Not Just Entertainment: Hollywood Animation and the Corporate Merchandising

Aesthetics and Narratives for a Children’s Audience

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Sarah G. Hoffman
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Not Just Entertainment: Hollywood Animation and the Corporate Merchandising
Aesthetics and Narratives for a Children’s Audience

By
SARAH G. HOFFMAN

has been approved for
the Film Division
and the College of Fine Arts by

Ofer Eliaz
Assistant Professor of Film Studies

Elizabeth Sayrs
Interim Dean, College of Fine Arts
ABSTRACT

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Not Just Entertainment: Hollywood Animation and the Corporate Merchandising Aesthetics and Narratives for a Children’s Audience

Director of Thesis: Ofer Eliaz

This thesis explores different techniques in aesthetics and narrative the Walt Disney Company, Pixar, and DreamWorks use to sell corporate ideologies to child consumers and family audiences in the 1980’s and early 2000’s. Disney scholars recognize Disney Princess Movies as large merchandising agents for moral pedagogy for children. Film theory on aestheticism demonstrate how Disney’s social representations reside in a spectacle rather than an actual moral educators for children. Disney’s affiliate, Pixar Inc., designs their characters for the Disney market, but Pixar promotes itself as a more socially conscience company. DreamWorks’s early films propose alternative methods for making children’s films by eliminating formulaic narratives and incorporating non-merchandisable comedy. These animation production studios provide children and families with antidotes for reality’s drudgery through images ranging from idyllic fairy tale narratives to their parodies.
DEDICATION

To my family, the McAllister family, and friends here and abroad
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INTRODUCTION: REVIVAL OF ANIMATION AND A NEW HOLLYWOOD
MARKET FOR CHILDREN

Children in movie-going audiences “sat still for the cartoons” as early as the 1930’s. Thomas Doherty uses this statement to describe how early motion-picture bills were set up for family audiences, but it also describes the audience for animated films sixty years later and further. Animated production studios in the late 80’s and the 1990’s compete to make blockbusters suited for family audiences. In one decade, Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* (Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise, 1991) is nominated for Best Picture, Pixar’s *Toy Story* (John Lasseter, 1995) ranks as one of the highest grossing films in 1995, and DreamWorks *Shrek* (Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jenson, 2001) wins the first Oscar title for “Best Animated Feature.” These three major production companies The Walt Disney Company, Pixar, and DreamWorks transform a medium of silly children’s entertainment into serious merchandising establishments. These three major corporations sell their identities to consumers as fun, safe organizations for families and children. My work focuses on how animated films in the 1990’s and early 2000’s fit into the method of marketing for children and family consumers.

The rejuvenation of animated feature films starts with the Walt Disney Company. In the late 20’s Walt Disney Studios changed the nature of cartoons by standardizing synchronized sound with their short *Steamboat Willie* (Walt Disney and Ub Iwerks, 1928). Characters, like Mickey Mouse, change from elastic beings that can be cosmetically tossed around as though “anarchists of any age…and seemed to appeal to

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1 Thomas Doherty, “This is Where We Came in: The Audible Screen and the Voluble Audience of Early Sound Cinema.” *In American Movie Audiences: From the Turn of the Century to the Early Sound Era*, ed. Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 152.
the intellect and imagination.”2 For instance, the Silly Symphonies following the success of *Steamboat Willie* encouraged viewers to accept Disney’s point of view of the world. The song “Whose Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf” in *The Three Little Pigs* (Burt Gillet, 1933) was a type of anthem for combating the plight of the Great Depression, and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (David Hand, Larry Morey, and others, 1938) reminded citizens to always “Whistle While You Work.”3 The quick transition from animation experimentation to a fast emerging ideological agenda paves the way for the merging of ideology and their Disney merchandise. The company’s animated shorts with synchronized sound created a means to influence their audience as well as providing artistic innovation. The Silly Symphonies involve stories of pursuing dreams, an American value, where even undead skeletons have a place to showcase their talents as dancers and musicians.4 Despite the Walt Disney Company's overall success from the 1930's-1960's, Disney animated films were generally a profit drag. Instead of relying solely on film production to earn a profit, the company diversified into producing television programs and most importantly developing Disney theme parks starting with Disneyland in 1953.

Janet Wasko’s *Understanding Disney* provides a comprehensive analysis of the Walt Disney Company’s history from the 1920’s to the early 2000’s and cultural influence from its enterprises. She notes the founding of Disneyland in 1953 created a

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4 A very successful The Silly Symphony “The Skeleton Dance” displays skeletons waking from their graves to dance and use their bones as instruments.
“value-laden environment, which extends and expands classic Disney into a material or physical existence, as well as providing a strong dose of All-American ideology”. Walt Disney even comments “I don’t want the public to see the real world they live in while they’re in the park. I want them to feel they are in another world.” I explain in my first chapter how the Disney Princess Movies, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, The Little Mermaid (John Musker and Ron Clements, 1989), and Beauty and the Beast, provide the company with images they can use to market a Disney spectacle as a version of reality. Jack Zipes argues Disney displaces the fairy tale origins as actual cautionary tales into processed formulaic narratives to sell commodified versions of fairy tales to inspire “dreams and hopes through false promises of the images [Walt Disney] cast upon the screen.” Disney films use formulaic narratives and songs as the primary means to establish a Disney ideology shared among generations of Disney consumers. Zipes makes a convincing argument, for all three films (Snow White, Little Mermaid, and Beauty and the Beast) involve princesses whose beauty and song lay a template for children’s merchandise.

In the late 1980’s starting with The Little Mermaid, Disney’s CEO and chairman, Michael Eisner and Jeffrey Katzenberg respectively, revamp the tradition of making musical princess films using Snow White as a model. Disney parks at this time also mimic aesthetic appearances from Disney films and characters. Henry Giroux and Grace Pollock

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explain how Disney reforms “the self, the state, and various public spheres as centers for critical learning and citizenship.”

From the princess films, thematic elements such as finding true love and embarking on courageous adventures incite the consumer’s desire to accomplish the same feats. Using Marxist film theorists Guy Debord and Sergei Eisenstein, I explain how Disney Princess Movies’ wholesome, beautiful images blur the relationship between reality and desire. It is a symptom of its capitalist endeavors where its spectacle “imposes an image of the good which subsumes everything that officially exists, an image which is usually concentrated in a single individual”, in this case, the princess. The earlier Disney princesses such as Snow White and Cinderella primarily perform domestic actions, but their appearance and beautiful singing voices indicate their place as “the fairest of them all”. Elizabeth Bell argues in “Somatexts at a Disney Shop” in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture* that the construction of women’s bodies in Disney films “align audience sympathies and allegiance with the beginning and end of the feminine life cycle.” Youth in the form of the princesses and elderly in the form of fairy godmothers exude both beauty and wisdom while marred middle-aged evil queens are figured as dangerous.

While my work strays from feminist and racial critiques, her observations contributes to an explanation as to how Disney creates an aesthetic social spectacle.

Racial and feminist scholarship on the Walt Disney Company typically stops at an in

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depth analysis on the sexist and racial depictions in the films rather than providing an explanation for why such images are inserted into the films. Scholars including Douglas Bode, Giroux and Pollock, and Amanda Putnam warn that Disney’s racial and gendered designs of the characters bodies affect a child’s moral framing where light skinned, beautiful bodies are “good” and darker, ugly ones are “bad.” No doubt the Walt Disney Company tries to encourage children and families to follow their idealized social platform based on the character’s look, but the company’s moral education relies primarily on an appearance symbolizing goodness rather than actual displays of virtue. Moreover, hard data on how these images affect Disney going audiences directly is scarce. I argue the negative portrayals of the female protagonists in the Disney Princess Movies makes it easier for Disney to merchandise the narrative rather than rigidly aligning children into a white, heteronormative social structure.

Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells collect seminal scholarship on a wide range of feminist and Marxist critiques about the Walt Disney Company. In 2010, for instance, Disney Stores (established in 1987) installed magic mirrors that show the children’s reflection as a princess instead of themselves. The mirror resides in a designated space separate from the rest of the merchandise. Girls stand in front of the mirror and the mirror dresses them in Disney princess gowns without any obligation for them to buy merchandise. For Disney, selling the idea “you want to be a princess” is just as important as selling the merchandise based on Disney Princess Movies. Eisenstein notes that “Disney doesn’t go into the roots, But has fun and entertains, mocks, and amuses—jumping like a squirrel from branch to branch somewhere along the very
surface of the phenomenon, without looking beneath the origins.” The Disney Princess Movies show why children should be “good” through a series of visual differences rather than teaching actual lessons on manners or morals. Children want to be good so they can match the image in the mirror that reflects their inner princess selves back to them.

Disney villains and heroes can symbolically impose a strict divide between decency and wickedness, but the impact of this divide on Western society remains largely in the realm of what Guy Debord has called the spectacle. If Disney’s corporate ideology has limitations encouraging consumers to practice their social order, why do scholars fear Disney’s influence from the princess fairy tale aesthetic as a girls’ guide to feminine behavior? The characters’ bodies signify their roles in the narratives, and their features indicate preferred bodies over undesirable ones. Older stern looking women, darker skin tones, and feminine males typically indicate the role of the villain. The difference between “ugly” and “beautiful” also mark a division in personality traits such as “hateful” and “compassionate” and vice versa. For instance, the character Gaston in Beauty and the Beast acts selfishly and vulgar negating his role as the hero despite his princely physique. Making symbolic imagery for the binary structure between “good” and “evil” allows Disney to merchandise the fairy tale’s fantasy and characters as “safe” products for children.

Disney’s new fairy tale films started the revival of animated films in the late 80’s and demonstrate the medium’s aptness for appealing to family audiences. However, the Disney Princess Movies apparatus hides the company’s capitalistic business practices. The Walt Disney Company, ironically, goes into business with a company that attempts

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to reveal Disney’s false social apparatus. Originally a struggling hardware company, Pixar Inc. agrees to enter into a partnership with Disney in 1991 with the latter providing distribution and merchandising for Pixar’s computer animated films.

David Price provides a historical account on the founding and an in-depth look at Pixar’s business practices in *The Pixar Touch: The Making of a Company*. He explains that “the first fully computer-animated feature film was a highly uncertain gamble. Several major studios passed on the opportunity to make a film with Pixar before Disney took the chance.”12 The Walt Disney Company benefits from partnering up with Pixar, despite the difference in business models, because using new computer technology speeds the process of animation and increases the realism in their animated films. Their new Computer Animation Production System (CAPS) would have been impossible without the help of Pixar. Moreover, computer animation replaces Disney’s two-dimensional animation as the preferred type of animated medium by the early 2000’s.

John Lasseter’s most significant contributions to the new children’s cinema are its characters and narrative structure. Pixar characters differ from the perfection of the Disney princesses, because Pixar characters have faults. Instead of fairy tale or folkloric outlines, Pixar provides more realistic emotions and obstacles for their characters. In their first full-length feature, *Toy Story*, a toy cowboy named Woody acts jealous towards a toy space ranger named Buzz Lightyear because his owner Andy prefers Buzz as his new favorite toy. His jealousy, however, does not position him as the primary antagonist as it would in a Disney films such as *Snow White* or *Beauty and the Beast*. Apart from its

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financial and critical success, *Toy Story* marks a shift in the narrative structure of family animated films. Pixar’s child-friendly characters such a fuzzy blue monster, a beat up, friendly robot, and glossy blue ants fight against corrupt businesses or other political apparatuses.

In the second chapter, I argue that Pixar’s films *Monsters, Inc.* (Pete Docter, Steve Unkrick, and David Silverman, 2001), *Wall-E* (Andrew Stanton, 2008), and *A Bugs Life* (John Lasseter and Andrew Stanton, 1998) express Pixar’s rebellion against its image as a money driven corporation due to its association with the Walt Disney Company. They want to be seen as a company that desires a corporate utopia. Utopia here refers to what Frederic Jameson describes as “an operation calculated to disclose the limits of our own imagination of the future, the lines beyond which we do not seem able to go in imagining changes in our society and our world.”

Pixar’s position as a corporate company prevents it from fully incorporating a system of equality among its workers. Vivian Sobchack notes Pixar’s animation focuses on the ‘posthuman’ relying on machines to design the computer images, thus making the worker on the other side of the machine invisible. However, the loveable Pixar characters Sully, Wall-E, and Flik act as mediators between their own computer-generated bodies and their ability to emote and create empathy with the audience as if they were human. Pixar’s fantasy of utopic corporate structures fits into Disney’s dream mold.

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14 Vivian Sobchack, “Animation and Automation, Or, the Incredible Effortfulness of Being,” *Screen* 50, no. 4 (2009), 378.
The films I discuss depict the idealized version of Pixar Inc. where any corporate apparatuses are successfully subjugated by eliminating hierarchal business structures. Sully in *Monsters, Inc.*, changes his loyalty from trying to protect the power company Monsters, Inc. to protecting Boo (and all children) from Waternoose’s plan to harvest their screams for energy in Monstropolis. In *Wall-E*, the lovable trash compactor robot, Wall-E, brings back humanity by showing humans how to choose relationships over consumerism, and Flik shows an ant colony the importance of everyone’s individualism.

Pixar’s real business dealings, according to Prince, Catmull, Lasseter, and Lawrence Levy secretly sold inexpensive shares making them “instant millionaires…denigrating the years of work everyone else had put into the company. They gave a hollow feel to Pixar’s labor-of-love camaraderie.”

Ed Catmull, the president of Pixar, provides his thoughts and anecdotes about the history and aims of Pixar in *Creativity Inc*. His assurances that the company’s “must have the flexibility to recognize and support the need for balance in all of our employee’s lives” contrasts with Disney’s strict corporate policies. Catmull’s book poses a bias because he describes how he thinks he provides a space that fosters cooperation and creativity among animators, directors, and production managers. Even though he writes about the company’s

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16 One notorious instance occurred during the production of *Toy Story 2* where “an overtired artist drove to work with his infant child strapped in the backseat, intending to deliver the baby to day care…he realized that he’d left their child in the car in the broiling hot parking lot.” Ed Catmull, *Creativity Inc.: Overcoming the Unseen Forces That Stand in the Way of True Inspiration* (New York: Random House, 2014), 73. Pixar refused Disney’s desire to make *Toy Story 2* a direct to video release because they make quality films, but it also meant an extra strain on the animators to meet a close deadline. The aftermath of the stress during the production of *Toy Story 2* horrified Catmull to a point where he ensured a policy of workers’ lives come more important than their films. Though a corporate Hollywood industry cannot maintain such a statement, the sentiment indicates his desire to approach worker conditions differently than other Hollywood industries.
struggles and his own mistakes in management, he uses inclusive language in his main idea of “to keep a creative culture vibrant, we must not be afraid of constant uncertainty.”17 His rhetoric shares a close similarity with the narratives in Pixar films which frequently involve a push/pull relationship between revolting against Disney’s enclosed social structure and promoting Disney’s promises of unity and hope.

Disney and Pixar (later merging into Disney Pixar in 2006) establishes a solid dominion over the market for animated features through ideologies embedded in child-friendly images. What happens when another rival animation production studio strays from the Disney and Pixar thematic ideologies and merchandisable characters? DreamWorks SKG, the new company Jeffrey Katzenberg starts along with David Geffen and Steven Spielberg, uses an alternative approach to making animated films for family audiences.

Nicole Laporte provides one of the few detailed accounts of DreamWorks history and business practices in The Men Who Would Be King: An Almost Epic Tale of Moguls, Movies, and a Company Called DreamWorks. She notes “the initial perception at Disney had been Katzenberg had latched on to animation because it was his place to make his mark…the hits started to roll in, the Disney chairman began to earn credibility.”18 Michael Eisner fires Jeffrey Katzenberg in 1994 and the following public disgrace sparks Katzenberg’s desire to reestablish himself without any affiliation with the Walt Disney Company. In my third chapter, I explain how DreamWorks relies on gags, jokes, and

music to appeal to family audiences rather than moral narrative themes and a consistent ideology.

While from an objective perspective DreamWorks animated films *Antz* (Eric Darnell and Tim Johnson, 1998) and *Prince of Egypt* (Brenda Chapman, Steve Hickner, and Simon Wells) grossed moderately well, their box office receipts were low compared to *A Bugs Life* and *Mulan* released earlier in the year. Where Pixar makes a trendsetter out of its first feature film (*Toy Story*), DreamWorks fails to produce a staple film until *Shrek* in 2001. The company also sporadically produces successful franchises compared to Disney or Pixar’s consistent stream of hits.

DreamWorks animation department struggled in making a successful film because Disney and later Pixar established a market for their animation style, narratives, and merchandise. Even though Pixar differentiates its films from Disney’s, their character designs and personalities embrace of Disney’s agenda for marketing dreams to children. DreamWorks strays from Disney’s illusionary magic in favor of providing a psychoanalytic dream world. Freud’s theory of dreams “regards wishes originating in infancy as the indispensable motive force for the formation of dreams.”

19 Dreams connect with the primal scene in one’s childhood whereas Disney equates them with a wish. DreamWorks films *Antz* and *Prince of Egypt* involve protagonists confronted with a childhood trauma. In the latter, Moses experiences regression when he discovers he was originally born a Jewish slave. Z in the film *Antz* never escapes the constant reminder of his position as a dispensable and knows how his mother reproduces ants just like him.

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Both of narrative premises mark a drastic difference from the Disney•Pixar illusion of innocence.

DreamWorks animates what Disney and Pixar try to repress: a direct reference to reality. *Antz*’s follows the template of Woody Allen film including dull colors, no diegetic singing, cynicism, and Woody Allen as Z. Even though *Antz* does not promote itself as an innocent children’s film, it harkens back to a pre-Dinsey style of cartoon where animated comedy was “a state of mind, one aptly visualized through the distinctiveness of the form in re-inventing not merely what is said, but how it is said.”

In DreamWorks first musical film, *Prince of Egypt* (Brenda Chapman and Steve Hickner) the music bares a little resemblance to wishful musical numbers in the Disney Princess Movies. God’s call to Moses gives him fear and sadness instead of a desire for adventure. The songs in the film never involve wishing for a new life or to have a hero to save the day. Katzenberg even removes talking animals or inanimate objects making *Prince of Egypt*’s realism a priority. DreamWorks animated films rely on comedic attributes such as jokes, or in *Prince of Egypt*’s case, a musical numbers to alleviate the films’ serious tone. Until *Shrek*, DreamWorks animated films achieve fluctuating success and their humor lacks consistency.

*Shrek* shifts DreamWorks from trying to separate itself from Disney and Pixar towards turning Disney/Pixar values onto themselves. *Shrek* parodies the Disney Princess Movies by stripping Disney’s classic fairy tale characters of their ideological framework as proponents of good morals. Laporte notes that the director “would tell the artists,

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'everybody come up with three funny ideas for the fairy-tale characters’,” with the end product resulting in images like the Big Bad Wolf (later renamed Wolfie as he becomes popular for the sequels) dressing in pink grandma clothes while speaking in a very deep masculine voice. He along with Pinocchio, Three Blind Mice, and others relocate to Shrek’s swamp by Lord Farquaad’s orders. Although a good person, Shrek’s natural grumpy, ogre behavior causes everyone to fear him before knowing him.

Lewis Roberts’s “Reflections on Shrek, Fiona, and Magic Mirrors” discusses contradictions of Shrek’s parody. As much as it separates itself from the Disney Princess Movies, Shrek becomes DreamWorks first franchise and makes the struggling company a viable competitor against Disney and Pixar. Roberts also compares the film and the children’s book, Shrek!, as the character Shrek in the book is too mean for a protagonist in a film trying to appeal to children and families. DreamWorks’s version of Shrek, by contrast, “acts not out of meanness or anger or the desire for destruction, but rather as a lonely hero.”21 Roberts overlooks a significant difference between DreamWorks and the Walt Disney Company, Shrek and none its sequels tries to encourage children or any audiences to follow the characters’ behavior. Shrek accentuates The Walt Disney Company’s absurdity in making fairy tales into social educators by relying on gags and parodies to market the DreamWorks franchise. Katzenberg’s envisioned plan for “a vast multimedia empire involved in not just live-action and animated movies…but publishing, theme parks, live entertainment and theater, and merchandising” but it never manifests on the same global scale as Disney and Pixar because the bulk entertainment in

DreamWorks films comes only from their comedy. Even DreamWorks franchises such as *How to Train Your Dragon* (Dean Deblois and Chris Sanders, 2010) and *Kung Fu Panda* (Mark Osborne and John Stevenson) exhibits preferences for telling a story rather than proposing an ideological social structure for audiences to internalize.

Jack Zipes observes for Disney “we are to delight in in one-dimensional portrayal and thinking, for it is adorable, easy, and comforting in its simplicity.” DreamWorks lacks a consistent narrative and character formulas the audience can enjoy generationally. The Disney’s Princess Movies succeed in this endeavor where they engage family audiences outside of the cinema. The system of binaries in The Disney Princess Movies makes it easy for children to consume narrated aesthetics in merchandise and theme parks. The latter especially has carefully arranged characters (cast members), architecture, and rides to align with their cinematic images. Even if Pixar’s films depict metaphorical revolts against the Disney Company, they offer to show the world from different points making the world we live to be larger than imagined. *A Bug’s Life*, for instance, gives the Walt Disney Company an opportunity to carve out a designated space for consumers to experience a bug’s world. I argue Disney and Pixar revamp animated films not only by using new technology but convincing families and children their narrative and aesthetic formulas provide nurturing and desirable principles. DreamWorks comedies, however, are sporadic in their aesthetics and thematic narratives make it difficult for the company to have commodities charged with a pre-set ideology.

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CHAPTER 1: THE SPECTACLE OF IDEOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTS IN THE DISNEY PRINCESS FILMS

Since the release of *Steamboat Willie*, Walt Disney has faced criticism for being an influence on children. Expressing a common accusation, Paul Hollister compares Walt Disney to the Pied Piper in an article from *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1940. Hollister describes Disney’s accomplishments as “charming the children of all races and ages out of a melancholy world into a sanctuary-mountain fortified against all attack.”24 Hollister does not specify where the “attack” originates, but Marxist critiques pinpoint it as the social-economic difficulties of living in a capitalistic society. Disney’s animation “is a reconstruction of the world, based on it but also freely reimagining it according to fantasy and will.”25 While Walt Disney receives credit for films that promote escapism, some three hundred Disney employees including seasoned animators such as Art Babbit and Bill Tytla were on strike in 1941, a year after Hollister’s article. Still Walt Disney’s public image remains a figure who creates wondrous items for children rather than an entrepreneur who exploits workers.

Walt Disney public persona emulates the great “everyman” and creative visionary.26 This cuddly version of Walt Disney excludes his ambition to use animated features primarily for profit. Thus, an odd dichotomy takes place embarking on a critique of the Walt Disney Company. First, the company’s position as a significant corporate enterprise seems obvious as it owns stores, theme parks, films and TV subsidiaries. Then

we have Disney’s perfect constructions of life to “protect” children from harsh realities and it also provides them with a hope. What makes Disney films more appealing and potentially corrupting, as the Pied Piper metaphor suggests, for children? The narrative and characters are secondary to Walt Disney’s agenda in creating a type of Disney signature where “fantasy” is realized as a type of fact.27

Henry Giroux and Grace Pollock echo Hollister’s observation in suggesting that “if Disney has its way, kids’ culture will become not merely a new market for accumulation of capital but a petri dish for producing new commodified subjects.”28 The merchandise based on the characters or images in Disney films prove to children there is a “Disney way” to live. A sentiment which turns into marketing scheme for the Disney brand. One of the most frequent observations of Disney films are their representations of “identifications that relentlessly define America as white and middle class.”29 Where scholars such as Elizabeth Bell, Johnson Cheu, and Amy Davis, critique Disney’s lack of diversity in race and gender representations, they do not recognize the process of exclusion as an integral part of the Disney’s Company merchandising apparatus.

Walt Disney’s animated productions during the Classical Period (1928-1950) are generally perceived as artistic endeavors to incorporate a photo-realism into the cartoons. The bodies of Disney characters in the 1930’s were “no longer polymorphous and polymorphous and polymorphous”

27 In 1935, Walt Disney described how he wanted his new animators to be trained in stating “the first duty of the cartoon is not to picture or duplicate real action or things as they actually happen—but to give a caricature of life and action…to bring to life dreams fantasies and imaginative fantasies we all have thought of.” (Walt Disney to Graham, memorandum, 23 December 1935).
potentially perverse. It was proper and ‘natural’---an ‘illusion of life,’ as the new style came to be called around the studio. Walt Disney, himself, is often praised as an artistic genius, so his early features are remembered as art “ahead of their time” rather than a method of monetary and ideological production. The Pied Piper in the form of corporation, not Walt Disney the person, continues to make films that provide entertainment for families.

Scholars expanded on Hollister’s critique in mapping the transference of the ideologies in the Disney Company’s Princess Movies in late 1980’s-early 2000’s. The Disney fact of life promises a resolution of conflict for the protagonists by simply being a “moral” person. The subject of a specific “Disney Ideology” does not exist, but Disney promotes existing Western ideologies into cinematic spectacles. Thus, the Pied Piper lures children into a separate society where one only needs courage and kindness to face all the trials life can offer. Moreover, the ideologies in the Princess Franchise primarily relate to gendered social positions in types of work. The design of the princess of the characters generate a spectacle which starts from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (David Hand, Larry Morey, etc., 1937) massive success.

The Disney Company also reabsorbs *Snow White* into the sub-franchise called the Disney Princess Movies. *Beauty and the Beast* functions as a type of *Snow White* 2.0. In a crude explanation for the success of *Beauty and the Beast*, David Koenig suggests that Clements and Musker (the directors) “rediscovered the magic formula. For the first time

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32 This is a paraphrase of a quote in the 2015 live-action version of (Kenneth Branagh). The Disney Company still relies on the classical period’s method of what constitutes the behavior which will ensure one’s happy ending.
in twenty-five years, all the key ingredients were combined in one picture: great music, vibrant animation, funny gags, and a memorable cast…and exciting storytelling”.33

Once the princess formula became profitable, it became a standard narrative in the 1990’s. 34 Scholarship on Disney films and the Walt Disney Company criticize its commercial status as an entity that limits a child’s imagination and individuality. However, they ignore the company’s success in the production of quality films and merchandise for children and parents. Although Janet Wasko is correct in stating that “Disney is not merely entertainment-the manufacture of fantasy by a company like the Disney Corporation has implications for the reinforcement of societal norms and values”, she is also dismissive of the Disney brand’s place as a source of entertainment and spectacle. 35 The Walt Disney Company utilizes various types of aesthetic spectacles in the Disney Princess Films which allows for the merchandise to promote the films’ ideology.

1.1 The Fairy Tale Aestheticism in Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs

The Walt Disney Company design films to cater to the education of children by imparting middle-class values. Before the release of Snow White, “children could, with enough money, have the image of the mouse on almost all of their possessions.”36 Despite the name of the franchise, the princesses in the classical period (Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora) have comparatively little on-screen presence. When they are in

35 Ibid.
the diegetic space, it is limited to either a domestic action or in a place where magic is fulfilled. These early princesses partake in the laborious tasks of cleaning, but the actual difficulty of cleaning and the abusive environments are overshadowed by their beauty, kindness, and singing voices. One key narrative aspect for Disney princesses is their “redemptive existence” or rather a promise of a happier life. In Disney’s classical period, coloration and songs provide a bridge between the princess in the diegetic space and a means to merchandise them into our world.

Walter Wagner explains that Disney combines color with their ideology making the fantasy in the film more transferable to what Wagner refers to as the “free world”. He refers to the Walt Disney Studios as “the modernistic pastel-colored fairyland plant where thousands are creating and delivering in the interest of a new education of the free world.” Like Hollister’s Pied Piper article, Wagner writes this critique in the 1940’s, and relates it specifically to Disney’s increase in global influence in South America during World War II. However, the question of why Disney films have a strong social influence in comparison to other American animated productions such as Warner Brothers needs to be addressed.

Disney Studio’s contemporaries produced their animated features differently to counter Disney’s contagious delightfulness. Warner Brothers’ Looney Tune productions in the early 1930’s “based much of their comedy on breaches of decorum.” Looney Tunes are designed to function as a purely entertainment without any influence on social

38 Ibid, 43.
behavior in daily life. There is also a distinct difference in the human element of animation between Hugh Harmon, the primary director for Looney Tunes, and Walt Disney. The merchandising of comedy rather than ideology was more important to the Warner Brothers’ success. Furthermore, Warner Brothers’ does not heavily rely on any particular type of narrative structure for their animated features. In Disney films, the structure of the fairy tale, especially for the Princess Movies, provides a “vehicle for animators to express their artistic talent and develop their technology.”

The spectacle in this role occurs through her cleaning and cooking. Snow White does not partake in an action which transfers her position from a servant to a fugitive in the woods. The Huntsman and the woodland creatures function as the action which forces Snow White away from the castle. According to Seymour Chatman, “an action is a change of state brought about by an agent or one that affects a patient. If the action is plot-significant, the agent or patient is called a character.” Snow White’s role as a character, in other words, comes from what is happening around her rather than her own actions. Despite her limited role, she promote the idealistic form of domesticity.

When she sings the song “Whistle While You Work” in the dwarfs’ cottage, the film focuses on Snow White directing the animals in how to clean. Moreover, she assumes children “untidy” orphans who need a mother live in the house. The scene “sets the stage for the theme of escape and fantasy”, for the difficulty of the work is hidden by

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41 Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Cornell University Press, New York, 1978), 44.
the humorous animals and song. The Disney production uses a combination of color, song, and setting to mark her as the fairest in the land, differentiating her from all the other characters according to a hierarchy of beauty. The mirror describes Snow White as “Lips red as the rose. Hair black as ebony. Skin white as snow” color references an actual image the audience sees in the following scene. Snow White scrubs the palace steps surrounded by white doves and blooming flowers, and her red lips, black hair, and white skin match the mirror’s description (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The use of technicolor color codes Snow White as an epitome of femininity. She is content and beautiful despite the rags and drudgery.

The addition of color enhances her visual signification for what will later become the innate virtuous nature of the Disney princesses. Settings associated with the princesses such as cottages, castles, and natural scenery foreground the characterization of the princesses as well as the narrative. Figure 1 shows a discrepancy between the action and the lighting and color.

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Snow White’s face is content despite the back-breaking task of washing stairs and the humiliation of wearing rags which are actually flattering her body. Moreover, the three-point lighting brings a brightness to the scene which matches her content face and beauty. The color and lighting in Disney princess films contribute to their function as spectacles. Audiences, mainly children, are meant to look at them and feel at peace, or better yet, to desire to be them. However, Eisenstein criticizes Disney’s use of color because “colour should be differentiated from its object, severed from what lies beneath it, in order to become itself a player in the drama.”43 Snow White’s position as an abused maid at the beginning of the film stays as the secondary image in favor of her role as “the princess” which carries through the rest of the film. Even in death her beauty as a princess remains. The dwarfs in the film were unable to bury her due to her beauty. Her glass coffin also contributes a princess aesthetic for its luxurious materials including a glass covering which displays her body so the prince can eventually obtain her. The aesthetics of color and domestic imagery define her place as a princess rather than her own actions.

Snow White’s image, as Disney’s definition of proper femininity, dominates the diegetic space rather than her actions in the narrative. She only knows how to be a domestic worker. When she finds the dwarfs’ cottage after escaping from the queen, she cleans and cooks for them. Moreover, she sings a song “Whistle While Your Work” which functions as the women’s version of “Heigh Ho”. In Disney’s ideology, one needs to find joy in their designated form of work. Such songs and spectacle, especially during

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the Great Depression, provide an escape for adult audiences and a promise of an eventual “happy ending” for children.

Apart from the characters, the famous Disney “happy ending”’s fabricates an idealized situation of hard work. The song “Heigh Ho” in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* encompasses the Walt Disney Company’s vision of how a person should feel about their own line of work. The dwarfs “can be interpreted as the humble American workers, who pull together during a depression,” and sing the famous jovial song while easily mining for gems.44 Here the Disney route of escape is aimed at adults rather than children. According to Debord, “the language of the spectacle consists of signs of the dominant system of production—signs which are at the same time the ultimate end products of that system.”45 The spectacle of the song “Heigh Ho” forms a replacement for the current reality of work. Payment for one’s services are large precious gems that can be kept for later use instead of a weekly earning of roughly twenty dollars for mining.46

Being able to pretend that the stress of work without reward does not exist exudes a strong appeal. The images of work in *Snow White* are carefully placed in the narrative and are accompanied with songs. Work ceases to be work as it becomes its own reward.

Disney Princess Movies clearly expose the symbolic representations of their characters, but the overtness does not overshadow the overall narrative. Natalie Kalmus, the director of Technicolor’s Advisory Service, “called for ‘natural colors’ which did not

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overload the eye.” 47 Walt Disney ensured his colorist would succeed in creating “colour schemes...to match characters’ personalities, and then the painted backgrounds blended harmoniously with figures in the foreground, and were never cluttered with distracting detail or lurid colors.” 48 Colors in Disney help construct the binary representations in the Princess Movies because colors affect depth and illusionary cues. Representations of nature in the image consists of doves (symbolic of peace) and flowers in the background.

As Snow White’s color scheme suggests beauty and light, the Evil Queen’s darker colors such as purple, black, and green designate her as the villain. 49 Moreover, this particular scheme is brought back in the princess films of the late 80-1990’s with the sea witch Ursula from *The Little Mermaid*. The use of the colors in the princess films correlate more closely with their positions in the narrative. The striking contrast of color schemes allow for an easier method to sell the “Disney experience” as a series of set social expectations. 50 The Disney Company is then able to reproduce the social expectations into their merchandise.

1.2 Mermaids and Princesses: Narrative Spectacle in Eisner’s World of Disney

One of the most prominent examples of the “Disney experience” are the Disney amusement parks and resorts especially during the “Eisner Era” of the Disney Company. The “Eisner Era” (1989-2005) or what sometimes gets called the “Disney Renaissance” is marked by technological advancements in filmmaking, but more importantly, the

48 Ibid, 286.
49 Lady Tremaine from Cinderella and Maleficent from Sleeping Beauty have the same dark color scheme too.
50 In other scholarly works, it has been noted that Disney villains have a “gender queerness” which reinforces the “goodness” of heterosexuality in the prince and princess characters.
company has access to more immediate methods of commercialization. Where Giroux and Pollock frame Disney’s “aesthetics forms, musical scores and inviting characters…within a wider system of gender roles, race, agency,” they recognize a difference in reproduction of negative stereotypes between classical and Eisner princess films. From a merchandising standpoint, the Walt Disney Company during the Eisner years sold the princesses who had more agency, a thirst for adventure, and intelligence outside of domestic duties. The narrative structures of Western fairy tales are altered to adapt the princess characters into more progressive and easily merchandisable protagonists.

The myth surrounding the Eisner Era has less to do with his identity and more to do with the success and influence of Disney films in the 1990’s. Although many of the films were popular, not all of them achieved critical and financial success. Five of these films (The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, Pocahontas, Aladdin, and Mulan) establish not only the crux of the Disney Princess Franchise, but also brings to a critical light the imposition of a Western Company’s distortion of fairy tales and history. Even though the classical Disney films have significant changes between their original content and the narrative presented in their respective films, Michael Eisner orchestrated the Walt Disney Company where the narrative changes actively replace Disney consumers’ perceptions of the original historical and cultural tales. For instance, The Little Mermaid’s

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quest to find an immortal soul in the original fairy tale is not conducive for an incorporation into a theme park or alludes to what American children relate to.

For American audiences, the tales are separated from both their cultural and historical context allowing Disney to have a new ownership and distribution of them. *The Little Mermaid* reestablishes the fairy tale narratives of the classical period, but it also marks a transition from a Disney ideology that purely focuses on a spectacle of domesticity to one of teenage rebellion where the princess character has more agency in her decisions. Ariel, the mermaid, disobeys her father’s law forbidding her to visit the human world. Eventually she falls in love with a human prince and sells her voice to Ursula the sea witch for legs after her father destroyed her collection of sunken human items. Ariel’s decisions revolve around reconciling her identity as mermaid and her love for a human prince. Laura Sells explains “feminists have criticized *The Little Mermaid*’s Ariel because she seems to have little ambition beyond getting her prince.”53 Despite their shared fairy tale origins, Ariel’s debatable position as a passive or active character leaves room for more questioning than the classic princess.

Social representations such as gender and race in the animated films are generally treated as a threat to child development where they will internalize Disney’s ideological teachings. Henry Giroux and Grace Pollock argue that the Walt Disney Company embodies “American triumphalism, possessive individualism, and a growing faith in privatization over public management.”54 They frame these ideas in terms of the theme

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park Walt Disney World where the illusion of a constant happiness is carried over from the films into the physical reality. A reason fairy tales have an appealing formula for Disney films is their appearance of an ahistorical nature. The Disney Company merely adapts the existing fairy tale narratives into a way that appeals to Western audiences of the contemporary period.

The question of why Disney films have an appearance of having strong ideological influence needs to be addressed. American society’s preexisting “formal logic of standardization had to give birth to Disney as a natural reaction to the prelogical”.

The Disney films during the classical period provided an image of stability where duties to domestic labor eventually reap a reward. Even though an ideal Disney World with no work and happy endings which imply a resolution to all of life’s obstacles has no real existence, the features provide an allusion where “we can sense them alive.” The unrealistic representations of characters are simply accepted having a real existence. Eisenstein further explains that Disney has “living drawing” which we accept “not in a logically conscious aspect but a sensually perceiving one.” He describes the ways in which immobile objects, body parts, and landscape have movement in a Disney animation which do not exist in physical reality. The Little Mermaid takes it one step further with the princess character being a creature a myth, yet the merchandise from the film allow for the realization of a fantasy to be a mermaid.

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56 Ibid, 55.
57 Ibid, 54-55.
58 According to Wasko, nine million video cassettes were sold during the first release, merchandising efforts included forty licenses, and made $25 million during the first year, 135.
On a narrative level, *The Little Mermaid* still makes allowances for a “one-dimensional, and we are to delight in in one-dimensional portrayal and thinking, for it is adorable, easy, and comforting in its simplicity.”\(^5\) The shift in the princess narrative from a purely passive character to one that is more independent does not change the princess’s role in relation to the spectacle. Disney’s ideology of the wholesome family and social relations defined by gender roles is consistently referred to in scholarship. However, as Janet Wasko observes, “the ‘sanctity of the family’ is said to be a dominant theme in Disney features, ironically, few complete families are represented.”\(^6\) Ariel only has her father as a parental authority figure and an indicator of a conservative patriarch. The role of the domestic princess is no longer the primary appeal for children, rather Ariel’s position as a sixteen year old mermaid teenager now holds a stronger appeal. The Eisner Era Disney films challenged the narrative binary separation between the definitive constructions of “good” and “evil” in the classical Disney films. Distinctions between protagonists and antagonists blur a little more in the Disney films from the 1990’s. In contrast to Belle from Beauty and the Beast, Ariel is not too different than the classical princesses in her desire to obtain the prince. However, Sells suggests “somewhat reductionist” due to the fact the film ends with Ariel’s access to the prince and her voice.\(^6\)

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A consistent component of the Disney Princess Movies are the character designs constructed so that could be practiced in actual society. Like the coloring in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Ariel’s voice is her primary mark as the “Disney Princess”. The first real description of Ariel is Sebastian’s, the sidekick crab, comment of “she has the most beautiful voice”. Despite their lack of agency, the princesses are still the most marketable because of what they represent—dreams coming true. Instead of singing in her father’s concert, the first visual introduction of her shows her exploring a sunken ship because she desires to be human. Because *The Little Mermaid* is the first princess film of the Eisner Era, having the princess’s first image be one of disobedience is significant. An image of a princess rebelling functions as indication that the Disney princess is now more than idealized form of domesticity.

The Disney ideology is not stagnant, but changes just enough to match the appeal to children in the contemporary time period. Giroux and Pollock observe that significant problem with the Disney films are their specificity in targeting and influencing children. However, it is an issue of consumerism rather than affecting children’s actual belief to be a “prince” or “princess” to achieve success in life. The refurbishing of Disney theme parks occurred in tangent with the release of the Eisner Disney film with the chance for children to meet these new characters. The construction of new exhibitions in the theme parks based on the older Disney princesses indicates a continuing influence. In 2011, Disney World opened Under the Sea Journey of *The Little Mermaid* complete with Prince Eric’s castle, palm trees, and maritime themed bridges. The newer Under the Sea Journey incorporates the full narrative of *The Little Mermaid* rather than just a focus on Ariel.

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62 Ariel’s Grotto, the place where children could meet Ariel, was established in Disneyland in 1996.
Unlike *Beauty and the Beast* or *Snow White* where an impressive technical aspect of the film significantly accounts for its success, *The Little Mermaid* offers a grander narrative of fantasy that still makes profits. The mermaid is an image of mythology, but Disney turns it into a hyper realistic image of her joining “our world” and vice versa.

Disney theme parks hold the same promise of escape from the mundaneness of life as its cinematic counterpart. The parks allow their “guests” to experience different cultures, thrill rides, and to converse with beloved characters from Disney films. The World of Disney differentiates itself from reality by constructing simplistic social relationships. However, not everyone falls under the Disney spell. Giroux and Pollock note that Eisner portrays himself as an “updated version of Old Walt’s desire to create a world of clean, well-lighted places, a world in which adult preoccupations with complexity and moral responsibility appear out of place”.63 Moreover, the Eisner era marked a reinvigoration of the Disney resorts. According to Wasko, “the Disney Parks can be described as a careful integration of entertainment, fun with commodification and consumptions.”64 The social-economic gap between those who can afford basic Disney merchandise (stuffed animals, dolls, clothes, etc.) becomes larger between the consumers who can and cannot afford to attend the theme parks. Even Walt Disney’s original licensing of his characters in the 1930’s signifies how both Mickey Mouse and *Snow White* were not a just an artistic endeavors. He designed the characters in hopes of selling other forms of merchandise imprinted with the characters’ images from their films.

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63 Ibid, 33.
The spectacle of the animated images desensitize viewers to the processes of the social adaptation of Disney narratives into a construction of reality. According to Guy Debord “The real consumer has become a consumer of illusions. The commodity is this materialized illusion, and the spectacle is its general expression.” Disney animated productions exemplify Debord’s observation in a literal fashion. In order for princess merchandise to sell, the audience has to, in some degree, accept their fantastic alternative to life’s possibilities which are in fact impossible. Disney’s method of merchandising and promotions in theme parks, therefore, have to continue to convince consumers of the Disney illusion. The company’s ability to convince consumers in their illusion progresses the company’s legacy.

1.3 “Tale as Old as Time”: Merchandising the Narrative Not the Princess Image

Like Ariel, it is not Belle’s work ethic that signifies her role of princess. In Propp’s analysis of folktales, “the functions of deities are transferred from one to another…the number of functions is extremely small, whereas the number of personages is extremely large.” Belle, as her name suggests, possesses the beauty, song, and kindness as her earlier Disney princess counter parts. The Disney princess aesthetic signifies her as the “princess”, but her characterization differentiates her from Ariel and her classic Disney princess counter parts. Unlike the princess Snow White, action in the narrative originates from Belle’s decisions rather than from relying on the action of other characters to perpetuate the story. She also does not have the naiveties of both Snow

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White and Ariel, for she starts her adventure when her father’s horse returns without her father. It’s a rescue mission where she sacrifices herself as a prisoner to the Beast in exchange for her father’s freedom. Where Ariel’s primary aspiration switches from being human to obtaining the prince, the prince never becomes Belle’s goal rather she “just happens” to fall in love with him as Beast turns more civilized with her presence.

Belle also challenges the more traditional image of a domestic princess. She does not partake in household chores, but she, in a way, becomes the matriarch of Beast’s castle. His servants begin to admire her as she “domesticates” the Beast. Belle’s higher levels of agency in the film compared to Snow White and Ariel separates her from being a “figure of collective dream”. Her desires go further than Ariel’s for her desire for adventure does not wain. Belle’s character breaks the one-dimensionality characterization which makes it more difficult to merchandise the princess. Therefore, Beauty and Beast’s narrative as a whole becomes easier to merchandise.

The enchantment surrounding Beast’s abode makes it a literal magic castle, and arguably a magic kingdom. Like Disney World and Disneyland, Beast’s castle is located in a secluded yet scenic region in the woods. In the film, the castle separates the mundane village life from the adventure and mystery Beast’s castle promises. Ironically, Belle finds her wish for adventure and freedom fulfilled as a prisoner in stone walled structure. Disney theme parks hold the same promise of adventure in its ability to provide an experience of different cultures, thrill rides, and conversing with beloved characters from Disney films. The Walt Disney Company generates its own myths; its most successful

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one is its image as corporation that has nothing to hide. It appears to the spectator and consumer as a completely open and helpful subject. *Beauty and the Beast*’s narrative resides not in direct images of fantasy, but to promote the corporation’s “helpfulness.”

Prior to *Beauty and the Beast*, the Disney princess sings a song about their desires for a better world, and it becomes a centerpiece in the film. The song usually receives a reprise and sums up the film’s plot. For instance the songs “Someday My Prince Will Come” and “Part of Your World” allude to Snow White’s desire for a prince and Ariel’s longing to be on land. Belle’s song is only a short reprise to the group opening number “Belle.” The song alludes to her desire for an “adventure in the great wide somewhere”, but has no specific reference or allusions to meeting Beast.68 The lack of focal point princess song suggests another song will take its place. *Beauty and the Beast* have two songs that work together to create a type of plot synopsis “Be Our Guest” and “Tale as Old as Time”, and both songs are sung by the Beast’s servants.

*Beauty and the Beast* marks the first time sidekicks have an explanation for a type of career. Even the dwarfs in *Snow White* lack clarification for why they are mining other than their identity as dwarves. For the two primary sidekicks, Lumiere and Cogsworth expressly state what their jobs (butler and steward) are in their “master’s” castle. All the servants, the prince (Beast), and the castle décor itself are all under a curse. The butler, Lumiere, is turned into a candelabra for both his name sake and as a butler, he “lights” the way for Belle. Cogsworth and Mrs. Potts are a grandfather clock and tea pot

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68 In the opening song “Belle”, one of Belle’s solos references a book she is reading where “this is where she meets Prince Charming, but she doesn’t discover that it’s him until chapter 3.” There is some foreshadow here, but it is not located in the traditional place where the princess character is alone singing about her dreams.
respectively. In an iconic song “Be Our Guest”, Lumiere and Mrs. Potts orchestrates a dinner and performance for Belle while Cogsworth attempts to remind them the master forbade any such celebration. The “Be Our Guest” song and sequence uses imagery from a Busby Berkeley spectacle to express the servants’ happiness of having a guest they can finally serve. The song not only alludes to their happiness about having a potential spouse for Beast which break the spell, but also excitement from a chance to use their servings skills once again. Although these sidekicks still possess the Disney “fantasy and escapist themes”, they also embody the controlling part of the Disney fantasy where “little is left to the imagination.” The escapism is structured as even the elaborate and fantastic spectacle suggests. Lumiere sets up the dinner as though it has been rehearsed multiple times. One of the more underwhelming but telling shots to suggest a type of “rehearsed performance” are the dishes waiting for their cue behind a set of doors. The orchestration to greet a guest mimics the gust greeting tactics at Disney stores and theme parks.

Austin Carr references Neal Gabler to describe the conditions of the Disney resorts, for “their success actually derives from ‘crafting a better reality than the one outside,’…where all is ‘harmonious’.” All is harmonious as long the Disney audience, especially children, as long as the underlying maxim for Disney park workers is “Be our Guest”. *Beauty and the Beast* takes a very literal approach to the construction of an engaging environment with characters whose goal is to please guests. In 2012, Be Our Guest restaurant opened in Walt Disney World. The scenery matches the golden ballroom

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in the second focal song “Tale as Old Time.” Although guests are in the position as Belle, the guest, the restaurant functions around the sidekicks’ main appearances.

Like the restaurant’s romantic décor, the servants take initiative to orchestrate romantic gestures and settings to help Beast and Belle’s romantic relationship. “Tale as Old as Time” marks the classical princess/prince dance image, and Mrs. Potts sings the song. Like “Be Our Guest”, it is a structured fantasy. The servants help both Beast and Belle dress up for a romantic dance with candle lights provided by Lumiere. *Beauty and the Beast* has a technical design of sets and characters in to have enough realism in their spectacle to be reconfigured into reality. Unlike the classical Princess Movies and *The Little Mermaid*, a friendly relationship between Belle and Beast lacks development until half way into the film.71 Beauty and the Beast, therefore, had to rely on more visual spectacles and a large amount of likable side characters.

1.4 Conclusion

The Disney Company and its subsequent products are mythologized as objects of quality and ideology that strongly influences children. What gets left behind in the initial Disney image are the many financial struggles and a history of worker exploitation that also take place in the Disney Company. The “fairy tale” mode of the narrative provides an effective method to perpetuate the Disney Company’s ideology in their merchandise. Janet Wasko correctly describes Disney’s pursuit of artistic style as a type of myth. Although Walt Disney impressed audiences including Sergei Eisenstein with synchronized sound, color, and fluid movement, his art of animation was a means for

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71 *Beauty and the Beast*’s runtime is one hour and fifty minutes, and Beast and Belle have their first civil conversation at the one hour mark.
profit gain. Douglas Gomery implies that the Disney Company succeeds in fooling audiences to the “great man” versions of Walt Disney and Michael Eisner since it is a myth that promise of seemingly limitless imagination into products of consumption.72

The Walt Disney Company generates its own myths; its most successful one is its image as corporation that has nothing to hide. It appears to the spectator and consumer as a completely open and helpful subject. The daily implementation of the ideology, however, comes from the audiences’ acceptance or rejection. However, being able to pretend the stress of work in a capitalistic society does not exist exudes a strong appeal. One can easily apply Benjamin’s observations of the Mickey Mouse cartoons to Disney’s Princess Movies. He explains “Nature and technology, primitiveness and comfort have become completely merged. And in front of the eyes of people who have become tired of the endless complications of everyday life…a redemptive existence appears.”73 Disney films provide the “redemptive existence” or rather a promise of life as an enjoyable experience.

Snow White and to some extent Belle, supposedly have tragic lives until an interference from another character switches their path. The path, of course, results in a marriage to a prince. From a narrative stand point, the Disney Princess films create a strong illusion of “happy ending” than its Mickey Mouse cartoon counterpart. In fact, the animated quality provides the strongest of merging of nature, technology, and

primitiveness. The Princess Movies and their subsequent role in merchandise allows a subject to viably imagine a life without strife.
CHAPTER 2: MINDING THE MARKETING MINEFIELD: PIXAR CHARACTERS
RECONCILE CORPORATE PROFIT WITH BUSINESS INTEGRITY

Disney highlights exaggerated images of beauty as a means to draw extra appeal for the heroes whose goodness helps promote itself as a company with positive influences on children. Pixar Inc. designs their characters differently with an emphasis on realistic emotional responses and attitudes. Their protagonists act on feelings of jealousy, selfishness, and bossiness, but always overcome a more abusive enemy. The three films I discuss in this chapter—*Monsters, Inc.*, *Wall-E*, and *A Bug's Life*—comprise of oppressive corporate structures the protagonists overthrow in favor of new political structures that uphold systems of friendship and cooperation. Achieving a sustainable corporate ruling structure without an agenda remains realistically impossible as “the market has been celebrated as an autonomous and totalizing system which necessarily ends up drawing everything else into itself”.74

The Walt Disney Company, for instance, has many avenues for revenue. Walt Disney Studio’s enterprise make a relatively small percentage of revenue compared to its media networks. In other words, the Walt Disney Company as a commercial enterprise keeps channeling money in even if one of their subsidiaries fail. Pixar films, however, creates the illusion that Pixar Inc. places monetary interest away from itself. Ironically, Pixar is a Disney subsidiary but the company promotes itself as more morally conscious than its parent company. Ed Catmull, the president of Pixar, explains “our purpose was not merely to build a studio that made hit films but to foster a creative culture that would

continually ask questions.”75 Yuki Noguchi from the Washington Post confirms Catmull’s claim as Pixar “garnered a reputation as a place where creative genius thrives, and in recent years the studio has far outpaced the bigger and more institutionalized Disney with hits such as *The Incredibles* and *Finding Nemo.*”76 Pixar’s diegetic worlds present this seemingly ideal place to work. Pixar protagonists in general display unique methods for observing the world from different viewpoints. For instance, *Monsters, Inc.* focuses how monsters fear the children’s closet, not how children fear the monsters.

The change in point of view provides some disruption in how we perceive our world, and the narratives create a commercial fantasy by installing an impossible form of corporate harmony. The films promote Pixar’s idealized forms of collaboration between employees, machinery, and product. Instead of relying on aesthetics and fairy tales to establish character arcs, the narratives suggests a “grappling with unfamiliar spaces, staking out a stable place from which to examine the unknown constructing a human realm in a world of uncertainty, disappearance, and ‘reality effects’.”77 Their aesthetic and attributes, however, are rooted in a realistic representation. Pixar places an emphasis on the characters’ hardships and emotions to negate the process of computer animation. Pixar’s cute characters fulfill Disney’s merchandisable criteria while also conveying more vulnerability making the characters more human-like and alive. They allow an audience who grows increasingly powerless over their lives due to technological

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75 Ed Catmull, *Creativity Inc.: Overcoming the Unseen Forces That Stand in the Way of True Inspiration*, 64.
separation to attach themselves to sympathetic figures who abolish corporate and technological tethers including their own computerized forms.

2.1 The Hidden Monster: The Monsters, Inc. Factory as the Monstrous Representation of American Corporations

Pixar’s fourth film, *Monsters, Inc.* (Pete Docter, David Silverman, and Lee Unkrich, 2001) suggests that corporate benevolence relies on a relationship between the laborers and their products. The power company, Monsters, Inc., provides power for the entire city of Monstropolis. Under CEO Henry J. Waternoose, Monsters, Inc. divides the most crucial workers into two categories: the scarers and their assistants. The most privileged workers are the scarers, for they obtain the children’s screams to fuel Monstropolis’s electricity. Scarers supposedly put their lives on the line to obtain screams because children are toxic to monsters. Sulley and his assistant Mike Wazowski’s friendship and eventual humane treatment of their resources (human children) allude to Pixar’s ideology of envisioning itself as a corporate community which respects both employees and consumers.

Monstropolis positions itself as a “home everywhere (bei sich), finding or believing to find no bounds, within the limits of other cultures would give themselves to realize their end”. Changing the inhabitants from humans to monsters does not change the fundamental economic and social relationships in a capitalist society. The city offers multiple monster jobs and resources to meet the needs of monsters such as providing different foods, garbage men, and a health agency called Child Detection Agency (CDA).

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These products and agencies, even Monsters, Inc., are typical representations of a non-specific Western society. The monsters in the city interact cordially with each other or even look friendly. Because of their natural amiable nature, scarers at Monsters, Inc. fake terrifying appearance for their job to scare children.

When their assistants use card keys to summon door portals to children’s closets in the human world, they prep up their scare tactics. Mike, for instance, prepares Sulley a morning scare work-out routine. Other monsters put in sharp dentures, extra eyes, or unleash horrific parts of their body such as claws before entering the closets. Immanuel Wallerstein argues that “the capitalist world-economy is constructed by integrating a geographically vast set of production processes” suggesting the limits of capitalism exceed a singular geographical location such as Monstropolis. Monstropolis and the human world comprise the capitalist world-economy with Monsters, Inc. taking advantage of the separation between the two worlds. Monsters, Inc. hosts a contradictory system of divided and united systems of labor where violence functions as the mediator. The monsters work together under the shared assumptions that 1) children are toxic and 2) children’s screams provide the only source of energy for the city. Children in the human world, however, begin to lose their fear of monsters in the closet causing a scream shortage because they no longer scare easily. The monsters are at the mercy of the human’s behavior and backgrounds rather than an assured victory from their monstrous forms.

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80 The prequel *Monsters University* elaborates on this point as the monsters in the Scare School learn specific methods to scare children depending on factors such as phobias, age, and gender.
Waternoose aptly demonstrates Wallerstein’s observation that “separate states...control the means of violence” by separating the cordial society of Monstropolis and the cut throat competition in Monsters, Inc. The monsters on the scare floor hostile and competitive mode of production. 81 The corporate culture within Monsters, Inc. encourages productivity through a scare competition to collect the most scream. As I mentioned before, the corporation forces the monsters to partake in artificial monstrous roles to scare children, but the competition provides an incentive for the scariest scare tactics. Collectively, the monsters provide scream, but they remain separate from each other in a competitive rivalry and between themselves.

At the beginning of the film, Sulley and Mike’s identities revolve around their positions as Monsters, Inc.’s top scare team. When the three-year-old human child, Boo, interrupts that life-style, they question the company’s policies toward children and the importance of the scare record. Mike, however, relies more on Sulley’s position as the top scarer to ensure his status. His job does not receive the same recognition as Sulley’s. As Monstropolis locks down due to the child outbreak, Mike devises plans to release Boo out of their custody while Sulley focuses on understanding Boo. Mike believes Waternoose’s rhetoric of children as killing machines on a more symbolic level. He recognizes Boo as a non-toxic entity as they remain unharmed, but he wants the child to return to “that frightful reality behind the separation line (here the doors of children’s bedrooms) from which we take our energy.” 82 She reminds him his career is more vulnerable than Sulley’s.

81 Ibid.
Mike also sees her as an unutilized resource. Monstropolis cannot benefit from her screams until they bring her back to the human world. Moreover, her inconspicuous behavior due to her young age risks exposing Mike and Sulley as the ones who brought a danger to Monstropolis. Sulley’s position as a top scarer allows him to view Boo as a child who needs their help. Though he initially believes her to be toxic, her cute and fearful demeanor convinces him to help her. Freeman notes that “Boo has catalyzed Sulley’s humanity in ways that threaten to shut the whole place downs” including dislodging Mike’s position as his assistant. Boo, in return, views Sulley as a friend and gives him the endearing name “kitty” due to his fluffy blue fur. Boo’s attachment to both Mike and Sulley celebrates their friendliness signifying to children and the family the monsters’ as safe creatures.

Sulley discovers the Monsters, Inc.’s culture of violence when he sees a screenshot of himself on a screen after he performs a scare demonstration on a child simulator. The scene shows a shot reverse shot between Sulley’s innocent demeanor and his terrifying attack stance on the screen. He realizes the scare work at Monsters, Inc. alienates him and prevents any understanding between monsters and humans. After the demonstration, Boo accidentally reveals herself to Mr. Waternoose who then pretends to send her back to the human world. He instead banishes Sulley and Mike for bringing Boo into Monstropolis. Mr. Waternoose and Randall then use Boo to test a new machine that sucks the scream out of the children bypassing the need for scarers. In the old system of production, the number of human children never depletes but their inability to scare

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reduces the amount to scream for Monstropolis. Randall’s machine, however, would
deplete the number of human children forcing the monsters in Monstropolis to truly
become monsters. The shift from scarers to the machine further depersonalizes the
relationship between the monsters and the children. The machine makes the educational
program for training scarers obsolete as it would no longer matter what the children fear.

The ramifications of new scream machine would cause “Waternoose [to be] in the
position of ‘the capitalist master’ ” and unemployment for the scarers who currently hold
a desirable social position in Monstropolis.84 Randall’s greed and jealousy marks
Waternoose as a comparatively desperate man who refuses to let his company or
Monstropolis fall to ruin. Monstropolis is a “world so sealed off that it is almost
completely coextensive with the factory” where the city too would be implicated in the
kidnapping and harvesting of children’s screams.85 The prequel Monsters University
explains how both the development of closet doors and scarer talent comes from
Monstropolis’s society. Monsters University depicts scarer stardom as a cultural
phenomenon with the introduction of collectible Scare Cards for monster children. In this
regard, the society in Monstropolis views Monsters, Inc. as a source of entertainment as
well its provider for energy. Waternoose’s new machine will transfer an important culture
of using scarers and closets into a production system that eliminates any means of
rapport, including the relationship between laborer and the product.

Sulley and Mike return to Monstropolis to stop the machine and rid children’s
screams as their main source for power. Boo reveals laughter to be a more powerful

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source of power than scream. Their new institution “makes products and services look like, or look like they bestow, humanity itself-as with the children’s laughter, to make profiteering look like participatory fun.”86 Sulley and Mike create corporate paradise for the scarers and their assistants. All of the monsters in Monsters, Inc. can be themselves as friendly, comedic creatures who make children laugh.

Monsters befriending children as well as using them as sources of capital reflects Pixar’s relationship with the Walt Disney Company. Ed Catmull advocates Pixar’s work environment “was not merely to build a studio that made hit films but to foster a creative culture that would continually ask questions.”87 He describes Pixar Inc. as a working environment where employees (or at least writers and directors) trust and respect one another. Freeman echoes his point, arguing that Monsters, Inc. “clearly references the relationship between the upstart Pixar and an aging Disney animation studio.”88 Films like Monsters, Inc. show children a palatable form of a more realistic corporate world. Unlike Disney’s policy of policing their employees and consumers, Pixar projects its company as one that actually fosters creativity and inclusion for their audiences. Sulley’s Monsters, Inc. provides a perfected version of the Pixar Company where the former works to bring humanity into the profit minded corporate world.

2.2 The Reintroduction of Humanity and Love into Dead Labor in Wall-E

Wall-E provides an example of a world where technology and corporations completely usurp social interactions between people. The film presents technology as

86 Ibid, 91.
87 Ed Catmull, Creativity Inc.: Overcoming the Unseen Forces That Stand in the Way of True Inspiration, 64.
something that can develop and thrive without any human presence. Robots repair each other, enforce order, and provide every need for the humans aboard the star cruiser Axiom. According to Vivian Sobchack, the programmed robots, especially the robot Wall-E “returns us to the cinematic apparatus and, even more so, to the computer, whose ‘motive power’ not only often appears ‘spontaneous’ also seems to involve ‘little labor’ because we do not see its moving parts in automatic and serial action”.89 Like the Axiom, computer animation removes the assumption of dead labor (the animators) due to the characters’ own autonomy. Even though this phenomenon is true for all animated features, Wall-E highlights its status as an animated feature since the robots essentially are the forgotten workers behind animation productions.

Robots and humans reside in two separate parts of the Axiom, and they only interact with each other when the humans need robotic assistance. The way in which the robots overly enjoy serving humans alludes to Disney employees at Disney Parks and stores. The logistics in Disney World, for instance, orchestrate “all other signs of a labor force…to a vast subterranean network of corridors and tunnels” just as the human aboard the Axiom have no access to the robot’s section of the ship. 90 Humans aboard the Axiom take the technology for granted and remain complacent in their state of technological dependency. Giroux and Pollock expand on the humanity’s reliance on the fictional corporation Buy n Large (BnL) where “humans have been in space for seven hundred years and have grown lazy and obese inhabiting a luxurious starliner…a totally controlled

89 Vivian Sobchack, “Animation and Automation, Or, the Incredible Effortfulness of Being,” Oxford University Press, no. 4 (2009), 383.
corporate environment (Disney Cruise Line vacation anyone?).” Buy n Large shares similarities with the Walt Disney Company where they want their workers to completely blend into the world of hospitality.

BnL’s history as a benevolent spacecraft to save humans from a decaying Earth stifles the knowledge about BnL’s responsibility for the Earth’s condition. In a similar fashion, The Walt Disney Company displays its own history as a product of Walt Disney’s benevolence and genius instead of acknowledging its corporate functions. For instance, children and families who partake in purchasing or involving themselves with Wall-E merchandise (as Giroux and Pollock suggest) enter a discourse between consumption and humanity. BnL and its proxy Auto ensures the constant flow of “mass culture represses [social anxieties] by the narrative construction of imaginary resolutions and by the projection of an optical illusion of social harmony.” Auto dictates more than the robots’ functions, he controls the entire social and labor conditions in the Axiom. Wall-E remains on Earth where he grows entirely separate from Auto’s directives and develops his own independence and possesses what one can call humanity.

In 2015 Buy N Large’s CEO enforces “Operation Cleanup”, a proposed method of recreating the planet Earth to its habitable state, using an army of Wall-E’s (Waste Allocation Load Lifter Earth-Class). Seven hundred years later the character Wall-E is the only one of his kind still operational. Garbage heaps as tall as skyscrapers cover the landscape revealing the futility of Wall-E’s efforts to make Earth a habitable place once again. Despite Wall-E’s pointless and repetitive labor, he contently lives among trash and

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91 Ibid, 134.
dilapidated skyscrapers. Meanwhile, the camera forces the audience to gaze down on a human-less Earth without any explanation. The bird’s eye perspective provides the powerful visual position with an all-encompassing gaze that displays “its practical weakness, its cognitive uncertainty, its ontological trouble from beginning to end.”93 The massive amounts of trash and advertisements reduces humanity and their history into commodities. They all come from the company Buy n Large whose left over presence dictates the corporation was once a large social and political influence.

One ad encourages families to enjoy vacations together on BnL’s luxury cruise ship, the Axiom. The ad indicates human relationships once did exist though the holographic ad only offers a replica of familial relationships. The form of a holograph and its image of a family becomes a type of artwork without a spectator or a “monument to its expectation, a monument to its absence…a combination of means for producing an effect outside of itself.”94 Buy n Large even replaces U.S. leaders with the Buy n Large logo on U.S. bills. Humankind has been reduced to a monument of consumption and the left over trash. Wall-E offer relief from the cognitive disturbance of an abandoned Earth. He clearly displays subjectivity by his enjoyment of music and fascination in collecting items.

The Axiom scares Wall-E when it sends EVE (Extraterrestrial Vegetation Evaluator) on a mission to find signs of plant life. EVE’s directive takes over when Wall-E shows her a plant he found earlier that day. She grabs the plant and shuts down to wait for the Axiom to pick her up. Wall-E stows aboard to save EVE despite her own comfort

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in her directive body. His intention to save her, a selfless act, represents his first action to threaten the social order on board the Axiom. Wall-E severs the human’s reliance on the ship and Auto’s control over robots and people. He disrupts the utopic environment on the Axiom by trying to rescue EVE from simply being clean. His separation from Auto’s control prevents from knowing about the benign protocol and mistakenly thinks the robots torture her. During his rescue operation, he accidentally releases confined, malfunctioning robots. These robots also live separate from Auto’s directive due to their inability to fulfill their proper function aboard the Axiom. Like Wall-E and now EVE, they can make their decisions freely.

The Axiom locks malfunctioned robots because they create an inconvenience for the axiom’s uniformity. The robots should only have one job which is to serve the humans. Failure to successfully complete that protocol results in a “rehabilitation”. When Wall-E releases them, they refuse to follow the freeway lines and fight alongside Wall-E against Auto’s police bots. Following Wall-E’s lead, EVE helps Captain B. McCrea learn the importance for the whole ship to experience freedom from Auto’s control.

Wall-E also introduces love an important concept for Disney, but BnL never promotes love and relationships. Though some scholars approach the film as an environmental message, the director, Andrew Stanton, claims the theme he intended was: “irrational love defeats life’s programming.” Having the primary romantic couple consist of robots, not John and Mary, is indicative of Stanton’s assertion. Framing the love story through the robotic characters points to “Pixar’s own position in the computer

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The unity of the love story between EVE and Wall-E and the human couple John and Mary and the anti-corporate message marks Pixar’s subtle subversion against Disney’s typical romantic happy ending. Even though Wall-E and EVE end up together, robots and humans working together go back to Earth and learning to cultivate it marks the true victory. Wall-E’s ability to love expands beyond personal feeling and into recreating a new social system with a reestablishment of humanity. The symbolic image of the New Earth promises a personal connection between people and technology. Just as Wall-E reintroduces humanity into a consumption-minded humans, Pixar uses its computerized characters to ease the audience's anxiety over an increasingly technological society. The films also relates Pixar’s image as a corporation that acknowledges both its technology and its workers that use it.

2.3 *A Bug’s Life*: Allusions to Pixar as a Progressive Company

Where Disney uses representations of work to distinguish the quality of the characters, Pixar characters are frequently workers whose lives get disrupted. Pixar’s reliance on Disney merchandising and distribution limits the representations of labor in their films. The characters in *Monsters, Inc.* and *Wall-E* eventually rebel against their corporate oppressors even though they were satisfied with their situation at the beginning of the film. *A Bug’s Life* provides an exception by showing the ants’ anxiety over harvesting enough food to feed the grasshoppers. If the ants fail to meet their quota, the grasshoppers will destroy their colony. The narrative framing of the grasshoppers aligns them with dictators rather than a corporate outsourcing of labor.

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96 Ibid, 61.
While the other ants are content with working to prevent the grasshopper’s invasion, Flik notices the underlying motives. In a final one on one fight between Hopper and Flik, Hopper tells the ants that “ideas are very dangerous things. You are mindless soil shoving losers! Put on this Earth to serve us!” Flik responds “You’re wrong Hopper… Ants don't serve grasshoppers! It's you who need us! We're a lot stronger than you say we are... And you know it, don't you?” Flik’s position as an ant who shows the grasshoppers that the ants only need to look to themselves to find strength and live prosperously strikes a similar chord with Pixar’s decision to make computer animated films.

The opening scene shows ants obtaining food and marching single file to place them on a pedestal. Flik, uses a machine to cut down the stalk instead of relying on the slower process. Princess Ata and the other older members of the council try and convince him to get in line like everyone else. Flik’s individualism and fascination with modernizing the colony make him a pariah among the uniform and traditionalist ants. Moreover, the film shows the flaws and pitifulness in the older monarchy political system. When the ants are heading single file to the offering, a leaf falls to the ground separating the line. The ants then panic because they do not know how to get back into formation. One of the council members has to guide the ants around the leaf to get them back into line. Their determination to continue in their repetitive and inefficient ways to gather food indicates why they never revolted against Hopper and his legion of grasshoppers.

Hopper and his followers invade the colony as a form of punishment. Kirsch and Mitchell reference Lukacs observation where ‘the ability to separate forcibly the
production of use-values in time and space’ allows for a greater rationalization of and control over the work process.” Hopper oppresses the ants, not for economic reasons, but because they are exploitable. The ants live in accordance with their colony’s tradition of always having served the grasshoppers. Even the queen tells her daughter, Princess Atta, “they come, they eat, they leave, that’s our lot in life.” When Flik’s harvest invention knocks down the grasshoppers’ offering, the grasshoppers invade the colony and demand another harvest by the end of the summer.

The disobedient ants force Hopper to stoop to their level instead creating an embarrassment for him. He directs his anger as the ants’ disorderly conduct rather than being upset by the lack of food. The food is not the commodity, but the pleasure he receives from having them live a lower social caste. Taking the ants’ identities to be anything other than laborers provides value to Hopper. Thus, Hopper’s misplaces his blame on the ants as a whole, especially on Princess Atta, when it only takes on non-conforming to bring down Hopper’s regime.

Pixar’s second film differs from many Pixar films because it shows worker exploitation directly. Where the employees in Wall-E and Monsters, Inc. enjoy their work, the ants simply accept their place a manual laborers to prevent the grasshoppers from destroying their home. The grasshoppers control the ants to show their superiority under the guise of desiring free food. Even the language in the film suggests forms of racial and economic inequality, for the terms for the ants’ homes consist of “the colony” and “the island” suggesting isolation and subjugation. Other than the colony, the film

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shows three other locations to indicate how far the ants are from the rest of bug society. The city is the first location where the protagonist Flik tries to find tough bugs to fight the grasshoppers. City bugs have to rely on human waste to create a civilization while the ants rely on organic materials such as dirt, mushrooms, and leaves. Flik’s travel pack is composed of such materials making him stand out as an outsider. However, it is a sentiment unique to the grasshoppers.

The ants’ location on the island severs their contact with the bugs in society, but Flik’s interaction with the city bugs suggests no form of prejudice. Just as the ants have not seen the big city, the city bugs do not know about the ants. The city’s images show many different types of bugs traveling through makeshift streets and businesses are built out of left over take out boxes. Instead of finding local city bugs, he meets outcast circus performers who incidentally put on an act of their faux strength to scare away bullies. Flik mistakes them for strong warriors capable of battling the grasshoppers. In the end, their lack of fighting skills do not deter them or Flik from trying to protect the colony.

The arrival of the circus bugs forces the ants to deviate from their traditional structure of harvesting food in favor of celebration and using their resources to make weapons such as a fake bird. Even though the introduction of outsider bugs causes a shift in the ants’ culture, it’s a total revolution of ideology. According to Wallerstein, revolutions do not always transform away from the world-system, in the ants’ case accepting the grasshoppers’ rule, but “revolution can create its own tradition about itself and link this self-appraisal to a perhaps revised but still fictive history of the state.”98 The ants still manage their monarchial structure and communal reliance even if they form a

98 Immanuel Wallerstein, “Culture as the Ideological Battleground of the Modern World-System.”
society no longer under the grasshoppers’ rule. Overall, their society does not change into a modernized world system. They still remain isolated from the rest of bug society and continue to rely on organic materials to live instead of human waste.

There are also no other ants or even grasshoppers in the city. Like in *Monsters, Inc.* and *Wall-E*, geographical locations play a significant role in the social relations for Pixar characters. Problems bugs face in the city involve personal employment rather than subsistence farming. The bugs Flik chooses to help fight the grasshoppers are unemployed circus performers. The city affects him because it shows him the possibilities modernization can do for the colony. Aspects in the city such as efficiency and assertiveness are eventually incorporated into the colony. Only with Flik’s progressive and commercialized ways of thinking can the ants succeed in fighting the grasshoppers.

2.4 Conclusion

Pixar’s practice framing capitalistic corporations as a source of corruption and abusive power raises the question of how Pixar Inc. defines itself. Other Pixar films including *Toy Story 2*, *The Incredibles*, and *Cars* favor individuality and compassion over opportunities to earn profit or reclaim a nostalgic past via financial backers. However, *Monsters, Inc.*, *Wall-E*, and *A Bug’s Life* address directly Pixar’s contradictory place as a profitable corporation that wants to hide its success. Unlike the Walt Disney Company where its brand closely associated with happiness while poorly treating its employees, Pixar consistently receives praise for its ingenuity as well as business practices.

Its own comparatively unknown lawsuits and general lack of information about lower level workers skews the accuracy the company’s and business magazines’ claims on its progressive corporate practices. Ironically, *Monsters, Inc.* (the narrative that
encourages cooperation between factory workers, civilians, and their products) lands Pixar in two lawsuits. Both lawsuits challenge the originality of Pixar’s character designs narrative premises about monsters scared of children.99 Despite Pixar’s attempt to establish itself as a company not run on greed or bureaucracy, their association with Disney and using their resources as a corporation to combat lawsuits raises a discord in Pixar’s marketing as a type of “good” corporation.

Pixar presents itself as an opposing production company to Disney in terms of its production philosophy. Being the first company to establish three dimensional animation cartoons as a viable medium marks the company as one that is creative and willing to take risks. Pixar’s creative production force is not so much a myth as it is an unrealistic ideal. They “feed the beast” in order to thrive as company, which means Disney encouraged Pixar to make less quality products because fans would purchase anything related to their brand especially their films. 100 Here marks a similar dilemma Mike and Sulley face when they become convinced the human children need protecting. Even though children are a means to obtain scream, they want the company and by extension Monstropolis to uphold a respectable reputation. The machine forces all of the monsters, not just Waterhouse and Randall, to permanently hurt or kill children and risk making their presence more pronounced in the human world. The machine’s abusive power along with Buy n Large, and Hopper’s oppression creates a separation from these antagonist and a company like Disney.

100 “Feed the beast” refers to the pressure Disney and Pixar faced to appease audience demands for more products.
CHAPTER 3: DREAMWORKS ANIMATED FILMS EXPOSE DISNEY’S REPRESSION OF HARDSHIP

The Walt Disney Company and Pixar encourage children and families to accept fabricated reality based on their films. Pixar rekindles Disney’s value after the decline of their Princess Movies begin in the later part of the 1990’s by making “prestigious films, films respected by one’s peers, films popular with one’s friends and family, films enduring in memory, films that would someday be looked upon as milestones.” Other animated production companies following Pixar’s computer animation with non-human characters instead of Disney’s model with formulaic fairy tale narratives. However, a new production company, DreamWorks, provides a new strategy for making family animated films.

DreamWorks’s first few films from 1998-2001 show the difficulty of locating a DreamWorks aesthetic with two political comedies, a biblical epic, and a parody of the Disney Princess Movies. On the surface, they have no commonalities in their narratives. The company’s lack of a unifying narrative type prevents a consistent stream of successful films and franchise. DreamWorks focuses on making their films comical instead of a means for social influence. Nicole LaPorte notes that “[Jeffrey] Katzenberg talked about of hoping to expand the breadth of animation and use the genre to make films about bigger, grander themes”. As discussed in the first chapter, Disney designs

102 Blue Sky Studios produces Ice Age, a film about prehistoric animals trying to survive the Ice Age. Ice Age has a mass appeal with five theatrical releases.
their films specifically for selling their characters, songs, and happily ever afters to the public. DreamWorks narratives use comedic means such as musical numbers and parody to prevent the representations of hardships from becoming too realistic, but the characters overcome obstacles rather than wishing their problems away. *Antz, Prince of Egypt, and Shrek* all use various modes of comedy to incorporate a more pragmatic understanding of reality instead providing children with a new world of fantasy.

The protagonists Z, Moses, and Shrek experience life as a cruel joke where their misery turns humorous. Henri Bergson describes the relationship between comedy and frustration as “the games of the child when working its dolls and puppets, many of the movements are produced by string, ought we not to find those same strings somewhat frayed by wear, reappearing as the threads that knot together situations in a comedy?”

DreamWorks narratives provide children with an experience of cinematic play that imitates life with the experience of “fray and wear”. None of DreamWorks characters live in the carefree worlds of Disney and Pixar, but jokes and music keep their films lighthearted enough for family audiences. Disney and Pixar films, by contrast, continually show there is no obstacle too great for a character’s optimism to overcome.

DreamWorks, as its name suggests, functions as a pseudo dream-work where the animated films manifest Disney’s repression of laborious hardship in favor of wish granting. DreamWorks characters’ wishes and desires can remain unfulfilled, but unlike Freud’s wish fulfillment where the “latent dream-thought are not conscious,” they become wholly satisfied about their situation by the films’ conclusion to assuage children
and family audiences. In other words, DreamWorks end their films with their characters having all wish-fulfillments fulfilled. The differences between the characters’ realistic portrayals of their anxieties and their very different conclusions of contentment do not set up a clear pathway for ideological merchandising.

3.1 The Most Okay Place on Earth: Child Proofing Woody Allen’s Humor in Antz

DreamWorks first film Antz already marks a large divergence from Disney and Pixar’s method for making animated films. Woody Allen voices the protagonist Z, the narrative is political, the setting is in New York City, and the film uses Freudian humor. The animated medium and PG rating signifies a new addition of mature humor and content not previously seen in an big American animated feature at this time. Using character templates from “Fielding Mellish in Bananas, Miles in Sleeper, and Boris—are all born losers makes Z a completely different comedic hero from the Disney princesses and the self-confident Flik or Sully. Z’s inability to process his unconscious causes him anxiety and an inability to focus on his job or his own inner strength.

From birth, the colony prevents the ants from having their own future and choices including the royalty. Z’s eventual love interest, Princess Bala, laments her position as someone who will eventually live her life giving birth to a new colony. It is unclear if Z’s mom is the queen, but the film shows how the ants receive their assigned roles. A bunch of ants in a line hold larva in their hands and place them on a table. When they place the larva, two ants sitting at the table say “soldier” or “worker” depending on which job they

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think the larva ant should have. Because all the ants know how they are born and designated to their worker stations, Z cannot repress the primal scene. The comedic moment in the opening scene where Z explains his anxiety to his therapist starts when the trivial moment remains in his consciousness instead of repressed. Moreover, the therapist treats his inability to repress as something that is useful to the colony. The scene plays out in a typical Woody Allen fashion with “the genre they represent reflect a new discourse of love, the discourse of intimacy.” 107 Z complains about a mother’s lack of attention because “when you’re the middle child in a family of five million you don’t get any attention…it makes me feel insignificant.” Instead of trying to assure him that he matters or examining more into how his relationship with his mother affects his life, the therapist responds with “excellent, you’ve made a real breakthrough…yes, Z you are insignificant.”

As I discussed in the previous chapter, A Bugs Life focuses on how individuality creates ingenuity, which in turn provides a means to rid the grasshopper’s control. The ants want to be free of the grasshoppers, but they have no courage to defend themselves at the beginning of the film. In Antz, however, everyone thinks they know how the colony functions and everyone except for Z and Princess Bala celebrate the colony. The position of the therapist raises an expectation that Z will get a new reassurance of his value. However, the ant colony functions as “it explicitly examines the different models of individuality and collectivism using narratives and images of Nazism and Socialism” where the Western idea of the individual holds no merit. The therapist does not want to delve deeper into Z’s psyche because Z finally understands his place as part of a whole. It

107 Ibid, 141.
is important for productivity that Z focus on being a worker without questioning his own desires.

Where *A Bugs Life* uses colorful visuals and gag related humor for its comic appeal, *Antz* primarily relies on verbal and mechanical humor. According to Henri Bergson, “A mechanical arrangement…is a thing. What therefore incited laughter was the momentary transformation of a person into a thing if one considers the image from this standpoint. With the American ideals of Woody Allen turns into a thing, an animated bug, his character also goes through a variety of mechanical transformations. Even his full name Z-4195 indicates his lack of identity, as he is merely letters and numbers in a system of ants. In one scene, Z and Azteca have to be part of a worker ant wrecking ball. Azteca encourages him to be happy about building a better colony, but he remarks, “I mean, how could I be unhappy about being a piece of construction equipment?” The camera alternates between medium and medium-long shots of the ball hitting mounds of dirt to display its image as an object. However, the camera intermittently focuses in on Z to remind the audience the ball’s material are actually individual worker ants. Despite their appearance as one unified entity, Z literally drops the ball also signifying giving up on his promise to assimilate into worker life.

Princess Bala shares a similar situation to Z where she is dissatisfied with her place in life. They meet at a bar, and she tells him that he can never see her again. He swaps places with friend Weaver, a soldier ant, to see Bala wave to the troops. Her fiancé, General Mandible, fabricates a war the ants have no hope of winning to kill the

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queen’s loyal soldiers, Z among them. When he comes back as “war hero”, Princess Bala reveals Z as an imposter, like Luna in Sleeper, forcing him to kidnap her to save himself from arrest. Their escape results in physical obstacles, which humorously test the limits of their physical capabilities.

When they first leave the colony, a magnifying glass comes over them and spews out fire killing one of the guards trying to retrieve Princess Bala. The explosion flings Z to the top of a leaf where a water drop entraps him. Z cannot separate himself from the water droplet and has to gargle his words. Z’s life may be in danger, but his gargling asking Bala includes additional mechanical humor to the scene. Eventually, Bala enters the water droplet with him, so they can break the drop by pushing it off the leaf. Another part of the humor of the scene is how quickly the situations transition. Something keeps coming up in an attempt to kill them. The comical moment of the scene reflects what Bergson describes as the accidental comic the “laughable element…mechanical elasticity, just where one would expect to find the wide-awake adaptability and the living pliability of a human being.”109 The next day a human leg steps on them and gum sticks them at the bottom of the human’s shoe. Even though both Bala and Z experience life-threatening situation, the human does not even acknowledge them. Meanwhile, Z and Bala scream as though they are on a very dangerous roller coaster. The discourse between the audience’s suture into the character’s perspective and the dangers from mundane human objects provides comedy within the serious danger to the characters find themselves in.

109 Ibid, 10.
Princess Bala and Z’s accidental brushes with death provide them with a new bravery when they return to the colony. They save the worker and royal ants run in panic as General Mandible’s tunnel floods the colony with water. Z tells the ants to build a ladder, a similar structure to the wrecking ball, to reach the surface indicating his choice to continue being a worker ant over leaving the colony. Compared to A Bug’s Life, Antz’s conclusion focuses on a Woody Allen style ending where “it is a place where funny ‘strange’ and funny ‘ha ha’ meet.” Z and Bala have the ability to choose their fate at the end, but they choose to belong to a colony all over again. The camera also zooms out at the end to show their “big” world as actually a span of a few feet with the ant pile right next to the water fountain. Allowing the audience to see just how small or “insignificant” the ant world is degrades Z and Bala’s entire adventure. Their hopes and dreams of a new life never were a real possibility all along. The mature humor and bummer ending shows the company’s disregard for Disney and Pixar’s mode of cute characters and excessively happy characters.

3.2 Prince of Egypt Uses Disney’s Musical Genre as Comedic Reprieve from Its Tragedy

DreamWorks’s second film, Prince of Egypt, offers a contrasting narrative to Antz where lives completely change. The Prince of Egypt is not a corporate mandate to make merchandise, but a cultural story of a specific ethnic group. Jeffrey Katzenberg and those who worked on Prince of Egypt “understood from the beginning how limited commercial prospects were”. Nothing in the color of skin, clothes, or actions symbolically

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demonizes the Egyptians. The narrative frames the antagonist Rameses as someone stuck in a destined path just like Moses. The characters are neither heinous villains nor perfect heroes who impose purchasable ideologies. Despite the realism of the film, musical numbers add comedic effects to *Prince of Egypt*’s realistic animation and somber narrative.

The song’s comedic reprieve emphasizes, “The action…concerned with surmounting obstacles to their living happily ever after.” Scores and soundtracks in Disney films accentuate the formulaic narratives that end in marriage and the binary good/evil characters. Unlike a Disney film, the songs in *Prince of Egypt* reveal the characters’ inner turmoil instead of symbolizing their narrative roles. Moreover, the narrative makes the characters undesirable to emulate, for the heroes live difficult lives and have to make hard decisions. Using Disney’s approach of the musical animated film to frame the narrative allows a reprieve from Moses’s solemn journey. The songs provide characters’ depth and act as comedic interjections.

Songs such as “Deliver Us” and “All I Ever Wanted” reveal the tumultuous inner conflict in upon a seemingly steadfast decision. Apart from the well-known story of Moses, “Deliver Us” signifies how Moses even as a baby will have no choice but to save the Jews. His mother, Yochaved, sings a solo lullaby to Moses as she sends him down the Nile River to save his life. Moreover, the song provides a mass voice to those who do not have one, the Jewish slaves themselves. Despite the tragic themes in the song, Director

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Brenda Chapman notes, “the key to the prologue is that it ends with hope.”113 The Queen saves Moses from the Nile foreshadowing an answer to the slaves’ prayers.

After the prologue, the story flash-forwards to a comedic chariot race where an adult Moses and his brother Ramses accidentally knock down the nose from Pharaoh’s statue. The scene takes place in an ancient equivalent of a construction site where the slaves are building the large statue of Seti. Moses and Rameses give no regard for their work or see anything wrong with their actions. Moses only recognizes himself as a prince of Egypt and enjoys the mischievous race with his brother. Even though “Deliver Us” already signifies Moses’s role as the deliverer, the chariot race conveys the innocence of two brothers having fun while ignoring the slaves’ suffering. Later that night, however, his sister Miriam tells Moses about his past and his role as their deliverer.

Moses pushes Miriam to the ground and threatens her for telling him lies. When she signs Yocheved’s lullaby, and Moses remembers the song. In one day, Moses transitions from a carefree prince to questioning his identity. The truth about his past now becomes part of his consciousness. Discovering the truth becomes a painful and humiliating experience for Moses, but his song about it cinematically hides the trauma. “All I Ever Wanted” provides a child-friendly way to express his feelings about the devastating moment of self-realization.

Similar to Z, Moses experiences a crisis with his mother. His infant-self did not have the self-awareness and knowledge to know his birth mother sent him away. Even though Moses is an adult, he associated his adoptive mother with his birth mother.

Realizing his separation from the birth mother causes a primal response where “the separation of the mother becomes a matter of life and death, the whole affective apparatus of the child is mobilized, the infant becomes frantic and noisy and assumes a search pattern.” Confronting Miriam forces him to confront the mother. Miriam’s hair blows over her face and teardrops slowly stream down her face just as Yocheved’s did. The confrontation of his sister/mother shocks Moses. He looks at her in terror and runs away back towards the palace. The song “All I Ever Wanted” starts upon his arrival at the palace lessening the potency of the tragic scene, but still accentuates Moses’s anxiety as he breaths shallow breaths, a symptom of panic.

Moses’s voice sings the song, but it comes from his thoughts not his mouth. The song exposes his inner thoughts on how he views himself as an Egyptian. Despite Moses’s initial fearful reaction, the song expresses how his identity as a prince gives him strength. He sings “With my father, mother, brother: oh so noble, oh so strong/Now I am home/ Here among my trappings and belongings, I belong/and if anybody doubts it/They couldn't be more wrong!” He stares upon statues and hieroglyphs of all, which show him as being a part of the Pharaoh’s family. Miriam’s words do not affect him until he dreams about the Pharaoh’s order to kill the infant male slaves. In other words, Ramses only turns into a villain because Moses changes his perception about the Egyptians.

“All I Ever Wanted” echoes in a later song “The Plagues” in which Moses already accepts God’s call to free the slaves even though it grieves him. The lyrics to the song

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include “Once I called you brother/once I thought the chance to make you laugh/was all I ever wanted.” Now through God’s command, he has to betray his beloved brother and home. A montage to showcases the destruction of the ten plagues including people screaming from boils, a mother, and son cowering in fear, and Ramses staring in anger at Moses on top of a hill. After the final plague, the death of the firstborn Egyptian sons, Ramses cries over his dead son and tells Moses he and the slaves can go.

Instead of celebrating, Moses collapses in a corner and begins to cry. According to Solomon, “the audience has experienced the destruction Egypt, culminating in the Death of the Firstborns, and now must share the triumphant joy of the former slaves.” To bring joy back into the narrative, Miriam places her hand on Moses and sings, “So many nights we’ve prayed/with no proof anyone could hear/In our hearts a hopeful song/we’ve barely understood.” The lighting changes from a darkness to the pale light of dawn with the Hebrews slowly coming out of their homes walking towards freedom. More than any other song in the film, “When You Believe” comes directly from Disney’s influence. The song addresses not only the characters but also the audience with lyrics such as “who knows what miracles you can achieve when you believe, somehow you will.” Upon singing these lyrics, Miriam turns to children making a connection the “you” are the children in the audience. Despite the serious and even sad parts in the film, the songs in The Prince of Egypt show the value of children and family. In order to confirm Moses made the right decision, Tzipporah tells him “look at your people, Moses. They are free!” allowing him to celebrate with the rest of his people.

3.3 Sick of Tales as Old as Time: *Shrek* Parodies Disney’s Fairy Tales as Social Educators

Unlike the Prince of Egypt with no marketing promise, Katzenberg uses Disney narratives and symbolic aesthetic to humiliate Disney’s ideological crusade. He makes a DreamWorks version of a Disney film with *Shrek*. *Shrek* situates itself as a comedy rather than Princess Movie to act as an influence for families and children. As mentioned in Chapter One, nature plays an important role in Disney films as their aesthetic to represent a difference between innocence and corruption.116 According to Keith Booker, “Disney’s consistent championing of nature (often in opposition to human intrusions or abuses) over the years has provided one of the company’s proudest traditions.”117

*Shrek*’s rejection of Disney’s harmonious relationship between heroes and nature comically subverts the fairy tale formulaic narrative and its ethos. Shrek behaves in a natural way for an ogre and prefers his life in isolation. He resides in the gap between villain and hero, as he feels forced to act like a monster because everyone fears him. According to Bergson, “any disguise is seen to become comic, not only that of a man, but that of society also, and even the disguise of nature.”118 Princess Fiona’s identity is in turmoil, for she has to reconcile both her identity as a princess and an ogre. Her attempt to act like a Disney princess humorously fails as she “represents a rebellion against that authority, a liberation from its pressure.”119 She tries to fulfill the role of the traditional

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116 For instance, Gaston hunts birds during the opening song “Belle” indicating his place as the villain despite his princely appearance.
Disney princess by trying to be the prince’s prize and become Princess Fiona Charming. She awaits in the dragon’s keep for her true love to rescue even though her actions later in the film reveal her resourcefulness and abilities fight. Princess Fiona only stays trapped because she follows her submissive predecessor, Aurora. Bergson also notes parody transposes the solemn into the familiar and degrades the former. Shrek parodies Disney to expose its superficial aesthetic and narratives that manage to impose social expectations based on fairy tale archetypes. The opening sequence starts like a fairy tale based Disney film with a storybook. Instead of the feminine voice or singing chorus such in films such as *Sleeping Beauty* (Clyde Geronimi, 1959) and *Cinderella* (Clyde Geronimi and Wilfred Jackson, 1950), Mike Meyers voices the narrator.

His voice in *Shrek* sounds strikingly similar to his character Fat Bastard in *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me* (Jay Roach, 1999) indicating *Shrek* includes both parodic and crass humor. Shortly after Shrek reads, “she waited in the dragon’s keep in the highest room of the tallest tower for her true love and true love’s first kiss” in his fairy tale book, a green hand rips the pages out of the story followed by a laugh and the exclamation “like that’s ever going to happen!” The camera zooms out to show the outhouse along where he was reading the story along with his continuing ridicule “what a load of...,” followed by a toilet flush. Bell, Haas, and Sells explain, “Disney is described as the ‘The Great Sanitizer’ a label applied to both applaud and condemn.”

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120 In the sequel *Shrek 2*, Shrek discovers she was waiting for another princely character named Prince Charming.

meant metaphorically, one can imagine marketing the pristine image of the prince and princesses would be more challenging if they were farting during their opening song. Shrek's morning routine introduces a hero in a fairy tale narrative without Disney’s wholesome image.

Typically, opening sequences in the Disney Princess Movies involve a sequence of nature and tranquility. After his hygienic routine, the townspeople encroach on his land attempting to kill him for a reward. Montage alternates images of the townspeople grabbing weapons and pitchforks with images of Shrek grabbing a tiny spoon to eat his dinner. The objects represent an underlying comic social nature in the film where the ogres are men and the men are monsters with Lord Farquaad as the ruler of the townspeople. Lord Farquaad artificially creates a world of normalcy by forcibly removing the fantasy of fairy tale creatures. Lord Farquaad’s guards relocate the fairy tale creatures and use Shrek’s swamp as their quarantine.

Shrek asks them for their help to find Duloc, so he can ask Lord Farquaad for his swamp back. Much to Shrek’s dismay, Donkey obnoxiously yells “pick me!” while no one else volunteers. Donkey finds Shrek when he escaped from Lord Farquaad's guards. When Shrek forcibly asks why Donkey is following him, he sings, "Because I'm all alone…" from Bette's Milder's “Friends.” Disney songs project Disney’s idealism such as love conquering any obstacle and always rely on your friends. Shrek’s annoyance at Donkey’s singing provides a potentially more realistic reaction if one were to have a

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123 Disney associates nature with their protagonists, not just the princesses. Hercules in the animated film *Hercules* starts his journey while singing, “Go the Distance” while staring off into an ocean view of the sunset.
constant singing companion. He continually asks Donkey to shut up during their journey to Duloc.

The kingdom of Duloc negates the magical and musical wonderment in Disney theme parks. Instead of the lively atmosphere of an actual Disney Park, “it was cold and militaristic, and overrun with menacing, black hooded men.” Donkey pulls a lever that says “information” breaking the uncomfortable quiet with singing animatronic figurines. The song “Welcome to Duloc’s” repetitive jingle and audio-animatronic characters closely resembles the Walt Disney park ride It’s a Small World. However, the song “Welcome to Duloc” imposes uniformity with lyrics such as “here we have some rules/let us lay them down/don’t make waves/stay in line/and we’ll get along fine.” Duloc’s Information kiosk mimics the It’s a Small World’s artificial display of diversity, but the former imposes a message of uniformity.

It’s a Small World ride features the song “It’s a Small World”, which provides a spectacle in the celebration of difference. Lyrics for the song include “there is so much we share/that it’s time we’re aware/It’s a small world after all.” Ironically, the difference between the songs highlights the problem with Disney’s welcoming attitude for everyone. Giroux and Pollock explain: “the visitor’s experience at Disney theme parks, where the messages imbibed is a celebration of liberty, individually, and freedom…contrast to demands for guests’ ready compliance.”

Even though the parks establish rules and regulations like Duloc, they provide more attractions and influences from the beloved Disney narratives. Shrek becomes completely out of place in Duloc because he enjoys the

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independence he gains from being separate from the fairy tale world.126 His identity as an ogre others him from both the cheery fairy tale creatures like Donkey and the human townspeople. When Shrek and Donkey enter the arena where Lord Farquaad is hosting the tournament for the hero to rescue Fiona, Farquaad sees Shrek and exclaims “Oh, it’s hideous!” Even Princess Fiona’s status as a “princess” does not hinder his disgust from her transformation into an ogre.

Donkey and Shrek accept the quest to save Fiona in exchange for an emptied swamp. The dragon guarding the castle flings Shrek into Fiona’s bedroom, and the noise wakes Fiona briefly, though she then pretends to fall back asleep before Shrek sees her awakened state. He leans over Princess Fiona as though going in for a kiss, and Fiona reciprocates by slowly puckering up her lips. Fiona expects the Disney trademark of true love’s kiss where “the princess’s princes turn up and it is true love before anyone has said a word.”127 Princess Fiona demonstrates the absurdity in using the Disney Princesses as the preferred body and personalities. Shrek shakes her awake instead of kissing her parodying the true love’s kiss and exposing an uncomfortable fact about true love’s kiss: the princesses have no idea who kisses them awake. Princess Fiona notices Shrek’s unromantic behavior, but she never questions whether his identity could be something other than a prince. She has no other template to follow other than the archetype of the Disney princess.

Her isolation in the tower has a dual function to keep her safe until a prince breaks her curse and conceals her the film’s anachronistic humor. As far as she knows, her

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rescuer is a human prince who will break the curse and marry her. They reunite with Donkey who the dragon has wrapped in her tale on a forced romantic date. Shrek uses her chains to trap her in the castle allowing them to get to safety. Shrek takes off his helmet and Fiona frantically yells, “This is all wrong! You’re not supposed to be an ogre!” Her emphasis on the appearance of a princess shows her unwillingness to follow the film’s joke as a “rebellion against that authority, a liberation from its pressure.” Princess Fiona cannot recognize the joke and aims to achieve Disney’s narrative standards as a princess trying to find a prince.

Her bossy attitude already separates her from the role of Disney princess. Another key trait for Disney princess is their connection to nature. According to Patrick Murphy, Disney princesses “consistently attempts to reflect a sense of ‘virginal’ innocence, promoting the ‘magic’ of childhood often through characters’ friendships or ability to communicate with animals”. Birds are one of the most common animal singing companions for Disney princesses. They help do chores, joins singing duets, and sometimes act as mentors. Fiona overhears Shrek confide to Donkey that people judge him before they know him because he is an ogre. Realizing her mistreatment after his rescue, she makes breakfast for Shrek and Donkey. In Sleeping Beauty, Aurora walks gracefully through the forest wishing she had a someone to bring her a love song while singing, “I wonder/I wonder/why each little bird has a someone/to sing to/sweet things

to…” Fiona’s morning stroll continues to parody *Sleeping Beauty* as she dances gracefully through the forest singing an ethereal tune.

Fiona’s singing wakes a bird from its nest and it flies up to a branch. As she sings to the bird, she slowly increases her pitch until her singing turns into a scream. The bird refuses to stop singing along with her and explodes when it can no longer reach the screaming tone. Not only does she kill the bird, but she also takes the eggs from its nest to make breakfast for Donkey and Shrek. The scene harkens back to the beginning where Shrek kills animals for use as his morning routine. Fiona’s ability to kill birds foreshadows her monstrous form. Unlike Shrek who can remain content with an unwholesome image, Fiona struggles to reconcile her identity as a princess with her ogre nature.

Classic Disney princesses such as Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora have a counter figure of female wickedness particularly with “the layers of rapacious animal imagery aligning women’s power with predatory nature.”130 By Disney’s physical template, she represents both princess and villain. She views her ogre identity as the predatory part, the one willing to kill birds for food or make animal balloons out of actual animals. Fiona explains, “I’m a princess and this not how a princess is supposed to look.” Only Donkey knows their personalities instead of their undesirable bodies make them both heroes. Shrek overhears Fiona say “who could love such a hideous ugly beast?” He mistakenly thinks the comment is about him, and he takes revenge against her by setting her up with Lord Farquaad even though he loves her. Shrek also mistakenly thinks

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Donkey sees him as a monster, so he sends him away. During their separation, Donkey runs into Dragon who escaped from the castle to look for him.

After finding his true love, Donkey confronts Shrek to stop Fiona’s wedding so he can have his happy ever after. Lord Farquaad captures them to rid final threat against his normal world. Lord Farquaad places the king’s crown on his head and yells, “I will have order! I will have perfection! I will…” Dragon swallows up Lord Farquaad before he can finish his sentence. In a Disney fairy tale film, Dragon functions as the “femme fatale, from whom the princess needs rescuing.” Her role as the “femme fatale” makes one final joke about his size by relating it sexual impotency. He is small enough to eat and cannot become king through consummation. She even burps his crown signifying the final rejection of Lord Farquaad and Disney’s aesthetic endorsement for beauty as good and heroic.

3.4 Conclusion

Shrek solidifies DreamWorks place as a new contender for producing franchise animated films by parodying the familiarity with the tropes in Disney Princess Movies. Even though DreamWorks films lack unified themes and aestheticism, they offer a counter perspective for making animated films. Derek Johnson explains the term franchise shifts from businesses shared under a corporate trademark to playing “an imaginative role in the media industries, framing their responses to other economic, technological, and sociocultural shifts in a specific set of cultural terms.”

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131 Rebecca-Anne C. Do Rozario, “The Princess and the Magic Kingdom: Beyond Nostalgia, the Function of the Disney Princess.”, 42.
Disney corner the market on children’s animated films and embed their ideology into their products.

DreamWorks films, however, are very much aware their cinematic apparatus instead of trying to pass themselves off as a fantasy that can be transferred into reality. The company sells characters through their jokes and zany personalities such as Donkey, and later films provide more pop culture references and jokes against Disney. Even though DreamWorks is a corporate production company, studies on its corporate ideology are scant to compare to both Disney and Pixar’s ideological machines. DreamWorks narratives in their animated films accentuate the characters’ inner turmoil. In other words they suffer from confusion and loss like us. DreamWorks encourages one can change one’s life rather than having the fantastic events happen to them. Their films offer a humorous divergent from one’s mundane routine rather than trying establish a set social order for children. Scott Mendelson from Forbes suggests the dual nature of DreamWorks animated films as having “violence and adult subject matter” and “mass-market friendly zany animal pictures,” prevents a unified aesthetic, which the company can market on a Disney grand scale.133 In other words, DreamWorks relies on the humor and more mature themes of their films to provide an alternate non-Disney type of family animated films.

Paul Wells notes DreamWorks uses “a similar stance to Warner Brothers in the 1930’s and 1940’s. These are smart, ‘gag’-led movies, topical and knowing, deliberately playful and glib, less earnestly satirical, emphasizing, entertainment before

Wells’s description fails to encompass *Antz* and *Prince of Egypt’s* place as important contrasts Disney’s formulaic narratives and binary characterizations in the passive feminine and the heroic masculine. Jeffrey Katzenberg responds to the question how animated films can entertain audiences without idealized forms and promises of dreams coming true. DreamWorks establishes itself as a franchise by attacking Walt Disney Company’s commercial culture by making subversive versions of Disney and Pixar’s happily ever afters.

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CONCLUSION: NOSTALGIA KNOWS NO END

After the revival of animation in the late 80’s-early 2000’s, American animation as a children’s medium shifts from designing animated features with children in mind to making animated films rooted in a nostalgia. These films are made to appeal to those who were children during that revival of animation. A survey from an offered course on Disney at University of Oregon in Eugene shows the students “identify strong memories of Disney as children, recalling their first encounters with Disney products, their favorite characters, and their first trip to one of the theme parks.”¹³⁵ In more recent years, The Walt Disney Company has remade their classic films such Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Sleeping Beauty, and Cinderella into live action films allowing for a hybridity between new spins on the classic narratives while retaining their essence to cater to both young viewers and their nostalgic parents. The remake of Sleeping Beauty, Maleficent (Robert Stromberg, 2014), focuses on a tragic backstory of the famous villain and gives Aurora, a formerly vague and passive Disney princess, bravery and a fun-loving personality. Although not as prominent as the princesses from the 20th century, Disney still makes animated princess films with a semi-new agenda in their attempt to incorporate less formulaic narratives and recapture the magic of the fairytale Eisner perfected.

Frozen (Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee, 2013) successfully revitalizes the spectacle of the Disney Princess as its Disney’s current CEO, Bob Iger notes that Frozen’s success “appears to show that Disney Animation Studios is finally, finally back in the groove.”¹³⁶

What makes *Frozen* so different or similar to other Disney princess films? It is also not the only princess film to be released in the 2010’s with both *Princess and the Frog* (Ron Clements and John Musker, 2009) and *Tangled* (Nathan Greno and Byron Howard, 2010) coming before it. Looking at the Disney spectacle from the earlier princess films explains why. *Frozen* switches the formulaic fairy tale-narrative just enough to where it is new and recognizable for that nostalgia factor. Having a narrative involving two merchandisable princesses adds a new desirable addition for marketing. Children can now choose which one they emulate or like best. Princess Anna follows the trajectory of a more classic princess where she dreams to meet a prince and falls in love at first sight. Her older sister, Elsa, has ice powers but lives in constant fear she will be discovered. Though Anna wants a relationship with her sister, their parents forbade Elsa from telling Anna about her powers after Elsa almost froze her when they were little.

Anna grows up essentially alone and makes a vow to herself to fall in love with the first prince she meets at Elsa’s coronation. Even though the film makes Elsa a queen, they market her as an empowered princess with Broadway star, Idina Menzel’s, signature voice. Though a “queen”, the narrative frames her as a misunderstood hero not the villain. Except for a greedy merchant, there are no typical aesthetic indicators of a Disney villain. When Anna meets Prince Hans he has a handsome appearance, has a bond with his horse, and shows kindness to the people when Elsa accidentally freezes Arendelle. Unlike Gaston whose ego and crudeness signifies him as the villain, Hans convincingly demonstrates a princely kindness. When he leaves Anna to die instead of healing her with true love’s kiss, the betrayal comes as a surprise for those looking for the Disney villain aestheticism and undesirable personality. By the end of the film, Elsa embraces herself
and Anna discovers she can rescue herself and finds love with Kristoff. *Frozen* also debuts a new iconic Disney princess song “Let It Go” which Elsa sings while building her ice castle. Disney World brings a tangible experience from the image of Elsa’s ice palace in a new ride Frozen Ever After.137 “Guests” ride in imitation Viking Boats through a series of light shows and fractal designs to imitate a winter wonderland. As you sail down, characters from the movie sing and greet you with Elsa giving a grand light/ice show from her palace at the halfway point.

Whether impressive or worrisome, the Walt Disney Company allows their fans to revisit the awe of Disney magic or make new memories by, attending theme parks, watching or re-watching new Disney films, or enjoying the products from one of Disney’s subsidiaries. The power of the Disney spectacle is not convincing their consumers they have to follow a Disney ideology but rather providing them with memorable experiences of what it could be like to live in a Disney world.

While Walt Disney Animated Studios resurrects their animation kingdom, Pixar uses a person’s life stage to capture the now-adult audience who once grew up on their films and characters. In *Toy Story 3* (Lee Unkrich, 2010) Andy goes to college and has to leave his toys, iconic characters like Woody and Buzz Lightyear, behind. Many people who knew *Toy Story* as a child were almost college age when the release of *Toy Story 3*. The film also fits into Pixar’s discourse on the relationships between corporate commodities and the individual. The toys experience a crisis in their identity between Andy’s toys and toys manufactured to be played with. For a toy, children’s lack of

interest in playing with them signifies a type of death in that they no longer have a purpose. They find a new loving child owner, Bonnie, who not only plays with them but gives them a new life. Rekindling the audience’s love for their characters replaces their anti-corporate sentiments from Pixar’s earlier years. Though the characters struggle with the reality of the human growth and process of maturity, both the college-aged audience and the characters makes their transitions in life together. Pixar’s *Monsters University* works in similar way where it explains Monsters, Inc. importance for providing power and the company’s popularity among the youthful monsters.

Disney•Pixar takes the extra lengths in their marketing for their films as something more than a cinematic experience. Pixar makes a fully functional college admission website for MU which is still accessible. The narrative focuses on Mike’s original dream to become a scarer at MU’s School of Scaring. Sulley, another student at MU, uses his legacy as a Sullivan to gain privilege in the school despite Dean Hardscrabble’s warning not to rely on his raw ability and name. Dean Hardscrabble’s reputation as the holding the largest scare record at Monsters, Inc. strikes a similarity to Harvard and Yale where “the tiny handful of elite admissions gatekeepers enjoy enormous, almost unprecedented power to shape the leadership of our society.” When Mike and Sulley get expelled for going through an unauthorized human door, Mike and Sulley prove themselves to be a successful scare team. It is not the school who springs them to the top of Monsters, Inc. but their own talents in proving successful as a team in all of their endeavors. In this way, Pixar retains its critique against the corporate world by

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tackling the corporate apparatus in higher education. *Monsters, Inc.* already showed Sulley and Mike’s success not only as scarers but as the new CEO’s of Monsters, Inc. As I discussed in the second chapter, *Monsters, Inc.* acts to some extent as a template for the business policies of Pixar. One cannot help but notice the similarity between Mike and Sulley’s success without the help of a major institution with John Lasseter’s story of being fired from Disney only to design and direct *Toy Story* and become CCO of Disney•Pixar. Lasseters and Mike/Sulley’s expulsion from Pixar favors the classic American story of workers who gain their success from their talents and hard work. Josh Spiegel from *Pixar Times* observes “it’s baffling that a company associated with breaking new ground…looks backwards while looking forward.”140 Disney•Pixar’s films encourage consumers to retain and relive their childhood while encouraging their abilities to succeed later on in life.

Disney and Pixar insert themselves back into a healthy place on the market for animated films in the past few years, but DreamWorks Animation finds itself in a more precarious situation. Currently, DreamWorks animated films make the bulk of the company’s income and their trail of box office disappointments forced the company “to shave as many as 400 jobs, or about 20% of its California workforce” in 2015.141 DreamWorks’s early films offer limited means for encouraging a nostalgic sentiment for their films. Its only early major success, *Shrek*, already has numerous prequels and sequels as well as spin offs. Moreover, they offer nothing new to DreamWorks parodic humor or mature narrative themes. The other films *Antz* and *Prince of Egypt* did not

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promote an ideology or aesthetic that DreamWorks can reincorporate for later use. I agree with Scott Medelson’s assessment that “if in twenty years parents are asking other parents if their kids have seen Shrek or Kung Fu Panda for the first time, DreamWorks will have won. If not, then they’ll always be second-best.” So far, DreamWorks keeps making films revolving around their successful franchises apart from Shrek such as Kung Fu Panda (Mark Osborne and John Stevenson, 2008) and How to Train Your Dragon (Dean DeBlois and Chris Sanders, 2010) with the latter having a third film released in 2018. However, their place as a childhood staple for generational visitation remains uncertain.

The initial plan for DreamWorks included “a vast multimedia empire involved not just live-action and animated movies, television, music, and interactive games, but TV animation, publishing, theme parks, live entertainment and theater, and merchandising.” The plan to create a massive DreamWorks empire failed because the films do not have visual or audio spectacles to emulate in thematic merchandise or theme parks. Until recently, The Prince of Egypt was DreamWorks’s musical animated film. Some of their other films like The Road to El Dorado (Bibo Bergeron, Jeffrey Katzenberg, Will Finn, and others, 2000) have soundtracks or a scene or two where characters sing, but they do not have long narrative segments of singing. However, Prince of Egypt is no longer DreamWorks Animation’s only musical film genre.

A new DreamWorks animated film, Trolls (Mike Mitchell and Walt Dohrm, 2016) assemble new, catchy renditions of previous songs to fit the narrative. Trolls attempts to use Disney’s combination color schemes and song to conclude the film with

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the message that inner happiness can bring everyone together. The trolls excel in living in constant happiness where a daily regimen includes songs, dances, and they have specified hug times. The Bergens, however, at trolls to absorb their happiness. The Bergen’s selfishness cause greyness and anger in their world. Eating the overly-happy creatures allow them to feel a momentary happiness.

*Trolls* could mark a shift in DreamWorks films from a distinct anti-Disney aesthetic to one that embraces Disney and Pixar’s style. Let children and families embrace images of happiness and nostalgia rather than divulging the absurdity in hiding children away from the inevitable hardships of reality. Where Disney carefully constructs their films for merchandise, *Trolls* uses a specific type of child’s merchandise to make a film. In other words, *Trolls* offers a niche market rather than a platform for future DreamWorks animated films to follow.
WORKS CITED


Clyde Geronimi, and Wilfred Jackson. Cindrella. DVD. Walt Disney Productions, 1950.


