounter such problems in relation to their purpose of existence. Valka, Hiccup’s long-lost mother, is built into a strong and uncompromising character and a fierce protector of dragons yet has “absolutely nothing to do” apart from being a responsible mother, providing support to her son, and help him fulfill his dreams. What’s more confusing is that there is supposed to be more interaction between Hiccup and his mother since Hiccup’s father Stoick died and his mother came back in *How to Train Your Dragon 2*. However, there is little direct connection between them in this film. Instead, Hiccup grows a deeper bond with his father through flashbacks while Valka even disappears in the final fight. As for Astrid, she is a champion of dragon races and a true Viking warrior. She has her own personality but she is not that independent. She feels inadequate because of her gender and eventually plays the romantic role in this male-led action story, adding another level of conventionality suggesting that women are not able to pursue their own goals and they are meant to nag a male hero into growing up. The twin sister, Ruffnut (or ‘rough nut’, her brother is called Tuffnut or ‘tough nut’) is just “another product of the sexless-yet-sexualized type” (Robinson online) of the crazy tomboy. She is there as comic relief, bringing a derisive laugh to the audience because of her talking ceaselessly in a big voice. Finally, the white Light Fury (who does not even receive a name), which has a similar appearance to the black Night Fury Toothless and moves as fast as him and shares his ability to blend into the sky, shows up as a savior of Toothless and Hiccup in their fight with Grimmel, the villain. However, her most memorable role in this film is the sexual object being wooed by Toothless. Accordingly, Toothless loses his senses and falls in love at first sight, which sends the negative message that males are not capable of controlling their sexuality.

As I mentioned before, the story takes place in the Viking world. It is not hard to imagine that whenever it comes to protecting their homeland, Viking males show their toxic masculinity and aggressiveness. Stoick and Hiccup represent a funny contrast. Stoick is the typical Viking warrior. He is large, strong, and the best dragon fighter in the village while his son Hiccup is weak and struggles to slay dragons, making him an outcast within the community. Despite his deep love for Hiccup, Stoick shows his disappointment in his son because he is not able to conform to the Viking norms. Nonetheless, this film defies patriarchal constructions. Stoick died in *How to Train Your Dragon 2* and shows up through flashbacks in this one. There are full of sensitive moments and heartfelt conversations between the father and the son. The father opens up and uses emotional words with his son; there is even a scene when Hiccup sees his father crying. Stoick is not the only man that shows vulnerabilities. Many male Vikings shed tears of joy at the final wedding despite their typical warrior images. They cry in another man's arms or on women's shoulders. When a big guy falls into Ruffnut's arms, she declares "Ok, you win. I like sensitive guys". Scenes and lines like these actually can be seen in many animated films, which, to some extent, can normalize the experience of men having negative or difficult emotions rather than seeing it as a weakness. However, what is worrying here is the portrayal of the unexpected hero, Hiccup. He has grown rather tall and handsome. It seems that he is turned into the conventional leader, indicating that men can only be accepted and valued if they comply with the norms and succeed, as a result reinforcing hegemony.

For years limited attempts have been made to touch upon issues regarding various disabilities in animated films. Most of the time, characters with disabilities are so hard to identify and they are normally presented as if they are unable to take care of themselves. Examining the Seven Dwarves in *Snow White* (1937) for example, Raya AlJadir points out that "Many might not recognize them as disabled figures, partly because there is a lack of awareness of people with low stature. The way in which the dwarves are portrayed is almost as if they are children. Snow White looks after them, puts them to bed, and tells them off. I worry that this will lead its young audience to regard people with low stature as the same –children that need looking after"(online). Also, it is almost impossible for children to recognize figures with mental health problems in films, like Piglet in *Winnie the Pooh*, though their presence "does open up their understanding of the different characteristics of people and, more importantly, accepting them, just as Piglet's friends do" (online), Raya AlJadir claims. Considering *Nemo* and *Dory* in *Finding Nemo* (2003) and Hiccup and Toothless in this film, for them, physical disabilities, which are not described as something unnatural or misfortune, may be perceived as normalization, especially when they seem quite comfortable with their impairment (Hiccup is missing a leg) and show no difference from the normal ones. However, in this case, the audience tends to neglect the fact that these figures have physical limitations, which distracts their attention from noticing, understanding, and accepting such disabilities.

How to Train Your Dragon: The Hidden World shows us a male-dominant world full of competitiveness and violence. However, what makes these Viking warriors ultimately adorable is that they are able to express emotions and the way they did it is not ridiculed. Also, through Hiccup's development, we can say that intelligence is valued more than physical strength, which is a healthy message for children, especially boys. Still, the portrayal of women is heavily stereotyped even though females can be of equal competence in combat. It seems that DreamWorks still has a long way to go to show us a world with more diversity and equality, though at least they seem to be on the right path.

Works Cited

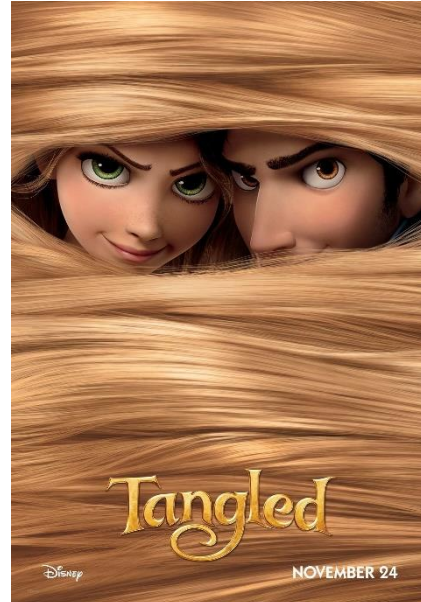
- Robinson, Tasha. "We're Losing All Our Strong Female Characters to Trinity Syndrome". *The Dissolve*, 16 June 2014, <https://thedissolve.com/features/exposition/618-were-losing-all-our-strong-female-characters-to-tr/>
- AlJadir, Raya. "10 Animation Characters with Disabilities". *Disability Horizons*, 12 May 2019, <https://disabilityhorizons.com/2019/05/10-animation-and-kids-characters-with-disabilities/>

Ting Wang

Tangled (2010): The Unconventional Princess and her Bad Mother

CREDITS

Director: Nathan Greno, Byron Howard
Written by: Dan Fogleman. Based on the fairy tale “Rapunzel” by the Brothers Grimm
Producer: Roy Conlu
Art direction: Dan Cooper, David Goetz
Editor: Tim Mertens
Music: Alan Menken
Main performers (voices): Mandy Moore (Rapunzel), Zachary Levi (Flynn Rider), Donna Murphy (Mother Gothel), Ron Perlman (Stabbington Brother), M.C. Gainey (Captain of the Guard), Jeffrey Tambor (Big Nose Thug), Richard Kiel (Vlad)
Company: Walt Disney Animation Studios, USA
Runtime: 1h 40’



REASONS TO SEE *Tangled*

- The film offers a different perspective from the traditional fairy tale “Rapunzel” with an assertive princess who does not need to be rescued.
- *Tangled* puts together computer-generated imagery and traditional hand-drawn animation in order to provide the impression of a moving painting, which makes the film visually outstanding.
- It was nominated to numerous awards, including Best Achievement in Music Written for Motion Pictures Original Song in the Academy Awards for “I See the Light” by composer Alan Menken and lyricist Glenn Slater.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *Tangled*

Tangled was produced by Walt Disney Animation Studios and released in 2010. Preceded by *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) and followed by *Winnie the Pooh* (2011) and *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012), *Tangled* is Disney’s 50th animated feature film. The story of Rapunzel is originally based on the popular fairy tale of the same title by the Brothers Grimm which was first published in 1812. Before its release, the film’s title was modified from *Rapunzel* to *Tangled* for marketing purposes in order to sell the film as gender-neutral. The film was an immediate success and was nominated to numerous awards including Best Achievement in Music Written for Motion Pictures, Original Song. *Tangled* managed to be a nominee as well for Best Animated Film and Best Original Song – Motion Picture in the Golden Globes.

After being healed by the powers of a magic golden flower, the Queen gives birth to Princess Rapunzel, whose hair acquires the same powers as the flower. Knowing the curative abilities of the baby’s hair, Mother Gothel kidnaps Rapunzel from the palace

and raises her as her own child in a secret tower. On the eve of her eighteenth birthday, Rapunzel asks her mother if she can leave the tower to see the floating lights that each year emerge from the kingdom's capital, but Gothel refuses to let her go. However, Flynn Rider, a thief chased by the palace soldiers finds Rapunzel's tower by chance and decides to hide in it. The princess persuades Flynn to escort her to see the lanterns for her birthday making a deal with him. Together they engage on a dangerous adventure running away from menacing thugs, kingdom guards, and eventually from Mother Gothel herself. Flynn helps Rapunzel defeat her evil mother and return to her real parents in order to become the long-awaited Princess of the kingdom.

When analyzing the film in terms of gender issues, the two most predominant characters are, logically, Rapunzel and Mother Gothel. The first one is presented as a strong, intelligent, and determined young woman. In fact, Rapunzel is much more assertive than other preceding Disney princesses. According to Jena Stephens, by characterizing a princess as a strong and confident woman with her personal agenda, in *Tangled* Disney "drastically changes the princess archetype from the weak female characteristics it once held" (97). At the very beginning of the film, we can see Rapunzel's routine and all the tasks she has to do daily for her mother. However, she does not only perform stereotypical womanly duties like cleaning, cooking, or knitting, she also reads, paints, studies, plays the guitar and throws darts. All these activities make the princess a much more complete character that goes beyond the stereotypical characteristics of traditional princesses. Stephens highlights that while Rapunzel performs all her chores she sings "When Will My Life Begin" whose lyrics suggest the protagonist has her own ideas about what her life should be like, longing for adventure as her isolated life in a tower is not fulfilling. This makes Rapunzel different from other previous Disney princesses who lacked rebellious qualities and just waited to be rescued by their Prince Charming. In *Tangled*, Rapunzel challenges her mother's commands to stay in the tower and plans her own escape making sure Gothel will not be there to stop her. Rapunzel becomes her own rescuer and leaves the tower without male assistance. In fact, Flynn Ryder is only there to help her find the floating lights for her birthday, not because she needs him to keep her safe. Thus, Rapunzel breaks with the conventional image of the damsel in distress.

Tangled presents Rapunzel and Flynn in an equal relationship. Both characters lead the adventure and save each other in numerous occasions. Their abilities are not defined and limited by their gender; they are both strong, clever, and skilled, perfectly capable of defeating their enemies. It is also important to consider the evolution that Flynn undergoes. At first, he is presented as an arrogant selfish thief who only cares about himself and who uses his handsomeness to manipulate other people. Nevertheless, as the movie proceeds, he gradually changes and becomes a more mature and caring man, willing to sacrifice himself for Rapunzel in order to liberate her from Mother Gothel. In this way, Flynn provides a positive and supportive image of masculinity. Another important aspect about Flynn and Rapunzel is that their romantic relationship is not the main plot of the film but it is instead presented as a secondary story line. Stephens points out that Rapunzel follows a dream that has nothing to do with love unlike former Disney princesses: "the most recent princesses can identify their own desires through their own ideas, without being forced to heed to other's opinions about their lives or use men as their sole reason for existing, they have dreams they want to achieve, regardless of their romantic situation" (101).

Mother Gothel's main motivation for her villainy is neither revenge nor domination over the kingdom, but her obsession with physical beauty and eternal youth; that is why she keeps Rapunzel hidden and secluded in the tower for so many years without the girl's knowing that Gothel is not her mother but her kidnapper: the girl's magical hair guarantees that Gothel stays young and attractive. Elnahla argues

that Gothel (who, incidentally is a common woman, neither a witch or a fairy) is a victim of ageism and thus she falls into the stereotypical role of the old, wicked female character: “it is usually women, especially the older ones, who are branded as evil villainesses in many Disney’s works” (125). Gothel is in fact a powerful and independent woman who lives alone in the woods and is wise enough to use the powers of the magic flower. However, she is vilified as the cruel aging woman who only cares about her lost physical attractiveness. In the film, Gothel’s cruelty is driven to the extreme as she is willing to commit murder by stabbing Ryder and to keep Rapunzel by force, for the sake of her eternal youth. Elnahla states that Disney takes the link between old age and villainy a step further when the aging female character is in disguise and her real identity is eventually revealed becoming a “hideous, grotesque and much older woman” (119). When Flynn cuts off Rapunzel’s hair with a shard of glass ending its magic, Gothel’s skin begins to wrinkle incredibly fast, and horrified by her own reflection, she stumbles and falls out the window aging rapidly into a pile of ashes by the time she hits the ground.

Apart from that craving for beauty, Gothel is also depicted as an arrogant, vain and manipulative woman. As noted, she kidnaps Rapunzel when she is a baby and raises her as her own daughter, pretending to be her biological mother. Although Gothel is not Rapunzel’s stepmother, DelRosso declares that she embodies the stereotypical negative image of the mean adoptive mother opposed to the classic idea of the nurturing and loving true parents. Furthermore, Gothel is constantly mistreating Rapunzel and frightening her about the external world. She also tries to “destroy Rapunzel’s self-confidence regarding her intelligence, her abilities, and even her body image” (526) by calling her slow, immature, clumsy, naïve and chubby. This way, Gothel’s villainy is increased as she is always undermining her adoptive daughter “embodying the traditional Disney female villain, shifting from mother to captor” (527). Reviewer Xan Brooks claims that Mother Gothel is Disney’s “more rounded and convincing villainess” because she “coats her ruthless self-interest in the language of love” (online). It is true that Gothel pretends to be loving and affectionate towards Rapunzel by calling her “sweetheart” and “darling”, which makes her even scarier and more evil as she is continually lying to her. DelRosso suggests that Gothel might have some maternal feelings towards the Princess as she lives with her in the tower; however, her love is clearly consumed by her sole interest: eternal youth, and she is capable of doing anything to maintain it.

Finally, A. O. Scott, another reviewer of the film, focuses on the voice-over narration of the film performed by Flynn Rider, as in fact, he tells the story of Rapunzel. According to Scott, this voice over was used for commercial reasons to reach a wider audience including little boys. However, having a male voice narrate the story of Rapunzel, shows that Disney was not ready at that time (before *Frozen*) to give full protagonism to a princess. However, it would have been preferable to have Rapunzel tell her own story and how she achieves her dreams as “the center of gravity” in the film belongs to her (Scott, online). Flynn’s voice over is actually rather unnecessary.

To conclude, we could say that through *Tangled*, Disney finally managed to overcome the traditional princess archetype by depicting Rapunzel as an independent strong woman who does not need to be rescued by a male character to follow her dreams. However, this is not the same case for her antagonist. Only interested in her physical appearance and eternal youth, Mother Gothel remains a rather flat and one-dimensional character, falling into the stereotype of the old, wicked woman. In this way, Disney defines Gothel within the boundaries of her gender preserving the traditional description of the female villain, which would only change later with *Maleficent* (2014).

Works Cited

- Brooks, Xan. "My Guilty Pleasure: *Tangled* (review)". *The Guardian*, 18 March 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2014/mar/18/tangled-disney-rapunzel-film-guilty-pleasure>
- DelRosso, Jeana. "De-tangling Motherhood: Adoption Narratives in Disney's *Tangled*". *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 48.3, 2015: 520-533.
- Elnahla, Nada Ramadan. "Aging with Disney and the Gendering of Evil". *Journal of Literature and Art Studies*, 5.2, 2015, 114-127.
- Scott, A. O. "Back to the Castle, Where It's All About the Hair (review)". *The New York Time*, 23 November 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/24/movies/24tangled.html>
- Stephens, Jena. "Disney's Darlings: An Analysis of *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled*, *Brave* and the Changing Characterisation of the Princess Archetype". *Interdisciplinary Humanities*, 31.3, 2014, 95-107.

Helena Zúñiga Centenero

Brave (2012): Real Changes and Symbolic Transformations

CREDITS

Director: Mark Andrews, Brenda Chapman, Steve Purcell (co-director)
Written by: Mark Andrews, Brenda Chapman, Steve Purcell, Irene Mecchi; story by: Brenda Chapman
Producer: Katherine Serafian
Art direction: Tia Kratter
Editor: Nicholas C. Smith
Music: Patrick Doyle
Main performers (voices): Kelly Macdonald (Merida), Billy Connolly (Fergus), Emma Thompson (Elinor), Julie Walters (The Witch), Robbie Coltrane (Lord Dingwall), Kevin McKidd (Lord MacGuffin/Young MacGuffin), Craig Ferguson (Lord Macintosh)
Company: Pixar Animation Studios, USA
Runtime: 1h 33'



REASONS TO SEE *Brave*

- In 2013 *Brave* won the Oscar for Best Animated Feature Film, and the director Brenda Chapman became the first woman to win an Academy Award for an animated movie (the second for all genres after Kathryn Bigelow).
- It is Pixar's first film top lined by a female character.
- The scenery is breathtaking and there are many references to the Scottish folklore and oral tradition. Moreover, it is the studio's first film set entirely in the historic past.

REPRESENTING GENDER IN *Brave*

Brave, produced by Katherine Sarafian for Pixar Animation Studios, was released by Walt Disney Pictures in 2012. It won both an Academy Award and a BAFTA award for Best Animated Feature Film and was nominated for ten Annie awards (it won two for production design and animated effects). The writer and original director, Brenda Chapman, was the first woman to direct a Pixar film and to win an Academy Award for an animated film; however, she had to share it with Mark Andrews, who replaced her when she was dismissed during the production. According to widespread rumors, her dismissal was due to the fact that the female protagonist, Merida, was required to be more compliant with the stereotypical depictions of Disney princesses, but Chapman refused to meet this request.

This is not the first time that Pixar is charged with sexism: Sharon Waxman and Jeff Sneider claimed, before Chapman signed up that, "as a studio that has not used a female director in any of its 11 releases, Pixar has been singled out for having a dubious reputation as a boys club" (online). This general opinion has been corroborated by Cassandra Smolcic, a graphic designer who worked at Pixar Animation

Studios for five years. In 2018 she published an essay titled “Pixar’s Sexist Boys Club”, in which she gives a detailed description of her “experiences with gender discrimination, sexism, harassment and sexual abuse” which she suffered both before and during her time at Pixar, among what she calls a “fraternity of men who have monopolized animation” (online). What is considered an established order of male dominance has not only created gender imbalances among the employees: the studio’s deeply ingrained gender bias is echoed in the production itself. According to Joel Stein, “Pixar has a girl problem”, since “all of its unfathomably successful movies” that preceded *Brave* “have male leads. Very male leads: cowboys, astronauts, robots, cars, Ed Asner” (online). This complaint is shared by many other critics; Haseenah Ebrahim, for instance, argues that “it had also become quite obvious after twelve noteworthy animated features that Pixar had avoided making a female a protagonist in any of its films” (44).

Brave, therefore, can be considered an extraordinary turning point, since it is the first of Pixar’s thirteen films to feature a female lead character. Without any doubt, it represents a departure from the traditional male-centered films produced before. Its plot focuses on Scottish Princess Merida, first daughter of the ruling royal house in Edinburgh, the Dunbroch clan. One day, Queen Elinor informs her teen daughter that she is to be betrothed to one of the eldest sons of the Dunbrochs’ allied clans. Merida is given three suitors to choose from, but she is not offered the option to reject them all. Her mother argues that she must accept the burden of royal obligations for the sake of the land or the consequences would be fatal for the kingdom. After a quarrel in which Merida slashes her mother’s tapestry, the girl runs into the woods and the Will-o-the-Wisps lead her to the cottage of an old witch. Merida begs the woman for a magic spell to change Queen Elinor’s mind, but magic changes more than that: it turns Elinor into a bear. Merida and Elinor’s quest focus next on reversing the spell and preventing the fatal outcome by which Elinor could be left with no trace of her human self, becoming a whole beast. Luckily, the magic spell comes with an escape clause: Merida has exactly two days to reverse the charm and “mend the bond torn by pride”.

Unlike the previous Disney and Pixar animated films, *Brave* challenges the traditional princess pattern and offers a radically different perspective: since “arranged marriage stands for the burden of the patriarchy on women” (Bulajewski, online), *Brave* is the story of a girl that revises the conservative practices and resists the patriarchal standards that would constrain her to traditional gender roles. Merida’s parents arrange an archery competition in order to determine which of the suitors will win her hand in marriage, but the girl defeats all of them declaring her intention to win her own hand (“I am Merida. And I’ll be shooting for my own hand!”). During the contest, “what becomes important is not her mastery of archery that is exceptional for women and men alike, but ultimately that she goes too far on the tomboy trajectory” (Dundes 9), since she emasculates the suitors by mocking them through the use of “a type of humor that supports hegemonic masculinity” (Dundes 7). She does not merely refuse to marry her suitors, she ridicules and humiliates them publicly.

In this occasion, Merida’s rebellion takes place both on a physical and ideological level. To attend the competition, she is forced to wear a restrictive lady-like dress that is extremely tight, but beautiful, according to Medieval and even current fashion standards. The dress can therefore be considered an allegory of her oppression and the embodiment of the implicit rule that requires girls to sacrifice their comfort for beauty’s sake. Therefore, the scene in which Merida rips the dress in order to shoot can be read as a rebellion against social constrictions imposed by traditional femininity. This reading of the dress shows how Merida does not partake in the stereotypical image of the submissive and beautiful princess. She is not even conventionally pretty and she enjoys physical activities that are not considered

appropriated for a lady, such as archery, sword-fighting, horseback riding, and rock climbing. Unfortunately, because of her independent attitude and because she is conspicuously involved in male-associated activities, Merida is often dubbed a “tomboy” princess by many critics. However, as Lauren Dundes states, “the use of the word itself risks perpetuating gender stereotypes in designating certain traits as masculine. In other words, the term *tomboy* validates the oppositional dichotomies of gender roles (in which certain traits—positive traits—are designated masculine)” (3, original italics).

Another great innovation in *Brave* is that the plot, based on a mother-daughter relationship, does not involve any romantic love interest. Despite the fact that the story is set in the Middle Ages, the film explores the complexities of family relationship (in particular how mothers and daughters relate to each other) in a way that fits our contemporary times. Merida and Elinor are rivals yet perfectly complement each other, to the point that it is almost impossible to side with one of them. Without any doubt, the success of their representation is due to the fact that Brenda Chapman, in pitching the idea for the film, was inspired by her relationship with her own teen daughter. The mother/daughter relationship is even more remarkable if we consider that in almost all past princess movies mothers are deceased or do not have a central role. Nearly all Disney princesses are intended to reach happiness by finding romantic love with a prince charming, but Merida is the exception. She firmly asserts her right to choose whatever path she desires and to be “free to write her own story”, eventually finding her own place in the world. Danielle Morrison seems to grasp the essence of the film when she asserts that *Brave* “takes many of the positive elements present in past Disney princess movies, such as a strong female lead seen in *Mulan* and *Tangled* and a refusal to accept predefined roles shown by Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*”. And, at the same time, it “combines them while avoiding the problematic aspects of those films, such as the portrayal in each of these films of romance as the ultimate goal of women’s lives” (9).

As for Merida’s mother, Elinor, she is “the woman behind the throne” (Bulajewski, online), and her uncompromising authority represents the embodiment of patriarchal values. She is powerful and intelligent, and men respect her because of these admirable qualities. Queen Elinor is the unacknowledged head of the realm and family, and she constantly attempts to instill a stereotypical idea of femininity by reminding Merida of what is appropriate for a princess and what is not. Thus, Elinor disapproves of Merida’s archery skills, her voracious appetite, and the fiery curly red hair that the girl has inherited from her father King Fergus. Food, weapons and hair will create a bitter conflict between the two women. Hair in particular becomes a distinctive element: Elinor’s straight dark-brown hair represents her royal duty and attention to bodily maintenance, in opposition to Merida’s rebellious mane of curly red hair. Her messy hair is strikingly different from the perfectly styled hair of her mother (and Disney princesses) in opposition to the stereotypical conceptions of feminine beauty, though it alludes to a look which is not uncommon in Scotland and Ireland. The symbolism of hair, therefore, serves as a fundamental means for Merida to reject the traditional idea of beauty and to prevent any association with her mother. It is then important to bear in mind that here the oppressor and the embodiment of the patriarchal society is not a man, but indeed Queen Elinor, also the embodiment of normative femininity. Elinor represents and embodies duties, oppressive restrictions and limitations, and both Merida and King Fergus seem to endure her patriarchal oppression.

Whereas the conflict between Merida and her mother is expressed in harsh terms, we see a strong connection between father and daughter: both have fiery red hair and a wild, fun-loving, independent spirit. Moreover, Merida’s beloved bow (the fundamental means in Merida’s rebellion and rejection of her arranged marriage) is a

gift from Fergus, though it must be noted that he plays no significant role in the quest to bring his wife to human form. *Brave* depicts the male characters as protective and proud, and constantly involved in an endless fight with the fearsome bear Mor'du. Merida finds out eventually that the legendary beast that threatens the kingdom was once a prince (the eldest of his clan, just like Merida) who asked the canny forest witch for a magic spell to get the "strength of ten men". However, he never managed to handle well the hyper-masculinity conferred by the enchantment and, therefore, he was overwhelmed and turned into a monster bear. According to Domínguez Morante, Mor'du is the incarnation of "the most ancient system based on instincts and the physical justification of male dominance" (62).

The trope of the transformation creates a parallelism between Mor'du and Elinor as it represents the horrible consequences of patriarchy. Thus, Merida is not the one punished for her rebelliousness, but Elinor for assimilating patriarchy and her own complicity with it too deeply. This is evident in the last fight, in which "Mor'du's target is not Elinor, but Merida, the one rebelling against the system" (61). About the possible meaning of the transformation, Laura Domínguez Morante says that "Elinor's characterization as a bear-mother that at the end turns to be a hero gives us a second insight of the actual meaning of Merida's narrative". According to this interpretation, "her transformation into a bear might symbolically externalize Merida's anxiety about her forced marriage –relatable to women's fears of rape and gender violence within the bounds of marriage" (60). Understood in this way, the she-bear –with her aggressiveness and strength– symbolizes the patriarchal system in which hyper-masculinity leads to terrible outcomes as much as Mor'du's. The dynamics described so far make his defeat, however, remarkable: after an epic battle, Elinor kills him and, in doing so, she does not rely on her strength, but on her human intelligence. The fact that Mor'du's human spirit thanks Elinor for his release is worthy of attention, since he recognizes that Elinor has saved him "from the curse of living under the burdens of traditional masculinities" (62). After fighting against patriarchal dominance, then, Elinor can finally regain her identity and return to her human shape.

In conclusion, the mother's transformation turns out to be fundamental to reunite the two women and to solve the conflicts existing between them. What is completely new in *Brave* is the notion of fate: this is not fixed but changeable; through her strong determination, Merida manages to change her own fate and to get what she is looking for in life: freedom of choice. Thus, it becomes clear how "fate plays a much bigger role in *Brave* than in other Disney/Pixar films because it is portrayed as something that the main character can control" (Stephens, 103). The princess archetype has changed, and this film can have a significant impact on a young audience's perception about self-determination and gender roles. Merida's final statement is extremely meaningful: "There are those who say fate is something beyond our command, that destiny is not our own. But I know better. Our fate lives within us. You only have to be brave enough to see it".

Works Cited

- Bulajewski, Mike. "A Review of Pixar's *Brave*". *Meta Reader*, 15 July 2012, <http://www.metareader.org/post/a-review-of-pixars-brave.html>
- Domínguez Morante, Laura. "Pixar's New Fairy Tale *Brave*: A Feminist Redefinition of the Hero Monomyth". *Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos* 19, 2015, 49-66.
- Dundes, Lauren. "The Upshot on Princess Merida in Disney/Pixar's *Brave*: Why the Tomboy Trajectory Is Off Target". *Humanities* 9.83, September 2020, 1-13.
- Ebrahim, Haseenah. "Are the 'Boys' at Pixar Afraid of Little Girls?" *Journal of Film and Video*, 66.3, 2014, 43-56.

- Morrison, Danielle. *Brave: A Feminist Perspective on the Disney Princess Movie*. BA Dissertation. State University of San Luis Obispo, 2014, <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/comssp/168/>
- Smolcic, Cassandra. "Pixar's Sexist Boys Club and My #MeToo Call for Radical Change". *Be Yourself*, 27 July 2018, <https://byrslf.co/pixars-sexist-boys-club-9d621567fdc9>
- Stein, Joel. "Pixar's Girl Story. An Exclusive First Look at the Megasuccessful Studio's First Film With a Female Protagonist". *Time*, 5 March 2012, <http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,2107515,00.html>
- Stephens, Jena. "Disney's Darlings: An Analysis of *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled*, *Brave* and the Changing Characterization of the Princess Archetype". *Interdisciplinary Humanities*, 31.3, Fall 2014, 95-107.
- Waxman Sharon and Jeff Sneider. "Is Pixar Sexist? Anger as Studio Replaces Female Director on *Brave*". *The Wrap*, 20 October 2010. <https://www.thewrap.com/pixar-sexist-blogsphere-angry-studio-replaces-woman-director-brave-21874/>

Silvia Gervasi

Frankenweenie (2012): Frankenstein as a Young Boy

CREDITS

Director: Tim Burton

Written by: John August; original idea by: Tim Burton. Based on the screenplay by Leonad Ripps for the 1984 short film

Producer: Allison Abbate, Tim Burton

Art direction: Tim Browning, Alexandra Walker

Editor: Chris Lebenzon, Mark Solomon

Music: Danny Elfman

Main performers (voices): Charlie Tahan (Victor Frankenstein), Catherine O'Hara (Mrs. Frankenstein/Weird Girl/Gym Teacher), Martin Short (Mr. Frankenstein/Mr. Burgemeister/Nassor), Martin Landau (Mr. Rzykruski), Atticus 'E' Shaffer (Edgar 'E' Gore), Winona Ryder (Elsa Van Helsing), Robert Capron (Bob), James Hiroyuki Liao (Toshiaki), Dee Bradley Baker (Persephone Van Helsing, Shelley/Were-Rat/ Colossus/Whisker)

Company: Tim Burton Productions, USA

Runtime: 1h 27'



REASONS TO SEE *Frankenweenie*

- It is an interesting take on Mary Shelley's original *Frankenstein*... with a somewhat problematic ending.
- It is a horror story for children, a sub-genre not too popular.
- Lovely Sparky and Victor's understandable love of his pet dog.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *Frankenweenie*

Frankenweenie (2012) is a stop-motion film directed and co-produced by Tim Burton. As the title reveals, it is directly and unashamedly inspired by Mary Shelley's timeless novel *Frankenstein* (1818). At the same time, *Frankenweenie* is a remake of one of Burton's oldest projects, the eponymous short film released in 1984. As a result, the plot draws heavily from its source material to tell a story about love, death, and resurrections, some of which turn out to be more successful than others. The film was released in the same year two other of Burton's projects saw the light, namely *Dark Shadows* (2012) and *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* (2012), although he was only involved in the latter as a producer. While the three Gothic films share a strange blend of dark tones and humorous situations, only *Frankenweenie* managed to achieve a generally positive reception, with an average rating of 7.5/10 on *Rotten Tomatoes*. The film was nominated for the BAFTA award to the Best Animated Film and composer Danny Elfman was awarded the Saturn to Best Music for his score.

The plot of *Frankenweenie* revolves around young Victor Frankenstein, here a thin, pale teenager whose two main interests in life are science and his dog Sparky. Victor lives with his parents in the quiet town of New Holland, a sort of placeless locus aesthetically close to the late 1950s American domestic imagery, yet conveniently timeless. Victor leads a fairly common life in New Holland: he goes to school, he plays fetch with Sparky and is generally a good son. Everything changes, however, when the science fair is announced. While Victor is eager to participate, his father, Edward, is worried that Victor might be a 'weird' kid, as he is not into sports. In order to convince his father to let him participate, Victor agrees to try and play a baseball match... which concludes with Sparky's tragic death after the dog chases a stray ball and is hit by a car. Overtaken by sadness, Victor focuses on the science fair and, inspired by his science teacher, Mr. Menace, he sets off to achieve the impossible: to bring Sparky back to life. With a great deal of electronics, oddly looking contraptions, and the power of a lightning storm, Victor manages to bring back Sparky. Soon, one of his classmates discovers Victor's secret and threatens to reveal the truth about Sparky to everyone else unless he is shown the formula for animal resurrection. This quickly gets out of hand when Victor's other classmates start to resurrect their old pets in a desperate attempt to win the science fair. Their pets, however, come back as horrible monsters, a disaster eventually stopped by Victor and Sparky. In the end, Sparky gives his new life to save Victor, though the dog is eventually resurrected a second time and dog and kid live, presumably, happily ever after. No real lesson about death is learned, then.

Although the events in the film are often portrayed in a humorous tone, it is important to remember that this is, after all, an animated movie for children based on a two-hundred year Gothic story that both defines and is defined by fear. Approached in their own context, the events depicted in *Frankenweenie* can be said to be horrible and horrifying: beloved pets come back from the dead in monstrous forms, terror grips the town of New Holland and a great deal of destruction ensues. As a horror film for children, *Frankenweenie* walks a very problematic line and negotiates several layers of meaning in order to reach a target audience whose concept and experience of fear differs greatly from that of adult audiences (Lester, 25). If the film manages to balance these elements successfully it is mainly for two reasons. First, the horrors on the screen are unequivocally supernatural in origin. They are engendered in and belong to the realm of the fantastic, that is to say, they exist at a safe distance where they can be harmlessly, yet excitingly, enjoyed. Second, Victor's centrality as a main character keeps things grounded. Presented within the frame of a conventional family, Victor is a clever child that uses his knowledge to fuel his problem-solving skills. While, in a way, he is responsible for the events of the film, he is also the one to fix the situation, and his endless love for Sparky makes him all the more relatable.

If Victor's centrality is key to the development of the story, this is because, as a character, he exists in opposition to many other characters that exist at the margins of the film in developmental terms. While Victor does embody a somewhat atypical yet common masculinity (he is smart, brave, and not at all interested in sports), he is still a character defined by his strengths and flaws. His classmates, however, are introduced to the viewer as unidimensional and simple, so much so that some of them don't even have a name of their own. Although stereotyping is not uncommon in children's films, *Frankenweenie's* depiction of racial minorities can stir some controversy, as it is through stories and narrations that children's own identities are shaped and their world views formed (Scalfi, 8). Hence, it doesn't come as a surprise that reviewer A.O. Scott poses the following, very legitimate question: "why did one of the only nonwhite residents of New Holland have to be an Asian boy named Toshiaki (James Hiroyuki Liao) with the exaggerated accent of a World War II movie villain?" (online). What in another film could be disregarded as an unfortunate decision or a momentary lapsus in

judgement, the truth is that Toshiaki's representation is, indeed, quite representative of the cast, as the film makes no attempt to develop or explain other characters such as Edgar 'E' Gore, a clear allusion to the archetypical hunchbacked lab assistant, or Weird Girl, who is, well, weird, and has a cat with eschatologically predictive powers.

There is, however, an even deeper issue within the film that exists at the furthest margins of representation. While most of the secondary characters are portrayed as stereotypical, they are still blessed with a modicum of agency and a certain degree of motivation: Toshiaki, Edgar, Bob, Nassor... all of them want to be the winners of the science fair... and all of them are male. As Scott points out "Why can't any girls compete in the science fair?" (online). The question is obviously a rhetorical one, as there is no law or rule forbidding anyone's participation in the fair. It is true, however, that none of the girls seem to be interested in science or the science fair. Although Weird Girl eventually partakes in the resurrection experiments, her participation feels more like an afterthought or a last-minute inclusion, as she is never seen showing any kind of explicit interest in any of Victor's experiments. Given how much of the plot and action the experiments take up, this only adds to the feeling of passivity that the girls of the film already convey, as theirs is an unclear agency that lacks focus.

To conclude, it would wise to echo Roger Ebert's words in relation to Burton's project: "This isn't one of Burton's best, but it has zealous energy. It might have been too macabre for kids in past, but kids these days, they've seen it all, and the charm of a boy and his dog retains its appeal". (online) The last sentence is particularly relevant, as it resonates with the topic of children's horror and exemplifies the subjectivity and construction of fear. Similarly, Victor's relationship with his pet dog is what drives the plot forward and what makes the character relatable. Although Sparky's second and final resurrection may feel sentimental and even detrimental to Victor's development as a character, since it comes moments after he finally accepts death as a part of life, this is only a minor setback in an otherwise enjoyable movie.

Works Cited

- Ebert, Roger. "Who's a Good Dead Doggie?". *Roger Ebert.com*, 3 October 2012, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/frankenweenie-2012>
- Lester, Catherine. "The Children's Horror Film". *Velvet Light Trap: A Critical Journal of Film & Television*, 78, 2016, 22-37.
- Moraes Scalfi, Grazielle. "Cine and Child: An Analysis of the Stereotypes Present in the Children's Film *Frankenweenie*". *PCST Network*, 2014. <https://pcst.co/archive/paper/1814>
- Scott, A. O. "It's Aliiiive And Wagging Its Tail!" *New York Times*, 4 May 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/05/movies/frankenweenie-tim-burtons-homage-to-horror-classics.html>

Rubén Campos Arjona

ParaNorman (2012): Do Not Be Afraid of What is Different

CREDITS

Directors: Chris Butler, Sam Fell
Written by: Chris Butler
Producers: Travis Knight; Arianne Sutner
Art direction: Phil Brotherton; Francesca Berlingieri Maxwell
Editor: Christopher Murrie
Music: : Jon Brion
Main performers (voices): Kodi Smit-McPhee (Norman Babcock), Tucker Albrizzi (Neil), Anna Kendrick (Courtney Babcock), Casey Affleck (Mitch), Christopher Mintz-Plasse (Alvin), Leslie Mann (Sandra Babcock), Jeff Garlin (Perry Babcock), Elaine Stritch (Grandma), Jodelle Ferland (Aggie), John Goodman (Mr. Prenderghast)
Company: Laika Entertainment, USA
Runtime: 1h 32'



REASONS TO SEE *ParaNorman*

- To meet Norman, a peculiar, strong, and independent protagonist.
- For the film's representation of non-normative and LGTBI+ characters.
- The movie has several messages, but the central one is a wish to break with stereotypes and avoid the rule of fear. This is a vital concept that should always be present and that is dealt with beautifully in this film.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *ParaNorman*

ParaNorman was released in 2012, following Studio Laika's brilliant film *Coraline* (2009). The studio would continue to make its name with films such as *The Boxtrolls* (2014) and *Kubo and the Two Strings* (2016). Chris Butler's and Sam Fell's original horror film for children *ParaNorman* received an Oscar nomination to Best Animated Feature in 2013, among other nominations to other awards, though the reasons that make this film appealing go far beyond any awards it may have received. It is a unique mixture of stop-motion and CGI techniques and a brilliant story about a boy and the dead.

Butler's original story centers around Norman, an eleven-year-old lonely boy that has the ability to see and talk to ghosts. These circumstances and his introvert qualities lead to Norman being considered 'abnormal'; both his family and his fellow students mock him for his queerness. One day, his outcast uncle Mr. Prenderghast confesses to Norman that he has the same ability to see the dead and warns him about the witch's curse that is coming soon to their small town, Blithe Hollow in Massachusetts. Norman will try to avoid this from happening by going to the graveyard in which the witch's victims were buried. He tries to appease her rage, but his efforts

are fruitless. At the same time but on the other side of town, Norman's teen sister Courtney realizes that her brother is missing, and asks Norman's friend Neil and his big brother Mitch to help her get him back. Once Norman is found, Courtney, Neil, Mitch, and former bully Alvin run from the cemetery to the town's archive, looking for the place in which the witch was supposedly buried. In the end, Norman manages to assuage the witch's rage, discovering that she was nothing more than a scared, unfairly treated girl, the victim of a witch-hunt in the late 17th century. He breaks the witch's curse so that both the former witch, Aggie Prenderghast, and her supposed victims, who came back as harmless zombies, can now rest in peace.

Fear is a key factor in the analysis of this Gothic film for children. Not only because it plays a major role in how the film develops, but also because it makes the viewers question their own beliefs and how they approach the world. *ParaNorman* is, at its core, a horror movie and even though its target are children, the topics it addresses are applicable and of interest to all ages. Explaining the narrative strategies of horror in studio Laika productions, a genre in which it specializes, Pérez-Guerrero and Forero-Serna describe how the horror genre allows Laika's films to explore "the youngsters' real fears" (24). However, it is more interesting to consider how these two authors view the figure of the monster as "an embodiment of social ills" (24), an embodiment that allows the writers of the film to introduce topics that can be considered taboo, and even issues that are very much related to the adult world. Indeed, *ParaNorman* deals with many issues that can be easily applied to our everyday life, even though zombies do not usually appear in it. Emotional abuse, fear of what is different, and the isolation of the ones considered to be different are three of the main issues tackled by this film. Unfortunately, to this day they also continue to be major problems in Western society.

The main subplot and conflict in the film revolves around Agatha, also aged eleven, a little girl that was unfairly accused of witchcraft, tried and sentenced centuries ago. The case is a clear reminder of the Salem witch trials (1692-93), in which many citizens were accused and executed under false charges of witchcraft. Labelled 'abnormal' by the inhabitants of the city, Agatha was accused of using witchcraft because of similar false charges, the injustice of the accusations forcing her to become the fearful, real witch haunting the village. Here we can already find the first most notable issue: though unfairly accused, Agatha becomes the stereotypical image of the evil hag. This representation is reinforced by the images that keep appearing in the film: the statue of the witch in the town, depicted as old and ugly; the town's myths about the witch's curse and her evil nature, and so on. This image is, of course, subverted later on when Norman realizes Agatha is not an ugly old lady but a lovely girl his age, but the film clearly plays with the viewer's expectations related to the concept of "witch". One of the secondary characters of the film, Salma, points this out beautifully during the class play rehearsal, when she questions why the witch always needs to be "a hideous old crow with a pointy hat and a broomstick", complaining that labelling her in that way is not historically accurate. The revelation that Agatha is a young girl confirms Salma's complaint, clearly meant to make the viewer question the validity of stereotypes. As Amy Biancolli states in her review, the movie makes a point of making the viewers understand the point of view of these "evil" creatures, so they will not feel misunderstood, even if they happen to be "ugly, dead, slow-moving, inarticulate and easily dismembered" (online). The deconstruction of stereotypes is, then, a major characteristic of *ParaNorman*, making us question the validity and credibility of our beliefs.

Agatha is not the only character to whom we can apply this idea of challenging stereotypes. Characters such as Neil, Mitch, and Courtney may seem mainly one-dimensional at first glance, but they all hold hidden depths that break with their assigned roles. Neil, who suffers as much bullying as Norman, is not even slightly

affected by the other children's opinions on him. He stands proudly, even giving his new friend a lesson by confidently stating that if Norman were "bigger and more stupid", he would probably also be a bully, thus expressing his pity on the bullies rather than his own victimization. Courtney, depicted as a stereotypical selfish and superficial teenager, finally leaves her qualms about her odd brother behind when she realizes that Norman is willing to fight for a town that has been constantly criticizing him. She is the first to stand by Norman when everyone turns against him. Finally, Mitch, depicted as the jock character, casually reveals his homosexuality at the end of the film, breaking any expectations about a possible relationship with Courtney, who spends most of the film batting her eyelashes at him. Especially in the cases of Mitch and Courtney, their gender plays a very important role in presenting their characterizations, as the writers trick the audience by initially showcasing the characters in the most stereotypical possible light, only to break all these preconceptions at the end.

The major defining point of the film, however, is the representation of Norman and Agatha. It is interesting to note how these two characters, sharing the same supernatural abilities, are rejected and ostracized by their communities in different ways. The difference lays mainly in the time they both live in, but there is also a gender factor that should be considered. On the one hand, Agatha is accused of witchcraft and executed, despite being so young; as discussed above, the town turns her into the stereotypical image of an evil sorceress. Year after year, she is silenced and put to sleep in a communal ritual so she will not create further problems to the other citizens, her voice never to be heard. On the other hand, Norman is a lonely boy that is constantly bullied and made fun of because of his character and his strange ability. Even though he is not executed, as the times have changed, the people around him silence him in a similar way to that of Agatha's silencing.

Furthermore, this silencing together with his other defining qualities could be read in a LGBTBI+ context. Gordon argues that Norman's ability to see ghosts, that is to say his queerness, can be read as a metaphor for homosexuality (1263). This would make Norman an outsider in a completely different way, but would tie in well with Agatha's own fate. In her time, she suffered from the fear and preconception against women, who at the time were the persons most susceptible of being accused of witchcraft. In his own time, queer Norman suffers the rejection and silencing often imposed upon the LGBTBI+ community, being unable to hide behind the barrier of stereotype as jock Mitch does in the film. In the end, both characters are forced to find their own similarities and find their voices thanks to each other, so they can finally manage to convey their feelings to the rest of their community. Thus, the message of the film seems to be a critique of American society's current preconceptions, and how much pain any discourse based on fear can create.

Overall, *ParaNorman* tackles many issues that transcend many barriers, so talking about an issue such as gender in it will inevitably lead to many of the other issues the film seems to be concerned about. As reviewer Myers points out, it is a "lot of stuff into a story about a boy who tries to save his town from a witch's curse" (online), but as he further adds the film manages to juggle all its topics incredibly well while still keeping its audience incredibly entertained. The children watching this film will hopefully pick one or two of the positive messages depicted while having a great time, and maybe one day that could make the difference when they are faced in real life with one of the realities portrayed in the film.

Works Cited

- Biancolli, Amy. "ParaNorman (review)". *SFGate*, 16 August 2012, <https://www.sfgate.com/movies/article/ParaNorman-review-Breathtaking-visuals-3793647.php>
- Gordon, Phillip. "Bullying, Suicide, and Social Ghosting in Recent LGBT Narratives". *Journal of Popular Culture* 6.6, December 2016, 1261–1279.
- Myers, Randy. "ParaNorman (review)". *The Mercury News*, 15 August 2012, <https://www.mercurynews.com/2012/08/15/review-ParaNorman/>
- Pérez-Guerrero, Ana. M. and Andrés Forero-Serna. "Between Reality and Fantasy: The Narrative Strategies of the Horror Genre in Productions by Laika Studios (2009-2015)". *Communication & Society*, 32.2, 2019, 13-27.

Cristina Espejo Navas

Wreck-It Ralph (2012): Unexpected Loves and Friendships

CREDITS

Directors: Rich Moore
Written by: Phil Johnston and Jennifer Lee; story by: Rich Moore, Phil Johnston and Jim Reardon.
Producer: Clark Spencer
Art direction: Ian Gooding
Editor: Tim Mertens
Music: Henry Jackman
Main performers (voices): John C. Reilly (Ralph), Sarah Silverman (Vanellope), Jack McBrayer (Felix), Jane Lynch (Calhoun), Alan Tudyk (King Candy)
Companies: Walt Disney Animation Studios, Walt Disney Pictures, USA
Runtime: 1h 41'



REASONS TO SEE *Wreck-It Ralph*

- It is a must-see film for gamers as some of the background characters are the protagonists of the first arcade games from the 80s and 90s, so well-known by not-so-young audiences.
- It is an opportunity to delve into the personality and feelings of characters which, as videogame avatars, were originally not meant to be so complex in design.
- The main characters are taken from a successful original 2D platform videogame designed by TobiKomi in 1982 (the vintage arcade game look was a marketing strategy).

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *Wreck-It Ralph*

Wreck-It Ralph (2012) was the first film produced by the new Walt Disney Animation Studios (one of Disney's film studios) to have a sequel with *Ralph Breaks the Internet* (2018). Featuring the characters from the original 1982 TobiKomi videogame *Fix It Felix Jr.*, the film won the Best Animation Feature prize at the 2013 edition of the Annie Awards. Rich Moore, who has also worked at *The Simpsons*, *Futurama* and Academy Award winner *Zootopia* (2016), signs here his directorial debut to expand the studio's successful list of films after *Lilo & Stitch* (2002), *Brother Bear* (2003), *Chicken Little* (2005) and *Tangled* (2010), to name but a few.

Tired of being socially ostracized, Ralph –the destructive bear-like stocky villain from an arcade game– decides to gate-crash the 30th anniversary party of its release, to which he has not been invited. The party is entirely centered on the figure of Fix-it-Felix, Ralph's antagonist in the videogame, a carpenter with a golden hammer able to

fix Ralph's wrecking of the building they share with quick hammer blows. Unwelcomed, Ralph leaves in search of a hero's medal that according to the Mayor of Niceland will prove that he can do more than just break things. Determined to 'go Turbo' (meaning jumping into another arcade game) in order to find the medal and gain the social recognition he so desperately claims, Ralph enters *Hero's Duty* to be later on expelled to *Sugar Rush* in a spaceship. The presence of a cybug unexpectedly taken from the previous arcade game poses the final threat in the movie. In *Sugar Rush*, Ralph meets car-race pilot Vanellope another ostracized character who suffers from a glitch, a spell put on her by King Candy. He eventually proves to be villain Turbo, the former protagonist of an old-fashioned racing game who decided to infiltrate *Sugar Rush* and modify the game's code to dethrone Princess Vanellope and occupy the throne. Joining forces as new best friends, Ralph and Vanellope defeat King Candy, and Ralph finally proves himself a hero.

Beyond the obvious lesson conveyed in the narrative –by which one must first accept oneself and love the way we are before claiming any respect or love from the rest– the film allows the audience to get to know the most remarkable protagonists of the first arcade and PC popular videogames. A therapy group frames the starting point for Ralph to unburden his worries and offers a first incursion into the villain-hero's hidden anxieties. There is a clear-cut message shared by all members in the room: "We can't change who we are" Pac-Man says, "and the sooner you accept that, the better off your game and your life will be". From the very beginning there is, then, apparently little room left for the characters to develop: the hero Zangief from the *Street Fighter* game has accepted the fact that he can't help keeping crushing skulls between his thighs. This leads Ralph to conclude this therapy group cannot help him cure his need for love and that he must resign himself to being an outcast. Ralph, however, distinguishes himself from the rest of the group for not fearing 'going Turbo' and breaks a tradition that has inevitably marked (as well as limited) the possibility for traditional villains to display any kind of affection. By leaving his own videogame, Ralph is also leaving the role of the villain which has for so long constrained his chances to gain social affection. Interestingly, this role is taken over by another character in another game –King Candy in *Sugar Rush*– for the narrative to advance.

There are four main characters in this film in charge of displaying the gender content (heterosexual, as it can be expected). Ralph and Felix respectively, represent two quasi-opposite kinds of hyper-stereotyped masculinities. Whitehead and Barret accept the fact that "it is evident that certain behaviors have come to characterize males –sexual and physical assertiveness, competitiveness, aggression" (19), a set of attributes that seems to have been taken to its extreme and incrustated in our subject of analysis. Frightening, bear-like, big, strong, stocky, and apparently dumb Ralph is designed in direct opposition to Felix, a short, crafty, lovable and intelligent carpenter who fixes all the damage caused by his co-protagonist, keeping Niceland and its inhabitants safe. The Nicelanders –contrary to what their place name hints at– have developed a zero-tolerance policy that has led them to keep violent Ralph away from any sort of social interaction beyond their responsibility to work in the arcade game, without which they would all be disconnected and sentenced to disappear. Yet Ralph strikes the audience by not fully conforming to his limited gender performance as depicted in the game; he now realizes how displaced he feels and his overwhelming condition as an outcast, which he has both endured for the last thirty years. It seems, therefore, not unreasonable to consider that Ralph must have been suffering a kind of depression which has eventually taken him to look for help in a therapy group. As J. J. Keppel states, "at times when the men feel depressed or panicked, they are conscious of their social, embodied behaviors in the gaze and presence of others. To avoid social objectification some men (...) perform the 'absence of emotion' in public spaces" (376).

The beastly and fearful destroyer goes one step further beyond solitude and displays his most secretly hidden emotions and weaknesses –initially in the private space of the therapy group– trespassing this way the walls of his gender constraints and letting the rest of the Nicelanders know about the unfairness of his situation.

The female characters also play a relevant role in the film's gender discourse. Sergeant Calhoun of *Hero's Duty* is maybe the clearest example. Overwhelmingly burdened with the most stereotyped masculine parameters –she is fearless, strong, authoritative, strict, and in charge of a full male professional battle squad– she embodies the representation of an alternative heterosexual femininity. Despite being physically characterized as a futuristic warrior and with all the expected sexy requirements for her to get the 'perfect male match' (in fact, she already got him in the past), this character is not constrained by the viewer's expectations and ends up finding her love in Felix, an average guy without most of Calhoun's 'masculine' attributes. This role reversal allows the female character to keep her position as protector and unburden little Felix from his 'duty'. This shift in the movie is so rooted in the narrative that it has a complete scene devoted to making even more clear that 'she' is the one 'wearing the breeches'. Trying to find Ralph in *Sugar Rush*, Calhoun and Felix fall on quicksand and discover that the living ropes above them can be reached if made to laugh. To do so, Felix tells Calhoun to repeatedly punch his face until he can get hold of one, which seems hardly funny. "If a burly male space marine was punching a small girl in the face, there would be outcry", reviewer David Addis complains (online) and it seems reasonable to think that such violence in this particular context –notice that these two characters end up in a personal relationship and even marry– needs a more plausible justification. Present-day movies should therefore be expected to treat potentially controversial issues like this unfunny violence more cautiously and join a trend by which more and more contemporary media productions "tackle (...) domestic violence in realistic and responsible ways, making visible issues that are frequently silenced" (Holliday, 201).

Vanellope is another character worth mentioning as her relationship with the protagonist opposes the traditional male/female bond by which friendship routinely becomes romance. Ralph and Vanellope's connection is of particular interest for it is strictly based on affection and solidarity and does not hint at any point –as children's movies have so traditionally done– at the possibility of romance between the two (it must also be taken into account that she appears to be a child). Their personal backgrounds and their expulsion from social life in their respective games has an undeniable effect on the terms on which these two characters have built their affection thus making Vanellope's eventual offer to keep Ralph in her castle a true proposal freed from double interpretations. Unexpectedly, there is a final gender transgression in this movie. After getting rid from Turbo's spell, Vanellope is transformed –through the most Disney-like magical whirlwind– into a princess in pink. Without any hint of hesitation, she decides to abdicate, ignore her royal responsibilities and set up a constitutional republican democracy, thus, allowing herself to live life without the constraints any princess –and more particularly a Disney one– must endure. The message successfully merges with Ralph's personal lesson and leaves the audience ready for the resolution.

It is true that the film might leave some –perhaps too many– contradictions unmentioned. Ralph does not really challenge the social constraints he has endured for so long but rather abides by the unfair mechanics of the system, and tries to gain respect and social recognition through the very same procedures available in the community: conquering the medal, becoming a hero. Likewise, the final twist in the story –Ralph's discovery of Vanellope's true identity– takes place as a pure coincidence and not as a process of reasoning, which leaves little room for the character to challenge future dilemmas. However, it would be equally unfair to ignore the fact that

Wreck-It Ralph victoriously manages to make the audience think about the importance of being oneself, being loved and valued for what one is, and the relevance of keeping one's self-esteem in good shape. That's the way to feel happy and make new friends.

Works Cited

- Addis, David. "Neglected Sexism – *Wreck-it Ralph's* Ruin (review)". *David Addis.com*, 6 March 2013, <https://www.davidaddis.com/?p=398>
- Holliday, Ruth. "Media and Popular Culture". *Introducing Gender and Women's Studies*, Diane Richardson and Victoria Robinson (eds.). Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. 198-207.
- Keppel, Jessica Jean. "Masculinities and Mental Health: Geographies of Hope 'Down Under'". *Masculinities and Place*, Andrew Gorman-Murray and Peter Hopkins (eds.). Ashgate, 2014, 370-384.
- Whitehead, Stephen M. and Barrett, Frank J. "The Sociology of Masculinity". *The Masculinities Reader*, Stephen M. Whitehead and Frank J. Barrett (eds.). Polity, 2004, 18-27.

Manu Díaz Inglés

Ralph Breaks the Internet (2018): Dealing with Toxicity

CREDITS

Directors: Phil Johnston, Rich Moore
Written by: Phil Johnston, Pamela Ribon; story by: Rich Moore, Phil Johnston, Jim Reardon, Pamela Ribon, Josie Trinidad
Producer: Clark Spencer
Art direction: Matthias Lechner
Editor: Jeremy Milton
Music: Henry Jackman
Main performers (voices): John C. Reilly (Ralph), Sarah Silverman (Vanellope), Gal Gadot (Shank), Taraji P. Henson (Yesss), Jack McBrayer (Felix), Jane Lynch (Calhoun), Alan Tudyk (KnowsMore), Alfred Molina (Double Dan), Ed O'Neil (Mr. Litwak)
Company: Walt Disney Animation Studios, Walt Disney Picture, USA
Runtime: 1h 52'



REASONS TO SEE *Ralph Breaks the Internet*

- It is a sequel of *Wreck-it Ralph* (2012), and it provides a lot of progression for the dynamic of the main characters' gender and friendship.
- It has a vast number of references to and cameos from modern pop culture.
- The core of the story is about learning how to have healthy friendships, something that the children whom the film is intended for can really benefit from.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *Ralph Breaks the Internet*

Ralph Breaks the Internet (2018) came out six years after *Wreck-it Ralph*, bringing the characters of the first film from the nostalgic setting of an old games arcade to the current world of online gaming. It was released during a generally prolific period in the history of Disney Animation during which they continued to stick to producing films in CGI, which were performing exceedingly well. *Ralph Breaks the Internet* was not an exception to that rule, grossing over \$500 million worldwide and being nominated for Best Animated Feature at the Academy Awards, the Golden Globe Awards, and the Critics' Choice Awards.

Six years after the events of *Wreck-it Ralph*, Ralph and Vanellope live the same routine every single day. Ralph is content with their life as best friends, but Vanellope yearns for some excitement, which Ralph tries to give her by altering the tracks of her game, *Sugar Rush*. This turns out to be a mistake, as the driving wheel needed to operate the arcade machine breaks and the owner of the games saloon decides to unplug the game. Trying to avoid becoming homeless, Vanellope and Ralph decide to venture into the internet to buy a new wheel off of eBay. However, they misunderstand

the bidding system of the website, spiking the price to \$27,001. It is up to them to amass the funds in 24 hours or they will lose the wheel, hence their home. They are offered next \$40,000 to steal a car from Shank, the main character from *Slaughter Race* –a game that car-racing pilot Vanellope falls in love with, as it is a brutal racing MMORPG with no tracks and an exciting level of unpredictability. Shank takes her car back, but she graciously directs them to Yesss, the head algorithm of BuzzTube (a stand-in for YouTube in the movie), who helps Ralph star in many viral videos to earn the money they need. He manages to make enough money, but Vanellope expresses her desire to stay in *Slaughter Race* instead of returning to *Sugar Rush*, which increases Ralph’s insecurities so much that he willingly releases a virus that targets insecure spots in *Slaughter Race*. The virus manages to escape into the internet, targeting Ralph’s insecurities about his friendship with Vanellope and creating a myriad of his clones that ‘break the internet’ until the combined efforts of Vanellope and Ralph manage to teach them that you cannot control your friends. In the end, Ralph returns to the arcade while Vanellope begins a life in her dream game. Even if they are apart, their friendship is stronger than ever.

When talking about *Ralph Breaks the Internet*, it is important to focus on its female characters and the way in which they are portrayed. Vanellope has always been a very solid character and the newly introduced Shank is confident, level-headed, and has a very genuine bond with her new friend. Both of these characters fall outside the stereotypically feminine Disney female character, having tastes and patterns of behavior that are often more often associated with men (such as their love for cars and high-risk racing). The first point of interest in terms of the female characters, however, is the most infamous scene in *Ralph Breaks the Internet*, which was used very heavily in the marketing of the film: a scene where Vanellope visits a site called ‘Oh My Disney’ and meets all the Disney princesses. Upon acknowledging that she is a princess like them (on the grounds of that people assume that “all of her problems got solved because a big strong man showed up”, in allusion to Ralph), the princesses give Vanellope the advice that by staring into a body of water and breaking into a song, as they have done, she will be able to find her dreams and what she truly wants in life.

There is an obvious feminist message in this scene: the filmmakers seem to be shining a light of self-awareness on the history of the Disney princesses, mocking the uncomfortable nature of their elaborate gowns by having them experience the bliss of wearing sweatpants, highlighting the overused tropes of the past (such as having been kidnapped or lacking a mother), but most importantly highlighting the misogyny by which it is always the men accompanying these princesses who get credit for solving all their problems. While there is nothing wrong with being self-aware about the mistakes of the past, the scene with the princesses seems shallow and disingenuous –it feels as if the scene exists for the novelty of seeing all the Disney princesses together and for the profit of advertising that reunion to promote the film, and not because of the inherent feminist message of rejecting the troubled past of the Disney princesses and their storylines. In “*Ralph Breaks Through Gender Barrier With Strong Women Characters*”, Jonathan Landrum claims that “the studio is taking ‘girl power’ a step further as directors Phil Johnston and Rich Moore wanted to incorporate more ‘strong and complicated’ female characters” (online), which might be true when it comes to the original female characters of the film, though the ‘girl power’ moments concerning the Disney princesses do not feel genuine at all. There is an additional scene with the princesses in the climax of the film, where they don their comfortable clothes to rescue Ralph from harm as if he were a damsel in distress, putting him in a Snow White dress and laying him on a bed to mimic that very princess (or, possibly, Sleeping Beauty as well) in a joking manner. Asserting ‘girl power’ through rescuing a ‘big strong man’ by putting him in a princess dress feels like an ill-intended joke outside the realm of

equality which, combined with the heavy marketing of the princesses whose role in the film is arguably superfluous, makes the feminist message they are supposedly trying to put forth fall flat. As Tim Grierson puts it in his review, “the scenes hint at what feels a little lazy about this sequel. Poking fun at Disney franchises while parading them around shamelessly isn’t nearly as edgy or subversive as the filmmakers think” (online).

Despite its failures with the cameos of the Disney princesses, where *Ralph Breaks the Internet* really triumphs is with the character of Vanellope von Schweetz and her relationships in this sequel. The core of the *Ralph* duology has always been the friendship between Ralph and Vanellope, but the sequel focuses on the way in which this friendship has become toxic. Ralph and Vanellope are shown to be drastically different people: Ralph loves routine, he is content with his life as it is and wants no change; Vanellope, in turn, wants change, progression and excitement. He loathes the violent environment of *Slaughter Race*, while she adores it. He is, as the film puts it, “clingy” and “needy” and terribly insecure. He cannot handle the idea that his best friend and he are fundamentally different people that want different things out of life. Ralph loves Vanellope so he wants to be with her every day, but even if she loves him, she is the one dissatisfied with her life and that is why she makes her choice to live in *Slaughter Race*. In this instance, Shank is seen as a competitor by Ralph because she and Vanellope have much in common, and she is a character that lacks the insecurities that Ralph has. Shank’s emotional maturity allows her to provide the healthy platonic support that Vanellope needs; this is in stark contrast to Ralph, who betrays Vanellope and sabotages her dream of living in *Slaughter Race* in a desperate attempt to keep her by his side.

While the film (and, subsequently, Vanellope herself) forgives and forgets this betrayal so quickly that it feels a bit unnatural, the positive aspects that the resolution of the film brings still remain. In “Toxic Masculinity Is the Bad Guy in *Ralph Breaks The Internet*” film critic Scott Tobias claims that “The opposing trajectories of Ralph and Vanellope’s friendship, fueled by their mutual insecurities and hurt, gives *Ralph Breaks the Internet* the little bit of heart it needs to keep from becoming mere product” (online), which I wholeheartedly agree with. Ralph is a character that has become obsessed with his best friend, but he is able to recognize his own toxicity and work to tame it. The representation of platonic male/female friendships with no romantic implications whatsoever is a rare thing in pop culture, but *Ralph Breaks the Internet* portrays such a friendship as its center and even addresses a real issue that can often take a backseat in Disney films –people can easily develop toxic, controlling or overly dependent dynamics in their friendships, especially in the case of a ‘big strong man’ that has the instincts of a protector mingled with a huge inferiority complex. Such a situation is unfortunate but natural, and the message of admitting one’s wrongs and letting your friends be their own people is very relevant to the children that this film is intended for.

In conclusion, *Ralph Breaks the Internet* has a very big focus on its female characters. Although the execution of the inclusion of the Disney princess cameos is questionable, the film knows its original characters and their relationships well, and their portrayal is crafted with care.

Works Cited

- Grierson, Tim. “*Ralph Breaks the Internet: Review*”. *Screen Daily*, 15 November 2018, <https://www.screendaily.com/reviews/ralph-breaks-the-internet-review/5134416.article>
- Landrum, Jonathan. “*Ralph Breaks Through Gender Barrier With Strong Women Characters*”. *Shoot*, 20 November 2018,

<https://www.npr.org/2018/11/21/669240038/toxic-masculinity-is-the-bad-guy-in-ralph-breaks-the-internet?t=1607540872195>

Tobias, Scott. "Toxic Masculinity Is the Bad Guy in *Ralph Breaks The Internet*". *NPR*, 21 November 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/11/21/669240038/toxic-masculinity-is-the-bad-guy-in-ralph-breaks-the-internet?t=1607540872195>

Maria Guallar Comas

Frozen (2013): Rewriting the Conventional Act of True Love

CREDITS

Directors: Chris Buck, Jennifer Lee
Written by: Jennifer Lee; story by: Chris Buck, Jennifer Lee, Shane Morris. Inspired by the fairy tale “The Snow Queen” (1844), by Hans Christian Andersen
Producer: Peter Del Vecho
Art direction: Michael Giaimo
Editor: Jeff Draheim
Music: Kristen Anderson-Lopez, Christophe Beck, Robert Lopez
Main performers (voices): Idina Menzel (Elsa), Kristen Bell (Anna), Jonathan Groff (Kristoff), Josh Gad (Olaf), Santino Fontana (Hans), Alan Tudyk (Duke), Ciarán Hinds (Granpabbie), Chris Williams (Oaken)
Companies: Walt Disney Animation Studios, Walt Disney Pictures, USA
Runtime: 1h 42’



REASONS TO SEE *Frozen*

- Both critics and the general audience tend to agree that it is one of Disney's greatest hits from the 2010s.
- It is one of the few Disney princess films that have family and, more concretely, sisterly love, at the center of its plot. Even though romance is definitely there, *Frozen* transcends the traditional romantic plot and focuses on the relationship of two sisters, Princesses Elsa and Anna.
- The beautiful songs and musical score, composed and performed by very famous artists from the musical theatre world.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *Frozen*

Frozen (2013) is undoubtedly one of Disney's greatest recent hits. Released only a year after Alan F. Horn became the Chairman of the Walt Disney Studios, *Frozen* had a highly successful awards' season, with a total number of eighty-one wins that included two Oscars, one for Best Animated Feature Film and another for Best Achievement in Music Written for Motion Pictures (for the song hit “Let It Go” by husband-and-wife team Kristen Anderson-Lopez and Robert Lopez). Furthermore, *Frozen* also amassed an incredible popularity among the youngest generations, especially little girls, that is still evident nowadays. In terms of economic success, *Frozen* is the third highest-grossing animated film in history, only surpassed by its sequel, *Frozen II* (2019), and the photorealistic remake of *The Lion King* (2019). On the other hand, it must also be noted that this is the first animated Disney film to be co-

directed by a woman, Jennifer Lee, who was also in charge of the movie script and is Walt Disney's Animation Studios' current Chief Creative Officer.

Frozen is loosely based on Hans Christian Andersen's fairytale "Snedronningen" or "The Snow Queen" (1844), one of Andersen's most highly acclaimed works. Even though the film's plot differs significantly from the original fairy tale, Hans, Kristoff, Anna, and Sven were named like this as a homage to the Danish author. In contrast to Disney's adaptation, Andersen's protagonists are not two sisters, but a boy and a girl called Kay and Gerda. In the story, Kay is affected by a fragment of a hobgoblin's magic mirror that freezes people's hearts and makes them only see ugliness in things. After that, the Snow Queen captures him and Gerda begins a long journey to get her friend back, just as Anna does in order to find her sister. In contrast, in the film Elsa has the power to control ice, which, when ruled by Elsa's fear, can freeze her whole kingdom and turn people into ice statues. She is not, however, a villain, but a victim of her condition.

After child princess Elsa accidentally injures her younger sister Anna while playing with the ice-controlling powers she was born with, the King decides to limit Elsa's contact with the world so she can learn to control herself without harming anyone. Because of this decision, both Anna and Elsa grow up in isolation from each other. The years go by and, after their parents drown in a sea storm, Elsa becomes the new Queen of Arendelle. Her coronation marks a crucial day in the lives of the two sisters, because for the first time ever the palace doors are open again. Anna longs for company and, when she meets the handsome prince of the Southern Isles, Hans, she inevitably falls for his charms and accepts his marriage proposal on the spot. However, this triggers an argument between Anna and Elsa, whose magic is unleashed. Her powers, fueled by Elsa's fear, provoke a snowstorm that covers the whole kingdom. Elsa flees the castle but Anna decides to go after her to make amends and put an end to the eternal winter. Along the way she meets the loveable iceman Kristoff, his reindeer Sven, and Olaf, a living snowman which Elsa has created. Anna finds Elsa but she is still fearful of her powers and accidentally freezes Anna's heart. The only way to reverse this kind of magic is with an act of true love, so Anna turns to Hans for a kiss. However, Hans is revealed to be the villain and leaves Anna to die. After that, Hans attempts to kill Elsa, but Anna sacrifices herself to save her and stops his sword just as she becomes an ice statue. This act of love saves Anna and shows Elsa that sisterly love is the answer to controlling her powers.

Although *Frozen* has been highly acclaimed for presenting in Elsa a powerful heroine whose story is not linked to any romantic relationship, some critical approaches question to which extent the film really challenges gender stereotypes. Defending the latter point of view, Madeline Streiff and Lauren Dundes argue that, even though presenting a strong, attractive female that is happy with having no partner by her side should definitely be praised, "Elsa's power appears to both substitute for romance and deter male suitors who risk emasculation in having a love interest who is powerful" (1). Both the fairy tale and the Disney filmic traditions tend to present characters with powers as solitary creatures, outcasts that do not fit in their society or, by default, as the villain of the story. *Snow White's* Evil Queen Maleficent or the more recent Mama Odie from *The Princess and The Frog* (2009) could be good examples of this tendency (though Maleficent has been rewritten as a victim in the 2014 film and its sequel).

Interestingly, in the production's first stages Elsa was meant to continue this trope and be the villain. In contrast to the final version, Elsa was supposed to be a middle-aged woman who had been stood up at the altar and, as a consequence of this, froze her heart so as not to be hurt again (sounding like Miss Havisham in Dickens's *Great Expectations*). The final portrayal of Elsa, then, seems to move away from the traditional demonization of powerful women. Furthermore, scholar Michelle Resene asserts that, in

the final version, Elsa's powers could be even interpreted as encoded disability. Taking into account Moritz Fink's statement that in animation disability is not so much represented as a "deficiency or flaw but rather [as something that] contributes to the destabilization of social hierarchies" (in Resene 255), Resene claims that one can establish a parallelism between the stigma surrounding Elsa's magical abilities and the stigma placed on disabilities in our society. Nevertheless, I believe there is not enough proof to assert that there is a general stigma or rejection of magic in Arendelle. The way I see it, the people of Arendelle are not scared of her Queen because she has powers, but because she has proved that she can be potentially harmful. On the other hand, the King's personal decision to isolate Elsa out of fear and, in turn, Anna, is what triggers Elsa's self-rejection and her power's growing danger. In my opinion, this poor parental decision causes Elsa's abilities to become a potential disability, for, as it can be seen at the end of the film once she regains control over her powers, she does not fight her magic but her long-imposed fear and belief that she is a monster, a freak.

Elsa's journey is one of self-discovery and self-acceptance. In contrast to Anna, who longs for meaningful relationships after being kept from the world for so long, Elsa "must learn not to be afraid of herself and accept her magic as a gift" (Llompart and Brugué 104) before even considering letting her sister back into her life. However, part of *Frozen's* audience has seen a potential to extrapolate "this celebration of being special and different from everyone else", as Llompart and Brugué claim, "to non-normative sexualities and gender identities" (104). Furthermore, whereas Streiff and Dundes's read Elsa as a character with no sexual interest in men, some fans have interpreted this "not as a suggestion that power and heterosexual romance are incompatible" and, thus, a reinforcement of gender stereotypes, "but as a sign of [sexual] queerness" (104). While this theory is as valid as any other, one must note that the film offers no hint at all about Elsa's sexuality. Furthermore, the way I see it, to reduce Elsa's quest for self-love and self-acceptance to a possible 'sexual outing' as a queer, specifically lesbian woman, completely diminishes the psychological complexity of Elsa's personal growth.

In terms of reviews, critics generally praise that, even though the characters are not so revolutionary or different from Disney's tradition in their physical appearance, as Stephen Holden asserts, they are "a little more psychologically complex than their forerunners" (online). For example, although Elsa and Anna are not at all the first Disney princesses to be confined to a lonely space, their story is one of the few which actually shows evidence of the consequences of isolation and self-deprecation on their mental health. From young Anna's begging for company in the song "Do You Want to Build a Snowman?" to Elsa's lament that the only way not to be a monster is to be alone in the reprise of "For the First Time in Forever", *Frozen* does explore psychological trauma in a way Disney had never done before.

Moreover, Donald Clarke also praises the complexity of the film's unexpected villain, Prince Hans. According to Clarke, "this is one of the very few Disney animations that does not employ a full-on demonic villain", which "adds a new dimension to a genre that more usually thrives on familiarity and convention" (online). Hans's presence in the film not only allows the plot to mock the traditional 'love-at-first-sight' trope of fairy tales, but also has the potential to teach young generations that the first love is usually not 'the one'. In this aspect, *Frozen* subverts the traditional Disney romantic plot because, on the one hand, it attaches to its protagonist Elsa no romantic interest and, on the other hand, it allows Anna to enjoy two romantic relationships in the same film. Furthermore, the film also rewrites the conventional act of true love by making it transcend sexuality. What saves Anna from becoming an ice statue is not a romantic kiss, but her own love for her sister and Elsa's for her. Anna's self-sacrificing act, therefore, leads to both her sister's and her own salvation. As Kelly West argues,

“Anna’s heroic act sends a powerful message about love, as it demonstrates sacrifice and the kind of unconditional ‘true love’ that can exist between sisters. The effect of her choice resonates with Elsa, who then figures out how to reverse what she’s done” (online).

In conclusion, *Frozen* takes an important step forward in subverting Disney’s own conventions by not only putting sisterhood at the center of the story, but also, through Elsa and Anna, transcending sexuality and the trope of the first love as one’s true love.

Works Cited

- Clarke, Donald. “Film Review: *Frozen*”, *The Irish Times*, 6 December 2013, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/film/film-review-frozen-1.1617850>
- Fink, Moritz. “People Who Look Like Things: Representations of Disability in *The Simpsons*”. *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, 7.3, 2013, 255-270
- Holden, Stephen. “From the Heat of Royal Passion, Poof! It’s Permafrost”. *The New York Times*, 26 November 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/27/movies/disneys-frozen-a-makeover-of-the-snow-queen.html>
- Llompert, Auba and Lydia Brugué. “The Snow Queer? Female Characterization in Walt Disney’s *Frozen*”. *Adaptation*, 13.1, 2020, 98-112.
- Streiff, Madeline; Dundes, Lauren. “Frozen in Time: How Disney Gender-Stereotypes Its Most Powerful Princess”. *Social Sciences*, 6.38, 2017, 1-10.
- West, Kelly. “How Disney’s *Frozen* Captures the Reality of True Love”. *Cinema Blend*, 1 December 2013, <https://www.cinemablend.com/new/How-Disney-Frozen-Captures-Reality-True-Love-40517.html>

Naiara López Alcázar

Frozen II (2019): Doing 'The Next Right Thing'

CREDITS

Directors: Chris Buck, Jennifer Lee
Written by: Jennifer Lee; story by: Jennifer Lee, Chris Buck, Mark Smith, Kristen Anderson-Lopez, Robert Lopez. Inspired by the fairy tale "The Snow Queen" (1844), by Hans Christian Andersen
Producer: Peter Del Vecho
Art direction: David Womersley, Tawhid Rike Zaman
Editor: Jeff Draheim
Music: Christophe Beck
Main performers (voices): Kristen Bell (Anna), Idina Menzel (Elsa), Jonathan Groff (Kristoff), Josh Gad (Olaf), Sterling K. Brown (Mattias), Evan Rachel Wood (Iduna), Alfred Molina (Agnarr)
Companies: Walt Disney Animation Studios, Walt Disney Pictures, USA
Runtime: 1h 43'



REASONS TO SEE *Frozen II*

- It is a heartwarming story about sisterhood yet again, like *Frozen*, and it deals with important real-life issues such as self-knowledge.
- It provides an explanation for Elsa's powers and gives more information about the Nordic winter world in which the story takes place.
- Like *Frozen*, the film has great songs performed by incredibly talented, well-known singers, such as Broadway star Idina Menzel (as Elsa).

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *Frozen II*

Frozen II (2019) is the sequel to the international phenomenon *Frozen* (2013). Preceded in Disney's history by the remake of *The Lion King* (2019), *Frozen II* has become the tenth highest-grossing film of all time (as of writing, December 2020). In 2020, *Frozen II* was nominated to the Academy Award for Best Achievement in Music Written for Motion Pictures for its original song "Into the Unknown", only losing to *Rocketman*'s "I'm Gonna Love Me Again". The film also received two Golden Globe nominations –Best Animated Motion Picture and Best Original Song again for "Into the Unknown"– and a BAFTA nomination for Best Animated Feature Film.

As it has been previously mentioned in the analysis of *Frozen*, the inspiration for the story and the characters was drawn from Hans Christian Andersen's "The Snow Queen" (1844). Furthermore, although the franchise is set in the fictional kingdom of Arendelle, *Frozen* is heavily inspired by actual Scandinavian folklore, something that can be seen more clearly in its sequel, which introduces a tribe inspired by the Sámi people –the indigenous group that lives in Northern Europe. Disney even went as far as

signing a contract with representatives of the Sámi, promising to present a respectful portrayal of their culture (Fouche).

Frozen II begins with a flashback to the time when Anna and Elsa were children and their parents told them the story of the Northuldra, a tribe that lived in the Enchanted Forest and with which Arendelle had established a treaty by building a dam in their land. King Agnarr explains how the Northuldrans betrayed Arendelle and attacked them, enraging the spirits of the elements and trapping the forest under a dense fog. After a flash-forward to three years after the events of the first film, we see the kingdom of Arendelle celebrating the arrival of autumn as Elsa keeps hearing a sweet female singing voice which seems to call her. Trying to follow that voice, Elsa ends up unleashing the elemental spirits, which drive the people of Arendelle out of their city. It is up to Elsa, Anna, Olaf, Kristoff, and Sven to follow the mysterious voice to the Enchanted Forest and discover the truth about what happened there, in order to appease the spirits. In their journey, Anna and Elsa also discover the truth about their parents' past and the reason behind Elsa's powers. In the end Elsa needs to make a decision about which world she really belongs to.

One of the main themes in both *Frozen* and *Frozen II* is sisterhood, and, so, the relationship between Anna and Elsa. Although it is clear that both sisters now have a healthy relationship and would do anything for each other, the film does a good job of portraying a realistic sisterly relationship in which there are still issues under the surface after the events of the first film. Elsa's struggles to trust Anna –or anyone else– are a fair example of this; while Anna has a blind confidence in her sister, following her in a quest guided by a voice only Elsa can hear, Elsa herself does not trust Anna enough to tell her what has been troubling her from the beginning. Elsa's lack of faith in Anna is deeply rooted in the fact that there is a clear power imbalance between the sisters; whereas Elsa has magical abilities, Anna does not, and although Anna never once shows jealousy or makes Elsa feel guilty for being powerful, this imbalance is enough to create a rift between them. This becomes clear after they both find their parents' wrecked ship, when Elsa uses her powers to send away Anna and Olaf, in order to resume the quest alone. Although many may argue that she does this because she wants to ensure her younger sister's safety, it is evident that Elsa has developed a feeling of superiority over Anna. This is somehow resolved at the end of the film, as Elsa abdicates in favor of Anna, after realizing that her younger sister is better fit to rule Arendelle than herself –although one must wonder whether Elsa is not really disposing of a throne that she did not want in the first place, therefore using her sister as a pawn. In any case, some reviewers, like Emilia Mullori (online), find this breach between the sisters a positive aspect of their relationship; a step forward from co-dependency to independence.

Despite this power imbalance, the relationship between Anna and Elsa is one of the most attractive elements of the film, not only because sisterly love is usually overlooked in cinema, but because it introduces the revolutionary idea that love between siblings is more significant than romantic love. Anna's line, "I believe in you, Elsa, more than anyone or anything", might be looked over by most spectators, but it contains great meaning; Anna, who has a love interest in the film, believes in her sister more than in *anyone else*, boyfriend Kristoff included. Therefore, Anna is telling Elsa (and the audience) that her sister will always come first, even before her significant other. In fact, there are many other instances in *Frozen II* in which Anna and Elsa's relationship is given the importance and emphasis that is usually given to romantic relationships in films, the most clear example being Anna's desperate remark, "when are you going to see yourself the way I see you?" This is a classic line often used in romantic scenes, in which usually the male love interest assures the female protagonist of her beauty. However, when placed in the context of sisterhood, the expression is

given a completely different, more powerful meaning celebrating a different kind of love.

Romantic relationships, although not as prominent as family ones, are still present in the film; in fact, there is a subplot in which Kristoff tries and fails multiple times to propose to Anna. These scenes are clearly introduced for comic relief, but there is a certain melancholy in Kristoff's struggles to hold Anna's attention. At one point in the film, when Kristoff is about to try to propose for the third time, he realizes that Anna has left the forest with Elsa, and that he and Sven have been left alone. In his hopelessness, Kristoff (voiced by Jonathan Groff) sings "Lost in the Woods", a song in which he expresses his heartache, as he feels that he is not a priority in Anna's life; "Again you're gone/ off on a different path than mine/ I'm left behind wondering if I should follow". Kristoff feels irrelevant in Anna's life because he knows Anna will always put her sister (and their kingdom) first, something that is not usually encouraged in Disney films, in which the princess is supposed to view marriage as the most important aspect of her life. In the end, Kristoff accepts the fact that he will never be Anna's first priority, and they get engaged. The fact that the marriage proposal is not at all unexpected, but had been a subplot from the beginning is another example of how *Frozen II* steers away from traditional Disney tropes, in which marriage is used for no other purpose than to signify the princess' happily-ever-after.

The matter of Elsa's sexuality is a debate that has been going on since the first film was released in 2013, as a large part of the audience expressed their hopes of having found a lesbian Disney protagonist –Elsa's lack of romantic interest having been taken as a statement of her queerness. After announcing *Frozen II*, Disney started receiving requests to make Elsa's homosexuality canonical and to give her a female love interest; however, Dundes argues, "with Disney prioritizing profit, Elsa's sexuality was undoubtedly considered in terms of its monetary consequences, making an apolitical stance seem safest financially" (8). Although Disney decided not to assign to Elsa a significant other in the film, Dundes contends that Nokk –that is, Elsa's horse water-spirit– can be considered a surrogate love interest. Accordingly, *Frozen II* is just an example of a fictional subgenre in which girls form emotional and physical bonds with horses, exerting their control and dominance over them (the originator of this trend was the popular novel *Black Beauty* by Anna Sewell (1877)).

The portrayal of women in positions of power is also one of the elements that separates *Frozen* and *Frozen II* from other Disney films; except for the flashbacks in which King Agnarr and his own father appear, all positions of power are occupied by female characters –whether it be actual political power, magical power, or simply power over the narrative. An example of the latter would be Iduna, Anna and Elsa's mother, who despite not being a central character, is the voice that guides the sisters in their quest, which gives her a certain power over the narrative. A more evident example of powerful women are, of course, Anna and Elsa; not only are they the rightful rulers of Arendelle (in the absence of a male heir), but they are the embodiment of the fifth spirit, the bridge between Arendelle and the Enchanted Forest. Furthermore, Yelena, the leader of the Northuldrans, is, if not a woman of color, at least a female character from an ethnic minority (Sámi), something that is not often seen in Disney films. Some argue, however, that the portrayal of this ethnic minority fell into the harmful stereotype of "the noble savage" and that the film provides an overall negative representation of indigenous peoples (Kain, online).

Despite all the criticisms, *Frozen II* received a great number of positive reviews for its depiction of real-life issues which are present throughout the film –such as Anna and Kristoff's relationship issues, Anna's struggles with grief and crippling depression (portrayed in her song "The Next Right Thing"), and the underlying concern of finding love and staying oneself in a world that is changing too fast– all of which issues the

audience can feel identified with (Martens, 2019). In the words of reviewer Nell Minow, “*Frozen II* is destined to be one of those movies children will want to see dozens of times. It will reward repeat viewings with both its reassuring messages about responding to change with courage and curiosity, and its challenge to understand the mistakes of the past so we can begin to work on ‘the next right thing’ together” (online). Hopefully, this is indeed the case.

Works Cited

- Dundes, Lauren. “Elsa as Horse Whisperer in Disney’s *Frozen 2*: Opportunity ‘Nokk’s’ to Quash Gender Stereotypes”. *Social Sciences* 9.86, May 2020, 1-11.
- Fouche, Gwladys. “Disney’s *Frozen 2* Thrills Sámi People in Northern Europe”. *Reuters*, 29 November 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-film-frozen-2-norway-sami-idUSKBN1Y318H>
- Kain, Erik. “*Frozen 2* Review: The 5 Biggest Problems with Disney’s Disappointing Sequel”. *Forbes*, 2 December 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/erikkain/2019/12/02/the-5-biggest-problems-with-frozen-2/?sh=5d31d9093261>
- Martens, Todd. “How *Frozen 2* Gets More Adult and More Political With Each Viewing”. *Los Angeles Times*, 2 December 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2019-12-02/frozen-2-climate-change-mental-health>
- Minow, Nell. “*Frozen II*”. *Roger Ebert.com*, 22 November 2019, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/frozen-ii-movie-review-2019>
- Mullori, Emilia. “*Frozen 2*: Growing Up, Sisterhood, and Woman Power – Among Other Themes”. *Medium*, 26 November 2019, <https://medium.com/@emiliamullori/frozen-2-growing-up-sisterhood-and-woman-power-among-other-themes-cecfce568c6f>

Raquel Prieto Xufré

Big Hero 6 (2014): The Future of Identity

CREDITS

Director: Don Hall and Chris Williams
Written by: Jordan Roberts, Robert Bird, Daniel Gerson. Based on the Marvel comics by Man of Action (Steven T. Seagle, Duncan Rouleau)
Producers: Roy Conli, Kristina Reed
Art direction: Scott Watanabe
Editor: Tim Merten
Music: Henry Jackman
Main performers (voices): Ryan Potter (Hiro), Scott Adsit (Baymax), Jamie Chung (Go Go), TJ Miller (Fred), Daniel Henry (Tadashi), Damon Wayans Jr. (Wasabi)
Company: Walt Disney Animation Studios, Walt Disney Studios, FortyFour Productions, USA
Runtime: 1h 42'



REASONS TO SEE *Big Hero 6*

- To see and enjoy San Fransokyo, the beautiful representation of a cultural blend between San Francisco and Tokyo.
- To see a really positive, open-minded representation of the future of gender roles.
- To see a unique super-team form around the power of science and education.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *Big Hero 6*

When building a vision of the future, filmmakers have to make an incredible amount of choices about what the world represents, what it looks like, and what it stands for. Notably, for an industry that deals in dreams, Hollywood seems to be surprisingly attached to dreary grey dystopias, from future Earths that have been decimated by global warming or pollution like in *Wall-E*, to shiny, metallic metropolises that feature an underbelly of crime and corruption like in *Minority Report*. Some are truly creative, such as *Her*, *Blade Runner*, *Cloud Atlas*, or *Akira*. Very few though, are truly optimistic about the future, not just in the way they imagine cities or technology, but in the way they imagine people. 2014's animated science fiction superhero gem *Big Hero 6* is a beautiful and praiseworthy exception to these negative visions of humanity. Loosely based on a Marvel comic series of the same title by Steven T. Seagle and Duncan Rouleau, the film won the 2015 Oscar for Best Animated Feature, and has been largely praised for, among other things, its depiction of the futuristic fictional city of San Fransokyo. The vibrant cultural blend of San Francisco and Tokyo is stunningly rendered, and features as the backdrop to a heartwarming story about grief, potential, and friendship. The main cast of characters is quite clearly purposely diverse both in

race and gender as well as personality. For a forward thinking, progressive audience, something feels shockingly right about this film. The beauty lies not just in the fact that this future has been rendered with optimism and diversity, it's that it isn't what the movie is about.

Big Hero 6 tells the story of Hiro Hamada, a robotics prodigy who uses his talents for bot fighting. After his older brother Tadashi convinces him to apply to the elite university program he himself is attending, Hiro enters a tech showcase and impresses with his microbots. Tragically, a fire is started after the competition, Tadashi is killed in the resulting explosion, and Hiro's microbots are stolen. Hiro locks himself in his room, processing his grief, until he accidentally awakens Tadashi's medical bot project named Baymax. The cuddly assistant follows the trail of a stray microbot, uncovering a sinister plot to manufacture more of Hiro's invention. Hiro then begins to upgrade Baymax into a combat robot in an attempt to defeat the tech CEO Krei that he believes is responsible for the disaster. Almost killed by a masked villain who is using the microbots, Hiro and Baymax are rescued by his university friends and narrowly escape. Deciding to team up and find the thief, Hiro and his friends develop and alter their tech projects to turn themselves into a superhero team. The team track down the microbots and discover that their professor Callaghan is the masked villain, jaded over the death of his daughter. He blames Krei, whose teleportation tech made his daughter disappear, and so Callaghan tries to destroy all of Krei Tech. Hiro and his friends work together to stop Callaghan's destructive plans. Entering one of his portals to save the city, Hiro and Baymax find Callaghan's daughter still alive and bring her back, but Baymax is lost in the ether. Later discovering that Baymax has saved his chip, Hiro recovers and rebuilds the robot. The group ends the film as a fully-fledged superhero team.

Nothing in that summary has anything to do with identity. The characters, and the future, are defined by a blended, open culture. The only thing that explicitly unites them is their talent for science and their dedication to education, something the future society clearly values. And yet, the cast features several strong females, characters of Asian, African, Latin, and Anglo descent, and personalities that do not adhere to conventional gender norms. The men are emotionally supportive and sometimes vulnerable, and the women are tough and sometimes disagreeable. As with any movie bringing together a team, there isn't time for everyone to get development, but outside of Fred, the goofy (white male) comic relief, the characters never just feel like one thing. They are people, who subtly and beautifully are free to express themselves across the spectrum of human behavior.

Aunt Cass, who has taken over the care of orphans Hiro and Tadashi, has doubts and insecurities, is loving and supportive, and dedicates herself to her family. She is neither a caricature of a single parent, nor a rejection of traditional motherly ideals. Even with limited screen time, small bits of dialogue hint at a larger world for her character. She hosts a beat poetry night at her cafe, she worries that she should have read parenting books. Gogo and Honey Lemon, appropriately named, are the female members of Hiro's fighting team. Opposite in temperament, Gogo is the leader, brash and confident, while Honey Lemon is distinctly feminine. This juxtaposition continues with Wasabi, the large muscular man who is obsessive compulsive about keeping the lab in order and shrieks when in danger. None of them, crucially, are just those things. They all show brilliant competence in their fields, bravery, and loyalty to their friends. Gogo takes over for Wasabi as getaway driver and a man being forcibly pushed aside isn't remarked on or played for laughs. She twice uses the catchphrase "woman up", but it doesn't feel forced or need follow up. Hiro is at the center of all of this, processing the loss of his role model and older brother, Tadashi. Their relationship is portrayed as incredibly supportive and loving, and as a pair of bright, confident young men who are

trying to make the most of their talent but still need others to thrive. The whole concept of the film's plot started with the idea of “a boy who loses his big brother and builds a robot that becomes a surrogate” (Julius 9). This elevates the movie from typical superhero and children’s films because Baymax as a surrogate works so incredibly well. The care put into Baymax and the brotherly love received from him is beautifully rendered, so well done that it has actually been used to model psychotherapy to psychology students (Gavero, 603).

These representations are so subtly positive that they can go almost unnoticed during a first viewing. There is a much more action packed story, a vibrant city, and an adorable robot to focus on. And this is the point. *Big Hero 6* quietly aces the Bechdel test (Aranjuez). It plays with stereotypes without subverting them. It skips the love interests, the princesses, and the objectification. It takes care of identity without featuring it. The filmmakers do not congratulate themselves or tip their hat. And yet, some critics aren’t satisfied with the representation. Adolfo Aranjuez points out that “the main drivers of the narrative” are still male (online). Manola Darghis, writing for *The New York Times*, complains that “The group is as harmoniously balanced as a university diversity committee, and largely distinguished by safe quirks of personality rather than stereotypes and unfunny accents” (online). This is a take that is extremely indicative of the social climate. What would it look like for a children’s animated superhero film to not play it “safe” in terms of race and gender? Does the plot have to be about their cultural identities? What other choices are there? How much criticism would this film have faced if it was just featuring white San Franciscans? And what exactly are storytellers trying to accomplish?

Issues of race and gender are still evolving rapidly in the 21st century. The wounds being healed are very fresh, and so, many filmmakers would prefer to avoid them. There are those who would prefer Hollywood to leave identity politics alone completely but America is too racially charged for that. Casting is too thorough a process, capitalism has too tight of a hold. There is a famous moment in *Avengers: Endgame*, the highest grossing film of all time and a touchstone for the current cultural climate, where all the female characters inextricably appear next to each other on the battlefield in order to team up. This scene proved highly controversial. Was the Girl Power moment useful? Effective? Was it even truly feminist? Whatever it was, it was hyper intentional, a move that must have been focus grouped, tested well, and was designed to gain attention not for storytelling, but for signaling the proper virtues. *Big Hero 6* offers us, in contrast, a vision of a future where that kind of thinking is not necessary, where people can be who they are without needing to react to other expectations, freeing up room for a beautiful image of the future. America and the world are not at a time in history where race and gender can fade into the background. But thanks to Hiro and friends, we can imagine a world where they someday will be.

Works Cited

- Aranjuez, Adolfo. “Power from a Different Perspective: Race, Gender and Grief in *Big Hero 6*”. *Screen Education* 79, 2015, 8-15
- Darghis, Manola. “Happiness Is a Warm Robot”. *The New York Times*, 6 November 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/07/movies/big-hero-6-an-animated-film-based-on-a-marvel-comic-book.html>
- Gavero, G.C. and A.P.S. Guerrero. “My Teacher Baymax: Lessons from the Film *Big Hero 6*”. *Academic Psychiatry* 41, 2017, 601-605.
- Julius, Jessica. *The Art of Big Hero 6*. Chronicle Books, 2014.

Jessiah Azul Mellott

The Lego Movie (2014): In Praise of the Average Guy

CREDITS

Director: Christopher Miller, Phil Lord
Written by: Phil Lord, Christopher Miller; story by: Dan Hageman, Kevin Hageman, Phil Lord, Christopher Miller. Based on characters by DC Comics and the LEGO Construction Toys
Producers: Roy Lee, Dan Lin, John Powers Middleton
Art direction: Grant Freckleton
Editor: David Burrows, Chris MacKay
Music: Mark Mothersbaugh
Main performers (voices): Chris Pratt (Emmet), Elizabeth Banks (Wyldstyle/Lucy), Will Ferrell (President Business/Lord Business/The Man Upstairs), Will Arnett (Batman), Morgan Freeman (Vitruvius), Liam Neeson (Bad Cop/Good Cop/Pa Cop)
Company: Village Roadshow Pictures, RatPac-Dune Entertainment, LEGO System A/S, Lin Pictures, Vertigo Entertainment, Warner Animation Group, USA
Runtime: 1h 40'



REASONS TO SEE *The Lego Movie*

- It makes a clever use of the LEGO Construction Toys created in Denmark by Ole Kirk Christiansen, Godtfred Kirk and Jens Nygaard Knudsen (www.lego.com).
- Its peculiar mixture of animation and live-action sequences (in the segment dealing with Finn and his father).
- The relevant message about how important it is to let children's imagination fly and encourage them to play.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *The Lego Movie*

The Lego Movie (2014) is the first installment of a franchise including so far *The Lego Batman Movie* (2017), *The Lego Ninjago Movie* (2017), and *The Lego Movie 2: The Second Part* (2019). The franchise also extends to television with the cartoon series *Unikitty!* (2017-20), to a wide selection of short films, to video games (five thus far) and indeed to a series of tie-in Lego sets. The Lego toys are the brainchild of Danish carpenter Ole Kirk Christiansen (1891-1958), who founded the company in 1934. In 1947, Lego started producing his now world-famous interlocking bricks, which Christiansen's son, Godtfred, transformed in the 1950s into the basis for the creative toy system we know today. The mini-figures were introduced later, in 1978. Lego's deal with Warner Animation Group, founded in 2013 as the current 3-D, CGI incarnation of Warner's long-lived animation division, led to the establishment of the franchise. *The Lego Movie* was animated in collaboration with Australian-Canadian studio Animal Logic, known for, among others, Oscar-award winner as Best Animated Feature *Happy*

Feet (2006). Curiously, although *The Lego Movie* won a BAFTA as Best Animated Feature and a couple of Annie Awards, its only Oscar nomination was for Shawn Patterson's song "Everything is Awesome", a catchy but rather insufferable song played for laughs in the film.

The plot narrates how Brickburg's construction worker Emmet sees himself misidentified as the Master Builder that will save the world from Lord Business' weapon of mass destruction, the Kragle, when he accidentally finds the Piece of Resistance that cancels it. Chased by the Bad Cop sent by President Business to retrieve the Piece but aided by a resourceful girl calling herself Wyldstyle, the disoriented Emmet meets Vitruvius, the blind wizard fighting Lord Business. Vitruvius confirms that Emmet appears to be the Special one, though Wyldstyle doubts he has the required qualities. Later, the three are joined by Wyldstyle's boyfriend, the gruff Batman. Unfortunately, their passage through Cloud Cuckoo Land wreaks havoc and most of its inhabitants end up imprisoned in Lord Business' Think Tank. Emmet eventually throws himself into the abyss, freeing in this way the prisoners, after asking Wyldstyle to lead them back to Bricksburg and save the place. His fall into the abyss, however, brings a big surprise: all the Lego characters turn out to be part of a game that the boy Flinn is playing using his father's Lego collector constructions in his huge basement display. While Flinn persuades his father that the Lego pieces should be used to play games and not to glue them into place (with Krazy Glue, or Kragle), Emmet convinces Lord Business that he need not be a villain. Dad agrees finally with Flinn but warns him that now it is his sister's turn to join in their games.

The gender issues in *The Lego Movie* are quite transparent. The film is, on the one hand, a celebration of the average guy, represented by Emmet, and, on the other hand, a lesson aimed at fathers for them to engage in playing with their sons... using the Lego toys. In the key scene, two thirds into the film, when Emmet finds himself in the basement of Flinn's home and understands that his life is the game which the boy is playing alone, there is a crucial conversation between father and son. Dad, the Man Upstairs that the Lego characters fear, and Flinn disagree about the use of the construction sets. The father chides his son for messing around with his tidy sets and the boy complains that they bought the bricks and the figures "at the toy store". We did, the father grants, "but the way I'm using it makes it an adult thing". The film uses in this way an issue which does come from real life: do adults have the right to use toys? If a father buys a toy, can he keep it away from his son?

In the particular case of Lego, the tension is built around the father's decision not only to keep the boy away but to use glue to keep the bricks in place, which the characters in the animated part of the film read as the worst possible threat and Flinn as an aberration. The later scene in which, in parallel, Emmet persuades Lord Business that he need not be a villain and Flinn argues to his father that freely using the bricks is much more fun, works very well at defending creative play. Yet, as Jordan Treece complains, "Although *The Lego Movie* displays a message of individualism and creativity, when the marketing advantages and subtle ironies found within its script are examined through the ways by which children find meaning in entertainment media, the film is seen to communicate a message that encourages consumer culture more than it does individuality and creativity" (4). In short, after seeing the film, children are more likely to ask their fathers to buy them a set than to reflect on how they play together, if they play together at all.

Interestingly, in an article dealing with three films of the franchise Bob Chipman notes that all deal with 'daddy issues', which he attributes to men making up "a disproportionate majority of the creative voices involved in their making" (online). He stresses that, in contrast, Lego, the brand, "widely promotes itself as one of the toy industry's nominal 'progressive' voices, originally advertising their products with

specifically cross-gender appeal (they only began developing the 'female-centric' LEGO Friends line after extensive research and consultation on the subject) and famously maintaining a ban on what would likely be highly-profitable modern-military themed toys" (online). In fact, the Friends line has the unfortunate side-effect of making the rest of Lego sets appear to be aimed only at boys. In addition, the sequel, *The Lego Movie 2*, is fundamentally based on exploring the threat that the Duplo sets preferred by Flinn's younger sister suppose for the integrity of the Lego world that he controls. Indeed, in *The Lego Movie* Flinn expresses total dismay at his father's suggestion that his daughter should be invited to play with them. Playing with little girls is no fun at all.

Emmet, as it turns out, has been chosen by Flinn to be hero and in that sense he certainly is 'the chosen one'. There are doubts, however, in the context of the film about whether this ordinary construction worker can play this role. Emmet is presented as a sweet, chirpy, optimistic guy but also as someone who is not as deeply appreciated by his friends as he thinks, and whose abilities are quite limited because he cannot think for himself and needs to follow the instructions he carries constantly in his pocket. He becomes the hero quite by accident when a fall leads him to find the Piece of Resistance, which is simply the cap that covers Lord Business' Kragle, a glue tube. Wyldstyle takes him then to meet Vitruvius and what follows is a rather peculiar scene in which the wizard grandly announces that "The prophecy states that you are the Special, the embodiment of good, foil of evil, the most talented, most brilliant person in the universe" only to find that the supposed Master Builder Emmet cannot build anything, except an absurd double-decker sofa. When the three visit Emmet's brain they find nothing but a completely bare landscape. Unfazed, Vitruvius declares that "your mind is so prodigiously empty that there is nothing to clear away in the first place". All Emmet needs to do to become a proper Master Builder is "to believe, then you will see everything". This is a pattern seen in many other stories about reluctant heroes, from Frodo in *The Lords of the Rings* trilogy to Harry Potter, but what is different here is that Emmet really has no heroic qualities.

This may be comforting for the boys in the audience who possibly enjoy the idea that being like Emmet is compatible with being a hero, but it is quite frustrating for the girls who may identify with Wyldstyle. As reviewer MaryAnn Johansson observes, "It's sad to me that an accidental message of *The Lego Movie* is that no matter how brilliant and brave and accomplished you are –as Wyldstyle is here– you can be upstaged by a bland boring untalented dude such as Emmet who's merely in the right place for the wrong reasons at the right time" (online). She is willing to "forgive that, because the larger message is 'Color outside the lines', and it is transmitted with a lot of verve and humor" but others might be less pliant. As noted, in the scene of Emmet's first meeting with Vitruvius Wyldstyle voices her doubts that Emmet is truly the Special and later on, resenting her doubts, Emmet tells her that "You cannot be as mean as you seem (...) I don't think that's you, the real you". Wyldstyle grants that she is disappointed: "I know that sounds super-immature, it's just ever since I heard the prophecy I wanted to be the one". She, however, soon puts her disappointment behind when Emmet replies that her initial praise for him, before she started doubting him, made him want to be special for her. Moved, she discloses that her real name is plain Lucy, a name not even her boyfriend Batman knows. Lucy's quiet acceptance of her side-kick role and her quick subordination to Emmet's needs as a bumbling hero is grating. Even more so is her relationship with Batman, who appears to be very poor boyfriend material. Irritatingly, he ends up transferring her to Emmet, claiming that Lucy deserves someone better, as if he had the right to make this judgement.

On the whole, then, *The Lego Movie* is more satisfactory in its treatment of the gender issues related to masculinity than to femininity. The boys in the audience are certainly likely to benefit from the resolution of the confrontation between father and

son for the Lego toys, and from Emmet's progression from being a nobody to being the somebody that saves the world (as the film poster's slogan reads). Yet, there is far less in the movie to satisfy girls and women, who are given an attractive female character in Wyldstyle/Lucy only to be told that she cannot be the Special one and needs to support, besides, the not-so special Emmet. Thus, the praise for the good guy is built at the expense of the celebration of the bright girl.

Works Cited

- Chipman, Bob. "Why Do All the LEGO Movies Have Daddy Issues?" *ScreenRant*, 28 September 2017, <https://screenrant.com/lego-movies-fathers-sons-ninjago-batman/>
- Johansson, MaryAnn. "The Lego Movie Review: Take the Brick Pill". *FlickPhilosopher*, 12 February 2014, <https://www.flickfilosopher.com/2014/02/lego-movie-review-take-brick-pill.html>
- Treece, Jordan. "The Double-Sided Message of *The Lego Movie*: The Effects of Popular Entertainment on Children in Consumer Culture". *English Seminar Capstone Research Papers*, 28, April 2015, 1-35.

Sara Martín Alegre

The Lego Batman Movie (2017): Postmodern Irony and Masculine Ideals

CREDITS

Director: Chris McKay

Written by: Seth Grahame-Smith, Chris McKenna, Erik Sommers, Jared Stern; story by: Seth Grahame-Smith. Based on characters by DC Comics and the LEGO Construction Toys

Producers: Jon Burton, Roy Lee

Editors: David Burrows, John Venzon, Matt Villa

Music: Lorne Balfe

Main performers (voices): Will Arnett (Batman), Michael Cera (Robin), Rosario Dawson (Barbara Gordon), Ralph Fiennes (Alfred), Siri ('Puter), Zach Galifianakis (Joker)

Companies: Animal Logic, DC Entertainment, LEGO System A/S, Lin Pictures, Lord Miller, NPV Entertainment, RatPac-Dune Entertainment, Vertigo Entertainment, Village Roadshow Pictures, Warner Animation Group, Warner Bros. Animation, USA

Runtime: 1h 44'



REASONS TO SEE *The Lego Batman Movie*

- To enjoy a hilarious takedown of toxic masculinity and superhero bravado.
- To see a surprisingly thoughtful examination of the history and mythos of the Batman character.
- To celebrate metatextuality and postmodernism at its peak.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER in *The Lego Batman Movie*

As Jeffrey A. Brown writes, “Superheroes have always represented the pinnacle of American cultural ideas about masculinity, and have served for generations as a key power fantasy for male adolescents. The superhero is stronger than anyone, defeats every villain, is always in the right, and gets the girl. Superheroes can fly, lift trucks, shoot laser beams out of their eyes, blast energy from their fists, and so on –Who wouldn’t want to be one?!” (Brown, 131). This is apparent to anyone growing up with a basic knowledge of pop culture in the 21st century –painfully, obviously, clear. We are flooded with superhero culture, and we idolize their representations. Superheroes and their outrageous personas are the number one source of masculinity in the West, reinforcing and defining what R.W. Connell calls “hegemonic masculinity” in its idealized variant.

As much time as we spend discussing stressful and unrealistic expectations and body images for women, the ideal put forth for men is equally outrageous. Specifically, the demands put on male superhero actors is borderline insanity. Many are using some

form of steroid or human growth hormone, and “spend more time in the gym than they do rehearsing” (Hill, online). 9-pack abs, relentless wit, lack of emotion or fear are common; any weakness must be followed up with intense violence. This is standard procedure but it does not match the realities of our modern lives. As more and more professions feature cubicles, obesity continues to skyrocket, and toxic masculinity is identified and stomped out, the realistic image of the modern man strays further and further from this outlandish yet popular ideal. Consider Batman, whose character has transformed countless times over the last 80 years, generally getting darker, grittier, and increasing the depth and quality of the plastic abs in his chest plate. He is arguably the most iconic character in the world in that span of time, and his name and silhouette signify an “ever-shifting model of masculinity” that even the biggest superhero hater understands intuitively (Hunting, 297).

Chris McKay’s *The Lego Batman Movie* (2017) knows this very well. It is constantly self-referential, and its intertextual irreverence pulls apart everything Batman has ever stood for. It is hard to explain a movie so in on the joke, so postmodern and constantly fourth-wall breaking. Yet there is a story, of sorts. Batman is the emotionally repressed, lonely, and hyper masculine hero of Gotham city, as usual. After defeating the Joker once again but failing to lock him up, Barbara Gordon takes over as Commissioner and proposes moving on from Batman’s ineffectual protection. The Joker is jealous that Batman doesn’t care about him and turns himself and his minions in, though this turns out to be a plot to enter the Phantom Zone. Batman accidentally adopts a son/sidekick Robin, getting his help to steal the Phantom Projector, using it to banish the Joker to the Phantom Zone. As planned, Harley Quinn steals back the projector, unleashing the Joker and a cavalcade of supervillains on Gotham city. Batman must then get past his emotional barriers to team up with Robin, Gordon, and his butler Alfred. They save the day from the mass of villains, and Batman eventually learns to work with a team. The heroes literally link up to prevent the city from splitting in half, and Batman and his new Bat family move forward as a crime fighting team.

Throughout this journey, there are small hints that the story unfolding is being acted out by children playing with their Lego sets, which is demonstrated clearly in the other Lego movies. The news reports that Gotham city is “Built on flimsy plates stuck together”. The improbable ending in which the heroes stick together to keep the city from splitting in half perfectly fits how kids might apply their imaginations to a Batman Lego set. This extra layer informs the whole movie, especially in regards to Batman’s masculinity. Not only are we supposed to understand that Batman’s masculinity is a farce, but that the child making these decisions is also fully aware of this. The child is literally performing masculinity, as so many children might do in a superhero costume on Halloween. But he is also performing Batman performing, in order to show that his behavior is comically absurd. Although this is all, of course, actually decided by adult filmmakers, the message is clear and quite accurate. In an extremely ironic, postmodern cultural environment, children are as well informed in this discourse as adults are. Any current children’s television network will confirm this. They are packed with the same postmodern meta humor, and if it isn’t coming from television, it certainly is coming from social media, which kids are fluent in. As Bo Burnham puts it, “Taking inventory of your life, being a viewer to your own life, living an experience and at the same time hovering behind yourself and watching yourself live that experience” (online video) is what modern living is about. This is the world that *Lego Batman* lives in, inside the mind of a child.

And this could be, arguably, a positive development. The young generation is learning that hypermasculine superhero figures are a joke. When Batman is beating up dozens of bad guys and instructs his computer to “overcompensate”, we are not surprised to learn later that the city views him as incompetent and that he is deeply

unhappy. Even children under ten can understand the message that Batman's behavior is ego-driven and that billionaire Bruce Wayne is unfulfilled in his lonely mansion. When a young audience watches *The Dark Knight* now, they are much more likely to wonder why Batman is pitching his voice comically low, and why he doesn't seem to have any friends (and did he build his Batcave alone?). The more recent films were starting to become self-aware too, having Batman torch his extremely invasive surveillance technology and understand that he is often more useful as a symbol than a flesh and blood hero. *The Lego Batman Movie* understands the steady evolution from the campy Adam West, through the acclaimed animated series, the Christopher Nolan trilogy, and more. But mostly, it is aware of the ridiculously inflated masculinity and the nihilism specifically inherent in the Batman character, and it turns the volume on those characteristics all the way up.

There are moments, however, when this self-awareness falters. At the center of the plot is The Joker and Batman's very queer relationship, which is played many times for laughs. The Batman character is still very much celebrating action-packed violence, weapons, and vehicles. There is the classic problem of irony, which this movie is drowning in, in that you are still saying what you're saying. This new model of self-aware masculinity is, nonetheless, encouraging. Batman still has his flaws at the end of the movie, but he learns to be part of a family and to let others into his emotions, which is a nice message for a post postmodern film looking for a touch of morality. The problem, for our young self-aware boys, is that worldwide culture still very much celebrates the masculinity in the superhero mythos. Aggression, muscles, extreme competence, and extreme dedication are still in but they must also have and perform the constant self-awareness that this film promotes. They must be softer, more thoughtful, and more selfless as well. We can see this especially in the core Marvel characters Iron Man and Thor. In some ways, this is a brutal contradiction to grow inside of. It isn't that high expectations are bad for children, or that our culture should stop growing, but that the culture demands and rewards behaviors that can't coexist, or force young men into such a narrow lane of acceptable behavior that there is no hope of them succeeding.

Perhaps this movie is a small step towards a masculine revolution, but it cannot completely separate itself from the established order. The child responsible for acting out *The Lego Batman Movie's* plot is clearly a super fan, and celebrates all forms of Batman culture. He is performing decades of masculine ideals but that performance is no longer enough.

Works Cited

- "Bo Burnham Examines Social Media". *The Off Camera Show* 16 November 2018, [youtu.be/ XHRJJe2KI0](https://youtu.be/XHRJJe2KI0)
- Brown, Jeffrey A. "The Superhero Film Parody and Hegemonic Masculinity". *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 33.2, 2016, 131-150.
- Connell, Raewyn. *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics*. Stanford University Press, 1987.
- Hill, Logan. "Building a Bigger Action Hero: Inside Hollywood's Muscle Factory". *Men's Journal*, 4 December 2017, <https://www.mensjournal.com/features/building-a-bigger-action-hero-20140418>
- Hunting, Kyra. "The Man Behind the Mask: Camp and Queer Masculinity in *LEGO Batman*". *Cultural Studies of LEGO: More than Just Bricks*, Rebecca Hains and Sharon Mazzarella (eds). Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 297-319.

Jessiah Azul Mellott

Inside Out (2015): Gender Identity Perpetuated

CREDITS

Directors: Pete Docter, Ronnie del Carmen (co-director)

Written by: Pete Docter, Meg LeFauve, Josh Cooley; story by: Pete Docter, Ronnie Del Carmen

Producer: Jonas Rivera

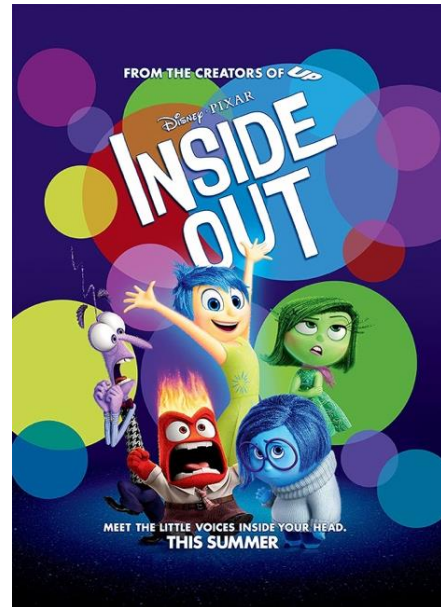
Editor: Kevin Nolting

Music: Michael Giacchino

Main performers (voices): Amy Poehler (Joy), Phyllis Smith (Sadness), Richard Kind (Bing Bong), Bill Hader (Fear), Lewis Black (Anger), Mindy Kaling (Disgust), Kaitly Dias (Riley), Diane Lane (Mom), Kyle MacLachlan (Dad)

Company: Pixar Animation Studios, USA

Runtime: 1h 34'



REASONS TO SEE *Inside Out*

- This movie was the winner of the Oscar for Best Animated Feature film of the year 2016.
- It was the second Pixar movie to feature a female as the protagonist and the first to feature the main character as both a female and a child.
- Its great story line about anthropomorphized emotions that brings to the table a very real discussion about depression in children, especially those who are reaching puberty and starting to feel more complicated emotions.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *Inside Out*

Inside Out (2015) is one of the movies by Pixar that deals with the theme of childhood and the messy emotions associated with growing up, together with the *Toy Story* franchise, *Finding Nemo* and others. *Inside Out* managed to set itself apart and was widely lauded by critics as a masterpiece that set a new standard for animated creativity and emotional resonance. It did win, apart from the Oscar as Best Animated Feature Film, ten awards in the 43rd Annie Awards out of fourteen nominations, including Best Animated Feature, Outstanding Achievement in Directing in an Animated Feature Production for Docter, and Outstanding Achievement in Voice Acting in an Animated Feature Production for Phyllis Smith. It also received a series of other awards including the BAFTA Award, the Golden Globe Award, the Critics' Choice Award, the New York Film Critics Circle Award, the Satellite Award, and the Saturn Award for best animated film.

Growing up is a path full of excruciating, awkward moments and exhilarating, unexpected moments, and it is not different for Riley. The story of *Inside Out* is set inside the mind of this eleven-year-old girl and depicts her emotional adventure when having to move away from her hometown. Throughout the movie, the five personified emotions –Joy, Fear, Anger, Disgust, and Sadness– work together in the control center inside Riley’s mind to advise and protect her through everyday life. Riley struggles to adapt to a new life as she has to move from Minnesota to San Francisco because her father starts a new job there. The five emotions conflict and struggle to help Riley adjust to her new life, leading to an upheaval that sweeps Joy and Sadness away from the Headquarters. While Joy, Riley’s dominant emotion tries to keep things positive and finds a way to get them back to the control room, the other three emotions struggle to direct her life on their own.

The character construction in *Inside Out* is directly based on the theorization of emotion by Paul Ekman, which describes seven universal emotions: Anger, Contempt, Disgust, Enjoyment, Fear, Sadness, and Surprise. Affect Theory was later developed to illustrate the interplay of the main emotions. According to Wikipedia, Affect Theory “seeks to organize affects, sometimes used interchangeably with emotions or subjectively experienced feelings, into discrete categories and to typify their physiological, social, interpersonal, and internalized manifestations”. Its elaboration is credited to psychologist Silvan Tomkins, specifically to the first two volumes of his book *Affect Imagery Consciousness* (1962). Quite controversially, Affect Theory has been applied for instance to academic work on how horror cinema activates fear. All humans are afraid of predators and will react in the same way before a tiger about to eat them, but this does not mean that all will react in the same way to a horror movie, or to comedy or romance. Therefore, contrary to what Affect Theory claims, emotion is culturally conditioned and not universal. In other words, humans cannot be reduced to a bunch of emotions, or biochemical reactions, or hormones, or anything that can be broken down and accounted for.

For that reason, there is a need to remain skeptical about how *Inside Out* represents the embodied five major emotions and how the film understands Riley’s character. Duaei pointed out in his article “‘Riley needs to be happy’: *Inside Out* and the Dystopian Aesthetic of Neo-liberal Governmentality” that “Such an aggrandizement of the way Riley’s emotional forces function, and the way *Inside Out* identifies them as the ‘true’ being of Riley, invokes the psycho-therapeutical nature of neo-liberal technologies of subjectification” (202). In his view, “*Inside Out*, furthermore, essentializes happiness as the sole normal way of being for Riley, and pedagogically, for its audience. This process begins with the first moment of the movie” (202). Besides her willingness to take on dominant role from day one, Joy proves herself to be a potential villain regarding self-awareness and interaction with friends. Her own need is to ensure that Riley is always happy and she constantly refuses the contribution of her friends to Riley’s mental balance. When she has a chance to return to the Headquarters, Joy intentionally attempts to leave Sadness behind with the excuse that “Riley needs to be happy!” Sadness, of course, does little good to Riley’s life but Joy fails to realize that suppressing sadness and burying down other feelings will eventually damage core memories and send Riley over the edge. This is why Duaei insists that the protagonist in *Inside Out* is “no one other than Joy, not even Riley herself, meaningfully because the most potential antagonist near her, that is her dad, is not meant to be perceived as an antagonist at all. The only character that exhibits some minimal indications of antagonism is Anger whose most obvious trait is ‘pessimism’, manifested in his referring to ‘objective circumstances’” (205).

In American fiction, there is a constant anxiety about the obligation to be happy and an emphasis on the ultimate goal to seek happiness. The Declaration of

Independence drafted by Thomas Jefferson incorporates 'the pursuit of happiness' as an American aspiration and individual right. This, of course, is impossible because few people are actually happy. What is worse, what used to be called sadness and was a natural part of human life is now called depression and is heavily medicalized. On the contrary, "sadness not only provides an outlet to express unsettling feelings, but sadness is the way to connect with other people, to connect with others about less-than-perfect moments" (Markotik, 165) Whereas depression is often depicted as a result of sadness, *Inside Out* on the other hand suggests that depression takes root because Riley lacks access to expressing her sadness. By the end of the film, when Riley eventually finds and embraces her sadness (and when Joy embraces the character Sadness), she becomes better equipped to handle her difficult emotional moments.

Regarding gender issues, the reviews of the movie tends to be divided between those who see the progress in Pixar's central character and those who take more critical approaches to gender stereotyping. When commenting on how Pixar established the inner world of each character, Robinson noted that "The film's innovation isn't in creating an inner world, it's in using the production design to elaborate on it without exposition, and in turning every variable and divergence into a clever point of characterization that reveals salient new information" (online). Nonetheless, the movie is often criticized for its lack of gender parity and of leading female characters. In *Inside Out*, Riley is Pixar's first protagonist who is both a girl and a child. Emotions, of course, need not be gendered but Riley's emotions are presented as characters gendered male or female and, what is worse, as stereotypes. Sadness, specifically, is presented as a classic non-athletic bookworm, as if being that kind of woman is implicitly sad. Joy, on the other hand, is thin and pretty. This contrasts with the presumed idea about happiness in most cultures in which this emotion is often recalled as a fat, smiling individual whereas sadness might be represented by someone tall, thin, and ill-looking. Furthermore, the gender distribution of emotion in which Fear and Anger are represented as male while Joy and Sadness are represented as female also reflects the socially constructed ideology regarding gender roles. We can see that anger is all too frequently associated with a masculine emotion which socially dictates that men should feel angry while in similar situations women are expected to curb down their temper and just express sadness. Similarly, we usually see Joy as a feminine emotion because women are often supposed to put on a happy and cheerful face. It's no surprise then that disgust, often seen as a petty and judgmental emotion, is personified as a teenage girl, reminiscent of the typical high school teen, a demographic whose opinions are often disregard as trivial. The emotions of Riley's parents also exhibit this stereotyped gender perspective and a traditional ideology. While Riley's emotions have at least both male and female figures, her parents' emotions are all male or female depending on each parent's biological gender. Thus, the emotions of Riley's father are all male and led by anger, while her mother's emotions are all female and led by sadness, which implicitly reflects the expected emotional expressiveness that society attributes to each gender in certain circumstances. "Such a uniform depiction of selfhood suggests not only that one grows into societal conformity but also that the process of stabilizing identity tends to conflate the multiple aspects of a character's subjectivity into one, emotionally flat, homogeneous personality", as Markotic put it (167).

Despite the fact that *Inside Out* attempts to deliver a valuable lesson about the importance of emotional balance and how the cult of happiness damages our mental health, its approach to gender issues brings, inadvertently or not, dissonance to any critical viewers. It is imperative to discuss whether the gender distribution of emotion in Riley's mind is designed to demonstrate that all individuals are a mixture of gender

traits or the product of implicit, stereotyped cultural norms and ideology (Joy dominates Riley because girls need to be happy and cheerful). From a positive perspective, *Inside Out* could contribute to tackling the incessant question about how individuals can liberate emotions, irrespective of gender and gender identity. From a less positive perspective, Pixar's film is itself stereotyped in its gendered view of girls as persons who must be happy and cannot afford to be sad. Or angry.

Works Cited

- "Affect Theory". *Wikipedia*, 29 December 2020.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Affect_theory
- Duaei, Kamaluddin. "'Riley Needs to Be Happy': *Inside Out* and the Dystopian Aesthetics of Neo-liberal Governmentality". *European Journal of American Culture*, 39.2, 2020, 199-215.
- Markotik, Nicole. "The Many and the One: Depression and Multiple Subjectivity in *Inside Out*". *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 58.4, 2019, 162-168.
- Robinson, Tasha. "*Inside Out*" (review). *The Dissolve*, 17 June 2015, <https://thedissolve.com/reviews/1663-inside-out/>

Thu Trang Tran

Moana (2016): I Am Not a Princess!

CREDITS

Directed by: Ron Clements, John Musker, Don Hall (co-director), Chris Williams (co-director)

Written by: Jared Bush; story by: Ron Clements, John Musker, Chris Williams, Don Hall, Pamela Ribon, Aaron Kandell, Jordan Kandell

Produced by: Osnat Shurer

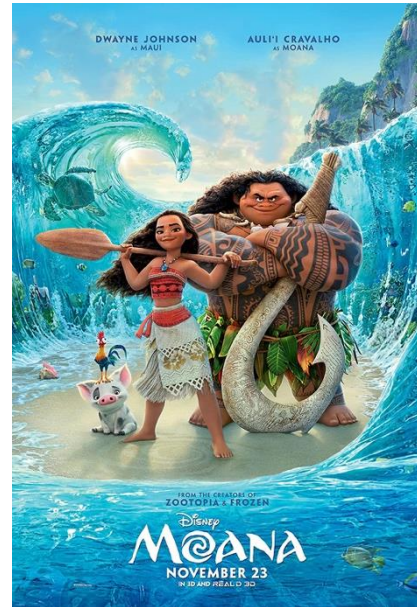
Music by: Opetia Foa'i, Mark Mancina, Lin-Manuel Miranda

Film Editing by: Jeff Draheim

Main performers (voices): Auli'i Carvalho (Moana), Dwayne Johnson (Maui), Rachel House (Gramma Tala), Temuera Morrison (Chief Tui), Jemaine Clement (Tamatoa), Nicole Scherzinger (Sina), Louise Bush (Toddler Moana), Alan Tudyk (Heihei)

Company: Walt Disney Animation Studios, Walt Disney Pictures, Hurwitz Creative, USA

Runtime: 1h 47'



REASONS TO SEE *Moana*

- Its beautiful songs. The theme song “How Far I’ll Go” was nominated to an Oscar for Best Achievement in Music Written for Motion Pictures (Original Song).
- The 3-D effect paints a vivid picture of life on the Pacific Islands.
- It is the perfect feminist film for girls after *Frozen*.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *Moana*

Moana (2016) was directed by Ron Clements and John Musker, directors as well of other famous animation films such as *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Aladdin* (1992), and *The Princess and the Frog* (2009). Clements and Musker, who had shared an Oscar nomination for this film for Best Animated Feature Film of the Year, shared another one for *Moana*. Curiously, the movie was renamed *Oceania* in Italy apparently to avoid any allusions to a famous Italian porn star, Moana Pozzi. In other European countries, the title *Vaiana* was used because Moana was a registered trademark (at least in Spain) (Pellegrini online). In any case, the slight change of title didn’t affect its popularity. Although released in the same year as the blockbuster *Zootopia*, *Moana* still had an outstanding performance at the box office, grossing more than \$600million around the world. The song “How Far I’ll Go” was nominated to an Oscar for Best Achievement in Music Written for Motion Pictures (Original Song); its composer, Lin-Manuel Miranda is the creator of groundbreaking Broadway musicals *In the Height* and *Hamilton*. *Moana* was also nominated to Golden Globes for Best Original Song (Motion Picture) and for Best Motion Picture (Animated). Auli'i Cravalho, the voice of Moana, won the Best Animated Female award together with Ginnifer Goodwin, who dubbed Judy in *Zootopia*.

Moana also earned two wins in the Annie Awards, Outstanding Achievement in Animated Effects in an Animated Production and outstanding Achievement in Voice Acting in an Animated Feature Production.

The story begins with Maui, the demigod who lives in the wind and the sea, in the Pacific Ocean. He steals the heart of the goddess Te Fiti and causes the lava devil Eka to fall into a state of madness, which puts the local islands under threat of destruction. More than a thousand years later on a small island, the chief's daughter Moana gradually grows up under the care of her parents. She enjoys sneaking into the shoal and she feels called by the sea, but her father strictly forbids Moana from sailing, even though the island is facing death threats. From her grandmother, Moana knows the history of their people, so in order to save the island, she still sets off to sea to find Maui, who has been punished due to his misbehavior, so that he can return the heart to Te Fity. After some hardships, Moana finally meets the legendary, arrogant demigod but Maui refuses to travel with her because he is worried that the heart of Te Fity would bring bad luck. Finally, they start the epic journey across the ocean and Moana returns the heart, thus restoring the safety of her island and of the rest.

When speaking of Disney, the first two things that come to people's mind are, definitely, Mickey the Mouse and Princesses. In 1937, the Disney Company created the world's first feature-length animated film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the first "Disney Princess" movie in history. In the next ninety years, Disney has created dozens of impressive female characters with different identities. Yet not until 2000, Andy Moody, then president of Disney's Consumer Products Department, officially proposed the "Disney Princess" project. Eleven of the classic female characters produced by Disney in the past few decades were selected to form the "Disney Princess" series of consumer brands. Many spectators may consider the female main characters in Disney Princess movies powerful feminine icons, but most of these Princesses are only part a of marketing strategy, built, as it can be seen, by a male-dominated social gaze.

It took Disney almost half a century since *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, in *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), for Belle to be the first girl to break the bias and prove that girls need not be princesses to explore their potential. After Belle, the story of a Princess who used to be locked up in the castle all day and spend all her life waiting for Prince charming has become a thing of the past. In *Frozen* (2013), Elsa, not the Princess but the Queen of Arendelle gave little girls a good model for girl power. In *Ralph Breaks the Internet* (2018), when the protagonist (Princess) Vanellope enters the Disney Princesses' dressing room on the internet, she learns from them all the associated clichés only to dismiss them: having animals to talk, being poisoned or cursed or kidnapped or enslaved by a witch, needing a true love kiss, having most problems solved by a strong man. When in *Moana* the girl protagonist first meets Maui a similar scene ensues. Moana claims that she's not a princess and the demigod replies that "If you wear a dress, and have an animal sidekick, you're a princess". Yet, Moana is not princess, but the daughter of the chief, which alters the tone of the whole film. In *Frozen*, the Disney princess celebrates empowerment with the song "Let It Go" and the prince becomes the villain, trying to restrain her potential. Elsa builds an ice castle for herself not to lock herself up again but to declare sovereignty over her powers, burying absolute male power under the castle's foundations. *Moana*, released three years later, came then at a time when the princesses began to define themselves instead of relying on others' judgement, thinking about what they truly wanted, confidently pursuing dreams, and starting an adventure of their own. This is the spirit of the new Disney princess, and it is a world where we expect our daughters to live, not as princesses but as their own women.

In this movie, there are three types of female characters: Te Fiti, the enshrined female as goddess; Grandma, the ignored female as (grand)mother; young Moana, the

independent female as herself. Te Fiti, the goddess of the ocean enjoyed unlimited creativity, but after being robbed of her heart by Maui she is reduced from goddess to the demon Eka, a possessor of extremely destructive power. This paradoxical oneness and duality represent the contradictory views of women in ancient times: on the one hand, women's reproductive capacity was equated with the 'divine power' that allows the Earth to bring forth the harvest, and was thus admired and loved; on the other hand, women's menstruation and loss of virginity were also considered as a sign of evil and impurity. That's how the twisted character of women is created. During this whole process, women were always watched whether pushed to the altar or slandered, and lost their subjectivity as human beings. They could not control their own destiny and had no right to speak. We can easily find in the movie that both Te Feti and Eka are silenced. To some extent, this also symbolizes the 'aphasia' of women at this stage. The predation and suppression from men strengthened and prolonged this state but eventually caused men to suffer as well. Moana, the younger generation of women, gradually understands that Eka is Te Feti, and that the enemy they faced was never a real enemy but a distortion of women's own self. Moana, therefore, plucks up the courage and steps forward to return the heart to Te Fiti. When the goddess finally shows her original appearance, and only then at this time, this is exactly the same as Moana's.

Grandma is, no doubt, the most intelligent person in the film. When Moana feels the call of the sea but is prevented by her father from sailing for being a girl, Grandma stands firmly on Moana's side and encourages her to stick to her ideals. She teaches Moana about her family's lost sailing traditions, and lets the girl understand that she yearns for the sea only because she has the blood of a voyager and is a born navigator. When Moana is frustrated because she cannot find the island where Maui hides, the soul of her by then deceased Grandma turns into a giant ray to guide her forward. When Moana and Maui lose to Eka, feeling depressed and ready to give up, Grandma/ray reappears, accepts Moana's sadness and comforting her. Grandma is Moana's most reliable life mentor during her adventure and her closest family. She is firm, wise, protective and the embodiment of legacy, which are also qualities that the ideal good wife and mother should have in the traditional patriarchal society. This is why this key character has no name: her identity has always been that of the mother of the Chief, the grandmother of Moana, and the prophet of the tribe, all social roles. Who she is and what she says is only good to serve others, not a free choice for herself. Still, Grandma has a personal character, she is always singing and dancing along the sea, amusing herself, though only when none watches. It is an indisputable fact that thousands of women like Grandma have always been neglected in their lives. They could only raise their children and grandchildren silently and die also silently.

As the heroine of the film, Moana is very unique in every sense. To begin with, her appearance does not actually conform to current beauty standards. Moana's complexion is a healthy wheat color, with a naturally curled explosive mane. Her figure is not at all skinny but rounded, even slightly chubby. She has a flat nose and a wide mouth, even some freckles. We should always remember, though, that the only person who has the right to judge whether she is beautiful or not is Moana herself. When Moana and Maui are defeated by Eka for the first time and there is no way out, Maui immediately transforms into an eagle, leaving Moana behind. Moana faces then the biggest crisis she has ever encountered, after fighting with all her strength but still failing. Moana has only her own strength to cheer her up, as happens to many girls growing up and who find that only other women, not men, can help them. Moana's actions were entirely out of her own. Her parents repeatedly warned her not to go to sea or make trouble, yet she listened to her heart's call and went to the sea without fear of patriarchal punishment and the dangers on her path. In the end, she becomes the

Chieftain and breaks the thousand-year-old local adherence to old prohibitions, actively leading the tribe to open up new worlds, needing no man's help.

Maui, dubbed by famous actor Dwayne Johnson, is a hypermasculine figure by virtue of his muscular body and appears to be a parody of Johnson's screen roles with some exaggeration. Although Maui is not a villain but a hero who as a semi-god is supposed to save humankind, he does not seem to be heroic at all. Instead, he is a cute, dumb character with many shortcomings who has caused all the trouble Moana seeks to correct for purely selfish reasons. As soon as he meets Moana, Maui keeps boasting about his great achievements, arrogantly asking others to admire him. When Moana clarifies why he must return the heart to Te Fiti, Maui categorically refuses and even tries to leave Moana stranded at the risk of her life. Afterwards, still reluctant to partner with Moana to complete the task, he gives it up immediately when his magical fishhook (his main weapon) is almost damaged, feeling unmanned –possibly because this very omnipotent fishhook should be read as a metaphor for male genitalia. Once the oppressive male loses the tool of aggression, the unrealistic expectations and superstitions piled around them collapse, and the males appear to be just ordinary men of questionable behavior. This is what happens to the demi-god Maui.

In any case, without any love interest to spoil their bond, Maui and Moana mature together. To Moana, the waves of the Pacific Ocean seem more appealing than the entangled ambiguity and bitter sweetness between men and women. *Moana*, then, redefines the princess story with a main character who is not even a princess and needs no rescuer. As Jana Monji pointed out, *Moana* “is a movie for wild-haired girls with wanderlust and the people who love them” (online), and this is a great advance in comparison to Disney's movies about docile, delicate girls that need the help of male rescuers. As for the princes, as Maui the demi-god shows, they need to grow up into better men, less self-engrossed, more caring and unselfish to be, not admired but accepted as good friends.

Works Cited

- Monji, Jana. “AFI Fest 2016: *Moana*”, *Roger Ebert.com*, 16 November 2016, <https://www.rogerebert.com/festivals/afi-fest-2016-moana>
- Pellegrini, Christina. “Turns out *Moana* Has a Different Name in One Country and it Might Be for a Very NSFW Reason”. *Hello Giggles*, 19 November 2016, <https://hellogiggles.com/reviews-coverage/movies/moana-different-name-nsfw/>
- Pérez-Simón, A. “Intertextuality and Autonomous Fictional Worlds in Disney: The Case of *Moana* (2016)”. *Theatralia* 22.2, January 2019, 72-82.
- Tamaira, A. Mārata Ketekiri and Dionne Fonoti. “Beyond Paradise? Retelling Pacific Stories in Disney's *Moana*”. *The Contemporary Pacific* 2.2, August 2018, 297-327.
- Yoshinaga, Ida. “Disney's *Moana*, the Colonial Screenplay, and Indigenous Labor Extraction in Hollywood Fantasy Films”. *Narrative Culture* 6.2, 2019, 188-215.

Cong (Jamie) Wang

Trolls (2016): The Happy Princess

CREDITS

Director: Mike Mitchell

Written by: Jonathan Aibel, Glenn Berger; story by: Erica Rivinoja. Based on the Good Luck Trolls toys created by Thomas Dam

Producer: Gina Shay

Editor: Nick Fletcher

Music: Christopher Beck

Main performers (voices): Anna Kendrick (Princess Poppy), Justin Timberlake (Branch), Christopher Mintz Plasse (Gristle Jr.), Zooey Deschanel (Bridget), Christine Baranski (Chef), Russell Brand (Creek), Jefferey Tambor (King Peppy), James Corden (Biggie), Kunal Nayyar (Guy Diamond), Ron Funches (Cooper)

Company: DreamWorks Animation Studios, USA

Runtime: 1h 33'



REASONS TO SEE *Trolls*

- Its solid voice cast with Princess Poppy voiced by Anna Kendrick and Branch voiced by Justin Timberlake (also the film's music producer).
- This film is based on the Danish Troll toys that have been popular for over half a century.
- It has a good beat, with a very happy tone and Timberlake's contagious hit song "Can't Stop the Feeling".

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *Trolls*

Back in the 1950s, Danish woodcutter Thomas Dam took inspiration from the scary Scandinavian troll tales and carved the first 'Good Luck Troll'. The original blood-curdling monsters turned into peculiar-looking, wide-eyed creatures that met with a roaring success all over the world, from children to teens. The film *Trolls* (2016) was based on these popular dolls with long, bright-colored hair, just as *The Lego Movie* (2014) took inspiration from the Lego toys (also a Danish export). *Trolls* was directed by Mike Mitchell (*Sky High*, *Shrek Forever After*), featuring a star-studded voice cast, with Princess Poppy voiced by Anna Kendrick and Branch voiced by Justin Timberlake (also acting as the film's music producer). This was one of the last three films that DreamWorks Animation co-produced with 20th Century Fox. The same year when the film reached the cinema, DreamWorks Animation was officially acquired by NBCUniversal. Consequently, the sequel, *Trolls World Tour*, released in 2020, was distributed by Universal Pictures, being partly released in cinemas and partly on Amazon because of the Covid-19 crisis.

Despite its financial success and the several awards it won (mostly for its soundtrack, for this is a musical comedy), *Trolls* did not gain much critical respect. A major point of criticism was its fusion of classic plotlines (with Bridget, the Bergen scullery maid, acting as Cinderella) with an avowedly commercial use of well-known pop songs. Simon & Garfunkel's "Sound of Silence", Bonnie Tyler's "Total Eclipse of the Heart", Gorillaz's "Clint Eastwood" or Cindy Lauper's "True Colors", together with Justin Timberlake's original song "Can't Stop the Feeling", illustrate each main plot with the updated, much cuter version of the trolls singing and dancing against vibrant-looking backgrounds, and all this fun seemed a bit too much. At least, reviewers like Justin Chang argued that "As infernally sugary as this movie may sound on paper, and however mercenary its commercial intentions, it's hard to resist its silly, utopian vision of a world where happiness reigns, love wins and the mere sound of Timberlake's voice carries the promise of salvation" (online).

The film begins with Princess Poppy's "once upon a time" as she narrates using a scrapbook as prop, the story of how King Peppy managed to help his whole community escape the troll-eating monsters, the Bergens. After those events, happened twenty years before, the trolls have lived peacefully in the woods. Poppy, however, decides to throw an unprecedented party to celebrate the historic anniversary, ignoring Branch's warning that the celebration might attract the Bergens' attention. Branch's worst fear is realized, the noise attracts the Bergen Chef and she takes away some trolls, intending to serve them at a feast for young King Gristle (who unlike his subjects, has never eaten a tiny troll). Poppy intends to rescue her friends because she believes it is her responsibility to make sure that no troll is left behind. Branch shows up on time when Poppy's in danger and together they embark on this adventure. In the end, Poppy succeeds in saving her captured friends, helping Branch regain his true colors and teaching their enemies, the Bergens, that happiness can be found inside.

Being "the happiest creatures the world has ever known", the new trolls, with their colorful and gravity-defying hair and their ongoing glitter-filled parties, are the major selling point of this film. Apart from their noticeable hair, they have wide noses, big ears, and round eyes. All these exaggerated features of their appearance make them be perceived as something cute, specifically, ugly-cute. Being a product of both nature and nurture, cuteness immediately triggers our affective response, which, inevitably, leads to a feeling of being manipulated and in the worst-case scenario a sense of cheapness: "Advertises and product designers are forever toying with cute cues to lend their merchandise instant appeal, mixing and monkeying with the vocabulary of cute to keep the message fresh and fetching" (Angier, online). This is what the critics have been arguing about this movie, that *Trolls* is just pleasing the audience merely with a renovated, cuter edition of the original troll dolls and many joyful songs, without the intention to polish its storyline.

Trolls, however, is not as bland as all this may suggest. Cuteness is usually associated with vulnerability, passivity, and helplessness; however, cute Poppy is quite the opposite. Poppy is a princess and eventually becomes the queen of her community. She is far from the conventional Disney princesses, who spend their lives waiting for their princes to get them out of trouble and she certainly overtakes the likes of Merida in *Brave* or Elsa in *Frozen* in self-confidence and spunkiness. Poppy grows up during a time when the trolls have managed to escape from the predatory Bergens (a type of much bigger mountain troll) and rebuild their community; this is a peaceful time making her "relentlessly positive and happy" (in Fandom, online). Poppy cheers everyone up in her tribe by throwing uplifting parties, helps the depressed Branch sing again and even seeks the happiness of her enemies, the Bergens. In this sense, she even takes a further step than her father King Peppy did. She teaches the Bergens that happiness

can only be found inside, so they stop eating the little colorful trolls that they consumed believing this would make them happy. Instead of leaving the world in the hands of monsters or exterminating them, Poppy chooses the third option –to befriend them. Besides, although her 20th anniversary party puts the whole community in danger, Poppy does not fall into self-resentment nor is she shamed for her mistake. Instead, she keeps “relaxed in dangerous situations” (in Fandom, online), undoing the wrong committed by rescuing her friends with great confidence in her actions. Her positivity and her care for others are rare qualities that most female characters in animated films fail to possess.

Nonetheless, Poppy can go to extremes: “Her biggest weakness that proved to be her constant undoing is her inability to see the world from the point of others, instead of trying to make others see her point of view. This causes her to value her own judgments over the opinion of others” (in Fandom, online). In this film, when she has the chance to escape with her friends without the missing Creek, Poppy suddenly decides that Creek is still alive and must be found, putting all trolls at risk of being eaten. This “inability to see the world from the point of others” can also be proved through her relationship with Branch. Poppy allows all the trolls to flood Branch’s survivalist bunker and mess up everything. They also hug Branch even though he is not willing to reciprocate. The way his fellow trolls push Branch to be happy without considering the reason why he is depressed is unsettling. Branch eventually opens up, disclosing that he feels guilty because his singing caused his grandmother’s death, yet this still raises doubts about whether the other trolls’ behavior, including Poppy’s, can be perceived as bullying.

There is also another complicated issue. *Trolls* displays a world where creatures with physical strength can take others’ lives with ease. Watching the Bergen monsters trying to eat the tiny trolls is creepy, no matter how this creepiness is glossed over by the cute presentation of Poppy’s tribe. The overflow of cuteness may make children less likely to notice the Bergens’ cruelty, and may even make them insensitive to the pain and suffering of others. However, Poppy herself is not blind to the ugliness of predation and the cruelty of the big trolls eating the smaller trolls. As Sara Martín notes, “when Branch, here still unable to explain what happened to him, reminds her quite angrily that ‘Bad things happen and there’s nothing you can do about it,’ Poppy replies ‘Hey, I know it’s not all cupcakes and rainbows. But I’d rather go through life thinking that it mostly is, instead of being like you’. The cuteness is here dropped for an instant to send the message that really matters” (Martín, 122-123). This is that one needs to protect oneself, but, above all, help the others.

Trolls is progressive in another way since the potential romantic relationship between Poppy and Branch does not take center stage. Instead the film celebrates Poppy’s inclination “to treat everyone as a friend” (123), especially Branch, and her dedication to her community’s welfare. The only romance here is that between two Bergens, Bridget and young King Gristle, which Poppy masterminds. Bridget is a Bergen scullery maid in love with the Bergen King, and Poppy realizes that if she wins the King over with the help of the trolls, their happiness will infect the other Bergens. *Trolls* suggests, besides, with their unlikely love story that one does not necessarily have to be pretty to find true love, for all Bergens are far from attractive. Bridget, who puts herself in danger by setting all trolls free when every other Bergen believes they can only be happy by eating trolls, also shows a remarkable capacity for rebellion (and for gratitude towards Poppy).

As Zwecker writes, *Trolls* is an uplifting comedy: “You simply will walk out –or perhaps dance out– of the theater feeling very happy yourself” (online). What this film has achieved, indeed, goes beyond the mission to just entertain its audience for ninety minutes, making them see the value of happiness. Bold Princess Poppy challenges

conventions, showing that her optimism and courage makes her a good role model for both kids and adult film-goers.

Works Cited

- Angier, Natalie. "The Cute Factor". *The New York Times*, 3 January 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/03/science/the-cute-factor.html>
- Chang, Justin. "Review: Delirious Animated Musical *Trolls* Is Both Craven and Charismatic". *Los Angeles Times*, 3 November 2016, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-trolls-review-20161028-story.html>
- Martín, Sara. "'There's Always a Bright Side': Poppy, a Positive Model in *Trolls*". *Contemporary Fairy-Tale Magic: Subverting Gender and Genre*, Auba Llompart and Lydia Brugué (eds.). Brill, 2020, 111-126.
- "Poppy". *DreamWorks Fandom Wiki*, n.d., <https://dreamworks.fandom.com/wiki/Poppy>
- Zwecker, Bill. "Delight *Trolls* Achieves Maximum Smiles per Hour". *The Chicago Sun Times*, 1 November 2016, <https://chicago.suntimes.com/2016/11/1/18359461/delightful-trolls-achieves-maximum-smiles-per-hour>

Ting Wang

Trolls World Tour (2020): A Celebration of Diversity

CREDITS

Director: Walt Dohrn
Written by: Jonathan Aibel, Glenn Berger, Maya Forbes, Wallace Wolodarsky, Elizabeth Tippet; story by: Jonathan Aibel, Glenn Berger. Based on the Good Luck Trolls toys created by Thomas Dam.
Producer: Gina Shay
Art direction: Timothy Lamb
Editor: Nick Fletcher
Music: Theodore Shapiro
Main performers (voices): Anna Kendrick (Poppy), Justin Timberlake (Branch), Rachel Bloom (Barb), James Corden (Biggie), Ron Funches (Cooper), Sam Rockwell (Hickory)
Company: DreamWorks Animation Studios, USA
Runtime: 1h 30'



REASONS TO SEE *Trolls World Tour*

- The film presents a very colorful and vivid animation using bright colors not only for the design of the trolls but also for the landscapes and other creatures that appear along the movie. It is visually a masterpiece.
- *Trolls World Tour* offers a rich variety of music from different genres. The songs are perfectly integrated in the film in relation to the mood and context of the characters.
- The film conveys a strong message about accepting difference and respecting diversity.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *Trolls World Tour*

Trolls World Tour or *Trolls 2* was produced by DreamWorks Animation and distributed by Universal Pictures in 2020. Preceded by *Abominable* (2019) and followed by *The Croods: A New Age* (2020), *Trolls World Tour* is the sequel to the popular 2016 movie *Trolls*. The film presents an appealing cast starring well-known actors and singers such as Anna Kendrick (Poppy), Justin Timberlake (Branch), Rachel Bloom (Barb) and James Corden (Biggie). *Trolls World Tour* was released during the Covid-19 pandemic in a complex and unprecedented way as it was distributed at the same time theatrically and for home-viewing platforms, such as Amazon.

In this sequel of *Trolls*, it is revealed that the trolls' world is much bigger than what Poppy and her friends initially thought. Furthermore, this is divided among six different music tribes: techno, funk, classical, country, rock, and pop. Each group of trolls possesses a magical string that holds their specific type of music; without them, they risk losing their 'vibe'. Queen Barb, a hard rock troll, is carrying out a world tour

with the intention of stealing all the strings in order to build a unified nation of trolls under rock music. Finding out that there are other trolls in the world, Queen Poppy, not knowing Barb's real plan, sets on a quest with Branch to reach the rock queen and help her unite all the trolls. Along the journey, Poppy and Branch visit the different tribes and discover the true intentions of Barb and her tribe. Together with the assistance of many diverse trolls, the protagonists find a way to defeat Barb and the rock tribe, learning at the same time a very valuable lesson about diversity and acceptance. Poppy manages to unite all the troll tribes by respecting their music differences and amending the damage her own ancestors have caused by separating them in the first place.

Trolls World Tour puts on stage two strong female protagonists, Queen Poppy and Queen Barb, who are sovereigns of their respective tribes. However, they are both quite unconventional queens. In the sequel, Poppy has become queen of the pop trolls because of her remarkable success liberating the trolls from the hands of the Bergens in *Trolls* (2016), achieving her position as a ruler thanks to her abilities and not because of her father's death (indeed King Peppy is very much alive). This is not the only characteristic that makes Poppy an unconventional queen. She still preserves her extreme optimism and confidence in herself for, as Tayongka claims, Poppy is "optimistic", "brave", "sincere", "cheerful", "trustworthy" and "always willing to help her friends" (29). Poppy is indeed brave and very ambitious, not letting anyone influence the decisions she makes, not even male characters such as her father the King or her friend Branch. When the pop trolls discover that their world contains five other kingdoms, she is the only one willing to find out more about the unknown troll world and meet the rest of the tribes. Furthermore, she is distinguished by her selflessness and her quest for global happiness. When Poppy finds out Barb's true intentions, she is determined to help all the trolls of the world recuperate their string. However, Poppy is not presented as a flawless queen. Her excessive belief in kindness and her impulsive personality renders her blind towards reality. She does not pay attention when Branch warns her about the rock trolls' real intentions, and she forgets to protect her own tribe from Barb's invasion. Nevertheless, despite her flaws, Poppy learns from her mistakes and is able to amend the damage she has caused.

In a similar way, Queen Barb is also portrayed as an unconventional queen. Unlike Poppy, she is not a cute optimistic troll. She wears a red mohawk, hoop earrings and loves hard rock music. Although Barb is represented as the opposite of Poppy, being the villain of the film, they have some characteristics in common. Barb, as well as Poppy, is also a brave ambitious troll who is willing to do anything to fulfil her plans. She wants to unify all the trolls under the same vibe and take revenge over the pop trolls who once destroyed the harmony between the tribes. Despite their differences, Poppy and Barb understand each other as queens and they both learn eventually from their mistakes, accepting that the divergences between trolls also matter. By portraying these two strong female alternative leaders, the film breaks with the stereotypes associated to princesses and queens in children's animated cinema, offering unconventional powerful personalities that are also suitable for strong queens.

Apart from the two female protagonists, the film also offers a positive image of masculinity through Poppy's male counterpart, Branch. In the sequel, Branch is no longer depressed, he has overcome his psychological trauma and is now happy and in good spirits like the rest of the pop trolls. Branch is not the stereotypical male character; he is not an impulsive reckless person, on the contrary he is the most sensible and rational troll within the pop community. Tayongka describes Branch, besides, as well-prepared: "Prior to doing everything, he will always have detailed preparation on everything. For Branch, everything has to be ready before hand" (30). Furthermore, he is also a tender and caring troll who is always willing to help Poppy and accompany her on her adventures. In fact, he sacrifices himself at the end of the

film in order to save Poppy from Barb. Branch rapidly understands that differences are important and that it is crucial to respect diversity, and he tries to teach this lesson to Poppy. The spectator knows from the beginning of the movie that Branch is in love with Poppy; however, their relationship remains a relation of friendship throughout the film. It is only at the end that Branch confesses what he feels and Poppy answers that she loves him as well. Nevertheless, they do not kiss or hug, they just high-five. Romance is thus presented here as a secondary story line. As reviewer Owen Gleiberman points out “even when Timberlake’s testy Branch declares his love to her, the effect seems weirdly muted by the film’s not wanting to overplay its romantic angle” (online). The film highlights therefore friendship between Poppy and Branch, instead of forcing a romantic relationship between a male and a female troll.

Another important feature of *Trolls World Tour* regarding gender issues is the film’s rich variety of leaders among the music tribes. For example, Poppy and Barb are young female trolls that rule on their own. Delta Dawn is a more mature female leader that rules over the country trolls, and Trollzart and King Trollex, who are male single leaders, rule over the classical and techno trolls. Finally, there is also a king and queen couple that govern over the funk tribe, sharing their powers as sovereigns. This heterogeneity among the leaders of the tribes is linked to the final message that the film conveys: the celebration of diversity. At the end of the film, Poppy, Barb, and all the trolls from the six tribes learn a very valuable lesson. They understand that the differences between their music genres and personalities have to be respected and acknowledged because diversity itself needs to be preserved. Reviewer Peter Gray argues that although the plot and the characters lack a certain development, the film’s message of acceptance works regardless. Both Dan Sarto and Victoria Davis also focus on the final message of the film, claiming that *Trolls World Tour* is “a masterful musical celebration of both art and diversity” (online). In addition, the trolls not only accept the six main tribes that form the trolls’ world, but they also embrace more recent tribes that did not have a previous specific territory like jazz, reggaeton or the K-pop trolls. This way, the film ends with a tremendous concert in which all the troll groups and their leaders celebrate diversity singing together songs from all the genres.

To conclude, we could say that despite having a predictable plotline, *Trolls World Tour* portrays complete and well-developed characters, especially Poppy and Branch. They both show distinguished personalities that complement each other by balancing the rashness of Poppy with the rationality of Branch. Apart from that, the film also conveys a very strong message about acceptance and respect that could be a valuable and useful lesson not only for the target audience of the film, but also for adults.

Works Cited

- Gleiberman, Owen. “*Trolls World Tour*: Film Review (review)”. *Variety*, 5 April 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/film/reviews/trolls-world-tour-review-anna-kendrick-justin-timberlake-1234570986/>
- Gray, Peter. “Film Review: *Trolls World Tour*’s Sunny Disposition Is Just What Families Need During These Uncertain Times (review)”. *The AU Review*, 14 September 2020, <https://www.theaureview.com/watch/film-review-trolls-world-tours-sunny-disposition-is-just-what-families-need-during-these-uncertain-times/>
- Sarto, Dan and Victoria Davis. “Gina Shay Talks *Trolls World Tour* Diversity and Dance Parties (review)”. *AWN*, 13 May 2020, <https://www.awn.com/animationworld/gina-shay-talks-trolls-world-tour-diversity-and-dance-parties>

Tayongka, Angela Nerissa. "Find Your Happy Place: A Study on Characterisation and the Meaning of Happiness in *Trolls* (2016)". *Journal of Linguistics, Literature, and Language Teaching*, 2(2) 2018, 25-36.

Helena Zúñiga Centenero

Zootopia (2016): The Ambitious She-Bunny and the (Im)perfect Allegory

CREDITS

Director: Byron Howard, Rich Moore, Jared Bush (co-director)

Written by: Jared Bush, Phil Johnston; story by: Byron Howard, Rich Moore, Jared Bush, Jim Reardon, Josie Trinidad, Phil Johnston, Jennifer Lee

Producer: Clark Spencer

Art direction: Matthias Lechner

Editors: Jeremy Milton, Fabienne Rawley

Music: Michael Giacchino

Main performers (voices): Ginnifer Goodwin (Judy Hopps), Jason Bateman (Nick Wilde), Idris Elba (Chief Bogo), Jenny Slate (Bellwether), Nate Torrence (Clawhauser) Bonnie Hunt (Bonnie Hopps), Don Lake (Stu Hopps), J.K. Simmons (Mayor Lionheart), Maurice LaMarche (Mr. Big)

Company: Walt Disney Animation Studios, Walt Disney Pictures, USA

Runtime: 1h 48'



REASONS TO SEE Zootopia

- It is a deceptively simple story with complex undertones connected to how communities stay together.
- It is an exploration of the extent of biological determinism and the nature of predators.
- The breathtakingly spectacular city of Zootopia.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN Zootopia

Zootopia (2016), also known as *Zootropolis* in a variety of countries of Europe and Africa, is a standalone computer animated film produced by Walt Disney Animation Studios. The film got overwhelmingly positive ratings and got several accolades, most remarkably the Academy Award to Best Animated film and, most interestingly, the Alliance of Women Film Journalists Award to Best Animated Film and Best Animated Female. Although the film had a very positive and warm reception by both critics and viewers, its production and distribution are not without legal controversy. Gary L. Goldman, owner of production company Esplanade Productions, filed a copyright infringement lawsuit against Disney, which was eventually dismissed. Goldman could not prove that his synopsis and treatment for his own movie *Looney*, part of a proposed franchise he also called 'Zootopia', had been plagiarized as he claimed.

Regarding its plot, *Zootopia* tells the story of Judy Hopps, a young female bunny from the countryside who wants to become a Police officer in the city of Zootopia.

Initially, her parents worry about her choice, as this is a very dangerous job to be performed by a rabbit, but they eventually (and reluctantly) relent and support Judy in her endeavor. If the story was to stop here and simply follow this line, it wouldn't be unlike any other story of dream-chasing and self-growth, but there is, of course, a catch. The opening scene reveals to the viewer that the society Judy lives in, entirely made up by animals, has transcended its natural instincts, and predators live now in harmony with their prey. Naturally, segregation is still around, and labor and societal roles are no exception. Judy, in any case, goes on to become the first rabbit Police officer in history and she is soon involved in the most mysterious case plaguing Zootopia: predators are being kidnapped for unknown reasons by unknown criminals. In her efforts to solve this case, Judy faces not only the usual obstacles of an investigation, but also the prejudice of her colleagues against all rookies and the vast loneliness of the big city. As the story progresses, however, Judy enlists the help of Nick Wilde, a sly fox who uses his cunning to cheat people out of their money and evade taxes. Together, they break down stereotypes and prejudices as well as uncovering the secret behind the strange disappearances. In an unexpected plot twist, the sheep Bellwether, Mayor Lionheart's sheepish assistant, has been planning to make a number of predators go feral and attack prey in order to upset the balance and usurp Mayor Lionheart's position. In the process, Mayor Lionheart is shown to be a shallow politician whose main interest is to retain power. Eventually, Judy and Nick expose the plot, arrest Bellwether, and remain best friends and colleagues.

Much of the film focuses on Judy's development as a character. In a way, *Zootopia* could be said to be a coming of age story in which a naïve, well-meaning girl discovers that not all that glitters is gold, as she faces stereotyping and discrimination because of her status as prey. As a character, Judy is the perfect example of a well-developed and relatable female protagonist. She is clever, brave, and extremely resourceful and has a very deep-rooted sense of justice, which prompts her to pursue her goals with zealous energy and determination. On the other hand, she is also naïve and somewhat gullible, which is the cause for complications in more than one occasion.

However, Judy wasn't always meant to be the solid protagonist that she eventually became. Originally, the viewers were going to be introduced to Zootopia through the eyes of Nick, with Judy acting as a sidekick. Director Byron Howard and writer Jared Bush soon realised, though, that if they wanted to portray the prejudice and disenchantment of a not so perfect society the focus had to be shifted: "If we're telling this movie about bias –something that is everywhere and in all of us, whether we want to admit it or not– the character that's going to help us tell that message is Judy, an innocent, [who comes] from a very supportive environment where she thinks everyone is beautiful, everyone gets along", Howard declared. "Then let Nick, this character who knows the truth about the world, bop up against her and they start to educate each other. When we flipped that, it was a major flip, but it worked so much better" (in Lussier, online). By placing Judy in the center, the film is able to explore topics such as discrimination and segregation from a standpoint closer to the viewer's while we follow Judy's journey and experience her own disappointments and frustrations.

Many critics see in Judy's journey through the city and society of Zootopia an exploration of current issues such as racism, stereotyping, and societal expectations (Beaudine, Osibodu, and Beavers 2017). While it is true that the film seems to convey a positive message through, for example, Judy and Nick's developing friendship (a prey and a predator) or the way Judy overcomes all obstacles to achieve her dream of becoming a Police officer, the metaphor implicit in the film may not translate too well to real life. This becomes apparent as soon as one starts to scratch the surface of positivity that envelops the film and starts to ask the right questions: aren't predators

biologically wired to hunt and devour prey? What are carnivores eating now? If the answer is meat, where is it coming from? Leaving aside the logistical issues, the deterministic nature of the animal kingdom presents some problems here. As reviewer Matt Zoller points out, “the film isn’t wrong to say that carnivores are biologically inclined to want to eat herbivores” (online) nor is it wrong to claim that sloths are slow-moving mammals or that bunnies reproduce at an alarming rate. Although the film treats these statements as harmful stereotyping, they are, nonetheless, true. If the film is to be read as an analogy of our own world, something very curious and potentially problematic takes place. The film, for example, claims that predators have learnt to suppress their feral instincts and now coexist with prey. Are the viewers to understand that racism is a natural instinct, too? Similarly, if the world is indeed divided into predator and prey, who is who in our world? As Zoller states, “I can imagine an anti-racist and a racist coming out of this film, each thinking it validated their sense of how the world works” (online).

As it must be clear by now, *Zootopia* is indeed a complex piece of narration with many virtues and some confusing points. If apprehended as an allegory, its foundations become shaky and its meanings start to blend and soon become muddled. This is partially due to “the generic structure of the film as comedy” (Zandlin, 1198), as it is through humor and unlikely situations that the status quo can be challenged and relevant questions asked, as the film does within its own context. However, this is an imperfect allegory, as its messages are “at times contradictory, making it difficult to discern a coherent narrative throughout” (Zandlin, 1198). Instead of judging the film for its shortcomings, however, perhaps it would be more useful to focus on the positive and very necessary message of cooperation and self-improvement. This is, after all, a Disney film, and as reviewer Jordan Hoffman points out “it concludes happily and without much nuance. There’s ample space given for prey like Judy to apologize to unjustly accused predators (like her fox buddy), and for everyone to grow. It’s a good message” (online). Judy’s feistiness and resilience are also refreshing, making her one of the most positive female characters to emerge not only in recent animated children’s films but generally speaking in US cinema. Let us, then, enjoy this wonderful story and learn from its message... and shortcomings.

Works Cited

- Beaudine, G., Osibodu, O., and A. Beavers. “Disney’s Metaphorical Exploration of Racism and Stereotypes: A review of *Zootopia*”. *Comparative Education Review* 61.1, 2017, 227-234.
- Hoffman, Jordan. “*Zootopia* Review – Disney’s Furry Fable Gets its Claws Out for the Bigots”. *The Guardian*, 3 March 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/mar/03/zootopia-zootropolis-zoomania-review-disney>
- Lussier, Germain. “How Disney Fixed a Huge Mistake With *Zootopia*, Just One Year Before Release”. Gizmodo.com, 20 January 2016, <https://io9.gizmodo.com/how-disney-fixed-a-huge-mistake-with-zootopia-just-one-1753845684>
- Sandlin, Jennifer A. “‘It’s Called a Hustle, Sweetheart’: Black Lives Matter, the Police State, and the Politics of Colonizing Anger in *Zootopia*”. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 51.2, 2018, 1190-1213.
- Zoller Seitz, Matt. “*Zootopia*” (review). *Roger Ebert.com*, 4 March 2016, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/zootopia-2016>

Rubén Campos Arjona

Klaus (2019): Kindness is Contagious

CREDITS

Director: Sergio Pablos, Carlos Martínez López (co-director)
Written by: Sergio Pablos, Jim Mahoney, Zach Lewis; story by: Sergio Pablos
Producers: Jinko Gotoh, Sergio Pablos, Matthew Teevan, Mercedes Gamero, Mikel Lejarza
Art direction: Sergio Pablos
Editor: Pablo García Revert
Music: Alfonso G. Aguilar
Main performers (voices): Jason Schwartzman (Jesper), J.K. Simmons (Klaus), Rashida Jones (Alva), Will Sasso (Mr. Ellingboe), Joan Cusack (Mrs. Krum), Neda Margrethe Labba (Márgu)
Company: The SPA Studios, Atresmedia Cine, Spain/UK
Runtime: 1h 37'



REASONS TO SEE Klaus

- It is Netflix's first original animated feature film.
- This is hand-drawn animation. The animators applied the latest digital technology and CGI elements to the traditional technique, though the artistic abilities of the creators in the use of lights and color make it look like a 3D movie.
- In a very original and funny way, *Klaus* tries to go back to the origins of Santa Klaus, providing a simple but still amazing message: "A true selfless act always sparks another".

REPRESENTING GENDER IN Klaus

Klaus (2019) is the first animated feature that Netflix has produced exclusively for its online streaming platform. The animated holiday comedy was directed by the Spanish director Sergio Pablos, a Disney veteran who worked on such blockbusters as *Tarzan*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and *Hercules*. He also created the story for *Despicable Me* and eventually founded his own animation company, the Sergio Pablos Animation Studios, in Spain. *Klaus* was released in 2019 and won seven Annie Awards including Best Animated Feature, Directing in an Animated Feature Production and Production Design in An Animated Feature Production. It also picked up a BAFTA for Best Animated Feature and was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Animated Feature Film. It has been lauded by many critics as one of the greatest animated films made outside the Hollywood studio system in the past ten years, but, unfortunately, it lost the Oscar to *Toy Story 4*. What is noteworthy is the fact that *Klaus* was produced using the traditional hand-drawn crafts and painted artwork of 2D animation and not computer-generated animation. Pablos and his crew created new and revolutionary

lighting techniques that gave the film and its characters a unique look and depth. As Scaife notes, “the exaggerated character designs are at once spindly and pleasantly rounded, and, most impressively, the textured, naturalistic lighting gives the film’s throwback techniques a distinctive and thoroughly modern edge” (online).

Pablos’ filmmaking team included veteran producers Jinko Gotoh and Marisa Roman (co-founder and producer at The SPA Studios in Madrid), as well as artists from twenty different countries who spoke fifteen different languages. This makes it pleasantly difficult to say to which nationality *Klaus* belongs; this peculiarity indeed is one of its strengths. Gotoh is the Vice President of Women in Animation and, certainly, *Klaus* marked a big win for gender equality: as she stated in *The Women of Klaus*, a promotional documentary released by Netflix to accompany the film, the crew included 43% women. In their interviews the two producers (Jinko Gotoh and Marisa Roman) and actress Rashida Jones (Alva’s voice) also highlight the diversity and gender parity in the film. They discuss how prioritizing inclusion helped them to build one of the most diverse crews in animation history. “We’re striving to hit our goal to hit 50-50 by 2025, and *Klaus* represents all of that”, said Gotoh. Although the production team had previously announced its gender parity goal, in 2015, Gotoh “never pressured Sergio as a filmmaker to hire for gender parity, but this movie truly represents gender parity and diversity” (in Tangcay, online).

Pablos’s film explores the mythical origins of Santa Klaus through the story of Jesper, a spoiled and selfish postal academy student who enjoys his privileged existence as the son of the wealthy Postmaster General. However, Jesper’s life of luxury comes to a sudden end when his father announces that it is time for his adult son to work for a living. Jesper is thus banished to the miserable island of Smeerensburg near the Arctic Circle. The only way to be allowed to return home is to start a post office and get the townsfolk to send six thousand letters in a year’s time. Unfortunately, this task proves difficult for Jesper, since Smeerensburg is a forlorn, frozen village that thrives on the hate between two warring clans, the Krums and the Ellingboes. The feuding families do not dare speak to each other, let alone send letters. Jesper’s fate changes when he meets the disillusioned schoolmaster Alva (who turned fishmonger to pay for an escape route back home) and the enigmatic woodcarver who lives at the edge of the forest, Klaus. This unlikely friendship forges a new neighborly alliance with the children’s collaboration. They eventually manage to return laughter to Smeerensburg, end the feud, and bring the Christmas spirit back to the town.

The first time we meet Jesper he is a spoiled rich kid living in an opulent mansion, doing nothing for anyone but himself. He is unpleasant, entitled, and privileged. His authoritarian father’s decision aims to teach him the value of money and hard work and the importance of responsibility. Jesper is supposed to achieve the imposed goal his father sets using his talents and skills, with no external help or special relationship that would make a crucial difference in his self-made rise. Though it seems he will not be able to succeed, Jesper eventually understands how he can take advantage of the unfavorable conditions in order to boost his postal office. Lazy as he is, Jesper is initially motivated only by self-interest. He is self-centered to the extent that he manipulates local children for personal gain. He tricks them into writing and mailing letters in order to reach his target and win his freedom. “We needed someone who was a bit more selfish, someone who needed to learn the lesson of altruism” to move the story forward, Pablos declared. “Basically, this guy had to con or scam a whole town into getting his own selfish way. That was the necessary step for him to realize, to turn his selfish means into altruistic means” (in Radulovic, online). The creators wanted Jesper to be immensely self-centered so that Klaus could be the catalyst for his transformation.

Despite his aloof and solitary personality, Mr. Klaus is a talented toy maker. Jesper, therefore, plans to use this knowledge to create a scheme to convince the children of Smeerenburg to send Mr. Klaus letters telling him how well behaved they have been and asking for presents in return. Unfortunately, Jesper finds out that the entire town is illiterate, so getting any letters to mail from them becomes a great challenge. A crucial role in this transformation is played by Alva, an attractive and sensual woman who has given up on her calling to be a teacher and instead has started using the schoolhouse as a makeshift fish market. Alva helps Jesper in his quest to unify the Smeerenburg community and eventually befriends him. However, their relationship is not smooth from the beginning. As far as gender issues are concerned, Jesper seems to be the relief valve for her anger and disillusionment. There are many moments in which this woman proves to be hard and aggressive towards Jesper, showing an unmotivated violence that –like any form of violence– cannot be tolerated.

Alva's decision to quit teaching comes from the fact that no one in Smeerenburg sends their children to school because that would mean mingling with the enemy. In this gloomy town, children do not have friends and being mean to one another is the expected social etiquette. We never really learn why the two groups despise each other so much. What we know is that “the town is haunted by a tradition of violence. No one really has an answer for how it started, only that it's always been that way” (Stevens, online). The two families have been at war with each other for so long that hating each other has become a tradition unto itself: their rivalry stands, as a film character argues, for “centuries of glorious hatred, passed down through generations!” This pitiful situation also sends the message that hatred is something that is learned, since the kids are influenced by the adults to start hating from the beginning of their lives. At the same time, *Klaus* shows the terrible outcome of a lack of education and how it crucially influences the rise of misunderstanding and conflicts. This is why “Things take a turn when Jesper realizes that an act of charity and good will overrides his own selfish ambitions” (Almachar, online). His selfish motives soon give way to actual selflessness as his actions breathe new life into the town, opposed only by the clan leaders, the matriarch Mrs. Krum and the patriarch Mr. Ellingboe, who want to restore the spiteful past by whatever means necessary.

As the film progresses, it also tells us that hate can be unlearned, and the acts of pure kindness change the kids and consequently the adults, making *Klaus* “a fun and heart-warming origin story that also operates with an anti-hate message” (Almachar, online). Alva is moved by the kids' will to learn and, finally, their enthusiasm makes her regain her teaching role. In a moving and hard decision, she gets the money she was saving to leave and instead invests it on the school. As the children from opposing families begin to attend school together and play with each other –not knowing the implications of such an act– their parents are forced to confront their hatred and “begin to change, at first reluctantly (and hilariously), and then genuinely” (Rought, online). In *Klaus*, every single character goes through a transformation. Jesper ends up having an incredible impact on the town and its inhabitants, since he sets in motion not only the end of the feud, but also the beginning of Santa Klaus' legend. His is “very much a standard tale of a selfish, scrawny victim of arrested development, maturing into a responsible contributing member of society, by being thrown into the ringer of how the other half lives” (Barnes, online) but this is by no means a cliché. Each change the characters go through is motivated by the good action of someone else, making real the message that, as the film claims, “a true selfless act always sparks another”. According to Sergio Pablos, the message they tried to present “has to do with the contagious and transformative power of good will. The story is presented as a comedy, but there's a deep heart behind it” (in Desowitz, online). That a selfish young man is the

catalyst for this discovery confirms that this is a story about how toxic masculinity can be abandoned and transformed into a force for good.

Pablos took it further by adding the theme of diversity through the indigenous Sámi Scandinavians. This is another great point made by *Klaus*, since children may learn about the Scandinavian indigenous group, the Sámi people. From an historical and geographical point of view, the Sámi are the oldest indigenous population in Europe: of hunter and fisherman origin, it is estimated that currently there are 80,000 people with their own culture and traditions. These people are also related to Santa Klaus, identified in many versions of the legend as native of Lapland. Despite the well-known legend that Santa lives in Lapland/The North Pole, it is very rare to see any indigenous representation, especially in animated children's films, where Santa and his elves are very often Americanized. *Klaus* gives us an accurate representation: the Sámi community depicted in the film is given Sámi features, they speak the Sámi language, and wear the traditional garments. One of the favorite characters is without any doubt Márqu, a little Sámi girl who turns out to be essential in Jesper's transformation, since she triggers his understanding of cultural inclusion and acceptance of gender equality.

In conclusion, *Klaus* can be considered a great movie in which empathy and communication (metaphorically represented by letters) are fundamental tools to break down linguistic and gender barriers. As Jason Kerin writes, "In age of mean-spirited and toxic environment on social media outlets and out there in the real-world, it's comforting notion to see a feature (be it animated or live-action) showcase the important values of being kind and spreading good-will to all" (online). *Klaus* highlights the moral enrichment generated by the encounter with otherness. In this film, alterity becomes the fundamental parameter in the process of transformation: it constitutes a precious source for creating a dialogic interaction useful to overcome prejudice and conflicts generated by differences.

Works Cited

- Almachar, Allen. "Film Review – *Klaus*". *Macguffin*, 18 November 2019, <https://macguff.in/film-reviews/klaus/>
- Barnes, Tyrone. "Review: *Klaus*". *Geeks Under Grace*, 22 December 2019, <https://geeksundergrace.com/movies/review-klaus/>
- Desowitz, Bill. "Anecy: Netflix Premieres Footage from First Original Animated Feature *Klaus* in Innovative 2D". *IndieWire*, 13 June 2019, <https://www.indiewire.com/2019/06/anecy-netflix-premieres-footage-animated-klaus-2d-1202149577/>
- Kerin, Jason. "A Christmas Animated Miracle". *Jason's Movie Blog*, 23 December 2019, <https://jasonsmovieblog.com/2019/12/23/klaus-2019-review/>
- Netflix, *The Women of Klaus*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UpfUiHe8xS4>
- Radulovic, Petrana. "*Klaus*' Director Pushed Past the Limitations of Traditional Animation". *Polygon*, 15 November 2019, <https://www.polygon.com/2019/11/15/20966847/netflix-klaus-sergio-pablos-interview-despicable-me>
- Rought, Karen. "Netflix's *Klaus* Will Charm the Christmas Spirit Right into You". *Hypable*, 26 November 2019, <https://www.hypable.com/netflix-klaus-movie-review/>
- Scaife, Steven. "Review: *Klaus* Gorgeously Grapples with the Reinvention of Tradition". *Slant*, 5 November 2019, <https://www.slantmagazine.com/film/review-klaus-gorgeously-grapples-with-the-reinvention-of-tradition/>

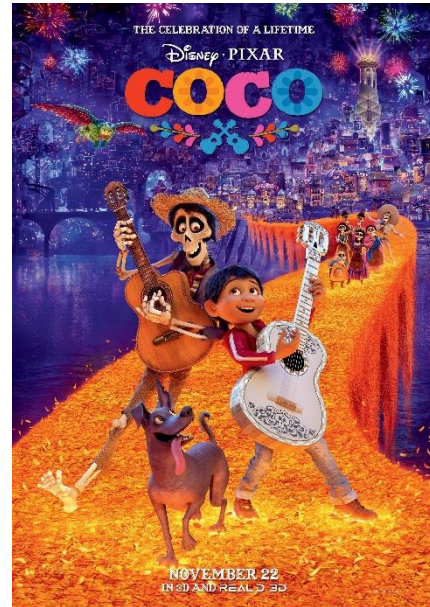
- Stevens, Ashlie. "Netflix's Visually Stunning *Klaus* Should Be Your New Holiday Viewing Tradition". *Salon*, 16 November 2019, <https://www.salon.com/2019/11/16/klaus-review-christmas-netflix/>
- Tangcay, Jazz. "Why *Klaus* Represents Gender Parity and Diversity". *Variety*, 30 January 2020 <https://variety.com/2020/artisans/news/klaus-netflix-gender-parity-diversity-1203482409/>

Silvia Gervasi

Coco (2017): Remembering the Lost Man

CREDITS

Director: Lee Unkrich, Adrian Molina
Written by: Adrian Molina, Matthew Aldrich; story by: Lee Unkrich, Jason Katz, Adrian Molina, Matthew Aldrich
Producer: Darla K. Anderson
Art direction: Bert Berry
Editor: Steve Bloom, Lee Unkrich
Music: Michael Giacchino
Main performers (voices): Anthony Gonzalez (Miguel), Gael García Bernal (Héctor), Benjamin Bratt (Ernesto de la Cruz), Alana Ubach (Mamá Imelda), Renee Victor (Abuelita), Alfonso Arau (Papá Julio)
Company: Pixar Animation Studios, USA
Runtime: 1h 45'



REASONS TO SEE *Coco*

- Its fabulous animation, based on Mexican culture's celebration of the Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead).
- Its delicate reflection on the importance of memory in the remembrance of the dead.
- The importance of family in this film and Miguel's love for his great-grandma Coco.

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *Coco*

Coco (2017), a stand-alone film and Oscar-award winner for Best Animated Film, was released between two Pixar franchise films, *Cars 3* (2017) and *Incredibles 2* (2018). Although *Toy Story 4* (2019) came soon after, hopefully the release of another stand-alone film in 2020, *Onward*, might consolidate this trend for future Pixar/Disney productions. The *Toy Story* franchise might reach a fifth instalment, but in general film series tend to disappoint as successive sequels lose energy and more stand-alone films seem the solution to spectator fatigue. It must be noted, at any rate, that *Coco* was not without controversy at the time of its generally well received release due to accusations of cultural appropriation and even of plagiarism. Unkrich and Molina's film is, after all, an American movie dealing with Mexican culture's celebration of the dead in its *Día de los Muertos*. The fans of *The Book of Life* (2014), a film on the same subject directed by Mexican filmmaker Jorge R. Gutierrez, launched a campaign against the Pixar film, accusing *Coco* of numerous cultural gaffes and, most worryingly, of having plagiarized if not the plot at least the visual art of Gutierrez's film. Indeed, there are similarities, most likely due to both films' taking inspiration from the same art and culture, but *The*

Book of Life, scripted by Gutierrez himself, is an embarrassingly backward film as regards the plot and, particularly, the presentation of its dated gender issues. In contrast, *Coco* is quite progressive in its total rejection of toxic masculinity, its avoidance of romantic themes, and its focus on young Miguel's love for his elderly great-grandmother.

Miguel Rivera, a twelve-year-old from Santa Cecilia in Mexico, loves music, but his shoe-making family abhors it for unclear reasons, taking it for granted that he will eventually become a shoemaker like them. His Abuelita Elena in particular, incessantly bullies Miguel for these reasons. Trying to get part in a local musical contest, Miguel steals a guitar from the tomb of his admired local idol, singer Ernesto de la Cruz, whom he secretly believes to be the father of his great-grandmother Mamá Coco. This offence against the dead sets a curse on the boy, who finds himself magically transported to the Land of the Dead. Miguel needs the blessing of a dead relative to return home, but when Mamá Imelda (Mamá Coco's dead mother) offers hers on condition that Miguel abandons music, he rejects it. Miguel decides then to find de la Cruz and ask for his blessing as his descendant. In this he is helped by a hopeless skeleton called Héctor, himself desperate because his family is beginning to forget him, and he will soon vanish for good. When Miguel finally meets de la Cruz, he realizes that he has been wrong all along and that Héctor is his real ancestor. Even worse, poor Héctor did not abandon his family as his wife Imelda and daughter Coco believe (which explains the family's hatred of music) but was murdered by de la Cruz, who wanted to steal Héctor's songs. With Miguel's help, Héctor stands now a chance to be remembered by Coco and all his family as the good man and great musician he once was.

The person signing their review as Li gives *Coco* only 2'75 points out of 5 considering its gender issues, on the grounds that only 10% of the creative decision-makers were female and the movie does not pass the Bechdel test, "the lowest of low bars to pass for equal gender representation" (online). Li complains that although "the Rivera women in *Coco* are strong, inspiring, and lovingly crafted, forming a long line of matriarchal figures who provide the family unit for Miguel Rivera", they are not the film's main focus. The women "play pivotal roles in the film. But Miguel's *abuelita*, his great-grandmother Mamá Coco, and their ancestor Mamá Imelda (...) come and go in short bursts, never finding a chance to actually hold a conversation with each other" (online). This is correct, but perhaps it is time to question the validity of the Bechdel test. *Coco* is focused on Miguel's strange odyssey to return home from the land of the Dead as he deals with his family's rejection of his passion for music and his gradual discovery of where his talent comes from: Mamá Coco's long-lost, presumably absent father Héctor. The whole point of the film is to prove that the judgement on Héctor (and on Miguel) is wrong; in fact, Mamá Imelda and Abuelita Helena have perpetuated that misjudgment to unacceptable extremes in Abuelita's awful bullying of Miguel and her denial of his right to choose a profession. Any conversations between the women should have to deal with this, which is not exactly a matter to present them under a good light. On the other hand, nobody applies the reverse Bechdel test to films about women. In *Frozen*, for instance, Kristoff has no significant conversations with other male characters, unless we count his reindeer Sven, but nobody would complain that this affects the film's gender equality negatively. It is just the case that *Coco* deals mainly with male characters and *Frozen* with female characters, and they must be judged according to what the scripts require and not to some external measurement that is not always applicable.

On his side, John D. 'Río' Riofrío focuses on the dilemma Miguel needs to solve: the perception that a man devoted to his career cannot be a good family man. The film presents singing idol Ernesto de la Cruz as "brave enough to have followed his dream of stardom at the expense of his many relationships" (391); he becomes Miguel's role

model as long as the boy believes that de la Cruz is his own great-great-grandfather. Ernesto “models for Miguel the price, and reward for eschewing family in favour of a relentless, but also honest, pursuit of self” (391). In contrast to “the lavish luxury of the remembered and adored” (391) which de la Cruz enjoys in the afterlife, Héctor represents “the poverty and pain of the forgotten” (391), until he finally recalls that his former boss murdered him and did all he could to erase his memory. Miguel’s subsequent discovery that de la Cruz is a dishonest man and a selfish criminal sets the record straight for Héctor, even though the explanation of what really happened still fails to appease a furious Mamá Imelda. In her anger, she belittles murder as a valid excuse for Héctor to have disappeared, because what she questions is the roaming life of the male musician which Héctor chose as his professional pursuit. In that sense, the film cannot reach closure and offer a solution to Miguel’s dilemma: he is finally allowed to pursue his dream musical career, but, since he is still too young to marry or become a father, the film cannot say whether he will manage to successfully combine career and home life, as Mamá Imelda expected of Héctor. The problem is just delayed to his future adulthood, though at least Miguel’s adventure results in Héctor’s reappraisal and reintegration in the family as a good, unfairly victimized man.

The looks and the career of villain Ernesto de la Cruz appears to have been inspired by Mexican idol Jorge Negrete (1911-53), though, of course, I am not suggesting with this that Negrete was guilty of any crime. In fact the connection between de la Cruz and Negrete might be offensive to Mexicans, just as other issues are potentially offensive. The Mexican person signing as Azul their blog post demolishing *Coco* is particularly annoyed by the cultural appropriation of the *Día de los Muertos* and by the highlighting of the border separating the living and the dead in the film’s afterlife: “Fuck them for robbing those who face the daily violence and separation from our families of a narrative that empowers us. *Coco* felt like a good argument on atheism, because truly, *Coco* is not a restful afterlife so much as it is a frightening prospect if you are poor, disabled, undocumented, black, LGBTQIA or otherwise disenfranchised” (online). Where Azul is wrong is in their supposition that Ernesto de la Cruz is somehow rewarded in the afterlife by a Christian God, despite being evil. The afterlife that *Coco* offers has social classes with different degrees of material comfort because it supposes that the riches of the dead come from the memories of the living. De la Cruz, who is still adored by many fans, is, therefore rich, whereas Héctor, almost forgotten by his family, is extremely poor. The suggestion, then, is that many evil men like de la Cruz are being unfairly venerated as celebrities after their death and regardless of their crimes. This has nothing to do with Christian values but with the wrong judgement passed by the living on the dead, and particularly on dead powerful men who still retain a great deal of power decades after their death. What this says about the living is that only strange miracles, like Héctor’s recovery of his memories, can redress appalling wrongs. That de la Cruz is an alpha male and Héctor the kind of men that his type victimizes and destroys send a powerful message to boys: be careful who you admire and make sure you love the right man, that is to say, the man that deserves affection and not just admiration.

Obviously, a similar story focusing on the same gender issues could have been told without appropriating Mexican culture for its background, and sticking to US peoples and landscapes. *Coco* is, however, what it is and this cannot be changed, as *Moana* or *Mulan* are what they are and cannot be changed, regardless of the offense they may cause local audiences. It would certainly be desirable for Disney to help local filmmakers, instead of exploiting other cultures, and distribute their animated films worldwide, as Netflix is doing with many series and films produced outside the USA (*Klaus* is an excellent example of this). In the particular case of *Coco*, not even *The Book of Life* can be invoked as a corrective for this situation because although the

director/scriptwriter is Mexican the film was made in the USA by Real FX Creative Studios (and distributed by 20th Century Fox). Still, *Coco* is a fine film with a powerful message on masculinity that boys in particular can benefit from, especially if they are willing to celebrate, as the film does, the importance of family and Miguel's deep love for a woman: Mamá Coco.

Works Cited

- Azul. "Shame on Disney/Pixar: Observation on *Coco*". *Guide to Belonging Everywhere: Adventure, Whimsy & Puppies for Everyone*, 7 November 2017, <https://happycosmopolite.wordpress.com/2017/11/07/shame-on-pixar-observations-on-coco/>
- Li. "Coco" (review), *Mediaversity*, 9 December 2017, <https://www.mediaversityreviews.com/film-reviews/2017/12/9/coco>
- 'Rio' Riofrío, John D. "(Re)Animating the Dead: Memory, Music, and Divine Justice in *Coco*". *Latinx Cine in the Twenty-First Century*, Frederick Luis Aldama, Paul Espinosa and Rosa-Linda Fregoso (eds.). University of Arizona Press, 2019. 382-404.

Sara Martín Alegre

Onward (2020): Brotherly Love

CREDITS

Director: Dan Scanlon

Written by (also original story): Dan Scanlon, Jason Headley, Keith Bunin

Producer: Kori Rae

Art direction: Noah Klocek

Editors: Sharon Calahan, Adam Habib

Music: Jeff Dana, Mychael Danna

Main performers (voices): Tom Holland (Ian Lightfoot), Chris Pratt (Barley Lightfoot), Julia Louis-Dreyfuss (Laurel Lightfoot), Octavia Spencer (the Manticore), Mel Rodriguez (Colt Bronco), Lena Waithe (Officer Spector)

Company: Pixar Animation Studios, USA

Runtime: 1h 42'



REASONS TO SEE *Onward*

- It is a sort of *Frozen* for boys, with a focus on brothers Ian, who has magical powers, and Barley, who doesn't but is anyway a great guy.
- For its emotive approach to the figure of the missing father and its respect for the mother raising her two boys alone.
- Because it is a great movie that went unfairly unnoticed on its release in March 2020 (blame Covid-19 for that).

RE/PRESENTING GENDER IN *Onward*

Onward (2020) is a brilliant Pixar film which had the misfortune of being released in March 2020, coinciding with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Unlike other animated children's films that could be rescheduled for streaming (such as *Trolls World Tour*), *Onward* was lost from view in the chaos ensuing the closure of cinemas all over the world. Even so, thanks to the reopening of cinemas, mostly in Asia and partially in the USA, the film managed to do considerably well in the box office grossing about \$141 million. At the time of writing, the nominations for the 2021 Oscars have not been announced yet, but hopefully *Onward* will be a strong candidate if not the winner in the Best Animated Film category. This is a beautiful film about two brothers and deserves having the same impact among boys that *Frozen* had among girls. Hopefully its availability on streaming service Disney + will lend it a long second life.

The plot narrates how the preference of the magical creatures for convenient, non-magical human technology has caused magic to disappear from their world. They live mundane lives still apart from humans, apparently content and not missing the old magic. However, on his sixteenth birthday, Ian Lightfoot, the youngest member of an elf

family, is told by his mother Laurel that his late dad (who had passed away before Ian was born) had left instructions for magic to bring him back from the dead for twenty-four hours as a present to his son. Unlike his ungifted elder brother, goofy metalhead Barley, Ian can work the spell but not with enough strength to have his father return whole. Trying to complete the spell with yet another magical stone, since the original one shatters and Ian has only managed to bring back their father's lower half, the two brothers embark on a mad quest that eventually leads them not too far from home. As a horrifying dragon chases them, and the Sun gets low in the sky, Ian realizes that optimistic though not-too-bright Barley may be all he needs as the best possible replacement for his father.

Despite the clear focus on masculinity and on brotherly love, most online comment on *Onward* has to do with LGBTQ issues. This is so because of a secondary character, a purple cyclops called Specter employed as a Police officer who is Pixar/Disney's first openly gay character. Voiced by lesbian screenwriter, producer, and actress Lena Waithe, Specter has attracted much positive criticism even though she only appears in one scene. Her line in it, nonetheless – "It's not easy being a new parent; my girlfriend's daughter got me pulling my hair out, okay?" – was sufficient for the film to be "banned in multiple Middle East markets due to the film's minor reference to a lesbian relationship" (Wiseman, online). Sam Adams praises Pixar/Disney for not including the scene in the trailer and thus keeping expectations low, unlike what happened in *Finding Dory* with a barely seen lesbian couple. As they explain, the point of the scene is not the line itself but that it is barely noticed: "The film doesn't pause to let it sink in or isolate the moment with a cut for emphasis. It passes unremarked, because in this world, it's accepted as a fact of life. Some babies have two daddies, and some babies have two mommies, even if those mommies happen to be centaurs or elves" (online). That is fine indeed but two objections can be raised: on the one hand, though pleasing, the brief scene shows how far we are still from having gay or lesbian parents be central in animated children's fictions; on the other hand, so much attention has been paid to this issue that what *Onward* really deals with has escaped critical attention.

Among the few who did pay attention, an important issue has been *Onward's* unashamed intention to elicit tears of emotion among the boys and men in the audience. According to Ryan Gilby (online), the tear-jerker "had always been sold as a female phenomenon" though in the late 1980s and early 1990s a number of films encouraged "male viewers to reach for the Mansize Kleenex" (which was indeed a thing). Gilby connects that past wave to items as diverse as the publication of *Iron John: A Book About Men* (1990) by Robert Bly – a book that invited men to be in touch with his inner man, including the inner warrior – , the popularity of emotional men such as actor Robin Williams, and "much chatter about the 'inner child' and the New Man". Gilby names as *Onward's* distant predecessors the popular weepy *Field of Dreams* (1989) and the far less known road movie *Coupe de Ville* (1990). *Onward*, Gilby claims, "contains elements of both films but none of their nauseating sentimental indulgence. Any tears it earns are honest ones" (online). This shows a traditionally masculine preoccupation with distinguishing between valid, manly emotion and invalid, effeminate emotion which is, besides, unfair to the rather notable *Field of Dreams*. *Onwards* can be said to be an honest film but it is, after all, also an instance of audience manipulation, as director Dan Scanlon knows very well how to alternate comic and tearful moments.

In any case, the same preoccupation with when it is legitimate for men to cry watching movies is expressed in the blog post by Mac Harris, who examines *Onward* from a Christian point of view. Harris presents himself as a "Disney-Pixar hater" annoyed by actor Chris Pratt's description of *Onward* as the ultimate "man cry movie" (in Harris, online). According to Harris, Pratt (who voices Barley), declared that he

hoped *Onward* would teach young boys “to start learning emotional intelligence”, and understand that “it’s okay for them to openly love, to be emotional. These are healthy, natural things” (online). Feeling “challenged” and “intrigued”, Harris did see the film, “And cry I did”. He clarifies that having lost his father at a young age (like director Dan Scanlon), and having brothers, he falls “into the film’s target audience”, yet Harris acknowledges that *Onward* has much to say about the “father wound” and the “bond of brothers” that needs to be discussed by families. His approach, as I have noted, is religious, still Harris’s analysis of the film’s gender issues is valid: this *is* a film aimed at male audiences, which has plenty to say about missing fathers and, above all, about caring elder brothers. Teen Ian’s characterization is quite transparent: he is shy, awkward but gifted. Yet, the true value of *Onward* lies in making the happy-go-lucky, nerdish Barley a brother so truly supportive that Ian ends up not missing his dad. The scene in which the boy ticks off the list of things he wanted to share with his dad but has already shared with his brother is one to enjoy and remember. It would be in any case unfair not to mention, with praise, the characterization of Ian and Barley’s mother, Laurel, the widow who, as the film shows, has raised her boys admirably and is there to help them in this new challenge. She does not miss her long-gone late husband but understands why her boys do, even though this does not mean that they find fault with their upbringing in his absence, quite the opposite.

In conclusion, *Onward* is a delightful, moving film that certainly has all the necessary elements to teach young boys how to show emotion, particularly those with brothers. Few films really deal with this issue and it is to be supposed that *Frozen* opened up a gap that Dan Scanlon and his co-writers knew how to fill in. A great achievement indeed.

Works Cited

- Adams, Sam. “Pixar’s *Onward* Finally Gets the ‘Exclusively Gay Moment’ Right”, *Slate*, 21 February 2020, <https://slate.com/culture/2020/02/pixar-onward-exclusively-gay-moment-mission-accomplished.html>
- Gilby, Ryan. “*Onward*: A Weepy Pixar Animation that Earns Every Teardrop”, *New Statesman*, 4 March 2020, <https://www.newstatesman.com/onward-pixar-review>
- Harris, Mac. “Why *Onward* is Worth The Stream (Plus a Guide for Family Discussion)”, *Rooted Ministry*, 3 April 2020, <https://www.rootedministry.com/blog/why-onward-is-worth-the-stream-plus-a-guide-for-family-discussion>
- Wiseman, Andreas. “Disney/Pixar’s ‘*Onward*’ Banned In Multiple Middle East Countries Due To Lesbian Reference”, *Deadline*, 6 March 2020, <https://deadline.com/2020/03/disney-onward-banned-multiple-middle-east-markets-lesbian-lgbt-reference-1202876168/>

Sara Martín Alegre

Disclaimer and Creative Commons License

DISCLAIMER

The text in the hands of the reader contains work written by the students enrolled in my elective course 'Gender Studies: New Sexualities, New Textualities' of the MA in Advanced English Studies, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (Autumn/Winter 2020-21). As an academic work, this volume requires no permission or license from third parties since it is published for the only purpose of disseminating knowledge. Neither my students, nor myself, have received nor will receive any earnings from the online publication of the volume. All the texts are published by permission of the authors.

CREATIVE COMMONS LICENSE



Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (by-nc-nd)

You are free: to Share – to copy, distribute and transmit the work under the following conditions:

Attribution – You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work).

Non-commercial – You may not use this work for commercial purposes.

No Derivative Works – You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work. You're specifically forbidden to generate academic research and publications based on this volume, though you may quote from it. If you wish to cite it, the correct **citation** would be:

Martín Alegre, Sara (ed.). *Gender in 21st Century Animated Children's Cinema*. Bellaterra: Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2021.

Followed by the URL of the Dipòsit Digital de Documentació, UAB

Notice – For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work. If in doubt, contact the editor, Sara Martín Alegre (Sara.Martin@uab.cat)

