Masculinity in Children’s Film

*The Academy Award Winners*

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Abstract
This study analyzes the evolution of how the male gender is portrayed in five Academy Award winning animated films, starting in the year 2002 when the category was created. Because there have been seventeen award winning films in the animated film category, and there is a limitation regarding the scope for this paper, the winner from every fourth year have been analyzed; resulting in five films. These films are: Shrek (2001), Wallace and Gromit (2005), Up (2009), Frozen (2013) and Coco (2017). The films selected by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in the Animated Feature film category tend to be both critically and financially successful, and watched by children, young adults, and adults worldwide. How male heroes are portrayed are generally believed to affect not only young boys who are forming their identities (especially ages 6-14), but also views on gender behavioral expectations in girls.

Key words
Children’s Film, Masculinity Portrayals, Hegemonic Masculinity, Masculinity, Film Analysis, Gender, Men, Boys, Animated Film, Kids Film, Kids Movies, Cinema, Movies, Films, Oscars, Ceremony, Film Award, Awards.
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Introduction

In the past year, widespread discussion about sexual misconduct in the workplace has been fueled by explosive revelations within the entertainment and media industry. Social media was set ablaze by the #MeToo movement, highlighting the scope and extent of the problem, followed by the Time’s Up movement. Debates about masculinity and gender dynamics have come to the forefront in western societies, and much of the discourse in news media has revolved around what has been deemed “The Crisis in Manhood”.

In their anthology Exploring Masculinities: Identity, Inequality, Continuity, and Change, C.J. Pascoe and Tristan Bridges point out that changes in definitions of masculinity (i.e. what it means to “be a man”), often follow rather than precede transformations in femininity.\(^1\) Pascoe and Bridges agree that men might be best understood as unlikely to initiate changes in gender relations since they are the group in power; and thus, definitions of masculinity are historically reactive to changing definitions of femininity. They contend that changes in the superficial features of masculinity has been the historical rule, not the exception.

The renowned sociologist Michael Kimmel, a prominent figure in masculinities studies, has proven similar patterns during both the late 17\(^{th}\) century in England and the early 20\(^{th}\) century in the United States. Thus Pascoe and Bridges maintain that masculinity is in a constant state of change, shifting and reacting to social and historical forces.\(^2\) Further, they imply that these crises in masculinity might actually be about challenges to inequitable gender arrangements in power; something we are seeing in many facets of modern western society.

Kimmel argues that there is a dichotomy today where we are witnessing dramatic shifts toward greater inclusion, and simultaneously witnessing some decreasingly numerous, yet increasingly vociferous men seeking dominance through any means possible because of the threat to the current power dynamic.\(^3\) Despite the fact that western society is evolving towards a more inclusive and equal dynamic, and the #MeToo and the Time’s Up movements

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have inarguably provoked some positive changes, it is unknown how much fundamental change has happened despite the recent spotlight on the issue.

Society at large, including men and women, benefit from a discussion about societal power structures; how traditional gender models are instilled through masculinity influences and portrayals. According to Kimmel, manhood is accomplished through cultural symbols and the subordination of women; achieving masculinity is a relentless test. Failure to embody, affirm, or accomplish masculinity is a source of men’s confusion and pain.\(^4\) Discussing boys, Kimmel contends that pressures to live up to the “boy code” leave many boys suppressing emasculating emotions like vulnerability, dependency, and compassion; instead affecting a hypermasculine unemotional pose.\(^5\)

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the evolution of changes in masculinity portrayals in award winning animated children’s films, to examine messages and critically determine whether there has been increased content awareness and progress around gender portrayals in the last seventeen years. Kimmel contends that boys look to their fathers, public figures, athletes, and other media-created heroes, constantly evaluating each other’s performance.\(^6\) Arguably, portrayals in children’s films play an important part in children’s identity formation; especially in the contemporary landscape where the amount of time children under nine years of age in the United States spend with mobile screens has tripled in the last four years.\(^7\) A steady increase in digital platforms, content, and consumption habits have all converged, making analyzing children’s programming as relevant an area of study as it has ever been.

**Problem Statements**

How is masculinity portrayed in five Academy Award winning animated children’s films from 2002 to the present day (2018)? Do these films reflect trends in hegemonic masculinity over time?

\(^5\) Kimmel, 2018, p. 295.
\(^6\) Kimmel, 2018, p. 295.
Method and Material

The Best Animated Feature category at the Academy Awards was created sixteen years ago, and has been in existence since the 2002 Oscars ceremony (rewarding films released in 2001). Analyzing the seventeen category winning films (all children’s films), since its creation would be too large in scope for this paper. Hence, films from every fourth year will be analyzed, resulting in five films; the winners from 2002, 2006, 2010, 2014, and 2018. These five films serve as the main material foundation for the paper, and are listed as follows:

- *Shrek* (Andrew Adamson, Vicky Jenson, 2001)
- *Wallace and Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit* (Steve Box, Nick Park, 2005)
- *Up* (Pete Docter, 2009)
- *Frozen* (Chris Buck, Jennifer Lee, 2013)
- *Coco* (Lee Unkrich, 2017)

It is worth noting that Walt Disney Pictures acquired Pixar Animation Studios in the year 2006. The last six years in a row, since 2013, the chief creative officer and executive producer John Lasseter whom oversees both Walt Disney Animation Studios and Pixar Animation Studios, has been in charge of every Academy Award animated feature winner via Pixar Animation Studios and Walt Disney Animation Studios (i.e. *Brave, Frozen, Big Hero 6, Inside Out, Zootopia, Coco*). Thus, the same creative and production team have been behind the most recent winners, which have similar sensibilities. As such, it is interesting to go back further in time and analyze not only the progression over the last seventeen years, but also take diversity of production teams into account through a variety of creators. *Shrek* was made by DreamWorks Animation, and *Wallace and Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit* by a collaboration between DreamWorks Animation and Aardman Animations. *Up* and *Coco* are made by Pixar Animation Studios/Walt Disney Pictures, while *Frozen* is made by Walt Disney Animation Studios/Walt Disney Pictures.

Recent and/or relevant texts in masculinity studies were utilized where applicable in the analysis of these films, along with Michael Kimmel’s book *Manhood in America* (2017), and a series of notable texts from some of the fields’ leading researchers and academics, found in C.J. Pascoe & Tristan Bridges’ anthology titled *Exploring Masculinities: Identity, Inequality, Continuity, and Change* (2016). Articles such as Haseenah Ebrahim’s “Are the “Boys” at
Pixar Afraid of Little Girls”, have also been utilized, along with Robert Geal’s “Frozen, Homosexuality and Masochism”, Ken Gillam and Shannon R. Wooden’s “Post-Princess Models of Gender: The New Man in Disney/Pixar”, and Elizabeth Marshall and Özlem Sensy’s “The same old hocus-pocus: pedagogies of gender and sexuality in Shrek 2”.

The literature and texts listed above serve as the basis for this study, along with the films. The films have been analyzed with particular focus on gender, especially masculinity portrayals. Four categorical themes in each film are highlighted where present and/or relevant, through both narrative and visual portrayals (i.e. narrative events including character behaviors, as well as visual portrayals such as physique etc.). The four main categorical themes are as follows: family (sibling, parental and child relationships), friendship (friend relationships), romance (romantic love relationships), and opposition (antagonist/s, oppositional events).

**Previous Research**

The importance of media effects on children is partly indicated by the fact that gender portrayals in children’s films have been widely studied, with many thesis papers from universities worldwide. The vast majority focus on representations of Disney/fairy-tale princesses and the potential implications for girls. Disney also seems to be the preference for gender portrayal analyses, along with films from Pixar Animation Studios. Some focus on gender portrayals in top grossing animated children’s films; these tend to be focused on films from fifteen and ten years ago; as are the papers analyzing Disney and Pixar films, most more dated than that.

Significantly, one thesis focuses on masculinity in children’s animated films, specifically Disney films. “Exploring Representations of Masculinity in Disney Animated Feature Films”, written by Britney Lynn Hibbeler from 2009 is insightful, and systematically discusses how one production company (Walt Disney Pictures) has evolved masculinity portrayals over a period of thirteen years. By definition however, there is a gap in her analyses in regards to other sources of animated feature films. Secondly, the most recent film studied here is *Ratatouille* (Brad Bird, 2007), which, much like the other papers, is over ten years old.
Theory

Kimmel contends that manhood means different things at different times to different people. Some cultures encourage a manly stoicism, and many cultures are preoccupied with demonstrating sexual prowess to prove it; while others prescribe a more emotional and familial man.\(^8\) Pascoe and Bridges discuss the difficulty in defining masculinity, highlighting contradictory messages found in two commercials; one portraying men in control, the other situating men as controlled by others. The first commercial, by Dove, tells men they “they can take on anything” because they are men; sending the message that men are inherently masculine by virtue of being born male. The second commercial, advertising the Dodge Charger, tells men they are not masculine, instead portraying men as emasculated by the requirements of modern society, such as being a good worker and putting up with overbearing female partners.

Pascoe and Bridges claim both these approaches resonate with viewers because society has learned to embrace contradictions embedded in understandings of masculinity.\(^9\) Commonly, they continue, definitions will refer to objects (e.g. guns, tools, beer) or practices (e.g. chopping wood, buying or selling stocks), or physical features (e.g. musculature, facial stubble). Others approach masculinity as a series of “nots”, (e.g. not feminine, not interested in interior design, cooking, or clothing).\(^10\)

A great deal of popular culture also situates masculinity as something to which men must lay claim, rather than passively posses. Kimmel claims that American men have been haunted by fears that they are not powerful, strong, rich, or successful enough; trying to control themselves, project fears onto others, and attempting to escape when feeling pressured.\(^11\)

Normative definitions are problematic, however. The renowned scholar Raewyn Connell aptly poses the questions: “What is “normative” about a norm hardly anyone meets? Are we to say the majority of men are unmasculine?”\(^12\) Connell points to the problem around trying

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8 Kimmel, 2018, p. 4.  
9 Pascoe and Bridges, 2016, p. 2.  
10 Pascoe and Bridges, 2016, p. 3.  
to determine, for instance, the toughness needed for a man to resist the norm of toughness, or the heroism needed to come out as gay.

Current masculinity studies operate on a social constructionist perspective, meaning that masculinity and gender are socially constructed rather than biologically determined. Pascoe and Bridges emphasize that scholars do not dispute that human reproduction, eggs, sperm and genitals actually exists; rather, they challenge the significance of biological facts for the rest of social life.\textsuperscript{13} What it means to “be a man” has changed over time, and this is one of the ways that scholars of gender have been able to prove that gender is socially constructed, rather than an inherent property.\textsuperscript{14} Hence, studies explore varying definitions of masculinity, the role of individuals in enforcing these definitions, the patterns of masculinity, the role of social institutions in sustaining and organizing masculinity, and the ways in which power is embodied regarding masculinity.

Considerations of gender as socially and culturally constructed go back to the beginning of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, with the anthropologist Margaret Mead’s cross cultural research. Mead was fascinated by varying definitions of masculine and feminine in different cultures around the world, discovering that what some cultures define as masculine others define as feminine.\textsuperscript{15} She is widely credited as an academic pioneer who began a scholarly dialogue that challenged the “naturalness” of gender as a central organizing framework of social life.

This prompted the first social theory of masculinity, as well as gender, called “sex role theory”; essentially proposing that socialization functions to ensure that everyone understands the “dos” and “don’ts” of society in which they live, including the roles they should perform that was understood to be definitive of one’s sex. Sex role theory invites us to shift our attention away from cultural assumptions about biological differences between men and women, with differences in gendered behavior being understood as socialized responses to social expectations, not as hardwired. This was built upon; the psychologist Robert Brannon for instance, asked if the male sex role is one thing, given the diversity in “masculine roles”; whether they are a jet-set playboy, a blue-collar type, a big-shot businessman, a football player, etc.

\textsuperscript{13} Pascoe, and Bridges, 2016, p. 12.
\textsuperscript{14} Pascoe, and Bridges, 2016, p. 37.
\textsuperscript{15} Pascoe, and Bridges, 2016, p. 7.
Sex role theory was widely discredited as a social theory of gender in 1985, partially with the publishing of an article called “Theorizing Gender” by Raewyn Connell, critiquing sex role theory for ignoring diversity and inequality.\textsuperscript{16} Connell is one of the most widely read and cited gender scholars alive today. Although her theorizations of masculinities constitute only one piece of a much larger theory of gender in social life, it has become most famous for the conceptualization of “hegemonic masculinity”.

Moving beyond sex role theory involved moving beyond the language that posited one male or one female role. To do this Connell suggested we begin to talk about masculinities, rather than the singular masculinity. Pluralizing masculinity allows us to think about relationships between men and women as well as among men and among women. Whereas masculinity affords men power, Connell wanted a theory capable of accounting for the fact that not all men benefit from gender inequality in the same way, hence, Connell conceptualized four configurations of masculinity defined by status and power; \textit{hegemonic masculinity}, \textit{subordinated masculinity}, \textit{complicit masculinity} and \textit{marginalized masculinity}.\textsuperscript{17}

Connell defines \textit{hegemonic masculinity} as “not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is, rather the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable… It is the successful claim to authority, more than direct violence, that is the mark of hegemony”.\textsuperscript{18} In other words, hegemonic masculinity is comprised of the practice which legitimizes patriarchy: guaranteeing the dominant position of men and the subordination of women. It is important to note that Connell makes no mention of specific traits or behaviors here.

\textit{Complicit masculinity} refers to configurations of masculinity that benefit from the overall subordination of women, but does not appear to be actively involved in the subordination. For example, a husband who endorses an egalitarian relationship with his wife may still benefit from making more money for performing the same job she does. Connell insists that the number of men that practice the hegemonic pattern may be quite small, yet the majority

\textsuperscript{16} Pascoe, and Bridges, 2016, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{17} Pascoe, and Bridges, 2016, p. 17.
\textsuperscript{18} Pascoe, and Bridges, 2016, p. 18.
of men gain from its hegemony since they benefit from the advantage of the overall subordination of women.\textsuperscript{19}

*Marginalized masculinity* refers to the interplay of gender with other structures such as class and race. This enabled Connell to illustrate how different masculinities can share some ground with hegemonic configurations, but simultaneously exist as marginalized by and to these forms. For example, black sporting stars can become exemplars of masculine toughness.\textsuperscript{20} *Subordinated masculinity* refers to configurations of masculinity with the least cultural status power, and influence. Initially, Connell used gay men as an example here. Subordination may also include political and cultural exclusion, economic discrimination, and so forth.

Despite considerable favorable reception, the concept of hegemonic masculinity nevertheless attracted some criticism. The main concerns were 1) the underlying concept of masculinity itself 2) lack of specificity about who actually represents hegemonic masculinity 3) whether hegemonic masculinity simply reduces in practice to a reification of power or toxicity 4) the concept’s unsatisfactory theory of the masculine subject.\textsuperscript{21} Responding to each of these criticisms, Connell and Messerschmidt reformulated the concept in 2005, clarifying that hegemonic masculinity need not be the most common or powerful pattern of masculinity in a particular setting, as well as incorporating a more holistic grasp of gender hierarchy that recognizes the agency of subordinated groups and that appreciates the intersectionality of gender with other social dynamics such as class, race, age, sexuality and nation; also recognizing local, regional and global hegemonic masculinities.

Hegemonic masculinity is sometimes depicted as as a specific “type” of man rather than a configuration of gendered practice within a system of gender relations. These inaccurate understandings of Connell’s concept fail to recognize that Connell understands this system of practice as always capable of transforming (despite not always being depicted this way in research relying in the term). We see an example of this, for instance, in Eric Anderson’s

\textsuperscript{19} Connell, 2016, p. 140.
\textsuperscript{20} Pascoe, and Bridges, 2016, p. 19.
article “Inclusive Masculinities”, where he states that Connell prescribes perpetual patriarchy for society.22

He argues that her model may have been relevant during 1980’s America that was steeped in homo-hysteria, but that his research instead shows a culture of inclusivity in today’s youth (a “so what” attitude around male homosexuality, for example). He aims to disprove the existence of hegemonic masculinity, suggesting that multiple masculinity types will proliferate without inequality in the future -- failing to realize that Connell recognizes these systems of practice as ever changing, both historically and culturally. Anderson’s contention aside, his observations around increasing inclusivity/equality are commendable and inspires an encouraging view of cultural shifts.

Agreeing with Connell, Messner points out that the upshot of much of this research has been to highlight that it is in men’s collective interest to maintain the current relations in the gender order, while it is in women’s collective interests to change them. While a few men throughout history actively have supported feminism, Kimmel being one of them, pro-feminist organizing by men never got beyond loosely connected networks of men, most of them academics and therapists.23 Messner believes that today’s shifting gender regimes of social institutions, especially those that encourage boys and men to interact with girls and women in ways that foster respect and empathy, can provide an emotional foundation for a dis-identification with the narrow interests of dominant men, and a commitment to take action with girls, women, and other men who are interested in building a more equitable and just world. Children’s film is a way to encourage this shift at an early age through gender portrayals that align with a more equitable outlook.

The above theories around masculinity, particularly Connell’s *hegemonic masculinity*, will inform masculinity portrayal observations made in the five following children’s films; as seen through respective protagonist’s (i.e. main character’s) familial, friendship and romantic relationships, while also taking male antagonist (i.e. villain) portrayals into account -- both via visual and narrative representation.

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Analysis

Shrek

*Shrek* (Andrew Adamson, Vicky Jenson, 2001), was the first feature film to win the Best Animated Feature Film Award at the Academy Awards in conjunction with the new category creation in 2002. The film, a comical reimagining of the classical fairy tale, inserts a “hideous” fairy-tale creature called an “ogre” as the unlikely hero and romantic love interest. The story revolves around an ogre, Shrek, and his unwanted friendship with a talking donkey (Donkey) and unwanted romance with a princess (Fiona), who, because of a spell turns into an ogre each nightfall. In his quest to get his swamp/home back to himself, Shrek must save princess Fiona from a fire-breathing dragon, and deliver her to the evil Lord Farquaad, who wants to marry a princess so that he can become a king.

One of the most predominant narrative themes in the film is that of friendship between two very different males, Shrek and Donkey. Although opposites in significant ways; with Shrek being physically large, guarded and taciturn, while Donkey is small and fearful yet emotionally available and talkative, they are united through their position as marginalized fairy-tale creatures. Falling into Connell’s *subordinated masculinity* configuration, perhaps *marginalized masculinity* in Shrek’s case (as Shrek gains the adoration from the townspeople for his masculine display of physical strength and fighting skill), both characters are united through individual efforts to avoid capture and exile by Lord Farquaad. According to Messner, military threat tends to unite men across class, race, and age; as this shared position created by the rounding up of the marginalized by Farquaad’s soldiers illustrates.

This dynamic simultaneously highlights the differences between Shrek and Donkey, however, as Donkey does not desire to be cast out from society, while Shrek wants to remain isolated from society. Interestingly, Shrek and Lord Farquaad – the hero and the villain – have the same goal here; Farquaad wants to gain order and control by casting the fairy-tale creatures out of his society (into Shrek’s swamp), and Shrek wants to get order and control back by casting the fairy-tale creatures out of his swamp. This is the starting point of Shrek’s

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character arc, as he evolves from a stoic hermit to possessing emotional availability on account of Donkey and Fiona. In a pivotal scene, Shrek confesses to Donkey that people judge him before they know him, saying “look, it’s a big, stupid, ugly ogle”. Fearing getting pushed away, Shrek safeguards himself by pushing others away first.

According to Ezzell, men within progressive men’s movements are driven by an individualist effort to change themselves, not to reform society. In his research, the men wanted to cultivate fuller emotional life, in contradiction to the suppression of empathy and emotion endemic to current hegemonic ideals of manhood. They redefined their more “feminine” characteristics as “deep” or “mature” masculinity.26 The film positions Shrek as the “masculine ideal” per Ezzell’s claim, in the sense that he suppresses emotion and has physical strength; and as marginalized in the sense that he is “The Other”. A similar dichotomy is also at play with Donkey in reversal, since Donkey is portrayed as fearful and weak, the antithesis of a masculine ideal; yet he is also loyal, forgives his friend for past transgressions, keeps his promises, and wears his heart on his sleeve; he stubbornly instigates a friendship with Shrek in the face of continuous rejection, which is a form of bravery.

Some of Donkey’s characteristics can be interpreted as “feminine” in the old gender discourse, such as fainting at the sight of blood; the film, however, values emotional vulnerability as a form of masculine ideal and maturity. Shrek has to face his fears and step up and “be a man” by telling Fiona he loves her, in order to finally find love and shed his isolationist ways. He is also forced to embrace his friendship with Donkey, as well as all the fairy-tale creatures in his swamp at the end of the film. Shrek does engage in violence in the film, however, only as self defense; when Farquaad orders his knights to kill Shrek, and then when Shrek has to save princess Fiona from the dragon that attacks him.

One of the reasons Shrek and Fiona fall in love is that despite their obvious differences (she is a human princess, and he is a simple ogre), they behave in similar ways. Kimmel argues that the idea that men and women are from different planets, that we are “opposite” sexes engaged in a primordial “battle of the sexes” is “a load of nonsense”.27 Agreeing, Ezzell contends that variation within a sex category is greater than variation between categories.28

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26 Ezzell, 2016, p. 194.
27 Kimmel, 2018, p. 320.
28 Ezzell, 2016, p. 188.
Biologically, males and females have more in common than they have in contrast. And yet “men” and “women” as gender categories, are cultural constructs created in opposition to one another. Fiona behaves like Shrek, burping out loud, eating conventionally distasteful things, and fights off Robin Hood and his entire crew of men when they attempt to “save” her from the ogre. Upon revealing she turns into an ogre at night, Shrek exclaims “Well, that explains a lot”; in other words, not only do they behave the same way despite being opposite sexes, but they are also alike because they are actually the same creature.

The one way in which they do behave differently harps back to fairy-tale conventions, and involves Fiona’s life purpose revolving around finding her one true love; being rescued and kissed so that her spell can be broken. In “The same old hocus-pocus: pedagogies of gender and sexuality in Shrek 2”, Elizabeth Marshall and Özlem Sensoy discuss Fiona’s “girl-power”, where she speaks her mind, is physically strong and practices martial arts; pointing out that the film is a contemporary example of a cultural text that replaces weak princesses with strong girls in an attempt to challenge traditional lessons about femininity; but that the strategy serves to give the appearance of feminism while ultimately reinforcing normative ideals about heterosexual girlhood. Hence, Fiona’s “girl-power” is used to win the affections of a man.

The second romantic relationship portrayal in the film is between Donkey and Dragon (a female dragon that holds Fiona captive). Donkey starts complimenting her as a strategy for survival, and as a result she falls in love with him. Conventional stereotypical gender messages abound, as Donkey flees from her needy clutches and subsequently breaks her heart. He is, however, a good “person/donkey”, and does not want her to be upset. Reconnecting with her, Dragon then saves Shrek’s chance with Fiona by taking him and Donkey to the wedding ceremony with Lord Farquaad in time to intervene. Donkey’s treatment of Dragon is reminiscent of a dog, dismissively telling her “go ahead, have some fun. If I need you, I’ll whistle”, as she happily bounds off.

Then, Donkey gives Shrek some romantic advice, “If you love Fiona, be tender. Chicks love that romantic crap”. When Shrek does whistle after Dragon, she dutifully obeys, suddenly turning into a symbol of weaponry, wielded as a gun as she kills Lord Farquaad and Donkey.

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exclaims, “I got a Dragon and I’m not afraid to use it. I’m a Donkey on the edge!” No doubt meant as a tongue in cheek reference to terror events of shootings, the sequence is nonetheless not only inappropriate in terms of the power-dynamic within the romance, objectifying Dragon into an “it”, while displaying dominance through having her ordered around; but also goes as far as to having Dragon’s physical power taken advantage of, effectively giving Donkey the masculine power he previously lacked, and now gains through his association with her.

The portrayal of the villain, Lord Farquaad, is equally important. This character displays a long list of traditionally “feminine”, or un-masculine qualities, such as physical shortness in stature, a penchant for order and cleanliness, as well as interior decorating: his bedroom reveals clues as to his “feminine” nature with two pink bathrobes, one for his bride to be, the other for himself, as well as a pink bow attached to the bear rug. According to Kimmel, the “idea” of women, or femininity – and most especially the perception of effeminacy by other men – can dictate men’s actions. Femininity, separate from actual women, can become a negative pole against which men define themselves.30 Shrek and Donkey repeatedly make fun of Lord Farquaad’s height, and a dismayed Fiona pushes his figurine down into the wedding cake to reflect that he is half her size; the implication unequivocally becoming that someone short is undesirable for marriage.

Connell asserts that it is the successful claim to authority, more than direct violence, that is the mark of hegemony (though violence often underpins or supports authority).31 The evil “feminine” male villain, is portrayed as exerting structural hegemonic masculinity via his rule. A tyrant who controls how the townspeople react to each event by cue cards, he dominates every aspect of their lives by exerting his position of power, sending physically strong guards to enforce obedience through threats of violence; an example being the Mirror on the Wall, who is forced to behave through intimidation. This dichotomy of hegemonic masculinity as practiced by an effeminate man, contrasting with the portrayals of Fiona’s “girl-power”, and Dragon’s pure physical power; could be interpreted as certain negative portrayals around femininity, and that it is best to control powerful femininity.

30 Kimmel, 2018, p. 6.
31 Connell, 2016, p. 140.
Wallace and Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit

*Wallace and Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit* (Steve Box, Nick Park, 2005), won the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature Film in 2006, and is a family friendly clay animation parody of cult horror films about werewolves set in small town Britain. The film is centered around Wallace and his partner Gromit (a dog), who run a humane pest control company that catches rabbits. Events run amok when Wallace accidentally turns himself into a large “Were-rabbit” vegetable eating machine leading up to the annual giant vegetable competition, hosted by the wealthy Lady Tottington. Wallace and Gromit must catch this Were-rabbit (Wallace transformed), before it ruins the giant vegetable competition, or worse, gets killed by the local hunter, Victor.

The friendship between Wallace and Gromit is portrayed as a long-standing one, and there is an interesting dynamic at play. Gromit is Wallace’s dog, and they are shown as partners in both at home and in business, in this sense, as equals. Gromit, however, does not speak, and so has little say (he is devoid of a mouth). Despite being understood through physical expression, Gromit does not ask for anything; rather, he obeys. Ezzell argues against Connell and Messerschmidt’s (2005) concept of the hegemonic ideal as consisting of societal structure practices of dominance, instead claiming that this is practiced on an individual level through “doing dominance”. In essence, manhood acts as dominance; what males actually do to achieve dominance, and thus, reinforce inequality.

Wallace’s “doing dominance”, consists of calling the shots, and having Gromit do most of the work around the house and the business. Gromit catches rabbits, he feeds the rabbits, he makes breakfast for Wallace. Wallace tells Gromit what to do; “turn on the machine”, “build a cage”, “wait here”; sometimes followed by validation in the form of a “well done” comment. Gromit continually helps and saves Wallace, unprompted, even at great personal sacrifice (as is illustrated when he loses his chance at winning the vegetable competition trophy with his squash in order to save Wallace). There is an instance in which Wallace reveals that Gromit “has him on a vegetable diet” in order to lose weight and stay healthy; implying here that Gromit is in charge, and that Wallace has to sneak some cheese when

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Gromit is not aware. This adds an additional level to the friendship/partner dynamic, and that is one of co-habitation within traditional gender roles.

From this vantage point, portrayals of Gromit seem to represent a replacement of spousal “duties”. There are visual cues, such as when Gromit is instructed to wait for Wallace in the car. He gets scared by the late night quiet spookiness, and starts knitting; with pink yarn -- the action and the color both considered feminine. He is also seen playing soothing music to his giant squash, stroking it gently and putting a blanket on it in a nurturing way. He is tasked with luring the Were-rabbit by playing a giant sexually alluring female rabbit, enacting typically flirtatious motions. Gromit may not inherently possess particularly feminine characteristics, but he performs typically feminine actions. At a foundational level, he supports Wallace and makes sure he is safe and avoids any potential mishaps, while carrying out every request, much like the societal image of an “ideal wife”.

Kimmel contends that a history of manhood must recount two histories: the history of the changing “ideal” version of masculinity, and the parallel and competing versions that coexist with it. What it means to be a man in America depends heavily on one’s class, race, ethnicity, age, sexuality, and region of the country. To acknowledge these differences among men, Kimmel believes, we must speak of masculinities. Simultaneously, however, all American men (and by extension, many men in western societies), must also contend with a singular vision of masculinity, a particular definition that is held up as the model against which all men measure themselves.34

According to George L. Mosse, the modern ideal of manliness was formulated in the age of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars. Since the beginning of the last century the consensus in western and central Europe about what it meant to be a “true man”, was a man of action who controlled his passions, and who in his well-proportioned bodily structure expressed his commitment to moderation and self-control.35 Although Wallace does not represent “the masculine ideal”; he is a blue-collar, slightly pudgy, bald, technological genius who wears sweater vests and is compassionate towards little cute bunnies who must not get hurt; the “doing dominance” ensures an unequal relationship between Wallace and Gromit.

34 Kimmel, 2018, p. 4.
Potentially, this could be attributed to the fact that Gromit is a dog, and Wallace is a human; nevertheless the portrayals suggest there is also a different dynamic at work.

In his Were-rabbit form, Wallace’s wild nature creates a sharp contrast from his human form. Apart from “doing dominance” in his relationship with Gromit, Wallace displays ideal masculinity as the Were-rabbit, through his giant physical form, strength, fighting capability, goal oriented nature, dominance over the other rabbits, and to some extent, sexual assertiveness. The concept of masculinities can be understood here, not just in terms of explaining differences in masculinity between different people, but also within one person. Several layers of masculinity, and ways of displaying manhood, resides within Wallace simultaneously, even as a dichotomy.

According to Kimmel, men define their masculinity in relation to each other, and less so in relation to women. He affirms that masculinity is largely a homosocial enactment, where men need men’s approval. Manhood, Kimmel believes, is less about the drive for domination and more about the fear of others dominating, having power or control over them. Historically, men have been afraid that others will see them as weak, timid, and frightened. In contrast to Lord Farquaad, Victor – the villain in this film – does not display what could traditionally be seen as “feminine” character aspects. Victor’s weakness partially lies in a self-perceived physical disadvantage, a bald spot prompting him to wear a toupee.

This “weakness”, is exacerbated because Wallace and Gromit’s rabbit catching machine pulls Victor’s toupee off, revealing that he is hiding something (baldness), mere moments after he has assured Lady Tottington that “What you see is what you get”. This representation of dishonesty is caused by Victor’s rabbit catching rival, Wallace, unknowingly challenging his masculinity. Victor’s failure to solve Lady Tottington’s rabbit problem in order to impress her, in conjunction with the humiliation surrounding his toupee, makes him appear weak. The budding romance between Lady Tottington and Wallace; whom are both in alignment about protecting the rabbits from harm, versus Victor’s wish to solve the problem by shooting them; further challenges Victor’s manhood as he tries to win Lady Tottington’s hand for her money.

36 Kimmel, 2018, p. 5.
Victor’s societal standing should traditionally put him above Wallace on the social hierarchy scale, as well as his passion for hunting should traditionally put him in a more masculine category than Wallace. Yet his goal of marrying Lady Tottington is threatened by Wallace, and so, he tries to kill the Were-rabbit despite knowing that it is, in fact, Wallace when transformed. The film sends a positive message about female empowerment; Lady Tottington has power through her wealth and she is non-judgmental, kind, honest, feminine, brave and fiercely protective of all innocent life (the rabbits). She recognizes that despite being a threat to her annual vegetable competition, it is in “their little bunny nature” to eat vegetables. Her affections for Wallace shows that she values kindness and intelligence, above societal standing and archaic displays of manhood (Victor’s hunting obsession).

Victor attempts to eradicate Wallace as a threat the only way he knows how to, by challenging him to fight physically; a fight he knows he will win. Wallace wins that fight however, due to the full moon turning him into the much stronger Were-rabbit. He doesn’t lay a finger on Victor (he never hurts anyone), but the terror of the transformation sends Victor covering, frightened. Victor realizes that if he can kill the Were-rabbit, he will both eradicate Wallace as a threat to his social climbing, and become the town-hero by saving the vegetable competition; also relieving people of their fear of the Were-rabbit.

Victor defines his masculinity in relation to Wallace, and is doing everything in his power to avoid being dominated and outdone by him. Towards the end of the film, the approval from the townspeople becomes more important than attaining Lady Tottington’s affection. Displaying fearlessness towards the Were-rabbit in front of a terrified crowd, with the promise to keep them safe by shooting it, makes him sacrifice his long-term goal (potentially marrying Lady Tottington), in order to attain maximum masculinity. Being recognized as masculine in other people’s eyes trumps becoming rich, having a higher social standing and winning the girl.

Because Victor is the hunter, and Wallace as the Were-rabbit the hunted, whom does not engage in violence, Wallace’s physical strength and “ideal masculinity” in this form can not protect him. The unlikely saviors are both Lady Tottington and Gromit, a nod to friendship, indicating that we are all stronger together than alone. Gromit blocks Wallace from Victor’s bullet with an airplane, and Lady Tottington saves Wallace from being shot twice; once by spraying Victors face with “pansy spray”, and secondly by whacking Victor over the head.
from behind. The pansy spray is a significant visual representation: a pansy is a cultivated viola with flowers in rich colors, but it is also an informal and offensive expression for an effeminate or homosexual man. Lady Tottington sprays Victor in the face with “pansy spray”, stopping and emasculating him, not because he possesses feminine qualities, but because he has an evil agenda and thus, is now a lesser man in her view.

**Up**

The 2010 Academy Award winning film for Best Animated Feature Film, is a Pixar Animation film titled *Up* (Pete Docter, 2009). The film revolves around Carl Fredricksen, a solitary elderly man, whom fulfills a promise to his late wife Ellie by flying their house to South America with balloons, when he is about to be taken to a retirement home against his will. His worst nightmare comes true when he realizes that he has been accidentally joined by a little boy named Russell, who wants to assist the elderly so that he can earn a badge as a senior wilderness explorer. While there, they team up with a female rare bird called Kevin, and a dog named Dug; as they try to keep Kevin from being captured by Carl’s childhood hero, the famous explorer Charles Muntz.

The film does not contain a romantic narrative in a traditional sense, as seen in many animated feature films. The opening of the film, however, is constituted by a condensed sequence of events that is a romantic, heartwarming, and heartbreaking continuous ten-minute dialogue-less display of lifelong love.

Carl and Ellie meet as children through a common interest, they both want to be explorers and seek out adventure, yet they could not be more different from one another. Where Carl is timid, quiet and fearful, Ellie is a force of nature: assertive, talkative, boisterous. They promise each other to one day follow in Charles Muntz’s footsteps, going to Paradise Falls in South America. They get married, renovate their house, go to work together, go through a miscarriage, and start a Paradise Falls fund that always gets used up for emergencies. Eventually, their happy life together ends, as Ellie falls ill and passes away.

Ellie remains an important character in the story, due to Carl keeping her memory alive by intermittently talking to her and tenderly kissing her portrait. For Carl, Ellie is still a part of

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37 *Up* (Pete Docter, 2009).
his life, and his goal is to honor her wish since he couldn’t while she was alive. Apart from this omnipresent love story, the film centers around the bonds of affection that develop between two “boys”, Carl and Russell, separated in age by seven decades; instead turning into a familial love story at the end. According to Ebrahim, male homosocial bonding, in several variations, is a conspicuous theme in a number of Pixar films. She astutely observes that Pixar’s films generally have two central characters who embark on a psychological and/or physical journey together, or who are part of some sort of twosome in which their interaction is key to the characters’ growth. 

In their paper “Post-Princess Models of Gender: The New Man in Disney/Pixar” (2008), Ken Gillam and Shannon R. Wooden takes this observation a step further by proposing that Pixar promotes a new model of masculinity, what Gillam and Wooden calls the “New Man” model. Unlike many princesses, who remain relatively static through their own adventures, these male protagonists develop and change over the course of the film, rendering the plot. From the revelation of the alpha male’s flaws, including acute loneliness and vulnerability, to figurative emasculation through even the slightest disempowerment, Gillam argues that each character travels through a significant homosocial relationship, and ultimately matures into an acceptance of his more traditionally “feminine” aspects; a kinder, gentler understanding of what it means to be a man.

Gillam and Wooden defines “alpha male” as a term that evokes ideas of dominance, leadership, and power in human social organizations. He states that the phrase may stand for all things stereotypically patriarchal: unquestioned authority, physical power and social dominance, competitiveness for positions of status and leadership, and lack of visible or shared emotion. In Gillam and Wooden’s “New Man” model, the protagonists all start out striving for an alpha-male identity, and once the homosocial relationship emerges, it moves the fallen (emasculated) alphas forward in their journeys toward a new masculinity. The film Up does not fit into Gillam and Wooden’s proposed “New Man” model, although it does include many of these aspects. To be fair, Gillam and Wooden does not utilize Up in their analysis as it had not yet been released, instead focusing on Cars, Toy Story and The

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Incredibles; they do state that all Pixar’s masculine protagonists begin with alpha-male traits, which, up until that point, perhaps they had.40

In the portrayal of Carl’s life with Ellie, Carl is not an alpha, by any meaning of that definition. Nor is Ellie, as theirs is a life of partnership, sensitivity and care; she is, however, the instigator to most everything in their union. In Carl’s life after Ellie, he does not strive for an alpha-male identity; he wants to be left alone in the self-imposed solitary confinement of his house. The construction workers, the retirement community employees, and the little boy Russell, are all obstacles in that pursuit. He does, however, display some dominance by telling people what he does not want or need, such as “I do not need any help!”, but he has no authority, physical power or social dominance. Carl is a physically weak, elderly man, who is being forced out of his house at the hands of a real estate developer. In other words, Carl is not a “fallen alpha” whom has been emasculated. As the homosocial relationship with Russell progresses, however, narratively two thing happen simultaneously: Carl becomes progressively more of an alpha, while concurrently displaying more traditionally “feminine” character aspects; only to conclude the adventure as a “New Man”.

In the sense that the character develops throughout the film because of a male/male relationship, and ends up a “New Man”, Carl’s character growth is in alignment with Gillam and Wooden’s theory; he evolves from a grumpy, isolationist, powerless old man; becoming an assertive and authoritative leader, seemingly gaining physical strength as the story progresses, while simultaneously becoming increasingly emotionally caring, kind, responsible, and honest, emerging into an arguably more “feminine” self concept. Carl’s emerging alpha behaviors are illustrated when he takes control and responsibility for Russell’s safety, leads their escape from Mr. Muntz, and leads their subsequent rescue of Kevin (because of Russell’s initiative); escalating into a physical sword/walker fight with Mr. Muntz.

Notably, despite Carl’s authority, the rescue mission is not a one-man-show. There are three simultaneous battles, spearheaded by Carl, Russell and Dug; showcasing the strength in teamwork and cooperation. Likewise, the previous escape from Mr. Muntz is accomplished only because of help from both Dug and Kevin. Carl applies his newfound alpha traits,

because of the internal ignition of traditionally “feminine” qualities, such as becoming attached to and caring about Russell. Carl’s growth lies in his development from selfishness and sole focus on fulfilling Ellie’s dream, thus redeeming his perceived failure as a man; to inclusiveness and showing love instead of rejection towards not just Russell, but also Dug and Kevin. In the discovery of how much Carl and Russell need each other, they become equals; and subsequently, family.

Where Lord Farquaud and Victor Quartermaine are both fairly static antagonists (e.g. villains), meaning that much like the princesses Gillam and Wooden uses as an example, they remain the same as they go through their journey and have no character development; Up’s Mr. Muntz does change. Mr. Muntz does not display the character growth that Carl does, rather, his is a regression; instead of accumulating positive qualities, his worst traits are unleashed. Mr. Muntz, being a famous explorer, is the epitome of fearless, “alpha” masculinity; someone Carl has looked up to his entire life, and wished he could be like. When Carl and Russell first cross paths with Mr. Muntz, he is welcoming, gracious and generous; inviting them into his aircraft home and offering them dinner. He is impressed by Carl’s means of travel (the balloon powered house), and treats his guests with respect.

Once threatened with the possibility of losing out on his goal of bringing back the exotic bird (Kevin) and clearing his name, Mr. Muntz turns against Carl and Russell. Stripped of his National Explorer’s Society membership and disgraced, there is no question that the importance of clearing his name is deeply interconnected with Mr. Muntz’s sense of achievement, manhood and self-worth; to the point where he is willing to kill an old man and a little boy to achieve it. Insinuating that he has killed other visitors to the area who were after the bird -- in all probability an imagined threat -- points to a deranged mind; fearful of failure.

In many ways, Mr. Muntz’s stance mirrors the moral panic to imagined threats in our contemporary landscape over fears concerning the end of man. As Heath states, these fears occur at the same time that new spaces are opening for men to “try on” hybrid masculinities and borrow elements of subordinated and feminized masculinities that resist a dominant
construction. The implication that Kevin has joined Carl and Russell out of free will the moment they arrived, because of Russell’s kindness; where Mr. Muntz has been unable to capture and dominate the bird for the majority of his life, symbolizes this shift in perspective of what types of masculinities are desirable.

Frozen

Frozen (Chris Buck, Jennifer Lee, 2013), a Walt Disney production, won the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature Film in the year 2014. Based on the fairy tale “The Snow Queen” by Hans Christian Andersen, the film is at its heart a love story between two sisters, set in Scandinavia. After an accident that almost kills her little sister Anna, princess Elsa is forced to hide and contain her ice powers by isolating herself from the world. Years later, upon hearing that Anna has gotten engaged to prince Hans after they have just met that day, Elsa’s powers are unleashed and she flees from their castle. Anna leaves Hans in charge and pursues her sister, soon joined by ice salesman Kristoff, his reindeer Sven and Olaf the snowman. Accidentally struck in the heart by Elsa’s power, Anna can only be saved by an act of true love.

What is represented on screen in the opening, is a husband and father, the King, fully in charge. The family bond, as well as the sister relationship, shatters with the realization that Elsa’s powers can be dangerous. The King is comforting, a problem solver with a compassionate tone, handling the situation without input from his wife, the Queen. In an attempt to keep the people’s fear at bay, and keeping all safe from harm, however, he sternly condemns his daughter Elsa to a life of solitary confinement in her room, crippled by fear of her abilities. It is Elsa’s potentially dangerous power, coupled with her lack of romantic love interest within this fairy tale, that has made America’s religious right criticize the film for what they deem its homosexual subtext.

In his article “Frozen, Homosexuality and Masochism”, Robert Geal does not dispute this reading, but builds upon it, making the case that the film represents homosexuality in a non-

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42 Frozen (Chris Buck, Jennifer Lee, 2013).
discriminatory manner, but undermines this potential through a range of cultural prejudices; revealing that the film treats female and male homosexuality in very different terms. The reading that Elsa is a homosexual, stems from her repressed abilities and her father instructing her to “conceal, don’t feel” her emotions. She is notably different from other people, and “born with the powers”. She does not share her sister Anna’s romantic longings, nor does she show any interest in being courted. When she finally unleashes her powers during the song “Let It Go”, she lets down her hair, transforming her dress into a sexy outfit complete with a high slit and high heels; symbolizing her sexual nature having finally been awakened, along with her homosexuality.

Geal furthers this interpretation, analyzing some of the male characters in the film. He starts with Oaken, the homosexual trading post owner; once he calls out to his family, the brief shot of them in the sauna reveals that the family consists of a same-sex partner and a bunch of children. Geal suggests that Oaken, in light of his “comedic Scandinavian accent” represents “Otherness”, portraying a negative image for indulging in violence by throwing Kristoff out of his establishment. Although Oaken is homosexual, Geal’s other claims are arguably far-fetched. Anna’s romantic love interest, Kristoff, is an ambiguous potential heterosexual convert, according to Geal. Kristoff’s supposed homosexuality is based on his absence of traditional heterosexuality (implicitly, for not aggressively pursuing Anna romantically, and for behaving as if she is his equal). In other words, Kristoff does not display “ideal masculinity”, and thus, must potentially be homosexual, according to Geal.

Kristoff’s interspecies relationship with Sven, the reindeer, is similarly scrutinized; the fact that they share a carrot -- Sven swallowing it and regurgitating it for Kristoff to break into two -- is interpreted by Geal as a phallic, sexual act. Geal continues, claiming that Olaf the snowman fits into the “sassy gay friend” trope, his mannerisms and comments such as “Let’s go kiss Hans!”, are inherently homosexual. In addition, he is a masochist, since he seems passive about having gotten impaled by an icicle, and wants to “do what snow does in summer” (i.e. melt: physically harming himself).

To counter, Olaf likes the idea and romanticism of summer, and does not understand how the heat will affect him; that is the continuous joke. Once he does understand, he runs away from

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44 Geal, 2016, 14.2, p. 103.
fire. Additionally, since he is like a lovable child, it is natural he wants Anna to kiss Hans in order to save her life; she is, after all, his friend. Kristoff and Sven sharing a carrot sends a message to be thoughtful and generous; their close relationship attributed to having been raised together; more accurately described as a brotherhood and/or human and symbiotic pet relationship that feels familial.

Although the subtext that Elsa is homosexual would indicate positive progress, what Geal and other proponents of this reading fail to understand is the underlying message of the film, which has less to do with some “liberal pushing agenda”, and more to do with equality and gender empowerment. The discussion does, however, problematize the heteronormativity of traditional children’s entertainment; highlighting that it is not yet possible for mainstream family film to have overtly homosexual characters or themes. Fundamentally, Disney is classically known for its fairy tale princesses, traditionally passive and waiting for their prince charming to save them; romance is their goal in life. This film -- being a contemporary Disney production -- has turned that message on its head, rebelling against the “passive female” and “active male” model.

The implication of Elsa’s repressed powers representing homosexuality, points to an ideology where homosexuality has the potential capability to harm and kill others if it is admitted, embraced and “unleashed”. That homosexuality is physically and/or psychologically harmful to the surrounding general public is an archaic stance, at best. Secondly, Elsa’s lack of pursuit of romantic love is believed to signal homosexuality; despite the fact that she neither longs for male romantic love, nor female romantic love.

Romance is very much an element in Frozen, but even that has been upgraded with a contemporary spin; Anna instantly falls in love with prince Hans at first sight, per classic fairy tale convention, and is ridiculed by Kristoff for having gotten engaged that same day despite not really knowing Hans. With the revelation that Hans took advantage of Anna’s desperation for partnership, so that he could attain power by becoming the king, the film dispels unrealistic fairy tale expectations. Rather, the portrayal points to the difference within different people; Anna’s childhood loneliness has led her to yearn for partnership and friendship, while Elsa’s isolation has led to her being comfortable by herself, and instead driven to focus on being a great ruler for her people. This can only happen after Elsa embraces her powers as a part of her identity, “letting it go” and no longer fearing what
people will think of her. The message is clear, “be yourself”. Her formerly perceived
dangerous weakness becomes her strength, as the townsfolk delight in her magical power, ice
skating outside of the castle in the middle of summer.

With this understanding of the film, the portrayal of Anna’s love interest Kristoff moves
away from hegemonic masculinity as ideal manhood. Kristoff is not a prince, he is an ice
salesman, inferior within the social hierarchy. Only after their friendship has evolved, and he
has gotten to know Anna, does he realize that he loves her. Believing she loves Hans, Kristoff
helps deliver Anna to him, sacrificing his own feelings for her happiness. He is heroic in his
attempt to help her find her sister, even though he has a personal incentive; ending the winter
so that he can sell ice again. In their joint battle against the wolves, Kristoff takes charge,
only to find that Anna is his equal in fighting the wolves off, and that they are stronger as a
team. The troll’s song gives the audience further insight into Kristoff’s character, revealing
that he is not flawless; he gets scared, is socially impaired and “unmanly” blond, but is
sensitive, sweet, honest and desperate for healing hugs. Promoting a kinder, more “feminine”
model of masculinity, the film concludes Anna’s and Kristoff’s romance as one of equality.
Anna embraces Kristoff just as he is without trying to change him, illustrated by her
recognition of his passion for ice, and gifting him with a new ice sled in order for him to
continue doing what he loves: selling ice; also promoting him to the official ice master and
deliverer of their kingdom.

The opposition, Prince Hans, is not revealed as such until the end of the film. Hans is
portrayed through a lens of “ideal masculinity”, he is kind, fair and strong throughout the film
-- until his true intentions of ultimate domination are revealed; he strives for a position of
hegemonic masculinity, ridding himself of any “weaker” feminine influence by killing both
Anna and Elsa. Much like a sociopathic chameleon, Hans mirrors the behaviors and
characteristics of whomever he is trying to impress upon; he is goofy with Anna, he is stern
with the Duke of Weasletown, and he is heroic with Elsa. When that “mask” of relatable
masculinity drops, Hans manipulative nature is revealed through his one instance of honesty
with Anna, but only towards the person he intends to kill; his spoken secret will die with her
– yet it is his intended personal hegemony that ultimately is eradicated.
Coco

The 2018 Academy Award winning film for Best Animated Feature, is a Pixar Animation Studios and Walt Disney Pictures film titled Coco (Lee Unkrich, 2017).\textsuperscript{45} Coco is a family film about the importance of family, set in Mexico during the annual Dia de los Muertos festival (Day of the Dead). The story centers around a little boy, Miguel, who dreams of becoming a musician despite his family’s generations-old ban on music. Miguel is sent to the Land of the Dead and must find whom he believes is his great great grandfather, the famous musician Ernesto de la Cruz. Along the way, he befriends the charming Héctor, who turns out to be the person Miguel has been looking for. The family ban on music is lifted when it is revealed that Héctor did not abandon his family for music, but tried to return home to his wife and daughter Coco before getting murdered by his partner de la Cruz, whom then stole Héctor’s songs.

If Gillam and Wooden were to rework their “New Man” Pixar/Disney model to exclude the claim that the protagonist starts out striving for an alpha-male identity, the film Coco would most definitely adhere to that model. Arguably, the film still fits into that category as it stands, since Miguel does strive to be a famous musician, just like Ernesto de la Cruz – who is perceived as an alpha male. He does not, however strive for “alpha maleness” and its inherent qualities categorically speaking; he just wants to be a musician despite it being forbidden. Miguel’s journey is based on his rebellion against his family at the outset, isolating himself from them in order to keep his dreams of becoming a musician a secret; only to value family, friendship and community above all else at the end. Once his homosocial relationship with Héctor emerges, Miguel’s character evolves into a more caring self concept of masculinity.

It is also worth emphasizing the utilization of young boyhood as a theme and catalyst for change, as seen in both the Pixar films Up and Coco. In Up, Russell as a co-protagonist inspires the change within Carl, arguably into a form of “New Man” model way of being sans alpha aspirations; while in Coco, Héctor inspires a change within Miguel and their joint family and ancestors. In both instances, a strong “family” bond is created through what started out as a homosocial friendship between an adult male and a young boy. According to psychologist William Pollack, boys learn that they are supposed to be in power and thus

\textsuperscript{45} Coco (Lee Unkrich, 2017)
begin to act like it. Although girls’ voices have been disempowered, boys’ voices are strident and full of bravado; but their voices are disconnected from their genuine feelings. Thus, he argues, the way we bring boys up leads them to put on a “mask of masculinity”. This statement is not supported in the portrayals of either Russell, or Miguel.

At the onset of Coco, Miguel may not voice his genuine feelings towards his family, but he does not adapt a voice of bravado or a mask of masculinity to cover up his emotions. His solution is one of withdrawal, and to rebel in secrecy away from potential conflict. As the film progresses, Miguel finds his voice and his courage, adapting an assertive stance in the pursuit of his goal (to get de la Cruz’s blessing). Yet this new loud and proud voice is deeply interconnected with his feelings, as he simultaneously is able to share his vulnerabilities and ask for help; for example, when he is about to perform onstage live for the first time and shares his stage fright with Héctor, or when he shares his love for music with de la Cruz and asks for his help and blessing. The portrayal of Miguel imparts a boy who follows his dream in the face of immense obstacles, showing courage and leadership along the way; while simultaneously exposing compassion, fears and forgiveness. He never strays from the secure sense of his own identity and goals, and towards the end of the film, is not afraid of showing who he truly is and what he wants – even to his family.

The two most physically violent figures in the film breaks from the norm and are arguably not men – but women. Miguel’s Abuelita (grandmother) rules their entire family with an iron-first in the land of the living; while Miguel’s great great grandmother Imelda, rules their ancestors with an iron-fist in the land of the dead. There is little male on male violence in the film, but female on male violence instigated by these two characters respectively. Abuelita fiercely attacks a Mariachi musician with one of her shoes in order to protect Miguel from his influence. Wielding her shoe as a weapon – she spins it around her finger as if it were a gun, before putting it back on – she hits the innocent man in the head with it. Her authority is unquestioned when she smashes Miguel’s guitar to pieces, effectively stopping him from pursuing his passion. Abuelita’s complete control is rivaled only by Mama Imelda, whom also removes her shoe and hits de la Cruz in the head with it, twice. Imelda’s violence is not prompted by self-defense, but justified as retaliation for having murdered Héctor, and for the attempted murder of Miguel.

46 Kimmel, 2018, p. 294.
Kimmel argues that just about every boy and man in America has some experience with violence, either using it himself, having it used against him, or being threatened with its use if he crosses someone. American men learn from an early age to fight back and that there are few expressions more legitimate than retaliatory violence; it is immoral if you use it first, but redemptive if you use it second. Quoting Kimmel, Miriam J. Abelson agrees that from playground bullying to large scale war, men perpetuate much of the violence we see in the modern world. Masculinities scholars and educators have worked to uncover the relationship among men, masculinity and violence.

Abelson continues by pointing out that men are far more likely to be the subject of all kinds of violent crime, and have the highest rates of victimization except for rape and sexual assault. Despite this, men usually report low levels of fear, whereas women report high levels of fear. This disjuncture between fear and victimization is often conceived in criminological literature as women’s “irrational fear” or the “gender-fear paradox”, but feminist scholars have pointed out that men’s lack of fear may be what is the most irrational. This could be due to men often performing fearlessness as part of negotiating a masculine self and identity in the face of possible violence.

While Abuelita and Imelda are portrayed as completely fearless – although it is imperative to note that neither is faced with a threat of sexual assault -- the antagonist Ernesto de la Cruz readily displays a fear of violence. De la Cruz may be portrayed as large and “muscular” in stature, contrasting to the physically skinny Héctor and smallness of the child Miguel; but unlike Kimmel’s observation around real life violence, de la Cruz never physically fights back, showing his fear of it. When he is attacked by Héctor (who just discovered he was murdered by de la Cruz), de la Cruz falls onto his back, puts his hands up and yells for his security detail. Similarly, when Miguel’s ancestors all team up to retrieve Héctor’s photo, de la Cruz runs away, ordering his security to protect him as a physical fight ensues.

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47 Kimmel, 2018, p. 295.
De la Cruz has no qualms about taking credit from other people, as he did when he told the world he wrote Héctor’s songs. He has no problem appearing heroic in front of a crowd, for example, jumping into a pool and getting Miguel to safety after he fell into it. De la Cruz maintains his position of power through his fame and wealth, which is built upon a lie. His dangerousness is revealed in moments when his success is threatened; Héctor is about to leave their tour to go home to his family, bringing his songs with him – so he is poisoned; and Miguel is about to reveal to the world that de la Cruz murdered Héctor and stole his songs – so he is thrown from the roof of a building. De la Cruz’s lethal attacks are limited towards defenseless people in situations where he knows he will not be challenged, since they are not able to foresee the attack. The outward representation of “ideal masculinity” that de la Cruz puts on, hides the internal “non-masculine” cowardice that defines him.

Conclusion

Although the sample size is limited to five films, the overarching trends delineated from the selected materials do, however, paint a picture of the evolution of animated feature film masculinity portrayals in the contemporary landscape. Perhaps the most obvious portrayal change is primarily a visual one, rather than a narrative one.

Between the years 2000 to 2017, visual portrayals shifted from a physically large protagonist (Shrek), and a physically small antagonist (Lord Farquaad); to physically small co-protagonists (Miguel/Héctor), and a physically large antagonist (de la Cruz); completely inverting the representational dynamic. The progression happens in stages; from the physically large Shrek and small Farquaad, to the physically similar protagonist Wallace and antagonist Victor, to the physically similar Carl and Mr. Muntz, the physically similar Kristoff and Hans, to the inverted physically small Héctor and physically large de la Cruz. As discussed above, the testosterone-pumped, muscle-bound Hollywood hero is rapidly deflating; taking his place is a new kind of leading man, the kind that Gillam and Wooden defines as the “New Man”. He still retains his authority and accomplishes various tasks, but with new values and perspective acquired along the way; the values of caring, sharing, nurturing, and community being clearly present -- the hero is at last able to achieve, improved by having embraced those values.\(^{50}\)

\(^{50}\) Gillam and Wooden, 2008, 36.1, p. 7.
It is worth emphasizing that the “New Man” theory does not discuss any particular physical visual representation, rather it is a narrative journey that highlights the positive internal and behavioral changes the male character matures into. Despite the physical portrayal of the character Shrek in one way representing “ideal masculinity”, he simultaneously represents subordinated masculinity and/or marginalized masculinity by virtue of being a marginalized ogre.

Narratively, Shrek’s masculine strength initially resides within his physical strength and fighting abilities, later to evolve into the masculine strength of the “New Man” model; portraying this model as a preferable example of manhood. Since the “New Man” model is constituted by a kinder, gentler understanding of what it means to be a man – traditionally considered more “feminine” aspects – that values community, teamwork and equality; the trend as portrayed in the above discussed films is coherently moving away from hegemonic masculinity as positive representation.

Utilizing traditionally “feminine” aspects as a negative pole of measurement for manhood is also declining. In the film Shrek, the villain, Lord Farquaad displays decidedly traditionally “feminine” traits; in Wallace and Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit, some of Victor’s mannerisms, such as his speech, could be perceived as slightly feminine and/or homosexual. These “feminized” portrayals of the antagonists disappear with Up, Frozen and Coco, instead displaying progressively more traditionally “masculine” and/or hegemonic masculinity traits. As discussed, the villains become more muscular and physically stronger, additionally portrayed as the antithesis of the “New Man” model. The film Frozen does have a secondary antagonist along with Hans -- the Duke of Weasletown – whom is also small in stature and “feminized”; creating some contradiction to the trend and revealing insights about the respective productions.

Taking into account the production teams of DreamWorks Animation (involved with both Shrek and Wallace and Gromit), Walt Disney Animation (Frozen), and Pixar Animation/Walt Disney Pictures (Up, Coco); DreamWorks adheres more closely to the traditional notions of masculine heroics and “feminized” villains in their films, despite turning the traditional fairy tale on its head in Shrek. Wallace is not traditionally the masculine ideal, but he also turns into the “masculine’ Were-rabbit. In the antagonist narrative that Frozen offers, Walt Disney
Animation portrays an “ideal masculinity” antagonist with hegemonic masculinity aspirations as their main antagonist (Hans), yet simultaneously retains a level of “villain as feminized” in the more minor, co-antagonist the Duke of Weasletown. It is also worth noting that neither Wallace, nor Kristoff fit into the “New Man” model, as their characters remain fairly static throughout their respective journeys. Shrek, Carl and Miguel, however, are all examples of the “New Man”. In the two Pixar Animation films, the protagonists are presented as a “New Man”, while the antagonists represent hegemonic masculinity.

The difference in narrative trends from these respective production companies could be attributed less to production team ideologies and static standpoints, and more to a reflection of societal trends; as these DreamWorks pictures are the oldest released films out of the selected group, while Pixar’s releases generally reflect the most recent. Were there an outlier, Disney would qualify; since Frozen was released after Up, but it is important to emphasize the ways in which Frozen still reflects more current attitudes. At any rate, the trend in masculinity portrayals point towards a shift that reflects a larger cultural movement; with Pixar Animation presenting the most progressive attitudes around masculinity.

Where the #MeToo and Time’s Up movements have cast a bright and much needed light on current western societal issues around unequal gender dynamics and the patriarchy that are very much still entrenched -- the evolutorial trend in these five animated feature films directed at children appears to indicate a far less dismal picture around cultural messages. Notably, in all five films analyzed, female portrayals have drastically changed from Disney’s passive princess days, along with the masculinity portrayals discussed. Large numbers of men are slowly changing the meaning of masculinity, encompassing increased equality, connection and internal integrity.

What seems to be changing is not only masculinity and femininity portrayals, but an emphasis on humanity versus the female and masculine as opposite poles of being. Explorations of positive versus negative human qualities, and what unites the masculine and feminine -- what makes them stronger not only together but simultaneously in tandem with one another – are becoming more common. Arguably, this is a step in the right direction in order to move away from the “battle of the sexes”. It is an advantage to be aware of the many sides of human existence, regardless of traditional gender stereotypes.
The implication of this gradual cultural gender dynamic shift as seen through masculinity portrayals in children’s film for its intended audience, impressionable boys and girls – is potentially profound. The progression of these portrayals in the five analyzed animated films indicate a growing encouragement directed at boys to interact with girls and/or other boys in ways that foster respect, empathy and equality. Additionally, these messages could also encourage the same dynamics within girls, instilling a sense of right to gender equality and compassion towards contemporary boyhood struggles. To the extent that animated film, and its characters as role models can partake in children’s identity formation and promote a commitment to take action towards building a more equitable and just world; this shift around masculinity portrayals is bound to be beneficial for both genders in future generations.
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