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RESURRECTING DISNEY:  
Tracing Walt Disney's ever-present spirit in feature  
animated films of the Michael Eisner era (1984-2004)

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*"Animation can explain whatever the mind of man can conceive.  
This facility makes it the most versatile and explicit means of communication  
yet devised for quick mass appreciation"*

**Walt Disney**

*"You can't succeed unless you've got failure, especially creatively"*

**Michael Eisner**



## **Resumen**

El trabajo *Resucitando a Disney: Rastreado el siempre presente espíritu de Walt Disney en los largometrajes animados de la era Michael Eisner (1984-2004)* pretende definir y analizar las características, tanto respecto al proceso creativo como en la definición de contenido, integradas en los clásicos originales de Disney para, a continuación, demostrar que éstas fueron recuperadas e implementadas de nuevo tras la muerte de Walt Disney -con leves adaptaciones- para dar lugar a una segunda edad de oro de la animación.

## **Resum**

*El treball Ressuscitant a Disney: Rastrejant el sempre present esperit de Walt Disney en els llargmetratges animats de l'era Michael Eisner (1984-2004) pretén definir i analitzar les característiques, tant respecte al procés creatiu com en la definició de contingut, integrades en els clàssics originals de Disney per, a continuació, demostrar que aquestes van ser recuperades i implementades de nou després de la mort de Walt Disney -amb lleus adaptacions- per donar lloc a una segona edat d'or de l'animació.*

## **Abstract**

*The final research paper *Resurrecting Disney: Tracing the ever-present spirit of Walt Disney in feature animated films of the Michael Eisner era (1984-2004)* defines and analyses the characteristics, regarding both the creative process and the definition of content, integrated in the original Disney classics to then prove that they were recovered and deployed again after the death of Walt Disney -with minor adaptations - to give birth to a second golden age of animation.*

## **Palabras claves / Keywords**

Walt Disney - Michael Eisner – Disney Renaissance - Animation - Feature animation Cartoons - Studio - Disney Classics
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## Summary

Introduction.....	9
1. Walt Disney in life.....	11
1.1 The young Walt Disney (1901-23).....	11
1.2 Early animation years (1923-37) .....	14
1.3 The Snow White effect (1937-47) .....	17
1.4 Escaping from animation films: Live-action and Disneyland (1947-59).....	20
1.5 A one-man studio (1959-66) .....	21
2. "Disney-ology" or the study of Disney's philosophy.....	23
2.1 "Disneyfication" vs. "Disney-ology".....	23
2.2 The process.....	25
2.2.1 Attention to detail.....	25
2.2.2 "Edutainment".....	26
2.2.3 Under one-name tyranny? .....	26
2.2.4 Feature animated films' source.....	27
2.3 The content.....	28
2.3.1 A film for the child within.....	29
2.3.2 The true self and the "I want more".....	29
2.3.3 Happy ending.....	30
2.3.4 A real-enough caricature of life.....	31
2.3.5 The role of nature.....	33
2.3.6 Gender and race.....	33
2.3.7 The representation of family.....	35
2.3.8 The importance of music.....	36
3. The Michael Eisner era (1984-2004).....	37
3.1 Michael Eisner, the man.....	38
3.2 Michael Eisner, the Disney ruler.....	39
4. Film analysis.....	43
4.1 "Disney-ology" in the Disney Renaissance.....	44
4.1.1 The Little Mermaid (1989) .....	45
4.1.2 Beauty and the Beast (1991) .....	47
4.1.3 Aladdin (1992) .....	49
4.1.4 The Lion King (1994) .....	52
4.1.5 Pocahontas (1995) .....	54
4.1.6 The Hunchback of Notre Dame (1996) .....	56
4.1.7 Hercules (1997) .....	59

4.1.8 Mulan (1998) .....	61
4.1.9 Tarzan (1999) .....	63
4.2 The latter modern classics of the Michael Eisner era.....	65
4.2.1 The Emperor's New Groove (2000) .....	66
4.2.2 Atlantis: The Lost Empire (2001) .....	67
4.2.3 Lilo & Stitch (2002) .....	67
4.2.4 Treasure Planet (2002) .....	68
4.2.5 Brother Bear (2003) .....	69
Conclusions.....	71
Bibliography.....	73
Periodic and non-periodic publications.....	73
Online resources.....	74
Films.....	74



# Introduction

## Justification

Walt Disney's death left the world of animation and its audience orphans in 1966. Throughout his life, his surname had become a promise of entertainment for both children and adult public, and the threshold that precedes fantasy. A strong personality combined with endless enthusiasm and will took him from a garage in Kansas City to The Walt Disney Company Burbank studio in California. When revising his life work, among the creations that gave him his well deserved fame, feature animated films play the key role, with *Snow White* as the pioneer in presenting colour, sound and music perfectly combined in, at that time, an unusually long format. This achievement and the many more that followed raised the standards of a currently very profitable industry. However, when the man disappeared the company lost some balance and decayed, until the dawn of a new golden era arrived at the animation studio.

The architect of this revival was Michael Eisner, CEO of the Mickey Mouse company from 1984 to 2004. It is the purpose of this work to analyse how Eisner brought back the studio's old radiance by applying Walt Disney's own philosophy in an up-to-date adaptation. The Eisner era, divided into the prosperous Disney Renaissance (1989-1999) and the -less successful- latter modern classics (2000-2003), took the creative process and the content highlights of the feature animated films Disney supervised in life as basic ingredients of a new formula to success. By only adding some contemporary spicing in the content treatment, Eisner's recipe resurrected the spirit of Mickey's father, proving that after more than four decades Walt Disney still casts a long shadow.

## Methodology

In order to provide a complete understanding of the Disney universe, the dissertation begins with a chapter dedicated to the description of Walt Disney's biography with special attention to his personality traits and how these would shape his supervision in developing feature animated films. Following this first foundation of the analysis comes the study of Disney's philosophy embedded in the original classics (1937-1966) or, as it has been named throughout the dissertation, "Disney-ology", separated into those characteristics that shape the creative process and those that refer to the content.

The third chapter chapter is devoted to the figure of Michael Eisner, dwelling briefly on his previous experiences before becoming Disney's CEO, and then building his portrait as the company's ruler during the second golden era of the studio's feature animation films. Finally, an individual examination of each film comprised in the 20 year lapse of Eisner's reign is implemented in chapter four. However, the investigation gives analysis preference to the films included in the Disney Renaissance years and excludes those films who did not reach at least US\$100,000,000 in box office revenues or exclusively used computer generation techniques as oposed to traditionally animated cartoons.

# 1. Walt Disney in life

If we had to identify a common thread in almost every child's infancy in the twentieth century, the reference to Walt Disney is inevitable. His signature has been a constant feature throughout generations, embroidered in any product that comes out from the company bearing his name. It is a name that has long ago transcended the man and its sight alone is synonym of fantasy, adventure, magic and a world full of possibilities. Countless times I have found myself sitting on the living room, humming the melody preceding each and every of his animated features while the man's signature materialised on the screen in white letters over the familiar blue shape of Sleeping Beauty's castle. However, as a little boy or girl one does not realise the autograph means that the empire had once been a tiny office at the foot of the Hollywood hills and that its visionary author was once a young 'chap' in his twenties who looked for an opportunity to make a living as an artist.

It is the purpose of this chapter to dwell on Walt Disney's life trajectory and the events that shaped his career, focusing mostly in those that had to do with feature animated films. Only by tracing his achievements and his failures, his joys and sorrows, his dreams and fears, we can depict the portrait of Mickey Mouse's father. This background digging is a necessary first step in order to identify the characteristic messages of his philosophy of life embedded in his films that will be inspected along the second chapter of this dissertation. By diving in Disney's biography we intend to open a door to understanding the high impact his work and legacy had and still has around the globe.

## *1.1 The young Walt Disney (1901-23)*

Though born in Chicago one year after the turn of the century, Walt Disney's childhood is best related to the time he and his family spent in Marceline, a small railroad city in the state of Missouri. While living in a farm, Elias and Flora Disney took care of four sons -Herbert, Raymond, Roy and Walt- and their daughter Ruth.

The four and half years (1906-1910) spent in Marceline were remembered by the two youngest brothers with extreme fondness. It was a time of bucolic anecdotes with their parents as centre of their universe and perfect balance of each other. "Elias

was, they recognized, a decent man caged by harsh ideas.”<sup>1</sup> His religiosity did not prevent him from professing an interest in socialism and, even when a quick temper sometimes made him a hard man to reason with, his honesty and decency are the features his sons recalled more often: “Elias ‘loved to talk to people,’ Walt Disney said. ‘He believed people. He thought everybody was as honest as he was. He got taken many times because of that.’”<sup>2</sup> Years later, some of Walt Disney’s colleagues and employees would recognise similar characteristics in their boss, proving that the apple does not fall far from the tree. Flora Disney stood at the other side of the scale as a loving mother with the gift of soothing Elia’s roughness. “An even-tempered woman who almost never displayed anger. (...) Her warmth brightened the Disney home and helped shape the optimistic outlook of young Walter Elias Disney.”<sup>3</sup>

The boys’ happy days in the farm were painfully over when father Disney’s typhoid fever forced them to move to Kansas City. In some way, this event also marked the end of Walt’s boyhood: from the moment they arrived to their new home he was put to work. Newspaper delivery was his first job, together with his brother Roy and his father, who bought the delivery route and made sure his sons worked “every morning and evening of the year, rain, shine or snow” with the exception of the few school hours in-between.<sup>4</sup> However, family business was not profitable for the youngest Disney; his father would not give him a pay for his work and soon the boy found other ways to make money running small errands out of his own initiative. In 1917, his parents and little sister moved back to Chicago but Roy and Walt stayed behind for the summer to work as news butchers selling newspapers, snacks and fruit on trains. This episode leaves us two hints of Walt Disney’s personality: his passion for trains and railways and his inability as a businessman, being equally fooled by customers and co-workers as well as unable to resist eating his own stock.

Back in Chicago, Disney combined high school with classes at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts - “that was his only formal art training of any kind, apart from some children’s classes that he attended in Kansas City”<sup>5</sup> - and more jobs that kept him always busy. The next remarkable deed in Walt’s life was how, despite being one

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<sup>1</sup> Interview of Roy Disney carried by Hubler in June 1968. Found in: GHEZ, Didier, *Walt’s People-Volume 6: Talking Disney with the Artists Who Knew Him*, United States, Xlibris Corporation, 2008, p.153.

<sup>2</sup> BARRIER, Michael, *The Animated Man*, California, University of California Press, 2007, p.15.

<sup>3</sup> WILLIAMS, Pat & DENNEY, James, *How to Be Like Walt: Capturing the Disney Magic Every Day of Your Life*, United States, Health Communications, 2004, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. BARRIER, Michael, *Op. cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> THOMAS, Bob, *Walt Disney: An American Original*, New York, The Wald Disney Company, 1976, p. 331.

year younger, he enrolled in the Red Cross unit as an ambulance driver at the end of the First World War. All these years, of what now would seem premature hard work, proved that wherever he went, Walt gave the best out of him with hardly a sign of displeasure:

'I don't regret having worked like I've worked,' he said. 'I can't even remember that it ever bothered me. I mean, I have no recollection of ever being unhappy in my life. I look back and I worked from way back there and I was happy all the time. I was excited. I was doing things.'<sup>6</sup>

Back from France, Walt had become a regular smoker, a habit that would follow him as cause of his health problems until his death, and was determined to become an artist of some kind, leaving the "hard physical labor that had been a constant in his life since his family moved to Kansas City" behind.<sup>7</sup> His first drawing job was back in Kansas City and it did not last long; nonetheless, he took his first steps in the commercial art business. In early 1920, Ub Iwerks, a colleague that had worked at the same studio, talked to Walt about his financial difficulties and Disney offered to go into business together. After working shoulder to shoulder for a while, Disney was offered a job as a cartoonist at the Kansas City Slide Company, that he accepted with Iwerks consent and reassurance that he would keep their project running. However, by March Iwerks also joined Disney in the renowned Kansas City Film Ad Company. Walt's insatiable curiosity led him to investigate the ropes of animation from books he took out of the city's library. Soon he started suggesting improvements that raised his immediate supervisor's reluctance to accept innovations. Since he could not put his ideas to practice at work, Walt installed a camera in the family garage and experimented on his own.

In 1922, with the money he had saved from his job and having created a first attempt of a film -the "Newman Laugh-O-grams" debuted at one of Kansas City's biggest theatres in 1921- Disney started Laugh-O-gram Films, Inc. He convinced Ub Iwerks to join him in the new business adventure with the plan to "produce New York-style animated shorts, using ink drawings on celluloid transparencies (or "cells")."<sup>8</sup> Little by little, Walt Disney's inexhaustible enthusiasm would prove his best asset when paving his road into the animation business.

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. BARRIER, Michael, *Op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. WILLIAMS, Pat & DENNEY, James, *Op. Cit.*, p. 23.

## 1.2 Early animation years (1923-37)

After the creation and production of a few fairy tale animations, the business adventure of Laugh-O-gram Films started losing its initial glow. Long story short, despite his excellent salesman skills, Disney could not find solid financial support nor a fair deal to display his artwork in Kansas City and in 1923 “he was living at his studio and bathing once a week ... He had nothing to eat but beans from a can and scraps of bread from a picnic.”<sup>9</sup> The young Disney saw his project drown. However, he was decided not to sink with it, and even though 1923 was a year of big failure for the animator, adversity encouraged him to pack up the few belongings he had left and build himself a new future far from Missouri. At the time, the only place apart from New York where he could continue in the motion picture business was California. As professor Louise Krasniewicz describes in her Disney’s biography, “when Walt Disney took a train to Los Angeles, California, in 1923, he was entering a world that was just in the process of being formed. It was a world where anything that could be imagined was about to be possible.”<sup>10</sup>

Luckily, his brother Roy recovered from tuberculosis quickly enough to join him. Together they started the Disney Brothers Studio after accepting the offer of cartoon distributor Margaret Winkler, who saw potential in Disney’s *Alice’s Wonderland*, a mix between life-action and animation adventure series of a little 4-year-old girl, and offered a contract of \$1,500 for each *Alice Comedies* film. The brothers delivered according to the deadlines and little by little they could afford hiring new people. As the public acceptance of their product grew, the terms of their contract changed for the worse, since Winkler’s new husband, Charles Mintz, felt the Disneys earned too much. This situation was soon over; as his fame grew, Disney gained bargain power and threatened to take his films to other distributors that would pay the proper price. Meanwhile, the brothers lived together in a small room and coexistence proved difficult for both. Apparently, a curious anecdote, Roy’s cooking was the straw that broke the camel’s back; the older brother called his fiancée and asked her to come and marry him, leaving the room to Walt. Shortly afterwards, in 1925, Walt Disney married Lillian Marie Bounds, one of the studio’s inker-painters.

In 1926, the Disney Brothers Studio became Walt Disney Productions as “a simple acknowledgment that in business decisions, as in the making of the cartoons, Walt

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. BARRIER, Michael, *Op. cit.*, p. 38.

<sup>10</sup> KRASNIEWICZ, Louise, *Walt Disney: a biography*, California, Greenwood, 2010, p. 30.

Disney's was the voice that mattered."<sup>11</sup> The studio kept growing when Walt convinced former colleagues from Kansas City to join him in Los Angeles. Ub Iwerks and Hugh Harman, among others, answered his call and together they began to develop a new character at the request of their distributor. Thus was born Oswald the Lucky Rabbit. However, as success grew, Walt exerted further pressure on his cartoonists and the studio's ambiance, jolly and thriving as once was, turned tense. Soon the animators started to negotiate with Mintz behind Walt's back. On March 13, 1928, after spending several weeks in New York trying to rewrite contracts with Mintz, Disney went back home empty handed: the distributor had taken his animators as well as Oswald with him.

History repeated itself; Walt Disney did not resort to self pity but put his mind to work a way out of the hole. Some biographers explain that he came up with his next idea, his trademark for decades to come, on the train back to Los Angeles. His wife Lillian explained in 1956 that "he was talking about different things, kittens and cats and this and that. Well, a mouse is awful cute, and he just kept talking about a mouse. So that's where he originated Mickey Mouse, was on the train coming home all by himself without asking anybody. He just decided that was a cute idea."<sup>12</sup> Other sources refer to Ub Iwerks as the one who suggested to use a mouse. Apparently he provided the look of the cartoon and Walt worked on the story and its personality, taking the credit of the character's birth with him.<sup>13</sup>

What different versions agree on is the fact that Walt's wife changed the original character's name, Mortimer, to the definitive Mickey Mouse. The remaining team at Walt Disney Productions was instantly put to work on the endearing cartoon, releasing the first Mickey Mouse animated short, *Plane Crazy*, on May 15, 1928. Not long after this release, Walt turned his attention to the latest industry innovation - features made with sound- and, following his always visionary personality, decided to incorporate sound to his own Mickey Mouse cartoons. *Steamboat Willie* was the first of its kind in the world and the artwork that marked the beginning of a golden era for animation where Disney and his team would be calling the shots. Sound synchronising helped to prove one of Walt's thought foundations regarding animation: "when the characters on the screen seemed to believe they were real, the

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. BARRIER, Michael, *Op. cit.*, p. 50.

<sup>12</sup> Quote from an interview of Lillian Disney in May or June 1956 by Pete Martin. Cf. BARRIER, Michael, *Op. cit.*, p. 56.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. WILLIAMS, Pat & DENNEY, James, *Op. Cit.*, p. 53.

audience might be encouraged to accept their reality, too.”<sup>14</sup>

After the unquestionable success of the first and only synchronised-sound animated cartoon comedy at that time, the studio divided itself between those working on Mickey Mouse’s animations and those dedicated to a series of animated shorts based on famous music pieces baptised as the *Silly Symphonies*. Nonetheless, no matter how good the symphonies were, “Mickey remained the distinctive Disney symbol. He appeared in every conceivable guise, from a cowboy to a fireman, from a ghost-buster to a giant-killer. He was Walt’s alter ego. His battles against Pegleg Pete symbolized Walt’s battles over adversity. Mickey always found creative ways to triumph -and so did Walt.”<sup>15</sup>

In 1930, another set of disagreements in the studio ended up with Iwerks’ resignation and the termination of Walt’s contract with Pat Powers, their small-scale distributor at the time. But contrary to what happened during the Mintz crisis, this time the Disney brothers’ position was more confident, at both a personal and financial level, which helped to quickly overcome the uncomfortable situation. On the other hand, there were troubles in the communication process between Walt and his cartoonists. In those years, Disney himself was learning new ways of animating at the same pace as the employees and that led to difficulties in expressing what he wanted -“it was frequently difficult for him to translate his ideas into guidance for his animators.”<sup>16</sup> Eventually, after suffering a breakdown<sup>17</sup>, Walt redefined his position in the studio, disassociating himself from any particular role (director, cartoonist,...) and focusing on coordination, as he later described: “The vital part I played is coordinating these talents. And encouraging these talents. ... I have an organization over there of people who are really specialists. You can’t match them anywhere in the world for what they can do. But they all need to be pulled together.”<sup>18</sup>

Partly thanks to this recognition of his own place in the company, the studio began working in a more efficient way, becoming more and more organised. Animators started introducing the use of storyboards and Walt made his cartoonists attend art classes in order to achieve the perfection and realism he demanded. Disney only needed one last stage before reaching his biggest accomplishment: colour cartoons.

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. BARRIER, Michael, *Op. cit.*, p. 48.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. WILLIAMS, Pat & DENNEY, James, *Op. Cit.*, p. 60.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. BARRIER, Michael, *Op. cit.*, p. 80.

<sup>17</sup> MENEN, Aubrey, “Dazzled in Disneyland”, *Holiday*, 7 (1963). p. 106.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. BARRIER, Michael, *Op. cit.*, p. 86.



In early 1932, work began on a Silly Symphonies cartoon called *Flowers and Trees*. Midway to completion, Walt halted production and ordered all existing work scrapped. Everything had to be redone -in full color. Walt had just witnessed a new Technicolor process that combined three color negatives -red, blue and green- to produce brilliant, near life-like color. Walt knew that color would be as revolutionary as sound.<sup>19</sup>

*Flowers and Trees* success was soon followed by other Silly Symphonies that incorporated colour. Another great boom was *Three Little Pigs*, with its main characters singing in operetta style. Disney had a very simple explanation for the great impact this animated short had on the public and that was the “real feeling and charm in our characterization”<sup>20</sup> that his animators were beginning to add to their work. All these experiences and innovations paved the way to the next episode in Walt Disney’s life: feature animated films.

### 1.3 *The Snow White effect (1937-47)*

At this point of his trajectory, everybody that worked with Walt knew that what made the difference between his cartoons and other studios’ animations was his personality.<sup>21</sup> He had been able to bring an emotional dimension to animation which, together with more than ten years of experience in the field and his entrepreneurial spirit, made him a sort of animation Midas, giving every product that came out from the Disney factory a golden touch. *The Golden Touch*, precisely, was the name of the Silly Symphony that would serve Disney as training for his next job, in which he intended to act as supervisor: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.<sup>22</sup>

The choice of the Grimm brothers’ story as his first feature film was no coincidence. During his teenage years, in 1916 in Kansas City, he had had the opportunity to attend a silent screening of *Snow White*, starring Marguerite Clark. “It was the first feature-length film Walt had ever seen, and it made a deep impression on him.”<sup>23</sup> Not only that, it was a story that allowed to be expanded further than other materials he had used in previous Silly Symphonies thanks to the figures of the seven dwarfs. Originally, the fairy tale does not differentiate between them but Walt decided to give the little men distinct identities so the weight of the plot would shift to *Snow White*’s

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. WILLIAMS, Pat & DENNEY, James, *Op. Cit.*, p. 79.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. BARRIER, Michael, *Op. cit.*, p. 97.

<sup>21</sup> Quote of a letter from Roy Disney to Walt Disney, January 24, 1930. Cf. BARRIER, Michael, *Op. cit.*, p. 78.

<sup>22</sup> *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, David Hand, William Cottrell, Wilfred Jackson, Larry Morey, Perce Pearce, Ben Sharpsteen, 1937.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. WILLIAMS, Pat & DENNEY, James, *Op. Cit.*, p. 11.

relationship with them rather than the rivalry between her and the evil queen. For all those who could not follow Walt's thought speed -his brother Roy and his wife Lillian among them- the thought of producing a feature film with sound and in Technicolor was an unconceivable endeavour and they tried, unsuccessfully, to talk him out of the project by referring to the obvious obstacles: the budget, the audience and the effort it would cost.

Luckily for the history of the cinema, Mickey Mouse's father was someone who did not let others decide what he could or could not do. One evening, he gathered his animators in a dark room, he stood under the circle of light projected by a single bulb and began his explanation:

Walt didn't merely *tell* the story. He *performed* it, acting out every part. He *became* every character. His eyebrows arched, and his features twisted into those of the evil Queen. He tilted his face toward the bare light bulb, and its soft glow transformed his face into that of Snow White. Each character had a distinct voice and personality. Reaching the end of the tale, Walt paused -then said, "That is going to be our first feature-length animated film." If Walt had said those words at the beginning of his presentation, his artists would have thought he was crazy. [...] But after watching Walt act out the story before their eyes, they believed it was not only possible, but practically an accomplished fact!<sup>24</sup>

Doc, Grumpy, Dopey, Happy, Sneezy, Bashful and Sleepy premiered on December 21, 1937, in what was the "most widely anticipated film ever -not only because Disney had made it, but also because no one could be absolutely sure that the audiences that loved Disney's short cartoons would love a cartoon ten times as long."<sup>25</sup> Far from it, the competitors' scepticism and the uncertainty of the audience's reaction were wiped off from the face of the earth as praises rained on the man who had had the nerve to create an artwork way ahead of his time. The public that attended the screenings came in all sorts and varieties, for Walt had not created a feature only for the youngest: "I didn't make the picture for children. I made it for adults -for the child that exists in all adults."<sup>26</sup>

"Disney's Folly", as some Hollywood intellectuals referred to *Snow White*, turned out to be the greatest and most profitable accomplishment of the studio so far. The animated characters were not only performing sequential gags like in any other short, but they moved the audience into tears, excitement, fear; it was a "caricature of

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. WILLIAMS, Pat & DENNEY, James, *Op. Cit.*, p. 112.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. BARRIER, Michael, *Op. cit.*, p.131.

<sup>26</sup> DUCAS, Dorothy, "The Father of Snow White", *This Week Magazine*, June 19 (1938).

life”<sup>27</sup>, as Disney himself defined it. The acknowledgements of the entire cultural community came together with large revenues that saved the studio from ruin after the expensive investment of producing such a film. The money inflow was also used to build a new studio in Burbank and to fund three new projects of feature-length animated films: *Pinocchio*<sup>28</sup>, *Bambi*<sup>29</sup> and *Fantasia*.<sup>30</sup>

The first two fell into the category of modified fairy tales that could be material for feature films. Even though Disney had clearly expressed that their new goal was set in producing this kind of animation, the Silly Symphonies and Mickey Mouse could not be left behind either. However, encouraged by his bold move with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Disney’s attention focused on the ambitious *Fantasia*, an illustration of several orchestral pieces. Here the music was the core of the project and the animation was an experiment of visually appealing effects and drawings meant to match the melodies to perfection. Nonetheless, as artistically impeccable as *Fantasia* was, it did not respond well at the box office:

“Walt was very disappointed that *Fantasia* didn’t go over,” said animator Frank Thomas, “because he felt that it was a whole new area of animation. He lost money and finally realized that the audience wanted another *Snow White*. I think the failure of *Fantasia* hurt Walt because it kept him from experimenting.”<sup>31</sup>

*Fantasia*’s poor performance in 1940 added up to *Pinocchio*’s failure after its release earlier that same year. Together they increased the studio’s financial difficulties; the money from *Snow White*’s income had been spent and the beginning of World War II had closed the European market and its possibilities. *Dumbo* (1941),<sup>32</sup> on the other hand, with a smaller budget had found a place in the feature film agenda of the studio and was able to bring back the audiences that had run away at the sight of the two-hour-long instrumental *Fantasia*. Released the next year, *Bambi* (1942), now considered another of Disney’s classics, did not return the film’s cost and played for only two weeks at the cinema where it premiered.

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<sup>27</sup> CHURCHILL, Douglas W., “Disney’s Philosophy”, *New York Times Magazine*, 9, March 6 (1938), p. 23.

<sup>28</sup> *Pinocchio*, Ben Sharpsteen, Hamilton Luske, William Roberts, Norman Ferguson, Jack Kinney, Wilfred Jackson, T. Hee, 1940.

<sup>29</sup> *Bambi*, David Hand, James Algar, Samuel Armstrong, Graham Heid, William Roberts, Paul Satterfield, Norman Wright, 1942.

<sup>30</sup> *Fantasia*, James Algar, Samuel Armstrong, Ford Beebe Jr., Norman Ferguson, Jim Handley, T. Hee, Wilfred Jackson, Hamilton Luske, Bill Roberts, Paul Satterfield, Ben Sharpsteen, 1940.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. WILLIAMS, Pat & DENNEY, James, *Op. Cit.*, p. 139.

<sup>32</sup> *Dumbo*, Ben Sharpsteen, Norman Ferguson, Wilfred Jackson, William Roberts, Jack Kinney, Samuel Armstrong, 1941.

Under his increased fame, Disney had now two daughters to take care of, a bigger house, a better car, a buoyant new studio, but also important money struggles and a great amount of stress that often emerged during his supervision over the animators. The studio was no longer a small office where youngsters with high school education could happily work; it was an empire, a factory, that used pressing deadlines and left no time for employee bonding. Unhappiness among workers came out in the shape of a strike of the studio's union led by animator Art Babbitt. Walt Disney took the strike almost as a personal attack; it opened a broader breach between the workers that supported him and those who went on strike, and it meant such a disappointment for him, that he would find it difficult to completely trust his crew ever again. The attack of the Japanese aviation on Pearl Harbor contributed to further modify the company's rhythm when Disney's studio had no choice but to allow more than seven hundred troops to occupy the venues as part of the anti-aircraft force.<sup>33</sup> Projects like *Peter Pan*<sup>34</sup>, *Cinderella*<sup>35</sup> or *Alice in Wonderland*<sup>36</sup> would have to wait a little longer to see the light.

#### 1.4 Escaping from animation films: live-action and Disneyland (1947-59)

The low profile Disney maintained during the war came to an end with the decision of choosing *Cinderella* as the next feature to hit the market. Walt's insistence in picking this fairy tale would determine the future of the Disney enterprise; without its success, the fate of the studio would have been doomed. *Cinderella* used live action to guide animation, an innovative technique the studio had already tried with earlier classics that contributed to the film's acceptance when it hit the screens in 1950. However, animated features brought no satisfaction to Walt anymore. His attention shifted towards live-action films and soon the studio proved it could achieve great audience and income numbers in this field too with the production of *Seal Island*, a documentary about seals that was assembled following an invented narrative as the first part of the *True-Life Adventures* saga. The series was "based on the premise that information can be entertainment if interestingly presented"<sup>37</sup>, as James Algar, *Seal Island's* director, expressed.

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<sup>33</sup> Article "Disney Turns Over Studio Bldg. to Army Detachment," *Variety*, December 17, 1941. Cf. BARRIER, Michael, *Op. cit.*, p. 182.

<sup>34</sup> *Peter Pan*, Clyde Geronimi, Hamilton Luske, Wilfred Jackson, 1953.

<sup>35</sup> *Cinderella*, Clyde Geronimi, Hamilton Luske, Wilfred Jackson, 1950.

<sup>36</sup> *Alice in Wonderland*, Clyde Geronimi, Hamilton Luske, Wilfred Jackson, 1951.

<sup>37</sup> ALGAR, James, "The Animated Film: Fantasy and Fact", *The Pacific Spectator*, Winter (1950), pp. 18-19.

Disney devoted himself to the inception of live-action feature films and to his latest hobby: miniatures and trains. The passion he felt during his teenage years for these machines came back as the hobby of building scale-model trains. Biographers agree in seeing this activity as an “escape from the pressures of his studio”<sup>38</sup> which helped him to “grew more confident in his own judgments”.<sup>39</sup> His interest in trains planted the seed of his next ground breaking project of building an amusement park: “Walt’s interest in trains may have provided an early structure for the park because no matter what, a train track was going to circumnavigate the land.”<sup>40</sup>

Live-action filming and the planning of Disneyland distracted Walt from the films that had built his good fortune. Between trips to Europe and his interest in what television promotion could offer, he found little time for *Alice in Wonderland* (1951), which since the beginning -they had started considering it in 1938- had been a story riddled with difficulties in the developing process and “filled with weird characters.”<sup>41</sup> The box office left a million dollar loss, and proved the audience was as disappointed with the film as he was during the creation process. *Peter Pan* (1953) came next, with relative success, and then *Lady and the Tramp* (1955)<sup>42</sup> as Disney’s first movie in wide-screen CinemaScope. However Disney had left most of the important decisions to his animators; he had lost interest, and “making animated features was by now a reflex activity for him; his real interests were elsewhere.”<sup>43</sup>

### 1.5 A one-man studio (1959-66)

As it had happened with previous animated films, the magic of *Sleeping Beauty*<sup>44</sup> (1959) relied on its secondary characters<sup>45</sup> -the three charming fairy godmothers- rather than on its heroine, whose figure had evolved very little when compared to Snow White or Cinderella. At the beginning of the 1960s, Walt’s characteristic coordination of human teams, his attention to detail everywhere, his liking for precision and excellence did no longer apply to the realm of animated movies and were scattered around the different projects that required his consideration, among which animated films were not a priority. Biographer Michael Barrier puts it in harsher

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. WILLIAMS, Pat & DENNEY, James, *Op. Cit.*, p. 183.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. BARRIER, Michael, *Op. cit.*, p. 214.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. KRASNIEWICZ, Louise, *Op. Cit.*, p. 125.

<sup>41</sup> BIRMINGHAM, Stephen, “Once Upon a Time...”, *McCall’s*, July (1964). p. 121.

<sup>42</sup> *Lady and the Tramp*, Clyde Geronimi, Hamilton Luske, Wilfred Jackson, 1955.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. BARRIER, Michael, *Op. cit.*, p. 230.

<sup>44</sup> *Sleeping Beauty*, Clyde Geronimi, Les Clark, Eric Larson, Wolfgang Reitherman, 1959.

<sup>45</sup> BENÍTEZ, Sergio, *Disney: 'La Bella Durmiente', de Clyde Geronimi*, Blog de Cine, 2014.

Retrieved from <http://www.blogdecine.com/criticas/disney-la-bella-durmiente-de-clyde-geronimi> (Last accessed: 24 April 2014)

words: “Consumed by his roles as proprietor of an amusement park and overseer of a studio churning out mediocre live-action movies, Walt Disney had surrendered his role as artist.”<sup>46</sup>

Disney attributed box office failures of animated movies as a sign not of his dispersion in his supervising role, but as an indicator that less and less investment should be directed to these activities. His disdain was evident after the release of *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* (1961),<sup>47</sup> when, despite the good reception of the film, Disney criticised the work of the head of the animation department Ken Peterson in the feature. He had insisted on becoming the centre of his studio for so many years, hardly delegating on his employees, that any task that would not receive his attention could not work independently and, hence, rapidly lost quality whenever he had more than one project in mind, as stated by story writer Bill Peet:

“Walt was involved in so many varieties of projects he couldn’t concentrate on any one thing. I didn’t expect him to put much thought into the cartoon features and I felt many of his suggestions were wrong- so I disagreed quite often... How could he be sharp in a story meeting with his head full of all the other stuff.”<sup>48</sup>

The last feature animated film that premiered while he lived was *The Sword in the Stone* (1963),<sup>49</sup> in which he was superficially involved, partly due to his deteriorating physical condition that led to his death in 1966.

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<sup>46</sup> Cf. BARRIER, Michael, *Op. cit.*, p. 269.

<sup>47</sup> *One Hundred and One Dalmatians*, Clyde Geronimi, Hamilton Luske, Wolfgang Reitherman, 1961.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. BARRIER, Michael, *Op. cit.*, p. 276.

<sup>49</sup> *The Sword in the Stone*, Wolfgang Reitherman, 1963.

## 2. “Disney-ology” or the study of Disney’s philosophy

The previous chapter gave an outlook of Walt Disney’s life trajectory, his decisions, which led both to mistakes and successes. By reproducing the main events related to the creation of feature animated films, our focus in this work, we have come to glimpse the kind of man he was. Many interviews conducted with Walt’s co-workers - be they animators, story writers, voice actors or designers- usually highlight three main features that characterised Walt Disney’s personality. Firstly, his simplicity. “Walt was no superman” but rather “quite a simple person”<sup>50</sup>, described animator Ben Sharpsteen; even “unsophisticated”<sup>51</sup>, according to art director Herb Ryman. Far from a disadvantage, simplicity worked for him as a great asset and a complement for his second quality: knowing what the public wanted. “He was a one-man combination of a whole family or at least all the men in the street” and he knew exactly what “the average man, woman, and child would tend to like.”<sup>52</sup> With this knowledge and his story ability, crowd pleasing was a very easy task for him. Finally, some of the members of the animation team say his greater quality was the “ability to build a highly specialized staff”<sup>53</sup>, groom it, coordinate it and make them act as a true team. Animator Eric Larson recalled a moment where Walt made this point very clear. He told his staff the following: “You guys are a lot of egos, but I want you to remember one thing and that is that you’re a team. And only a team effort will get a result on the screen.”<sup>54</sup>

Walt himself had a big ego, and because of this ego, agree the people who once knew him, he was able to overcome all the obstacles and the hardship he encountered. A simple man but a genius one at the same time for caring about what the audience wanted and enjoyed and discovering hidden talents by making his employees responsible. His personality transpired into a code of conduct, a philosophy that flowed through the empire he built and presumably reached our days, which is worth further investigating.

### 2.1 “Disneyfication” vs. “Disney-ology”

What does Disney mean? We have seen the man and all his angles, but as Byrne

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<sup>50</sup> PERI, Don, *Working with Walt: interviews with Disney artists*, United States, University Press of Mississippi, 2008, p. xiv and xxii.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.

and McQuillan rightly point out, Disney can also refer to a type of Fordian film production and studio organising, or to a set of leisure and entertainment products with global interests that comprise a wide range of services from brand endorsement to satellite television. Moreover,

Disney is an oeuvre of audio-visual publications (including feature-length animation, short animation, pedagogical material, nature films, and live action films, not to mention home videos, CD-ROMs and computer games). Furthermore, the name 'Disney' is a signifier which has come to represent a set of contradictory and unstable ideological codes. This entire signifying complex (which incorporates all the anxieties and conflicts of national and international cultural development in the twentieth century) is inscribed in the signature 'Walt Disney' which accompanies every Disney product.<sup>55</sup>

What these two writers bring to the debate around Disney's legacy is a sceptic point of view, which hints towards a potential influence power over culture exercised by his animated creations. In *A History of Popular Culture*, Raymond Betts refers to this as "Disneyfication" and explains how critics of the Disney world use it in a scornful way. The concept suggests a process by which a certain uniformity -Disney's- slowly erodes other cultures and its particularities. Instead, the "Disneyfication" brings strict organization, fictional history, a glorification of certain American patterns and a powerful business model. To these analysts, "Disneyfication is commodification passing as entertainment wrapped in a nostalgia for what never was ("the good old days") and seeking conformity of behavior in a tightly controlled environment."<sup>56</sup>

It is true that entertainment and nostalgia are present in the Disney imaginary. However, the definition of "Disneyfication" make them sound as part of a manipulation process that, if real, has more to do with the commercial machinery behind the company than with the actual principles that guided Walt's actions. The other side of the coin would be to focus on his contribution not as a negative process of cultural phagocytosis but as a manual of business success. After conducting over 1,000 interviews in order to draw a picture of Walt's figure, writer Pat Williams, summarised his attitude in seven laws. Among them we find statements that encourage the reader to be creative as a sign of bravery, to use life experience as inspiration, to avoid restricting the imagination with criticism and to persist<sup>57</sup>. The study of his ideology, the "Disney-ology", will be interpreted in the following

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<sup>55</sup> BYRNE, Eleanor & McQUILLAN, Martin, *Deconstructing Disney*, London, Pluto Press, 1999, p. 5.

<sup>56</sup> BETTS, Raymond F., *A History of Popular Culture: more of everything, faster, and brighter*, New York, Routledge, 2004, p. 125.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. WILLIAMS, Pat & DENNEY, James, *Op. Cit.*, p. 64.



subsections and divided between the traits that define Walt's process of creation and those that refer to the contents found in his artwork.

## 2.2 *The process*

### 2.2.1 *Attention to detail*

Walt was well aware that mediocrity was not success material. In order to bring attention to his studio's creations, these had to be better than the average productions from other companies and linger in the audience's memory: "The big story of Walt is that he was determined to make a superior product; he was determined to give the public more for their money than they thought they had paid for."<sup>58</sup> To achieve this, paying attention to every detail was a task he would almost never allow anybody to do except himself. Writer Art Linkletter recalls the day in 1940 when he first met Mickey's father. Linkletter had arrived early to the press conference where Disney would be presenting *Fantasia*. In the room he found a man arranging the chairs who, when introduced, turned out to be Walt Disney in the flesh. "I like to have things just-so," he answered when the writer asked him why he was doing that<sup>59</sup>.

He demanded his staff the same level of commitment he required of himself, which sometimes led to delicate situations whenever his employees could not answer to the requirements the way he expected them to. Apart from meticulous, assistant director Jack Cutting highlights his "tremendous sensibilities about discerning what was meaningful or what was not meaningful or what had something that would be valid for an audience."<sup>60</sup> Sending his animators to art lessons was another example of how much he cared about giving his studio's cartoons accuracy and definition. Thanks to this insistence and going after what other cartoon studios refused to do, "his characters were actual things, not just drawings jumping around on the screen [...], they were real, individual beings with minds of their own and individual personalities of their own."<sup>61</sup> Although his employees would not realise it until years later, according to director Wilfred Jackson, "this was what made his Mickey Mouse and other pictures so terribly popular."<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Cf. PERI, Don, *Op. Cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. WILLIAMS, Pat & DENNEY, James, *Op. Cit.*, p. ix.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. PERI, Don, *Op. Cit.*, p. 186.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. PERI, Don, *Op. Cit.*, p. 64.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

### 2.2.2 “Edutainment”

One day Walt Disney was asked his opinion about entertainment and education and how they relate to each other. “I would rather entertain them and hope that they will learn,” he stated, “than to teach them and hope that they will be entertained.”<sup>63</sup> Of the different aspects that characterise Disney’s creation process, this might have been one of the most criticised. Detractors accuse him of not setting proper boundaries between entertainment, education and commercialization and, by fusing them, he opened the door to aggressive marketing techniques that might influence in children’s education.<sup>64</sup> According to censors, the mix between education and entertainment -“edutainment”- might lead to see citizens exclusively as consumers and spectators, or to the extreme of contemplating Disney’s corporate culture as synonymous of democracy itself.<sup>65</sup> Since children are regarded as a social investment, the consequences might extend to the use of politics cloaked under the appearance of pedagogy.

If entertainment is confronted to the education provided in schools, Walt’s choice will probably lean towards the former. However, as a self-educated man who learnt his way in the world after leaving classes at an early age, Disney’s defence to these arguments resides in asserting that “education is not confined to schools but implicit in the broader realm of popular culture and its own mechanisms for the production of knowledge and values.”<sup>66</sup> Following this line of thought, he illustrated his perspective when he undertook the production of *The True-Life Adventures* and proved to academics and the general public that information could be entertaining if interestingly presented.<sup>67</sup> From that moment on, few people could deny that the strategy of wrapping information in entertainment helps to fix it in the viewers’ minds faster and in an enjoyable way.

### 2.2.3 Under one-name tyranny?

There is only one name in the studio that matters, and that is Disney’s. Unity is at the core of every activity performed by the company and, while Walt lived, this was done under his direct supervision and instructions. As mentioned in the introduction to this

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

<sup>64</sup> GIROUX, Henry A., *The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the end of innocence*, Maryland, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001, p. 89.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. p. 21.

section, he refused to allow his employees' egos get in the way of the feature film production.<sup>68</sup> Director Ben Sharpsteen confirms this fixation:

He was always on guard to keep that organization status quo. I do not mean by that he would not replace people whenever he saw fit, but it had to be a unit, a well-oiled machine. He said many times that this was a team effort, and we cannot have prima donnas getting out of line. [...] The success of the pictures they worked on depended upon the talents of many other people. He could not allow any of them to get out of line.<sup>69</sup>

In the process to achieve this, Sharpsteen recognises that Disney bruised lots of feelings but justifies it as the only way the man could run the business, since he was forging a team by bringing out the best talents and contributions of everybody.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, there was no room, and still there is not, for individuality and experimentation out of the premises established by the company<sup>71</sup>, but this was probably due to Walt's strong personality that made him able to project himself into the personalities of the Disney factory characters. Cartoonists drew and animated but he was the one who would say "I want the elephant to do this or I want the stork to do this", and then he would become whatever it was. [...] It was Walt's projection into this anthropomorphism that made these things come to life."<sup>72</sup> Despite his limited education and lack of sophistication, Walt was seen as the only person in the studio who could feel "the pulse of the world"<sup>73</sup> and, therefore, the man entitled to exercise the one-name -not tyranny- rightful rule.

#### 2.2.4 Feature animated films' source

Fairy tales, children novels, literature classics and legends are behind the Disney stories portrayed in his most famous animated features. The process of resorting to these sources of plots had the great advantage of saving the story writers a great amount of time in the creation process and allowed Walt to focus on the elements he wanted to highlight and the ones he would rather discard. Never was his intention to follow the stories accurately: "None was designed to reflect the literary elements of them, characterization, and writing style found in the original books. What Walt Disney wanted when he bought the rights to a children's classic was the basic setting

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<sup>68</sup> Cf. p. 24.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. PERI, Don, *Op. Cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. GIROUX, Henry A., *Op. Cit.*, p. 50.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. PERI, Don, *Op. Cit.*, p.168.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

and plot.”<sup>74</sup>

Critics tend to see this process of story adaptation as “a giant stamping machine crunching out cookie-cutter copies of the same basic film, whatever the source material [coming from] literature’s bargain basement.”<sup>75</sup> *Snow White*, adapted from the Brothers Grimm tale; *Pinocchio*, based on Carlo Collodi’s book; *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*, taken from the work of Charles Perrault; *Alice in Wonderland*, a product of adjusting Lewis Carroll’s novels; and *Peter Pan*, inspired by J.M. Barrie’s character, are just a few examples of where the inception of Disney classics comes from. The impression of these films following the same pattern is due, states May, to the fact that in all of them Disney “sought the memorable drama, the action and the villainy long remembered by the reader after finishing the original of a well known book.”<sup>76</sup> Thus, Disney saw the process of adapting novels, fairy tales or legends not so much related to the content, but to the creation of “satisfying emotional experiences that would remain with the viewer”<sup>77</sup>; hence the original characters inaccuracy and the setting imprecision.

### 2.3 The content

A framework is made to support and shape an essence. As described in the previous section, Disney’s process of framing included attention to every detail, an entertaining yet also informing wrapping, the work of a united team of employees and the use of literature and traditional tales as starting point for the film narrative. The purpose of the analysis shifts now towards the content of the feature films that Disney supervised in life and focuses on eight characteristic traits that run through most of the stories.

*Snow White*, in its role as the pioneer feature animated film, was responsible for establishing many of the conventions that would dictate the contents of children’s films for decades.<sup>78</sup> Even though some of them have become a cliché mocked by later films of the same Disney studio, they were the early foundations of what the company believed children and adults would enjoy and they were, therefore, depicted over and over in successive films.

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<sup>74</sup> MAY, Jill P., “Walt Disney’s Interpretation of Children’s Literature”, *Language Arts*, 58 (1981) 4, pp. 463-472, p. 463.

<sup>75</sup> BOOKER, M. Keith, *Disney, Pixar, and the hidden messages of children’s films*, California, ABC-CLIO, 2010, p. 35.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. MAY, Jill P., *Op. Cit.*, p. 463.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 463.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. BOOKER, M. Keith, *Op. Cit.*, p. 2.

### 2.3.1 *A film for the child within*

Walt Disney once said he did not only make films for children but for the child within every adult.<sup>79</sup> Being in touch with the inner child means to return to a time where innocence was the king attribute and, in Disney's view, "presented as the deepest truth".<sup>80</sup> To retrieve this innocence, explains Giroux, is to access a space free of time, history and politics, a space "where children share a common bond free of the problems and conflicts of adult society"<sup>81</sup>; and Disney presented himself as the guardian that safeguards this space. What this nostalgia excitement embedded in Disney feature animated films communicates is that the past is often contemplated as better than the present, if we consider innocence the most preferable quality.<sup>82</sup>

Furthermore, as Booker highlights in his study of Disney's films hidden messages, the definition of innocence includes a notion of wonder and, overall, of magic. Magic is the key ingredient in most of the Disney constellation of films: Snow White's poisoned apple, Cinderella's transformation for the royal ball thanks to the intervention of her fairy godmother, Tinkerbell's pixie dust, the blue fairy that turns Pinocchio into a real boy and Aurora's sleeping curse are just a few examples of the crucial role magic plays in Disney's early films. In the same way, "the Magic Kingdom is not only the designation of the central attraction at both Disneyland and Disney World, but might also be used to designate the overall world of Disney's animated films."<sup>83</sup> Finally, but not less relevant, the references to innocence in the course of animated films are also a cry for "the natural, the real, and the authentic"; in fact, "this cult of authenticity is perhaps the most crucial element that underlies the discourse of the Disney animated film from the very beginning"<sup>84</sup> and deserves further study in the next lines.

### 2.3.2 *The true self and the "I want more"*

Disney's main animated characters are confronted with obstacles that keep them from disclosing their true essence. The immediate reaction is to express the frustration in the form of dreams and hopes, or even words; it is the cry for a better life, or the "I want more". Once again, Booker perfectly describes the conflict with the

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<sup>79</sup> Cf. p. 19.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. GIROUX, Henry A., *Op. Cit.*, p. 34.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. BOOKER, M. Keith, *Op. Cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

example of Snow White:

Snow White, like so many Disney protagonists after her, is faced with a threat that makes it impossible for her to be her true self and to occupy her rightful role in life. The resolution of the plot then entails her success in surmounting this difficulty to assume her natural place in life and to return to her authentic self as a princess.<sup>85</sup>

*Dumbo* sets another example of getting in touch with one's true self; only when the small elephant listens to the crows and accepts their help can he realise that he is able to use his big ears to fly. The emphasis made on words such as "authentic", "real", "true", "natural" or "rightful" is present throughout Cinderella's story too: she connects with her true self when she overcomes the displacement she suffered at the hand of her stepfamily. However, the quest for the true self and the cry for a better life appear contradictory to Booker. Apparently America's well-known 'pursuit of happiness' and upward social mobility through actions and hard work clashes with this idea of the 'rightful place' by birth or origin that Disney's characters present<sup>86</sup>. But if we look closer, the main characters do in truth work, persevere and face obstacles that only in the end take them to reach their true selves. Without the acknowledgement, first, of their dreams and what they hope to achieve and without, second, setting certain actions in motion, they would have never reached their final happy ending.

### 2.3.3 *Happy ending*

A Disney ending is always a happy ending. The explanation comes from Walt himself, from his optimistic personality that preferred to look for rainbows in the sky instead of looking for dirt on the ground: "There's always a rainbow. The great masses like happy endings. If you can pull a tear out of them, they'll remember your picture. [...] Some directors in Hollywood are embarrassed by sentimentally. As for me, I like a good cry."<sup>87</sup> Mickey's father used his 'one-man combination of a whole family'<sup>88</sup> nature as compass to give the audiences what they wanted. His films struck all the rights chords, usually related to longings and desires with which the public identifies itself.

On the other hand, happy endings are also a result of his belief "that man is innately

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<sup>85</sup> Cf. BOOKER, M. Keith, *Op. Cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>87</sup> Cf. BARRIER, Michael, *Op. cit.*, p. 284.

<sup>88</sup> Cf. p. 24.

good, that he is moral.”<sup>89</sup> Being innately good does not suppress the fact that men also have evil inside, but to Disney, good conquers evil at all times. Thus, everything he did had that inherent upbeat feeling that brought an emotional dimension to animation. And even though engagement through sentiment is powerful, “the challenge is to integrate thought and feeling at a more profound level and in new ways.”<sup>90</sup> The more thought animators brought to the film -characters, backgrounds, music, voices...- the more likely they were to create a product that would strengthen the connection with the public and bring out the tear. The emotive power of Disney’s features is also related to the quality of realism they display and how balanced they are. The trick is to enhance “the capacity of animated film to approximate to the real world in terms of the impression created by movement and surface detail, albeit whilst retaining the licence to interpolate fantasy sequences and devices.”<sup>91</sup>

Finally, the happy ending is also influenced by the context in which the film is being released. During the 1930s, for example, happy endings were common among Hollywood filmmakers, who thought they would attract more audience “by providing them [spectators] with escapist fare that would get their minds off their very real day-to-day troubles.”<sup>92</sup> Unfortunately, sometimes even the promise of a happy ending could not distract the public from their worries, as evidenced by *Bambi*’s poor box office in the 1940s because of the country’s involvement in World War II and the recent Pearl Harbor attack.<sup>93</sup>

#### 2.3.4 A real-enough caricature of life

There is another way to bring emotion and sentiment into the films characteristic of the studio’s signature and it has to do with how the characters are presented. While going through the stages of his life, we saw how one of Disney’s first and constant concerns in filmmaking was to endow the characters with behaviours, attitudes and movements that would give them enough credibility. The more believable the animations were, the bigger were the odds that the audience would accept their existence too. Sound synchronizing, for example, was the first step towards the construction of credible personalities in Disney’s shorts<sup>94</sup>; then came the technology that brought colour into the screen, which drove the characters even closer to a

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<sup>89</sup> Cf. PERI, Don, *Op. Cit.*, p. 138.

<sup>90</sup> WHITLEY, David, *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation*, Hampshire, Ashgate Publishing, 2008, p. 2.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>92</sup> Cf. BOOKER, M. Keith, *Op. Cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>93</sup> Cf. WHITLEY, David, *Op. Cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>94</sup> Cf. PERI, Don, *Op. Cit.*, p. 64.

convincing act.

Nonetheless, we must not completely identify credibility with realism. As animator Eric Larson recalls, Disney's goal was to draw a real-enough caricature of life: "Walt was always insistent that we stick to realism, but once you know what it is, caricature it for all it's worth, get everything you can out of it."<sup>95</sup> The process required the animators to first understand how to depict reality in order to be able to then undo it and "look at it from the angle of what these humans could do if they weren't held down by the limitations of the human body and gravity."<sup>96</sup> Thus, in Walt's own words, "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."<sup>97</sup> One easy way of caricaturing the animations is the use of slapstick humour and easy laughs, which always find place in Disney's features. Dopey's clumsiness in *Snow White*, the wicked cat chasing after the mice in *Cinderella*, Jiminy Cricket's bad luck while trying to guide Pinocchio, Aurora's fairy godmothers and their 'pink' versus 'blue' fight in *Sleeping Beauty*, Captain Hook's fear of the crocodile in *Peter Pan*, and many more bring out the laughter in adults and, notably, children, who "find slapstick violence quite entertaining, especially as animated characters can emerge unscathed from such violence."<sup>98</sup>

Another effective way of bringing caricature and credibility at the same time into the films is always giving the characters a touch of 'cuteness'. The animators were told to "keep it cute"<sup>99</sup> when depicting the strokes of, overall, animals and the main character's sidekicks. In this way, the animals anthropomorphisation in behaviour and appearance, analysts point out, is a way of portraying children's innocence: "These animals can serve as stand-ins for children, and thus the films need not have children as characters."<sup>100</sup> By "rendering wild nature as disarmingly cute"<sup>101</sup>, Disney fuses the emotional reactions towards children's vulnerability from the adults and the sentimental reactions towards animals coming from the younger viewers.

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 217.

<sup>96</sup> Cf. BARRIER, Michael, *Op. cit.*, p. 116.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>98</sup> Cf. BOOKER, M. Keith, *Op. Cit.*, p. 2.

<sup>99</sup> WASCO, Janet, *Understanding Disney: the manufacture of fantasy*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2001, p. 111.

<sup>100</sup> Cf. BOOKER, M. Keith, *Op. Cit.*, p. 2.

<sup>101</sup> Cf. WHITLEY, David, *Op. Cit.*, p. 3.



### 2.3.5 *The role of nature*

The theme of nature in Disney’s imaginary is recurrent in every feature film, be it portrayed in a direct or indirect way. David Whitley explains that film settings within natural environments do not have a simple decorative purpose. On the contrary, they are fundamental in unravelling the question of ‘What is the meaning of home?’, which he relates to the important process of children growing up and finding their place in the world. That is how, in most of the animated features, nature is a place where the main character usually feels comfortable, like at home. These sensations come from a narrative that has survived the passage of time: the genre of pastoral, where human beings share an ideal relationship with nature, be it wild or domesticated,<sup>102</sup> that can be related to a possible feeling of urge to retreat or escape -”from the stresses perceived within contemporary civilization; from injustice and oppression experienced in the arbitrary exercise of power.”<sup>103</sup>

Whitley identifies three different types of animated films that engage with the theme of wild nature.<sup>104</sup> First, we find the fairy tale adaptations, which tend to portrait rural settings full of animal helpers that befriend the protagonists. *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty* and, in a minor way, *Pinocchio*, show traits of this first division. However, while in the original tales the fauna and flora tend to perform a functional role, in the Disney universe they are at the heart of the films. As a second category, the author refers to the theme of the North American Wilderness, illustrated by *Bambi*. In this case, the focus is on natural history rather than on human; in fact, it consists of the representation of an almost dehistoricized setting that is only interrupted by the hunters’ presence -still portrayed in a very indirect way. The third type of description of nature in the “Disney-ology” is linked to tropical environments -take the example of *The Jungle Book*<sup>105</sup>. Here the objective is not to imitate a real landscape but to rely on the “allure of the exotic” to create a dreamscape where “fantasies and deep-seated cultural longings can be projected and worked through.”<sup>106</sup>

### 2.3.6 *Gender and race*

These two issues are probably the ones that have generated the biggest amount of literature in the analysis of Disney films. This should come as no surprise, for it is

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<sup>102</sup> Cf. WHITLEY, David, *Op. Cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14 and 15.

<sup>105</sup> *The Jungle Book*, Wolfgang Reitherman, 1966.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

impossible to deny the great role that films play in shaping and determining the tastes and views of the world of young viewers. Therefore, the references to gender and race in Disney films are subject to the most extensive and detailed study in order to determine to what extent do they impact the thoughts and beliefs of the young community. With regards to gender, Amy Davis argues in *Good Girls and Wicked Witches* that “Disney films have been perhaps the single most powerful force in determining expectation about feminine behaviour in American society as a whole since the 1930s.”<sup>107</sup>

In *Snow White*, for example, there is no middle point in the personality of the two female characters; women are either pure evil (Queen) or angels (Snow White). Another critic thrown at Disney’s vision of the female figures is their passive role as helpless princesses singing the “someday my prince will come” litany -*Snow White*, *Cinderella* and *Aurora* clearly play this part. Also, it is common to see them always busily performing house chores and giving the impression that these are pleasant and something they were born to carry out. It seems as if the heroine in these films equalled the ideal of female conformity. On the other hand, analysts do realise that these depictions usually are a result of the historical context of the decade the film was made in and that they are “no more stereotypically sexist than were the depictions of women in many other films of the day”.<sup>108</sup>

When talking about race and how this matter has been addressed in Disney early features, the attention is mainly drawn to the portrayal of the black community. *Dumbo* is considered the first animated film where there is an acknowledgement of the use of characters identified as black:

The crows who find it hard to believe *Dumbo* can fly inhabit a set of codes that are readily recognisable as performances of blackness which conform to white audience expectations in the 1940s, drawing on the codes current in music hall and short cartoons for supposedly ‘obvious’ character traits.<sup>109</sup>

The images found in these early films -clumsy depictions, in some critics’ opinion- are the result of the history and the notions of “difference and otherness that operated in both America’s domestic and international affairs.”<sup>110</sup> Hence, we find crows represented as black people in *Dumbo*, but also Siamese cats as Asian ‘illegal’

<sup>107</sup> Cf. BOOKER, M. Keith, *Op. Cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>109</sup> Cf. BYRNE, Eleanor & McQUILLAN, Martin, *Op. Cit.*, p. 95.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

immigrants in *The Lady and the Tramp* and *The Aristocats*, as well as Red Men when talking about the Native Americans shown in *Peter Pan*, and all of them are part of the average middle-class, white American vision of this particular era when the films were released.

### 2.3.7 The representation of family

The feature animated films produced in Walt Disney's life suffer from certain "conservative, patriarchal, heterosexual ideology which is loosely associated with American cultural imperialism", state Eleanor Byrne and Martin McQuillan.<sup>111</sup> Walt's puritanical attitude was translated into a careful use of his language when women were around and an obvious dislike for jokes about sex.<sup>112</sup> It is possible that this trait of his personality transpired into his films more than one would expect, leading to the assumption that "children must be protected from any hint of sexuality, up to and including the virtual elimination of parents from the lives of the characters."<sup>113</sup>

Disney characters suffer, in some cases, from the loss of the mother; in others, from the loss of the father, and as a third option, from the loss of both parents. Of all Disney classics released before Walt's death in 1966, only in the *Sleeping Beauty* do we see both parent figures of the protagonist. However, it is only for a short time and they hardly act as traditional parents since Aurora is raised away from them hidden in the forest. The lack of familiar background is a reference to the loss of origins. In the case of mothers, the image "is erased in order for Disney to give birth to its narratives."<sup>114</sup> The fatherly figure, on the other hand, is often either substituted - the seven dwarfs take care of Snow White and the panther Bagheera acts as Mowgli's mentor in *The Jungle Book*- or ridiculed - Prince Philip's father in *Sleeping Beauty* or Mr. Darling in *Peter Pan*. Eventually, the narrative tends to link the protagonist's success with their prospects of creating a family of their own or returning to their place in their existing family: together with a partner (Snow White, Bambi, Cinderella, Aurora, Lady, Pongo and Mowgli), by becoming a real son to his father (Pinocchio) or through the process of forgetting their fantasies and returning home (Wendy in *Peter Pan* and Alice in *Alice in Wonderland*).

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>112</sup> Cf. BARRIER, Michael, *Op. cit.*, p. 156.

<sup>113</sup> Cf. BOOKER, M. Keith, *Op. Cit.*, p. 2.

<sup>114</sup> Cf. BYRNE, Eleanor & MCQUILLAN, Martin, *Op. Cit.*, p. 61.

### 2.3.8 *The importance of music*

A Disney classic cannot be named so without a memorable soundtrack to accompany its characters and their actions. The use of music and sounds is tailored in such a way that it flows in perfect harmony with the visuals and, eventually, the viewer feels as a natural occurrence that seven dwarfs burst into song while going home from work, that Snow White and Cinderella sing while performing house chores or that animals such as Jiminy Cricket or Baloo would chant their philosophies of life to their *protégés*. Scholars are aware of the great importance Disney gave to the melodies of his films:

‘Whistle While You Work’, ‘One Day My Prince Will Come’, ‘When You Wish Upon A Star’, ‘Bare Necessities’ [...] far from being mere adjuncts to the animated narrative, musical interludes between anthropomorphic action, these songs represent some of the decisive indices in which the Disney ideology is most securely embedded. They structure the films and carry the weight of the Disney signature.<sup>115</sup>

In *Understanding Disney*, Wasco agrees with this line of thought and restates how important is the role songwriters play in the storytelling process of the film since music is used to stress the biggest turning points in the story.<sup>116</sup> Furthermore, the music not only stands out when sung by the protagonists, but it can be used in many different ways depending on the situation: “Expressive music is used to express facts or emotions in the film; choreographic music is used for dancing in motion pictures; mocking music is used for funny scenes in a film; version music is used to emphasize real or fantastic sounds, etc.”<sup>117</sup> As a last attribute, music is to children what honey is to bears: an irresistible source of attraction. They enjoy the melodies and, at the same time, these help them to hold their attention.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Cf. BYRNE, Eleanor & McQUILLAN, Martin, *Op. Cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>116</sup> Cf. WASCO, Janet, *Op. Cit.*, p. 115.

<sup>117</sup> NIOLA SANMARTIN, Rosa E. & RIVERA CAJAMARCA, Miriam E., *Walt Disney and his influence in the American society*, Universidad de Cuenca: Escuela de Lengua y Literatura Inglesa, (2010) pp. 348.

<sup>118</sup> Cf. BOOKER, M. Keith, *Op. Cit.*, p. 2.

### 3. The Michael Eisner era (1984-2004)

Walt Disney's death in 1966 had two immediate effects. As a first consequence, his figure was raised to the category of legend. He became a fictional character himself, forever inhabiting the collective imaginary of not only America, but any part of the world where his films had ever been shown. Even long after his death, his ideas and his deeds are rescued and repeated over and over again: "Walt Disney, as a name and a person, is a far more visible part of his company's activities than, say, Henry Ford is at the company that bears his name. [...] His name is routinely invoked in ways that would be unusual at other large corporations."<sup>119</sup> Nonetheless, at the same time, his disappearance left a vacuum which would be extremely complicated to fill again. Some describe the process as similar to a family that has lost its endearing yet bossy father<sup>120</sup>; the shock left the company paralysed for a while. After that followed a period of debating whether to carry out Walt's wishes or not, and of questioning if these wishes made sense now that he was not present anymore.

The period between 1967 and 1989 is also known as a wasteland for animated films for children. Walt Disney Productions continued with the output of "clumsy and obvious family comedies"<sup>121</sup> that only led to further lower the quality and the fame of the studio. *The Aristocats*<sup>122</sup>, *Robin Hood*<sup>123</sup>, *The Rescuers*<sup>124</sup>, *The Fox and the Hound*<sup>125</sup>, among others, are currently found inside the Walt Disney Animated Classics as part of a marketing strategy. However, critics are reluctant to consider these films 'classics', for they resort to a *collage* of already-used techniques, plots and characters. In the midst of this downhill slide only a "traumatic change in management"<sup>126</sup> could revert the declining process. The answer came in 1984 in the form of a new face that would assume the position of Chief Executive Officer (CEO): Michael Eisner. Equally praised and condemned depending on who you ask, Eisner "stepped into his job as Disney's new leader with a sense of energy and urgency"<sup>127</sup> and he succeeded. With a hint of contempt, Booker quotes theorist Fredric Jameson, who describes this new wave as belonging to the postmodern culture and using

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<sup>119</sup> Cf. BARRIER, Michael, *Op. cit.*, p. 323.

<sup>120</sup> FRANCE, Van Arsdale, *Window on Main Street: thirty-five years of creating happiness at Disneyland Park*, Nashua NH, Laughter Publications, 1991. p.83.

<sup>121</sup> Cf. BARRIER, Michael, *Op. cit.*, p. 321.

<sup>122</sup> *The Aristocats*, Wolfgang Reitherman, 1970.

<sup>123</sup> *Robin Hood*, Wolfgang Reitherman, 1973.

<sup>124</sup> *The Rescuers*, Wolfgang Reitherman, John Lounsbery, Art Stevens, 1977.

<sup>125</sup> *The Fox and the Hound*, Ted Berman, Richard Rich, Art Stevens, 1981.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.* p. 322.

<sup>127</sup> BODDEN, Valerie, *The Story of Disney*, Minnesota, Creative Education, 2009, p. 38.

nostalgia as the main mood together with a pastiche technique.<sup>128</sup> Put into more favourable words, what the new CEO did was to adapt the original success formula that had already worked for Walt, both in style, process and content, and accomplished a miracle: Disney's resurrection.

### 3.1 *Michael Eisner, the man*

Born in New York in 1942, Michael Eisner knew from a very young age that his life would be linked to the television he liked to watch so much during his schooldays. He grew up in his parent's apartment on Manhattan's Park Avenue surrounded by comfort. Still, his parents would not easily allow him to get away with countless hours in front of the 'idiotic box' and made him read two hours for every hour he spent watching television. Ironically, that may have further encouraged his TV passion: "I'm saying that, because I was forced to read at a very young age in order to do something that I wanted to do, which was watch Hopalong Cassidy, maybe in some twisted way that was how I ended up becoming an usher at NBC."<sup>129</sup>

Ushering at the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) was a summer job he took while he was enrolled as a pre-med student. Luckily, an anecdote that involved writing a theatre play for a girl he liked showed him that his true interest lay in English literature and theatre itself. After graduating in 1964 he became a clerk at NBC but, while he did not really enjoy the tasks he performed there, his time at the company helped him to see he enjoyed being with people. Determined to keep climbing the ladder in the TV business, Eisner wrote more than one hundred letters to different companies expecting to improve his position. Only the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) answered him and he was hired as Assistant to the National Programming Director.

Success followed him during his 30s -"I was lucky, was at the right time and the right place, with the right ideas, and each one of these areas became number one"<sup>130</sup>- and in 1976 he reassured his lucky star when his former mentor offered him the role of President and Chief Executive Officer of Paramount Pictures. His achievements rocketed him to the media spotlight: "I've been involved with that a couple of times in my career, where you do something that you believe in and it just creates a cultural

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<sup>128</sup> Cf. BOOKER, M. Keith, *Op. Cit.*, p. 38.

<sup>129</sup> ACADEMY OF ACHIEVEMENT, *Michael Eisner Interview* [Online], Las Vegas, 1994. Retrieved from <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/eis0int-1> (Last accessed: 7 May 2014)

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

phenomenon all over the world.”<sup>131</sup> Among these cultural phenomena he managed to create we find titles such as *Grease*, *Saturday Night Fever*, *Footloose*, Indiana Jones' *Raiders of the Lost Ark* or three instalments of the *Star Trek* cycle.

In September, 1984, Michael Eisner became Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of The Walt Disney Company: “Since the death of Walt Disney in 1966, the studio had continued to enjoy periodic box office successes, and to earn profits from its theme parks and merchandising, but many felt the company was suffering from a lack of direction.”<sup>132</sup> In the following 21 years that he stayed at the cusp of the company, “he transformed it from a film and theme park company with \$1.8 billion in enterprise value into a global media empire valued at \$80 billion.”<sup>133</sup> Among many of his deeds, Eisner’s achievement consisted in redirecting the spotlight back to feature animated films. It was about time the studio went back to its roots, to the philosophy one could find in the small office where Walt conceived his first animations in the 1930s, and focused on what it knew how to do best: animate to entertain the audience.

### *3.2 Michael Eisner, the Disney ruler*

Michael Eisner never was nor intended to be the new Walt Disney: “I’m trying to be the bridge from what Walt Disney made and created to whoever will be the next person after me that maintains that same philosophy of ‘Let’s put on a show.’ Let’s be silly. We’re a silly company. Let’s never not be a silly company.”<sup>134</sup> The keys to the Magic Kingdom were not lost after the wasteland between 1966 and 1984; indeed, The Walt Disney Company had changed in countless ways, but the foundations were the same and Eisner planned to dust off the spider webs and expose them for the world to remember. Entertainment and popular culture were still the core concept during the Eisner years, as well as the recognition that they played an undeniable role as educational forces.<sup>135</sup> Thus, animated features would be the chosen vehicle to bring back Walt’s presence.

The second golden era of animated films -also known as the Disney Renaissance for

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<sup>131</sup> Cf. <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/eis0int-1>(Last accessed: 7 May 2014)

<sup>132</sup> ACADEMY OF ACHIEVEMENT, *Michael Eisner Biography* [Online], 1998. Retrieved from <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/eis0bio-1>(Last accessed: 7 May 2014)

<sup>133</sup> Michael D. Eisner Biography, [www.michaelisner.com/bio/](http://www.michaelisner.com/bio/) (Last accessed: 7 May 2014)

<sup>134</sup> SCHIESEL, Seth, “For Disney’s Eisner, the Business is Content, Not Conduits”, *New York Times* [Online], July 2 (2001). Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/07/02/business/02GIAN.html> (Last Accessed: 7 May 2014)

<sup>135</sup> Cf. GIROUX, Henry A., *Op. Cit.*, p. 29.

its numerous successes- started in 1989 with the release of *The Little Mermaid*.<sup>136</sup> The film, according to Booker's analysis, resurrected motifs from the original golden era of Walt Disney creations:

The Disney renaissance initiated by *The Little Mermaid* is most remarkable not because it introduced new themes or techniques, but because it largely didn't, representing an attempt instead to reproduce the magic of the earlier classic Disney animated films from *Snow White* to *The Jungle Book*. [...] Thus, the element of nostalgia for an earlier and presumably more authentic time that was already present in the earlier films becomes significantly stronger [...], because these films now have the added element of being nostalgic for the earlier films.<sup>137</sup>

But the new wave of 'modern classics' could not limit themselves to repeat past motifs, for these were already known by the public who had seen Walt's 'original classics', on the one hand, and the new potential young public might not identify with them since they had been raised in a different context. Thus, Eisner's creations needed to adapt to the recent times. Byrne and McQuillan consider that, in this process of readjustment, the films "open themselves onto the entire history of the West and act as a symptomatic concentration of all the ideological contests which are currently being fought in our world today."<sup>138</sup> The next section will analyse in more depth how the Eisner era films one by one can be related to the world's historic circumstances that were happening when they premiered.

Thanks to Eisner's arrival, The Walt Disney Company had regained its direction. What was special about his leadership that put the company back on the right track? In his own words: "The right style of leadership varies by industry, by person, by the people you are leading. It is unrealistic to think that one leader's way is necessarily the only way. But I've got my way, and I've been lucky so far."<sup>139</sup> Actually, his luck was made out of four principles he said he practiced every day at work: being an example, being there, being a nudge, and being an idea generator.<sup>140</sup> Proposals had to keep flowing if the company sought to reinvent itself, and he was the first to put his on the table and have them rejected if they were not good enough. A big amount of these ideas came out at 'gong shows', a meeting where anyone could offer a

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<sup>136</sup> Michael Eisner's rule started in 1984. None of the films produced between 1984 and 1989 - *The Black Cauldron*, *The Great Mouse Detective* and *Oliver & Company*- had nearly half the success *The Little Mermaid* accomplished.

<sup>137</sup> Cf. BOOKER, M. Keith, *Op. Cit.*, p. 37.

<sup>138</sup> Cf. BYRNE, Eleanor & McQUILLAN, Martin, *Op. Cit.*, p. 168.

<sup>139</sup> WETLAUFER, Suzy, "Common Sense and Conflict: An Interview With Disney's Michael Eisner", *Harvard Business Review*, 78 (2000) 1, p. 121.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.



proposition and immediately people would react to it. Ideas, nonetheless, were not enough if one did not subject them to the use of common sense: “Common sense has to take over. It’s the innate ability to stop, stand back, and ask, ‘Does this make sense? Will it work?’”<sup>141</sup> Another trait of Eisner’s leadership relied on the diversity of the company’s employees, not exclusively as an ethnic background reference, but as key to solving an issue by bringing different individualities and their own perspectives. To Eisner it was, in the end, a matter of responsibility to preserve the past and plan the future while keeping a balance: “In a creative person, just as in a creative company, you have to have both, a creative outlook and one that embodies common sense, side by side, inseparable. If you don’t, then you get neither art nor commerce.”<sup>142</sup>

His managing style, often described as abrasive and ruthless by detractors<sup>143</sup>, and his results, materialised in feature films, received attacks from both sides of the political spectrum: the radical left and the reactionary right.<sup>144</sup> During his last years, his focus might have strayed from entertaining to an exaggerated make-the-biggest-profit-possible philosophy which involved a wish to transform “every child into a lifetime consumer of Disney products and ideas.”<sup>145</sup> Even Roy E. Disney, Walt’s nephew, blamed him for turning The Walt Disney Company into a “rapacious, soul-less” company.<sup>146</sup> A series of accusations of micromanagement, favouring friends in job repartition, questioning others’ decisions, thrown at Eisner led to his destitution after Roy E. Disney convinced an important number of shareholders to withhold their votes of confidence.<sup>147</sup>

There are analysts that see little merit in Michael Eisner’s intervention and ascribe the success of the films released during his era to the fact that they followed years of failure. Not only that, this perspective sustains that with every success, the chances of the next film being an accomplishment grew thinner:

With each new ‘modern classic’ that Disney produces the company is confronted by a law of diminishing return in which it cannot hope to repeat the spectacular successes of *The Little Mermaid*, *Aladdin* and *The Lion King* because these films have altered the mediatic

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<sup>141</sup> Cf. WETLAUFER, Suzy, *Op. Cit.*, p. 121.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>143</sup> Cf. BOOKER, M. Keith, *Op. Cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>144</sup> BRODE, Douglas, *Multiculturalism and the Mouse: race and sex in Disney entertainment*, United States, University of Texas Press, 2005, p. 13.

<sup>145</sup> Cf. GIROUX, Henry A., *Op. Cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>146</sup> Cf. BOOKER, M. Keith, *Op. Cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>147</sup> Cf. BODDEN, Valerie, *Op. Cit.*, p. 42.

circumstances under which such success would be possible. [...] As long as Disney continues to produce films like *The Little Mermaid* it cannot produce another *The Little Mermaid* and the growth of the company will be restricted by its own success.<sup>148</sup>

While Michael Eisner was not a cartoonist, his university background in English literature gave him hints on how to address the artistic side of The Walt Disney Company; the commercial know-how came not so much from direct knowledge, but from years of experience in the audiovisual industry. However, it seems that Eisner's greatest quality had to do -same as in the case of Walt Disney- with, on the one hand, knowing what the audience wanted, and on the other, putting talents together, challenging them, coordinating them and, sometimes, allowing failure: "If they don't fail, then they probably will never succeed. You can't succeed unless you've got failure, especially creatively."<sup>149</sup> This line of thought prevented Eisner from running a company trapped 'in the middle', for he would always prefer suffering a terrible failure or experiencing celebrated achievements over mediocrity.

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<sup>148</sup> Cf. BYRNE, Eleanor & McQUILLAN, Martin, *Op. Cit.*, p. 131.

<sup>149</sup> Cf. <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/eis0int-1>(Last accessed: 7 May 2014)

## 4. Film analysis

Ever since Walt Disney died the magic of his ideas had remained dormant. Who was good enough to pick up the slack and continue the progression of his legacy? Who could oversee the studio and lead it to new successes? Michael Eisner accepted the challenge and, for the years he acted as CEO for The Walt Disney Company, the studio's feature animated films occupied the centre of the stage and monopolised the spotlight in the animation field during the Disney Renaissance from 1989 to 1999, awakening praise and criticism equally wherever they would be screened. Eisner's recipe was not new; throughout this dissertation it has been argued that the CEO brought Walt's own philosophy back and applied it to the new times.

Not many scholars acknowledge that “the current Disney studio adheres, progressing along a continuum, to social and political attitudes set in motion by Walt himself.”<sup>150</sup> This may have to do with the fact that Eisner could not literally copy the Disney features; since they were created in a different time, they would have not worked for the new generations. Instead, the studio took the road of adapting the Disney philosophy to the modern -and post-modern- context while keeping the essence of what Walt had established back in his days. Context is everything; in the process of creating and releasing a film, the social, political, economic and cultural framework the world lives in can dictate what succeeds and what fails in the industry. At the same time, the relationship is reciprocal, states feminist professor Gail Dines, as “encoded in media images are ideologies about how we think about the world.”<sup>151</sup> And while she then affirms that Disney provides a harmful conditioning to spectators, other analysts such as Douglas Brode defend Disney's role in shaping a positive image of multiculturalism.

The purpose of this section is to study the films that characterised the Michael Eisner era<sup>152</sup>, divided into the Disney Renaissance films (1989-1999) and the latter modern classics (2000-2003), and investigate how Disney's philosophy and the traits described in the second section of this work have been brought back to life and applied according to the new context, without losing Walt's magic touch in the process.

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<sup>150</sup> Cf. BRODE, Douglas, *Op. Cit.*, p. 13.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>152</sup> The study comprises only the films that reached at least \$100,000,000 of revenue at the box office and use mostly the traditionally animated hand-drawn technique. Therefore, *The Black Cauldron*, *The Great Mouse Detective*, *Oliver & Company*, *The Rescuers Down Under*, *Fantasia 2000* and *Dinosaur* have been left out of the analysis.

#### 4.1 “Disney-ology” in the Disney Renaissance

Before jumping to the individual analysis of each film, it is worth taking a look at the general traits of the original “Disney-ology” and give a general overview of the adaptations that might have occurred during the Eisner era. Regarding the process, although advances in technology have provided animation with new and faster tools, artistry and attention to detail still play a crucial role in the creation process.<sup>153</sup> Entertainment is still key to the company but there is a bigger consciousness around what its education possibilities are and the dangers it entails if used “as an educational force to shape society in its own interests.”<sup>154</sup> Michael Eisner worked extremely hard to establish a functional synergy between the many businesses he had to run besides the production of animated films<sup>155</sup>. That way, delegation on others could also work and accelerate decision processes that would otherwise take more time; however, Eisner recognised that constant push from his side was needed to keep the synergy running and that his supervision needed to be continual. Regarding the inspiration for the stories, the studio would continue to draw it from fairy tales, legends and classic universal literature.

When referring to the contents, the modern “Disney-ology” retains the importance of the childish innocence and the nostalgia. “The specific appeal of Disneyland, Disney films”, explained Eisner, “comes from the contagious appeal of innocence [...] Obviously, Disney characters strike a universal chord with children, all of whom share an innocence and openness before they become completely moulded by their respective societies.”<sup>156</sup> The new characters, on the other hand, have a stronger determination in the quest to find their true selves; their “I want more” cries are louder, and they are not so afraid of facing the unknown but rather curious and open to it. Furthermore, most of them will be complemented with two well-defined and psychologically-rich sidekicks that usually personify the small devil and angel on every protagonist’s shoulder.

Happy endings are still the norm and the characters are carefully portrayed with a right balance between the credible, troubled protagonist and the caricatural secondary figures. The pastoral relationship with nature is no longer so obvious and

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<sup>153</sup> Cf. BODDEN, Valerie, *Op. Cit.*

<sup>154</sup> Cf. GIROUX, Henry A., *Op. Cit.*, p. 31.

<sup>155</sup> Cf. WETLAUFER, Suzy, *Op. Cit.*, p. 121.

<sup>156</sup> Cf. GIROUX, Henry A., *Op. Cit.*, p. 31.

there is a clear division between the natural and the human worlds that predominates in the film narrative of the 1980s.<sup>157</sup> With regards to the gender representation, female characters increasingly present qualities that in the original films were exclusively associated with the male roles, although that does not mean a complete abandonment of the stereotypes; and multiracial and ethnic references surge as a way of mimicking the growth of multiculturalism in the United States. In the same way as in the original classics, most of the main characters suffer from a loss of one or both parents. Finally, music is given the same special and privileged position that Walt Disney granted melodies in his animated films; famous musicians and singers are put in charge of creating tunes that will linger in the memories of children and adults long after they finished watching the film. The films will usually include a structure of songs that includes a choral introduction piece to place the viewer; the heroes chant to freedom and the search of their true selves, which states the conflict of the story; the villain's song; the sidekick song, meant to encourage and comfort the protagonist; a transition song, during which the main character suffers a transformation; and, often, a love song between the couple of the film.

#### 4.1.1 *The Little Mermaid* (1989)<sup>158</sup>

Ariel, the sixteen-year-old daughter of King Triton of the merpeople, had everything a young mermaid could desire and, yet, her restless curiosity takes her to save a human prince from a shipwreck. Fascinated by the surface world and madly in love with him, Ariel is determined to do everything in her power to experience what is like to have legs instead of fins. Paying no heed to her father's advice she finds herself striking a deal with the sea witch Ursula, who secretly plans to use the young mermaid to snatch away Triton's power. According to the contract they sign, the merprincess would grow legs in exchange for giving up her sweet voice. Once in the surface, helped by her two sidekicks, the crab Sebastian and the tropical fish Flounder, Ariel will have to avoid the witch's continuous sabotages to pull her away from her true love and, eventually, fight the sorceress to save both her father's throne and her beloved's life.

Three decades after *Sleeping Beauty*, Disney had dusted off another of the Brother Grimm fairy tales and adapted it to match the studio's philosophy. Young Ariel was the first princess of the Disney renaissance; she is the new Snow White of sorts and

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<sup>157</sup> Cf. WHITLEY, David, *Op. Cit.*, p. 39.

<sup>158</sup> *The Little Mermaid*, Ron Clements, John Musker, 1989.

“one of animation’s most believable heroines.”<sup>159</sup> Her role, however, incorporates features of the transformation women had been going through since the 1960s: the nonconformity of teenagers who want to escape domesticity, who refuse to immediately adopt a maternal function in the narrative.<sup>160</sup> Ariel is sexy and she knows it, and it is this physical sexual identity what distances her from Victorian Wendy, and the fairy tale princesses Cinderella, Aurora and Snow White. With no mention of her mother, family -her father and sisters- is to Ariel an institution to run from rather than a safe haven; they are “obstacles to overcome”.<sup>161</sup>

The difference with previous princesses also lies in her “I want more” cry, which takes her to revolt against her original nature as a mermaid.<sup>162</sup> Nonetheless, as much as she is portrayed as independent and confident, gender stereotypes surface again, according to some critics, when her happy ending consists in loving a handsome man -prince Eric-, or when we find the evil/good women contrast between her and Ursula in the same way as we saw it between Snow White and the evil queen, Cinderella and her stepmother, or Aurora and Maleficent. When talking about magic, another of the constant elements in Disney, it materialises in the hands of Ursula, who uses it for evil purposes, and in the hands of Triton, as a goodwill power.

The caricature of life is brought to us through a myriad of secondary characters, animal and human, in the story. Among them, her two companions stand out. Righteous, severe Sebastian and carefree and jumpy Flounder star in most of the gags and the slapstick violence throughout the film. More funny moments are brought by the other animals in the film: the seagull Scuttle, Ursula’s green moray minions Flotsam and Jetsam, and the Old English Sheepdog Max -curiously, the only animal in the movie which is minimally anthropomorphic and does not speak, reinforcing the division between the human world, where animals do not talk and the life under the sea, where they are free. On the human side, crazy chef Louis, prince Eric’s manservant Grimsy and the housekeeper Carlotta are in charge of bringing out the laughter.

Racial references are found in chef Louis, obviously French, and Sebastian, which is given Jamaican nationality as the perfect excuse the producers needed to bring the

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<sup>159</sup> BECK, Jerry, *The Animated Movie Guide*, Chicago, A Cappella Books, 2005, p. 148.

<sup>160</sup> Cf. BYRNE, Eleanor & McQUILLAN, Martin, *Op. Cit.*, p. 66.

<sup>161</sup> Cf. BOOKER, M. Keith, *Op. Cit.*, p. 53.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

tropical sounds of reggae and calypso music<sup>163</sup> into the soundtrack. Directors Ron Clements and John Musker devised the plot in the style of a Broadway musical and found a success formula that would dominate the following Disney films for the next decade: "This film is a hybrid of exceptional character animation, classic fairy tale, and the modern American stage musical. Irresistible to kids and sophisticated enough for any adult."<sup>164</sup> It is worth mentioning Ariel's hopeful "Part of your world", Sebastian's "Under the sea" and Ursula's "Poor unfortunate souls" as musical highlights of the film.

Films are a product of their time which is why some analysts take the study one step further and look for hints of historical and ideological events in the films of the Michael Eisner's era. This is the case of Byrne and McQuillan, who see a metaphor of the fall of the communist system embedded in the *The Little Mermaid*.<sup>165</sup> Following their line of thought, the mer and the human world are presented as opposed kingdoms separated by a supposedly impenetrable barrier. The parallelism with the East and the West and the role of the Berlin wall in 1989 seem to fit the description. Pushing the analysis, Ariel would be the incarnation of a citizen from the east who yearns to trespass the barrier and live in the capitalist block where they offer "personal freedom with consumerist bounty and the pursuit of happiness."<sup>166</sup> The only way Ariel has to achieve such a thing is to indebt herself -in the same way as East Europe did-, turning the plot into a story of the economy of the debt.<sup>167</sup>

*The Little Mermaid* revived the Disney spirit and set a high bar that the studio would keep raising with every new instalment the company released. With success come praise and criticism in equal amounts, yet none could deny the presence of adapted features of the first animated films in this new story carried the signature of Walt.

#### 4.1.2 *Beauty and the Beast* (1991)<sup>168</sup>

In a little town in the French countryside lives young Belle. She is a charming and beautiful girl who fantasises with adventures as the ones she reads from the books she borrows everyday from the village's bookshop. This fixation for literature and daydreaming, together with his father's fame of crazy inventor, takes the villagers to

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<sup>163</sup> Cf. BECK, Jerry, *Op. Cit.*, p. 148.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>165</sup> Cf. BYRNE, Eleanor & McQUILLAN, Martin, *Op. Cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>168</sup> *Beauty and the Beast*, Gary Trousdale, Kirk Wise, 1991.

consider her 'strange', 'funny' and 'peculiar'. Everything changes when her father loses his way in the forest and finds shelter in an enchanted castle. There, he is made prisoner by a beast. Under the hideous appearance hides a spoiled prince that had been cursed by a sorceress for his selfish behaviour with a spell that could only be broken if he learned to love and be loved in return. Belle finds the castle but she is obliged to stay as a hostage in exchange for the release of her father. However, during her stay and her interaction with the cursed servants of the castle, both Belle and Beast learn to see through appearances. Their final test will come in the shape of an assault to the castle led by the villain, Gaston, portrayed as a narcissistic hair-chested ruffian that could not accept Belle's refusal to marry him.

If Ariel wanted to escape the mer world, Belle dreams about leaving her provincial life behind. Her feminine role includes a distinctly independent and brave personality, according to the modern portrayal of women, combined with reminiscences of the fearful character of the first princesses. Similarly, and contrary to previous films where the male figure would be left quite undefined, the prince/beast shows emotions, usually associated to the feminine role. The innovation in Belle's personality is that she is the first princess "to show very high rates of intellectual activity as she read books frequently"<sup>169</sup> and very few love for domestic chores, which leads to encourage her attitude of 'I know best'. Disney's features are present once again but divided in two people: Her cry for a better life is intertwined with the Beast's desire to return to "his true (genuine, natural, authentic, original) form in the nick of time."<sup>170</sup> On the other hand, critics of the film only see "another woman whose life is valued for solving a man's problem."<sup>171</sup>

Based on Jeanne-Marie Le Prince de Beaumont's abridgement of the fairy tale, this film also presents a critique of rural life. Villagers establish one's value and strength by counting the number of hunting prizes hanging on the wall -Gaston's display at the tavern- and have little time to dedicate themselves to intellectual activities. Belle "is not represented with a sympathetic animal entourage [...] nor does she indulge in choral interplay with innocent forest creatures".<sup>172</sup> She rejects this model and pays little attention to her relationship with nature<sup>173</sup> -her horse Phillippe, the wolves that attack her and the birds in the castle's courtyard are the only examples of her

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<sup>169</sup> ENGLAND, Dawn E. & DESCARTES, Lara & COLLIER-MEEK, Melissa, "Gender Role Portrayal and the Disney Princesses", *Sex Roles*, 64 (2011) p. 564.

<sup>170</sup> Cf. BOOKER, M. Keith, *Op. Cit.*, p. 54.

<sup>171</sup> Cf. GIROUX, Henry A., *Op. Cit.*, p. 101.

<sup>172</sup> Cf. WHITLEY, David, *Op. Cit.*, p. 48.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.



interaction with the natural environment. Stereotypes in racial representation surface in Belle's two sidekicks, the French candelabra Lumière and the British pendulum clock Cogsworth. Racial references are innocent features meant to increase the caricature side of the film, since both characters will not stop fighting comically about everything as an allusion to the historical distaste both nations -England and France- profess to each other.

The portrayal of the family clearly follows the Disney tradition: there is not a single mention to Belle's mother, and the depiction of an infantilised father, Maurice, who seems unable to understand his daughter and brings more trouble than responsible parenting to the life of the young girl, seems to hint a crisis in masculinity.<sup>174</sup> Following the trend instituted by *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast* musical display is Broadway material, complying with the song structure: "Belle" as the choral opening that situates the viewer; "Gaston" as the villain's song; the sidekick song "Be our guest" performed by Lumière with Cogsworth's useless attempts to stop him; "Something there" as the melody that leads the audience through the transformation stage where the couple starts to see beyond the appearances, and "Beauty and the Beast" as the quintessential love song.

If *The Little Mermaid* was a reference to the economy of debt, Byrne and McQuillan understand this film as a portrait of the economy of hospitality: "By allowing Belle into his castle the Beast hopes that by reciprocating 'true love' she will prove to be the girl who breaks the Enchantress's spell placed upon him."<sup>175</sup> It is a forced hospitality that these scholars link to the hospitality the West offers to the new democracies that rise in East Europe after the fall of Berlin's wall, which only assimilates the Other if it is in the interest of the economy.<sup>176</sup>

#### 4.1.3 *Aladdin* (1992)<sup>177</sup>

Street rat Aladdin spends the days in the fictional sultanate of Agrabah without knowing if he will be able to eat the next day. His routine is turned upside down the day the sultan's daughter, princess Jasmine, tired of the boring royal life escapes the palace undercover. Their paths cross and when he tries to help her, oblivious to her title, they both get caught by the royal guards, who put Aladdin in the dungeons.

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<sup>174</sup> Cf. BYRNE, Eleanor & McQUILLAN, Martin, *Op. Cit.*, p. 67.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>177</sup> *Aladdin*, Ron Clements, John Musker, 1992.

Meanwhile, in the palace, the Grand Vizier Jafar wishes to be sultan himself and, in order to do so, has been mind controlling Jasmine's father and trying to get hold of the magical oil lamp containing a genie from the Cave of Wonders. However, when he is told that only a 'diamond in the rough' can enter the cave, he tricks Aladdin into retrieving the lamp in exchange for his freedom. When the cave collapses, the young street rat is trapped inside with the lamp and unexpectedly releases the genie. With the magical aid of the genie's wishes Aladdin returns to Agrabah transformed into a rich prince ready to woo Jasmine, who rejects him without recognising him. The now prince Ali tries to win Jasmine's heart but when Jafar uncovers the deception, only the combined efforts of the protagonist couple will prevent him from becoming a despotic tyrant.

Based on the collection of folk tales of *One Thousand and One Nights*, also known as *The Arabian Nights*, *Aladdin* is undoubtedly the Disney film that harvested the biggest amount of criticism. Its timing and setting in a undefined middle East country coincided with US's recent engagement in the Gulf War (1990-1991)<sup>178</sup> made the studio target of accusations of managing "geopolitical change in order to keep up with the game at a time when the traditional order of politics and economics which underpin the corporation are undergoing radical revision as a result of that change."<sup>179</sup> Leaving geopolitical interpretations aside, the story rescues Disney's "pursuit of happiness" philosophy in most of the characters portrayed in the animation: streetrat Aladdin's wish to leave poverty behind; princess Jasmine's yearning of marrying for love and not convenience; Genie's dream to become free from the lamp, and even the villain Jafar's desire to become sultan and rule over Agrabah.

Only the couple and the blue genie achieve their ambitions, for happy endings in Disney entail the defeat of the villain and the prevalence of good over evil. Jafar -"a cross between the Ayatollah and Saddam Hussein"<sup>180</sup>- is used as an obvious orientalist<sup>181</sup> caricature of Arab men. It is worth mentioning that he is the first male

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<sup>178</sup> Macleod suggests that the production of the animation echoes, to certain extent, Eisner's approach to cultural globalization that parallels the causes and unfolding of the Gulf War. Cf. MACLEOD, Dianne Sachko, "The Politics of Vision: Disney, *Aladdin*, and the Gulf War ", *Ayres*, (2003) pp. 179-192.

<sup>179</sup> Cf. BYRNE, Eleanor & McQUILLAN, Martin, *Op. Cit.*, p. 75.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>181</sup> Orientalism is a term coined by Edward Said in a book that carries the same name published in 1994 that describes the distorted vision the Western colonisers built around the lands and peoples of Orient. It usually comprises seeing the Asian cultures as equally exotic and barbaric, and, therefore, in need of rescue from the West. In *Aladdin*, for example, Addison sees a perpetuation of

antagonist that is able to reach the levels of wickedness of the previous female villains.<sup>182</sup> His clothes, his snake-shaped cane, and his feathered sidekick Iago<sup>183</sup> make him almost a perfect version of a male Maleficent. As contrast, we also find a caricature of a “benign buffoon”<sup>184</sup> and too-puerile-for-his-own-good man in the sultan. In the same way as Maurice in *The Beauty and the Beast*, Jasmine’s father is someone who needs more parenting advice than the one he can offer to his child. There is no mention of Jasmine’s mother, nor Aladdin’s parents, which furthers the tradition of orphan protagonists in the Disney universe.

Regarding gender identity, Jasmine is subject to stereotyping when she is “shown frequently as physically weak, highly affectionate, and troublesome [and] uses overt sexuality and exaggerated femininity in order to aid in Aladdin’s rescue.”<sup>185</sup> On the other hand, however, she does present a more updated vision of women, evident in the way she refuses arranged marriages and decides to explore the world beyond the palace’s walls. The role of nature in *Aladdin* is limited to the three animals present in the film: Al’s pet monkey Abu, Jasmine’s tiger Rajah and Jafar’s parrot Iago. Though acting as supporting characters, these animals are given responsibility over key events in the development plot. Thus, Abu’s greed triggers the collapse of the Cave of Wonders and saves Aladdin from being killed by Jafar; Rajah helps Jasmine escape the palace, and Iago is the master mind behind the idea of marriage between Jafar and the princess so that the former can become sultan.

Musically speaking *Aladdin* offers unforgettable tunes. “Arabian Nights” and “One jump ahead” introduce the audience to the scenery and the protagonist respectively, while Genie has his own presentation song in the style of a Broadway musical - “Friend like me”-, as well as a stellar performance in the transformation song that

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this thought in the fusion of “venal vendors, half-dead hash-smokers, sword swallows, veiled women, nearly naked veiled women, belly-dancers, acrobats, camels, elephants, Bengal tigers, cobras, Arabian steeds, desert, garden, scarab, fez, turban, khufiyah, pyramid, pagoda, Taj-Mahal, suq, classical ruins, Allah, the djinn, and the Chinese New Year” shown on screen. Cf. ADDISON, Erin, “Saving Other Women from Other Men: Disney’s *Aladdin*”, *Camera Obscura*, 31 (1993) p. 4.

<sup>182</sup> *The Beauty and the Beast* does have a male character, Gaston, as antagonist. Nonetheless, he is presented more as a common person who becomes evil when trying to prove his points rather than a sinister born-to-be-evil figure, such as the early Disney villains.

<sup>183</sup> Evil sidekicks are a continuous presence in Disney’s animated features that would deserve an analysis of their own in order to see how they have been acquiring more personality and definition over time: the evil queen and Maleficent’s crows in *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty*, Cinderella’s stepmother cat, Captain Hook’s second in command Smee, Ursula’s green morays, LeFou as Gaston’s minion, Iago as Jafar’s parrot, etc.

<sup>184</sup> Cf. ADDISON, Erin, *Op. Cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>185</sup> Cf. ENGLAND, Dawn E. & DESCARTES, Lara & COLLIER-MEEK, Melissa, *Op. Cit.*, p. 564.

turns Aladdin into "Prince Ali". Disney does not forget to give Jafar a singing reprise, and the film's love song "A whole new world" is known as one of the most beloved tunes in the history animation. Despite the criticism received in racial and gender portrayal through the characters and the lyrics<sup>186</sup>, *Aladdin* proved to be the second most successful film of the Disney renaissance in its box office performance, only behind our next analysed feature: *The Lion King*.

#### 4.1.4 *The Lion King* (1994)<sup>187</sup>

The animal kingdom rejoices with the birth of the heir to the throne, little Simba, son to Mufasa, the lion that rules the pride lands. Mufasa's brother, the sour Scar, sees his nephew cub as a competitor and allies himself with the hyenas. Together they plan a stampede where Mufasa dies and they frame Simba as responsible for his father's death. Full with guilt, the young lion flees to exile. He is adopted by a funny couple of friends -Timon, the meercat, and goody warthog Pumbaa- who teach him their carefree philosophy of life. Several years go by in this new paradise when Simba's old girlfriend Nala runs into him and discovers that he had survived when everybody else thought him dead. She begs Simba to return and face his uncle to put an end to the reign of terror. Baboon shaman Rafiki helps him to regain confidence in himself and Simba returns to challenge Scar and earn back the title of Lion King.

The story of *The Lion King* is thought to draw its inspiration from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*<sup>188</sup>, as well as from the biblical stories of Joseph and Moses, although unproven accusations of plagiarism relate it to Japanese artist Tekuza's *Kimba the White Lion*. Regardless of the discussion around its origins, the story narrates the universal myth of the hero's journey that has been represented over and over again in the story of human kind: "A hero is called to find himself and save his people by dint of a harrowing series of trials that test his mettle to the utmost."<sup>189</sup> This film is the best example of Disney's portrayal of the quest to find the protagonist's true self. Simba flees into exile doubting himself after his uncle put Mufasa's death blame on him. During his stay with Timon and Pumba he finds it easier to consign his old identity to oblivion and, in the process, he gets rid of any habits that would remind

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<sup>186</sup> Disney agreed to change two lines of "Arabian Nights" after criticism rained on the producers because of allegedly racist connotations. The lyrics were changed in 1993 from "Where they cut off your ear if they don't like your face," to "Where it's flat and immense and the heat is intense."

<sup>187</sup> *The Lion King*, Roger Allers, Rob Minkoff, 1994.

<sup>188</sup> Cf. BOOKER, M. Keith, *Op. Cit.*, p. 59, and Cf. BYRNE, Eleanor & McQUILLAN, Martin, *Op. Cit.*, p. 83.

<sup>189</sup> Cf. BECK, Jerry, *Op. Cit.*, p. 145.

him that his nature is that of a lion. Nevertheless, deep inside, Simba knows his duty and life purpose asks of him to occupy his father place. Acknowledging this and facing his demons under the shape of his uncle and the army of hyenas he commands are the obstacles in Simba's journey of heroism.

The special care on every detail comes to light in the depictions of the African nature through the landscapes of the savannah, the jungle and the wastelands. The colourful palette reminds the viewer that the flora and fauna of this continent are one of its biggest treasures and that it can be equally mesmerizing -Timon and Pumba's exuberant home of vegetation- and gloomy -the elephants' cemetery where the hyenas live. Once again, the good and evil secondary characters gather all the comical scenes: Zazu's overprotective and severe attitude, Rafiki's mute wisdom and, of course, Timon and Pumba's energetic combination on team Simba; and, on team Scar, the three hyenas Shenzi, Banzai and Ed. These last ones also represent the references to a racial codification in the film: Shenzi as a black character, with Woopy Goldberg's voice, and Banzai as a Latino figure, with comedian Cheech Martin's voice. Other racial reference is the battle good versus evil evident in the colouring of villain Scar, who is given a darker hair colour, as well as in the shadowed forbidden areas, while Mufasa's kingdom is bathed in the light and colour brightness.

Gender identity follows the example of real life lions, where the lionesses are strong enough to hunt and are in charge of raising the cubs but the system is still a patriarchal one where the female is subordinated to the male.<sup>190</sup> The new times, however, bring a new perspective where the feminine character is often the one saving the male protagonist and not the other way around: Ariel saves Eric from drowning in *The Little Mermaid*, Belle is responsible for breaking the Beast's curse, Jasmine helps in distracting Jafar when Aladdin needed it most, and now the lioness Nala is the one who finds Simba, reminds him of his true nature and encourages him to go back to Pride Rock, delighting the public with yet another happy ending. Regarding family treatment, we are allowed to meet Simba's parents, but tragedy strikes with the death of Mufasa and, again, leaves us with an orphan protagonist *made in Disney*.

In *Deconstructing Disney*, Byrne and McQuillan associate *The Lion King's* release with the first democratic election in South Africa and the interest of the West during

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<sup>190</sup> Cf. GIROUX, Henry A., *Op. Cit.*, p. 102.

the Apartheid era.<sup>191</sup> According to their arguments, *The Lion King* would incarnate the West's strategy of supporting kingship in Africa during the Apartheid era<sup>192</sup>, as opposed to communism -played by Scar in the film. While the debate remains open to interpretations, *The Lion King's* musical display is without any doubt the work of three geniuses: composer Hans Zimmer, lyricist Tim Rice and singer and songwriter Elton John. "Though all Disney animated films are musicals to some extent," agrees Booker, "*The Lion King* may employ music more effectively than any other Disney animated film, which perhaps explains why it has also gone on to become a highly successful Broadway show."<sup>193</sup> From choral "Circle of Life" and Simba's introduction "I just can't wait to be king", to "Can you feel the love tonight" as the main love song, without forgetting "Hakuna Matata", the sidekicks' song -in this film it is also the melody that illustrates Simba's transformation from a cub to a grown up lion- and the villain's tune of "Be prepared". In this film, the music is considered indispensable to explain the great success -it holds the first position in box office revenues during the Disney Renaissance- of *The Lion King*.

#### 4.1.5 *Pocahontas* (1995)<sup>194</sup>

Two civilizations collide when a ship of English settlers reaches the coast of the New World where a Native American tribe lives. Captain John Smith does not wish to ignite a conflict but Governor Ratcliffe's greed knows no boundaries and will take him to do anything in his power to exploit the resources of the land they have encountered. Settlers and Indians mutual distrust grows parallel to the love story between John Smith and chief Powhatan's daughter, Pocahontas, who teaches him that her tribe is much more than a handful of heartless savages. Eventually, a series of unfortunate events initiates the hostilities between the two groups. Smith and Pocahontas' love beyond racial distinctions seems like the only way to prevent further bloodshed.

*Pocahontas* slightly deviates from the Disney tradition when it takes a real historical figure as the basis for its story, the figure of "a young Powhatan girl who famously befriended English colonist John Smith during the building of Virginia's Jamestown settlement in 1607, furthering communication between the colonists and the Native

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<sup>191</sup> Cf. BYRNE, Eleanor & McQUILLAN, Martin, *Op. Cit.*, p. 86.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>193</sup> Cf. BOOKER, M. Keith, *Op. Cit.*, p. 58.

<sup>194</sup> *Pocahontas*, Mike Gabriel, Eric Goldberg, 1995.

Americans who inhabited the area.”<sup>195</sup> Though the film takes its traditional artistic license with the adaptation and rewrites a happy ending, there is a clear purpose of acknowledging the debt upon which modern America was founded through the depiction of the white settlers’ greed and the realization that the indigenous population had their own culture worth of respect.<sup>196</sup> Racial representation in the film is also a clear example of how Disney grows together with the recognition of the world’s multiculturalism from the “red man” described in *Peter Pan* to the “copper-skinned” members of Pocahontas’s tribe.<sup>197</sup>

Critics argue that this change in the depiction of white men, traditionally seen as the *good guys* and now wicked and greedy, follows the political agenda of Bill Clinton and his ethical foreign policy where war is seen as a “radical inequality between the West and its perceived enemy” and it is now “put on hold, in the name of the humanitarian”.<sup>198</sup> Despite the positive multiculturalism depicted in the film, these analysts still find evidences of racism when they point out that *Pocahontas* concludes that coexistence between these two civilizations is impossible and they should remain separate<sup>199</sup>; also, they argue the film helps to project “the white-centric formula of ‘us’ (white) and ‘them’ (Natives).”<sup>200</sup> Defenders of Disney, on the other hand, reply

that reactionaries on the far right and radicals on the far left, despite seeming polarization, always end up saying the same thing, occasionally even doing so for the same reason. In this case, they both hate today’s Disney films because those films are politically correct and further those very ideas of diversity that Walt Disney himself first presented to the public—ideas that have finally been absorbed into mainstream thinking.<sup>201</sup>

Again, Disney rescues the relationship between the female protagonist and the nature surrounding her. Pocahontas is followed everywhere by small hummingbird Flit, the incarnation of prudence, and naughty, troublemaker pet racoon Meeko; she also turns to Grandmother Willow, a centenary tree located at the heart of the forest, for advice and comfort, and invokes the nature spirits to help her. The young Powhatan girl both challenges and imitates some of the gender stereotypes we have

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<sup>195</sup> Cf. BOOKER, M. Keith, *Op. Cit.*, p. 60.

<sup>196</sup> Cf. BYRNE, Eleanor & McQUILLAN, Martin, *Op. Cit.*, p. 108.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>198</sup> Cf. BYRNE, Eleanor & McQUILLAN, Martin, *Op. Cit.*, p. 125.

<sup>199</sup> Cf. BOOKER, M. Keith, *Op. Cit.*, p. 62, and Cf. BYRNE, Eleanor & McQUILLAN, Martin, *Op. Cit.*, p. 110.

<sup>200</sup> BELKHYR, Souad, “Defining the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ in Disney song lyrics”, *International Journal of Human Sciences*, 10 (2013) 1, p. 1372.

<sup>201</sup> Cf. BRODE, Douglas, *Op. Cit.*, p. 270.

been noticing in Disney films. On the one hand, she is “bright, courageous, literate, and politically progressive”, and on the other, she “is drawn primarily in relation to the men who surround her.”<sup>202</sup> Initially, we witness how her father -once more, there is no mother in the picture- wants to force her into marrying the bravest warrior in the tribe. Then, she falls in love with blond John Smith and agrees to teach him her tribe’s way of life. Eventually, however, Pocahontas stands on her own as the hero that prevents a war outbreak and saves both her father and John Smith from perishing by convincing the settlers to embark back to England.

English Governor Ratcliffe is the villain in the story and also a character built from the historical figure of John Ratcliffe, captain of the *Discovery* who actually died at the hands of Indians from the Powhatan tribe in 1609. In this film, his source of power comes not from magic, but from the amount of weapons he owns and men he commands. For the first time we see an antagonist who does not directly attack the heroes of the film, who does not make his sole purpose to destroy or submit the protagonists; it is greed what drives Ratcliffe’s actions and the rest of characters are indirectly involved in his quest for riches, thus, evidencing a more complex and up-to-date justification of the motivations behind his preponderous appearance. Musically speaking, he enjoys the lead singing in encouraging and not at all gloomy “Mine, mine, mine”, where he inspires his crew to dig for gold, and also intervenes in “Savages”, raising the tension between the two cultures. The film also includes the habitual chorus songs introducing the scenery and characters from both worlds -“The Virginia Company” and “Steady as the beating drum”-; the song where the heroine intonates her reluctance to accept the impositions of her father, and dreams about what is “Just around the riverbend”; the famous ‘transformation’ song “Colours of the wind” that changes John Smith’s perception of the Native Americans; and the love reprises between him and Pocahontas in “If I never knew you”. Composer Alan Menken<sup>203</sup> is in charge of a score so well accomplished that it received the Academy Award for Best Musical or Comedy Score in 1995.

#### 4.1.6 *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996)<sup>204</sup>

High on top of Notre Dame’s bell tower in the Paris of the 15th century hides the mysterious deformed bell-ringer, Quasimodo. He has been raised by judge Claude

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<sup>202</sup> Cf. GIROUX, Henry A., *Op. Cit.*, p. 101.

<sup>203</sup> Previous to *Pocahontas*, Menken was also responsible for *The Little Mermaid*, *The Beauty and the Beast* and *Aladdin* soundtracks’ successes.

<sup>204</sup> *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Gary Trousdale, Kirk Wise, 1996.



Frollo out of the sight of the Parisians, but the day of the Festival of Fools he flees his tower to experience what it is like to live outside the cathedral's walls. The day ends in humiliation after the crowd discovers that his monstrous appearance is no disguise. Frollo refuses to help him, expecting the humiliation to serve him as a lesson. However, beautiful and kind gypsy Esmeralda, intervenes to defend him and is then obliged to take refuge in the cathedral to escape Frollo's guards commanded by Captain Phoebus. In gratitude for her kindness, Quasimodo helps her to return to her people. Meanwhile, judge Frollo develops lustful feelings for Esmeralda, who he accuses of having cast a spell on him, and orders a hunt for her and the gypsies that hide in the Court of Miracles. Captain Phoebus revolts against the judge's methods and switches sides to help Quasimodo and the gypsies, falling for the exotic Esmeralda in the meantime. However, the villain manages to take Esmeralda as prisoner and is determined to burn her at the stake. Quasimodo will have to gather all his inner and physical strength if he wishes to save his new friends from perishing at the hands of his hateful prison warden.

Disney's portrayal of multiculturalism and ethnic diversity continues in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* with a story drawn from French Victor Hugo's novel, though "Disney considerably sanitizes the source material replacing the tragic conclusion of Hugo's original novel with a happy ending of triumphant celebration."<sup>205</sup> The film is overtly political in its criticism of ethnic cleansing, a pertinent issue at the time, for the film was produced while the unfortunate events of the Bosnian war were taking place at the heart of the European continent.<sup>206</sup> It is a deeper and darker feature than previous Disney classics that introduces concepts more likely to be understood by adults than children, such as the mentioned racial purge, religion, and inner human struggle. Nonetheless, the biggest theme in the story is still true to Disney's philosophy and refers to the power of friendship: "Friendship runs through the narrative like a pink thread, joining each series of events. [...] These friendships play an organising role in the film's presentation of justice and democracy."<sup>207</sup>

Together with the subject of friendship, Quasimodo's search for *something more*, expressed in the lyrics of "Out there", takes him to experience the world outside the cathedral, where he encounters emotions against which judge Frollo had warned him -the fear for the unknown (Quasimodo's otherness) of the Parisians is turned to hatred and public scorn. However, he also learns there is kindness, caring attention

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<sup>205</sup> Cf. BOOKER, M. Keith, *Op. Cit.*, p. 62.

<sup>206</sup> Cf. BYRNE, Eleanor & McQUILLAN, Martin, *Op. Cit.*, p. 133.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

and loving concern, provided by the exotic gipsy Esmeralda. As Ward highlights in her *Mouse Morality*, Disney's adaptation of the French novel is both tragic and comic: "The result is a *Hunchback* with a life-affirming moral tale, as reasonably a happy ending as can be expected given a love triangle, and Hugo's characters transformed into 'feel-good' caricatures"; however Quasimodo "remains disfigured, and he doesn't get the girl he loves. We feel pity for him even though he is at last able to go out among the people."<sup>208</sup>

Esmeralda acts as the corner stone of the film, and all the male protagonists' actions -Quasi, Phoebus and Frollo- always seem to have her as a hidden motivation. She belongs to the outcast minority of gipsies that have been subject of manhunt and injustice at the hands of Claude Frollo, who also instructs newcomer Captain Phoebus to look for the safe haven where the nomad community hide and finish them off. She is portrayed as a smart and independent woman that knows her way around the city of Paris and does not need a man to survive; also, there is a motherly attitude in her towards her people that she sings out in "God help the Outcasts". But her friendship is asymmetrical, and "while Phoebus and Quasimodo can be friends and political allies, Esmeralda is more than a friend to both. [...] At the close of the film, Phoebus and Esmeralda are a couple while Quasimodo is infantilised."<sup>209</sup> On the other hand, Frollo develops unhealthy lustful feelings towards her -"Now gypsy, it's your turn/Choose me/ or Your pyre/Be mine or you will burn", he sings in "Hellfire"- that clash with his pious *façade* and drive him to evil and madness.

To bring some comic relief Disney resorts to the animal secondary characters - Esmeralda's grumpy goat Djali and Phoebus' horse Achilles<sup>210</sup>- and Quasimodo's stony friends Hugo, Victor and Laverne, a trio of gargoyles who, as sidekicks of the protagonist, have their own song: "A guy like you". Following the Disney traits, family representation is characterised by the traumatic episode where Quasimodo's mother dies, making him yet another orphan in the hero tradition of the Disney imaginary. The dark colours and themes displayed in *The Hunchback* had negative repercussions on the general audience -the box office was lower than previous *Pocahontas*-, as well as on the media, where unfavourable reviews were more numerous than positive ones. Despite including many of the elements in the Disney's formula to success resurrected by Eisner, the studio had aimed too high in trying to

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<sup>208</sup> WARD, Annalee R., *Mouse Morality: the rhetoric of Disney animated film*, United States, University of Texas Press, 2002, section 4.

<sup>209</sup> Cf. BYRNE, Eleanor & McQUILLAN, Martin, *Op. Cit.*, p. 138.

<sup>210</sup> These two characters are the only contact the characters have with nature, since the film is set in an urban environment.

adapt such a complex story and, unable to establish what was the target public for the film, neither children or adults found it convincing.

#### 4.1.7 *Hercules* (1997)<sup>211</sup>

Greek gods Zeus and Hera celebrate the birth of their son Hercules. However, Zeus's jealous brother Hades wishes to overthrow the father of all gods and discovers that in 18 years the planets will align and allow him to free the Titans and conquer the Mount Olympus. The only person who can prevent this from happening is Hercules. Thus, Hades has him kidnapped by his minions Pain and Panic, who take him to the earth. There they succeed to turn the baby mortal but fail to remove all this supernatural strength because they are interrupted by a couple of peasants that find Hercules and raise him as their own son. Hercules grows oblivious to his godly nature and, when he finally discovers he is Zeus's son, the only way to return to his true family entails becoming a true hero. With the help of satyr Philoctetes he trains and performs heroic labours wherever he is needed. The invincible hero has, nonetheless, a soft spot: sarcastic damsel in distress Megara. Bound by a debt, Megara is used as Hades' puppet to weaken Hercules and allow the god of the underworld to carry on with his plan of defeating Zeus. Only Hercules's sacrifice of his own life to save Megara will restore his godhood and grant him the strength to defeat his uncle.

After *The Hunchback's* slip, we can imagine Disney animators' reluctance to select a novel as complex as Victor Hugo's again, which is why *Hercules* represents a back-to-basics in the choosing of the narrative source. This time the story comes from the ancient Greek myth of the divine hero Heracles, with its habitual "erosion of historical sense"<sup>212</sup> -in this case, probably meant to save the parents a complicated explanation of the Greek gods' promiscuity. Traditional narrator is interrupted by the Muses, a "black Motown girl-group reminiscent of the Supremes"<sup>213</sup>, who introduce "The Gospel Truth" or the explanation of how Zeus jailed the Titans. This group of black Muses serves, apart from the obvious multicultural connotation, as the perfect excuse to build *Hercules'* soundtrack along spectacular and entertaining gospel music. Once again we are presented with a tragedy that moves the hero away from his parents and forces him to grow up with a sense that he does not belong in the little cottage where a loving couple raised him. When his adoptive parents finally

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<sup>211</sup> *Hercules*, Ron Clements, John Musker, 1997.

<sup>212</sup> Cf. BOOKER, M. Keith, *Op. Cit.*, p. 63.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

disclose the truth, the hero's journey in search of his true self<sup>214</sup> begins accompanied by the lyrics of "Go the distance".

But the clumsy teenager Hercules first needs an intervention/transformation if he wants to become a true hero and enter the Mount Olympus again. The task falls on the satyr Philoctetes, a wannabe womanizer who has lost faith in ever training a boy with enough potential to be a legend. However, in the same way as Genie transformed Aladdin, Phil reluctantly accepts and works his magic -not literal magic this time- to train Hercules to the rhythm of "One last hope". Obstacles in Hercules' path are planned by Hades, god of the Underworld, who as main villain follows the physical depiction of "narrow jaw line and high, prominent cheekbones"<sup>215</sup> and long robes that give him an androgynous silhouette, just like Jafar and Judge Claude Frollo before him. Nonetheless, Hades -complemented by his evil comic minions Pain and Panic- is far from plain and dull; on the contrary, his wickedly funny personality is an improvement in the villainy barometer. By making him a caricature, always failing to defeat Hercules, Disney animators create an opportunity for the audience to stop fearing him and start secretly wishing he had more appearances in the plot.

Megara plays the role of heroine, and an unconventional one, for she is Hercules' doom and salvation at the same time. The Greek girl is strikingly beautiful as the previous heroines but storywriters decided to introduce a new type of feature that had never been given to a female character before, and that is her acute sarcasm and cynicism. She considers herself a fool for falling in love with a man who ran away with another girl and carries the fault of having lost her soul to Hades with bitter resignation. Meg also proves to be manipulative when she tricks Hercules into fighting the hydra. However, despite her efforts to deny it in "I won't say I'm in love", she falls for 'Herc' and achieves redemption when she sacrifices herself for love. This gender portrayal is complemented when, for the first time, the male figure "must give up something [his deity] in order to be with the female, instead of the other way around."<sup>216</sup> The last character worth mentioning is the winged mythical horse Pegasus, whose role as the helping animal sidekick serves once more as the link between nature and the protagonist. Even though he is unable to speak, Pegasus provides entertainment with his expressions, which are as communicative as it gets.

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<sup>214</sup> Cf. WARD, Annalee R., *Op. Cit.*, section 5.

<sup>215</sup> LI-VOLLMER, Meredith & LAPOINTE, Mark E., "Gender Transgression and Villainy in Animated Film", *Popular Communication: The International Journal of Media and Culture*, 1 (2003) 2, p. 97.

<sup>216</sup> Cf. BOOKER, M. Keith, *Op. Cit.*, p. 64.

In an effort to link Hercules with the events contemporary to the film, Byrne and McQuillan refer to it as a metaphor of the mediatic construction of the political space in the 1990s in the United States around Clinton's scandal with Monica Lewinsky:

It relates *demos*, economy, *aporia*<sup>217</sup> and justice to *eros* and a myth which occupies a privileged position in the history of Europe. [...] As an *aporia* this difficulty overruns logical confines and can only resolve itself in the form of a narrative which offers an imaginary resolution to its real and pained contradictions. Disney's *Hercules* is one such narrative [...] following the same aesthetic process as Hillary Clinton's conspiracy narrative [...] taken up by Clinton's lawyers during the impeachment trial.<sup>218</sup>

Despite its detachment from narrative complexity and the great appeal of its soundtrack and characters, especially the villain and the heroine, *Hercules* did not break box office revenue records. In fact, it performed worse than its predecessor classic, leaving a cloud of doubt hanging over the animation studio around what story would be able to motivate the audiences next.

#### 4.1.8 *Mulan* (1998)<sup>219</sup>

Back in the era of the dynasties, the Huns, led by brutal Shan Yu, invade Han China and force the emperor to call to arms. When Fa Mulan hears that her elderly father must serve in the army as the only male representative of the family, she decides to take matters into her own hands: she runs away with armour and weapons and disguises herself as a man to substitute her father. Mulan fools her superiors and the general's son Li Shang while assisted by the small dragon Mushu and a lucky cricket. However, after being the responsible for the avalanche that crushed the Huns in the mountains, she is wounded and her deceit is discovered. Li Shang spares her life but expels her from the army. While the soldiers head to the Imperial City Mulan discovers that a handful of the fiercest Hun warriors, including the villain, have survived the avalanche and plan to infiltrate the city and take the emperor down. The brave girl and her ability to convince her former comrades in arms will be China's only hope to defeat the Huns.

The unstoppable advance of globalization took Disney's animation studio to focus on

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<sup>217</sup> An irresolvable internal contradiction or logical disjunction in a text, argument, or theory. Oxford Dictionaries, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/aporia> (Last accessed: 7 May 2014)

<sup>218</sup> Cf. BYRNE, Eleanor & McQUILLAN, Martin, *Op. Cit.*, p. 158.

<sup>219</sup> *Mulan*, Tony Bancroft, Barry Cook, 1998.

reaching new markets that, up until that moment, had been closed to foreign influences. This is the case of China, a country that offered the promise of a vast market potential<sup>220</sup> for Disney products. In order to reach a hand towards the Asian rising economy, Disney dived into the Chinese tradition and rescued the legend of Hua Mulan as source material for a new animated adventure<sup>221</sup>. *Mulan* introduces a new type of heroine that incorporates an important amount of features that in the old classics would only belong to the male figure. In the film Mulan is athletic and unafraid of riding a horse like an amazon, which signals how much effort the studio was putting into updating the representation of women<sup>222</sup>, a process that had already started with Ariel but becomes more evident from Pocahontas onwards. Mulan's adventures have, therefore, a lot to do with this new masculine attitude in the feminine heroine: "Much of the troublesome nature of the princesses is related to their undertaking of more masculine roles and pursuing non-traditional paths in the movies such as bravely taking leadership roles and embarking on climactic adventures."<sup>223</sup>

The problem with the adoption of this traditionally masculine attributes was, on the other hand, that it did not relate to the Chinese way of life. Hence, it was not screened in China during its global release in 1998, but instead had to wait until 1999 and "failed at the box office, partly because the story was said to be too Westernized."<sup>224</sup> Signs of this Westernization, viewers highlighted, can be found in Mulan's aggressive pursuit of her goals, her individualistic behaviour and her excessive physical contact interaction.<sup>225</sup> Traits like these made it difficult for the Chinese public to relate to the character and raised the question of whether the film wanted to impose "American values under the guise of a Chinese folktale."<sup>226</sup> When compared to previous Disney heroines, however, Mulan stands out as a character that looks for self-understanding in her duties of bringing the family honour and protecting her emperor and country; in fact, her romantic end with Li Shang and the return to her traditional role in the family does not come until she has succeeded in fulfilling her other two duties first.

*Mulan* addresses the issue of Chinese racial representation too, which up until this

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<sup>220</sup> Cf. BYRNE, Eleanor & McQUILLAN, Martin, *Op. Cit.*, p. 163.

<sup>221</sup> Cf. BOOKER, M. Keith, *Op. Cit.*, p. 64.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>223</sup> Cf. ENGLAND, Dawn E. & DESCARTES, Lara & COLLIER-MEEK, Melissa, *Op. Cit.*, 565.

<sup>224</sup> Cf. BELKHYR, Souad, *Op. Cit.*, p. 1375.

<sup>225</sup> Cf. WARD, Annalee R., *Op. Cit.*

<sup>226</sup> Cf. BELKHYR, Souad, *Op. Cit.*, p. 1375.

moment had been seldom portrayed in the Disney classics. Critics point to the racial coding also visible in the representation of the Huns, with darker skin than the Han standards, as a negative point.<sup>227</sup> Nonetheless, Disney has already used the technique of darkening the villain's appearance to evidence his gloomy personality from the outside -such is the case of Scar in *The Lion King*, for example-; and thus it has more to do with the association of evil to darkness and dim colours than with racial stigmatization. Mushu -another multicultural representation (he is voiced by black actor Eddie Murphy)-, the small and streetwise red dragon that is supposed to keep the heroine out of trouble, provides one of the funniest caricatures in the story of Disney sidekicks with memorable lines and dialogues. Mulan's other sidekick is a tiny lucky cricket who serves as the traditional helping animal that links the heroine with the natural world.

Surprisingly, in this film, the family of the heroine is complete with father, mother, and even a grandmother. The traumatic loss of a parent is materialised on the male character's figure, whose father, General Li, dies in battle against the Huns. Finally, as the last Disney feature, the film follows the tradition of incorporating musical numbers in the Broadway style -although producers included more pop references with the participation of Christina Aguilera and Stevie Wonder, among others. The choral beginning of "Honor to us all"; the heroine's questioning of herself and her place in the world in "Reflection", and the transformation song "I'll make a man out of you", where she goes from being a hopeless soldier to a well-trained warrior, are some of most beloved tunes in the film.

#### 4.1.9 *Tarzan* (1999)<sup>228</sup>

A human baby is adopted by female gorilla Kala when his family is killed by Sabor, a rogue leopardess. The baby Tarzan is accepted into the troop and raised as one of their own cubs, despite the alpha male's disapproval. The boy grows into a strong and caring man who seeks acceptance among the gorillas despite being aware that he is different. Their routine is interrupted when a group of English explorers reaches the coast. The members of the expedition are Professor Porter, his clever and charming daughter Jane and their hunter-guide Clayton, who secretly plans to find and trap the gorillas. One day, while exploring the jungle, Jane goes astray and finds herself chased by a horde of baboons. Tarzan rescues her and discovers, to his surprise, that she looks like him. Thrilled by the discovery of the wild man, Jane and

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<sup>227</sup> Cf. BOOKER, M. Keith, *Op. Cit.*, p. 65.

<sup>228</sup> *Tarzan*, Chris Buck, Kevin Lima, 1999.

her father start educating him, teaching Tarzan what it means to be human. Clayton, however, tricks him into disclosing where the troop is located and cages all of Tarzan's gorilla family and friends. It will be his duty to find the strength to save his beloved and decide whether his place is among humans or animals.

*Tarzan* is often considered the last film of the Disney Renaissance; after this feature, the Michael Eisner era would lose its shine in both commercial appeal and artistic detail.<sup>229</sup> For this new adventure, the Disney studio takes the popular literature character created by American writer Edgar Rice Burroughs and turns it into a tale of transition from boyhood to manhood characterised by the repeated search of the true self and the sense of belonging. The film is a renovated attempt to retrieve the original Disney spirit. In order to do so, wild nature and its relationship with the protagonist are given a predominant presence in the feature in a way that echoes previous classics such as *The Jungle Book* (1967) and distances itself from the big civilization speech -Chinese in *Mulan*, Greek in *Hercules*, Native American and British in *Pocahontas*, Middle Eastern in *Aladdin*, to mention some examples-. With the world increasing its concern around the climate change issue and developing strategies to palliate its effects, *Tarzan* joins in the current of portraying "the natural as good and the unnatural [human] as bad."<sup>230</sup>

Of course there are exceptions to this classification: Tarzan himself and, because of their innocent scientific curiosity, Jane Porter and her father. The heroine's design leaves Pocahontas and Mulan's physical strength and boldness behind; Jane is supposed to embody the qualities of the Victorian woman -elegance, patience, politeness and devotion. However, to keep the trend of updating women's role, Disney endows Jane with intelligence and endless curiosity, attributes that are probably justified by her upbringing as a mother orphan and her close relationship with an infantilised father too oblivious to care about social conventions. Still, in this case, she is the one who gives up her life in England to stay in the jungle next to her beloved. Tarzan, on the opposite side, though adopted by a female gorilla, lacks a paternal figure to encourage him -alpha gorilla Kerchak refuses to acknowledge him as his own son- and, because of that, the boy never ceases to try to prove his own worth.

Bossy gorilla Terk and neurotic elephant Tantor are Tarzan's inseparable sidekicks and the ones in charge of providing the comic gags and the slapstick action. If critics

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<sup>229</sup> Cf. BOOKER, M. Keith, *Op. Cit.*, p. 65.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.



complained about the studio's inclusion of racial references in previous features, in this case they complain that *Tarzan* is a film without any allusions to the black community or any other racial group. In front of these accusations, academic Douglas Brode exposes the contradictions of the judgements elaborated by those sworn to witch-hunt Disney's products:

Include Indians or Africans and caricature them (along with the Anglos) to maintain the tone of burlesque so necessary for a broad entertainment, and a producer will be accused of perpetuating an odious cliché. If, on the other hand, the studio did not portray Indians or Africans, it would be attacked for less-than-benign neglect.<sup>231</sup>

Clayton is the main antagonist in the film -leopardess Sabor is defeated by Tarzan before the arrival of the humans- and a second-class villain who looks like a combination of Gaston's muscles and Ratcliffe's face features. Not evil enough to reach Jafar or Ursula's meanness nor funny enough to compete with Hades, Clayton's main role is to serve as an obvious criticism to the poacher's illegal activities. When talking about the role of the music in the animated feature, there is a clear change: the studio slowly distances itself from the Broadway musical model and prefers to keep the tunes as background to the actions on screen. Nevertheless, producers hired pop music artist Phil Collins "seeking [...] to re-create the magic of Elton John's songs for *The Lion King*"<sup>232</sup> and accomplished some successful tunes such as "Two worlds", "You'll be in my heart" and "Son of man".

#### 4.2 *The latter modern classics of the Michael Eisner era*

Traditional animation had been the queen in the 1990s and Disney its king for most of the decade thanks to a formula that incorporated Walt Disney's original messages and adapted the features to the new audiences. The late years of Michael Eisner's era, however, did not bring as positive financial results as expected and difficulties started to surface. Management expert Richard P. Rumelt gives four main reasons why the Disney studio's traditional animation started to lose its allure:

In part, the problem was a changing world in which the "nice" Disney image had less and less appeal to a coarsened youth culture. In part, it simply had to do with, at long last, real competition for kid's entertainment -Nickelodeon, Pixar's animated films, Dreamwork's Shrek, PBS' teletubbies, and Nintendo's Pokemon. In part, it was a clash of cultures brought on by the CapCities/ABC acquisition. And, in part, the problem was simply size. In

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<sup>231</sup> Cf. BRODE, Douglas, *Op. Cit.*, p. 264.

<sup>232</sup> Cf. BOOKER, M. Keith, *Op. Cit.*, p. 65.

1999 Disney was a much larger organization with less room for dramatic growth. The world of entertainment was only so big.<sup>233</sup>

The loss of the spotlight was evident and yet, the studio had created a such a strong tradition around the periodic release of animated films that it kept on trying to adjust the old formula to a new series of decaffeinated features without realising -many blame Eisner's stubbornness- that the competition, the technologies available and the audience's wishes demanded a change in direction.

#### 4.2.1 *The Emperor's New Groove* (2000)<sup>234</sup>

Kuzco is the emperor of the Incan Empire but also an eccentric and selfish eighteen-year-old. His latest whim is the construction of a summer home named Kuzcotopia on the top of a mountain where there already exists a little village. He summons the chief of that community, Pacha, to inform him that their village is going to be erased to give way to his new palace. Pacha attempts to protest but is dismissed. Meanwhile, Kuzco's recently fired advisor, a wrinkled and high pitched woman named Yzma, is furious at him and together with her dumb assistant Kronk tries to poison the emperor. However, what is supposed to be poison turns out to be an elixir that transforms Kuzco into a llama. In the way to get rid of the body, Kronk loses the sack where the llama-emperor has been put after being knocked out. The spoiled emperor ends up in Pacha's cart. In order to retrieve his throne, Kuzco will have to ask for the chief's help, which he gives in exchange for the promise of building the summer home elsewhere. Will Kuzco and Pacha trust each other enough to keep their word?

Suspiciously released few months after Dreamwork's *The Road to El Dorado*, *The Emperor's New Groove* is a comic buddy film that follows the multicultural trend, and tries to wink at the Latino public ever more numerous in the United States. Disney locates this story in the Inca empire and changes the usual male-female protagonist couple to a male-male interaction between the orphan emperor Kuzco and chief Pacha. In its attempt to adapt, the protagonist hero is given a caricaturesque role while his supporting character is the voice of conscience, which "seems to suggest that the wisdom of common people [...] may outstrip that of pompous rulers."<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> RUMELT, Richard P., "Management Profiles: Michael Eisner", *The Anderson School at UCLA*, (2003), p. 6. Retrieved from <http://www.anderson.ucla.edu/faculty/dick.rumelt/Docs/Cases/EisnerX.pdf> (Last accessed: 7 May 2014)

<sup>234</sup> *The Emperor's New Groove*, Mark Dindal, 2000.

<sup>235</sup> Cf. BOOKER, M. Keith, *Op. Cit.*, p. 66.

Disney abandons the Broadway musical style and music will be from now on, also in the following films, a background element. The film is completed with a hilarious villain in the shape of extravagant counsellor Yzma and her dumb but endearing sidekick Kronk.

#### 4.2.2 *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* (2001)<sup>236</sup>

Set in 1914, young Milo, a brilliant linguistic, buries himself in books trying to discover the secret to reach the mythical city of Atlantis, which it is said to had been destroyed ten thousand years earlier by a natural disaster. Mocked by his colleagues from the museum he cannot seem to convince the scientific community that he only needs the Shepherd's Journal to locate the city. His luck changes when he meets millionaire Preston B. Whitmore, who also happens to be an old friend of Milo's grandfather. The old man provides Milo with the journal, the tools and a varied crew to start the journey towards Atlantis. While Milo's interest in Atlantis is scientific, Commander Rourke intends to find the source of energy of the city and take it to the surface to sell it and become rich. Together with Atlantis' princess Kida, Milo will have to convince crew and citizens to help him stop Rourke and avoid the complete destruction of the ancient civilization.

The impressive visuals are the only highlight of *Atlantis*, a film full with weak stereotypical figures<sup>237</sup> and a repetitive background message against greed that had been already portrayed in *Pocahontas* and *Tarzan*. The film, based on Jules Verne's literature, wanted to distance itself from musical driven predecessors and provide instead adventure entertainment with the help of a protagonist couple that falls in love -Milo and Kida- and a multicultural representation embodied in each of the crew members -we see French, African American, Italian and Latino characters- with little humour. The villain of the story, Commander Rourke, presents a too-similar-appearance, physically and psychologically, with *Tarzan's* Clayton. *Atlantis* follows the science-fiction trend inaugurated by Disney competitors, with Warner Bros' *The Iron Giant* (1999) and 20th Century Fox's *Titan A.E.* (2000) as examples.

#### 4.2.3 *Lilo & Stitch* (2002)<sup>238</sup>

When young Lilo and her older sister Nani lose their parents to a tragic accident, a

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<sup>236</sup> *Atlantis: The Lost Empire*, Gary Trousdale, Kirk Wise, 2001.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>238</sup> *Lilo & Stitch*, Chris Sanders, Dean DeBlois, 2002.

social worker visits them and threatens to take the kid away if Nani does not prove to take good care of her. Since the little girl struggles to make friends, Lilo is finally allowed to adopt a dog. In the animal shelter, her attention falls on a curious being, Experiment 626. Disguised as a pet, Experiment 626, who happens to be the result of alien Dr. Jumba Jookiba's illegal genetic experimentation, has escaped exile and reached the earthly islands of Hawaii. Under Lilo's care, the alien is now named Stitch, and his naughty behaviour will be responsible for countless disasters that will worsen the already delicate familiar situation. Slowly, Stitch is tamed by the young girl. However, while evading his pursuers he ends up risking Lilo's life, who is taken away by Galactic Federation's Captain Gantu. The alien, having learnt the meaning of family, will do everything in its power to save his new sister.

Pixar's huge success of *Monsters, Inc.* might have encouraged the Disney studio to find its own traditionally animated monster within the sci-fi world and come up with Stitch. The film focuses on the importance of family -though the parents are absent, the story wants to prove there is more to a family than just sharing the same blood<sup>239</sup>- and the Hawaiian natural and musical background reinforces the multicultural message. Of all the Michael Eisner era's last movies, *Lilo & Stitch* was the only one that gave satisfactory box office profit and it was also nominated for the 2002 Academy Awards for Best Animated Feature. However, its success did not suffice to modify the "corporate mindset that hand-drawn animated features were no longer economically viable."<sup>240</sup>

#### 4.2.4 *Treasure Planet* (2002)<sup>241</sup>

Young and rebel Jim Hawkins receives a sphere containing a map to the biggest treasure of the galaxy from the hands of a dying pirate. With this knowledge he embarks in an expedition with Dr. Doppler that will sail the space to find Treasure Planet. Also aboard the ship are under disguise the pirate Long John Silver and his bloodthirsty crew, who wish to take hold of the map. Upon arrival to the island, Jim and his companions are able to flee the ship before the pirates take them as prisoners. The race to reach the core of the planet where the treasure awaits is a dangerous and treacherous one. Eventually, Jim and Long John Silver will have to decide if the riches are worthy of putting their lives and their friendship at risk.

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<sup>239</sup> Cf. BOOKER, M. Keith, *Op. Cit.*, p. 70.

<sup>240</sup> Cf. BECK, Jerry, *Op. Cit.*, p. 249.

<sup>241</sup> *Treasure Planet*, Ron Clements, John Musker, 2002.

The action-adventure film based on Robert L. Stevenson's *Treasure Island* combined two of Disney's interests: "translating science-fiction into children's entertainment and converting the English literary tradition into child-oriented American pop culture."<sup>242</sup> Analysts see no evident reason why a film filled with such elaborated visual effects and great adventure scenes would fail at the box office. Eventually, they find arguments in the bad timing and its horrible luck in finding an audience. Despite the good argument and its beautiful steam-punk aesthetics, the film will be unfortunately remembered as the "biggest financial disaster in the history of Disney animation" and as playing a "key role in the decision to close the 2-D animation studio that had flourished for 65 years."<sup>243</sup>

#### 4.2.5 *Brother Bear* (2003)<sup>244</sup>

Kenai, the younger of three brothers, belongs to a North American tribe that believes in spirits inhabiting all living things and guiding humans in the shape of an animal totem that the youngsters are given when they transition to adulthood. Kenai, however, was born to complain: he whines about his totem -the bear of love-, argues with his brothers the whole time and ends up putting himself in danger when he takes his frustration out on a bear. Unfortunately, his older brother perishes, in his attempt to protect Kenai, while the bear survives the fall. Blind with pain and rage Kenai resolves to avenge his brother and hunts down the animal. The Spirits punish Kenai's action by transforming him into his hated totem. The young boy, now a bear, begins a journey to find the way to return to his human shape and, in the process, learn what his true nature is.

Michael Eisner's last attempt to increase box office success took traditional Disney animation to deviate from science-fiction and rescue the Native American culture theme from *Pocahontas* but taken to an age before colonization took place. The film retrieves the relationship with nature -the restoration of "the natural order and natural balance which had been upset by his [Kenai's] earlier transgression"<sup>245</sup>-, the presence of a loyal and adorable sidekick embodied in bear cub Koda and funny secondary characters -the moose comic couple Rutt and Tuke. As additional curious information, *Brother Bear* was the first animated film to do a widescreen shift from a format that fosters a more realist aspect while Kenai is human to a screen format that

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<sup>242</sup> Cf. BOOKER, M. Keith, *Op. Cit.*, p. 69.

<sup>243</sup> Cf. BECK, Jerry, *Op. Cit.*, p. 290.

<sup>244</sup> *Brother Bear*, Aaron Blaise, Robert Walker, 2003.

<sup>245</sup> Cf. BOOKER, M. Keith, *Op. Cit.*, p. 71.

favours brighter colours and caricatured shapes. The film received an Academy Award nomination for Best Animated Feature, but lost it to Pixar's *Finding Nemo*.

## Conclusions

The Michael Eisner era (1984-2004) proved to include a second golden age for the Disney animation studio packed with unforgettable titles released year after year. It was the purpose of this dissertation to provide evidence to argue that this huge success was due to a resurrection of Walt Disney's original ideas. In order to do so we had to start by tracing back the events in his life that helped to shape his particular vision of animation and the development of feature animated films. Thus, we glimpse Walt's determination and resilience despite failure knocking at his door several times; his insatiable curiosity and will to experiment that gave sound synchronised and colour films as a result, and his innate talents to know what the audience wanted and coordinate a large team of people to create a product that would respond to these demands.

All these life examples led to the release of twelve main feature animated films: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Pinocchio* (1940), *Fantasia* (1940), *Dumbo* (1941), *Bambi* (1942), *Cinderella* (1950), *Alice in Wonderland* (1951), *Peter Pan* (1953), *Lady and the Tramp* (1955), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* (1961) and *The Sword in the Stone* (1963). Embroidered in its pencil strokes and inked cells, the characters that inhabit these adventures carried the original genetic code of the Disney philosophy or "Disney-ology". We have noticed how these principles refer both to the creative process and the content definition. Disney classics, on the one hand, underwent rigorous scrutiny in its details, performed by Walt himself in his role of supervisor. They also were the result of a team effort and, as adaptations of fables and tales, they carried entertainment within as well as educative messages. On the other hand, regarding the content, Disney always gave preference to creating a product that was believable enough to reach the inner child of every person, where the innocence resides, and bring out emotions, from hilarious laughter to tears of sadness or worried clenched jaws. The films portray characters that illustrate human struggles: the yearning of always reaching for more while trying to elucidate one's true self -without the support of a family, for the hero's journey is usually triggered by the loss of origins. But, at the same time, they do so with a humorous touch -usually provided by animals- and with the certainty that, in the end, obstacles will be surmounted and good will prevail. As a product of a certain time, Disney early classics are also a window to the thinking of the twentieth century and a valuable sociological document on gender and racial representation, and even music evolution.

But Walt's death opened a period of creative drought. As explained in our analysis, the slack was taken up by Michael Eisner in 1984. The new CEO was a man who had always enjoyed the audiovisual industry and who possessed a business know-how provided by his previous experiences and not by merely memorising knowledge. As Disney ruler in his position of CEO, it has been demonstrated that Eisner, in the same way as Walt did, had the ability to tackle people's needs very quickly and coordinate teams. Under his guidance the studio flourished once again giving way to a decade known as the Disney Renaissance.

*The Little Mermaid (1989), Beauty and the Beast (1991), Aladdin (1992), The Lion King (1994), Pocahontas (1995), The Hunchback of Notre Dame (1996), Hercules (1997), Mulan (1998) and Tarzan (1998)* are the highlights of this era and their success has been explained in chapter four as a result of retrieving and applying the old "Disney-ology", complemented with the appropriate updates in the techniques and the content. Hence, fairy tales and literature classics are still adapted to follow the norm of happy endings; but these materialise only after a more intense quest for the true self and a louder cry of "I want more" coming from the heroes and heroines of these stories. The main characters still adhere to a model where there is a traumatic loss of the family; their relationship with nature will be more limited, though, and restricted to interaction with caricaturesque animal sidekicks. Personalities will be better defined, however, especially when it comes to updating the heroines to match the values women held in the 1980s and representing a broader spectrum of races as a mirroring exercise of the American society. Also, villains are not bad 'because I say so' but show shades of grey in their justifications of resorting to evil, despite being equally defeated in the end. Finally, music, as mood sculptor and attention holder, is given as much importance, if not more, as any other figure in the films, which continue to link their thematic to the contemporary world events.

Eventually, with the turn of the century, we also concluded that due to several circumstances, among which we find technology advances and an increase of the studio's competition, Disney lost the leadership in feature animation. The last Michael Eisner films -*The Emperor's New Groove (2000), Atlantis: The Lost Empire (2001), Lilo & Stitch (2002), Treasure Planet (2002) and Brother Bear (2003)*- failed in adapting to a new generation that, even though it still believes in the basics of the "Disney-ology", requires of the industry to be as fast-paced as their vertiginous life rhythms.



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