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Are the "Boys" at Pixar Afraid of Little Girls?

HASEENAH EBRAHIM

"Pixar has a girl problem.
—Joel Stein, *Time* magazine (38)

Until I visited Pixar's offices, I did not know that 12-year-old boys were allowed to run major corporations.
—Joel Stein, *Time* magazine (37)

CHRISTIAN METZ'S OBSERVATION THAT "a film is difficult to explain because it is easy to understand" (69) appears particularly evident when one is teaching an undergraduate course on the animated feature films of Disney and Pixar. In a recent class taught in Chicago,[1] many students were taken aback when they learned that the course involved historical, sociological, and theoretical framing and analysis. The students, it turned out, expected little more than discussions of the animated films' plot events, some character and stylistic analysis, and the role of hand-drawn versus computer-generated (CG) animation in a film's popular appeal. In addition, a refrain began to emerge—namely, "I love Disney films, but I never thought of them as being ideological." In some instances, I sensed a hint of disapproval that the course would subject Disney and Pixar to the kind of analysis that might require students to reevaluate much-loved films associated with cherished memories of childhood. I reiterated the argument I make every time I teach the course, best encapsulated by Giroux and Pollock, that the pleasures of scopophilia notwithstanding, "it is as important to comprehend and mitigate what gives us pleasure as it is to examine what elicits our disapproval" (xvi). I also make no apology for sharing those pleasures, however mitigated those may be by my own position as a film scholar (and as a parent).

Having taught a course on children's and family films since 2005 in South Africa, I found the aforementioned sentiment more pervasive among students in the US institution than among those in my home institution in Johannesburg, South Africa. The notion that this category of media texts is somehow excluded from ideological concerns—that the films are "ideologically empty," so to speak—reflects a widespread perception within both broader cultures that children's films are just innocent, escapist fun. Walt Disney himself was known to perpetuate this perception by, somewhat disingenuously, remarking, "We just make the pictures, and let the professors tell us what they mean" (qtd. in Bell, Haas, and Sells 1).

In both contexts, one finds that many students—especially, but definitely not only, males—are openly enamored of the films of Pixar Animation Studios. This is not surprising. In addition to the drama of the well-publicized agreements and conflicts between Disney and Pixar from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s (before Pixar was purchased by Disney), and in particular the tensions between their then two larger-than-life CEOs, Michael Eisner and Steve Jobs, Pixar's films have made motion picture and animation history, with film after film achieving considerable box office success and critical acclaim.

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Departing from what is frequently seen as the Disney formula—even if that notion is something of a simplification—of princesses and fairy-tale fantasies, Pixar's stories are perceived as fresh and innovative, combining a motley assortment of characters, both human and nonhuman, with technologically sophisticated and artistically acclaimed animation. Pixar's tales of friendship, or other types of platonic bonds between male characters, have captivated animation fans, male and female.

In the months preceding Pixar's June 2012 release of *Brave*, its first film with a female protagonist, Internet bloggers, animation and film Web sites, feminists, Pixar fans, newspapers, magazine columnists, and entertainment TV channels were all abuzz with speculation about what this departure from the animation studio's well-established record of highly successful male-centric fare would mean. The anticipation, and in some instances trepidation, was almost palpable—would Pixar be able to give us girl stories comparable to its narratives of male homosocial bonding? Male bonding, in several variations, is a conspicuous theme in a number of Pixar films: a pair's shift from rivals to friends in the *Toy Story* films; father-son bonds in *Finding Nemo*; interspecies symbiosis forged by challenging the "elitism and pretentiousness of . . . French haute cuisine" (Booker 101) in *Ratatouille*; the lifelong friendship and professional partnership of Mike and Sully in *Monsters, Inc.*; or the bonds of affection that develop between two "boys," separated in age by seven decades, adventuring together in *Up*. A question hovered uneasily in the ink and ether of the pop culture landscape: what if this move into Disney's well-established "princess" terrain blemished the company's stellar record of Oscar wins and box office mega-hits?[2]

Why the concern? The answer may well lie in the words of *Time* magazine's Joel Stein, who, a few weeks prior to *Brave*'s release, declared what every Pixar fan already knew: "Pixar has a girl problem" (38). It is worth noting that the media—both news and trade—and Pixar itself have expended considerable resources painting a brand image of the company as an upstart production company in Hollywood and painting its animators as mavericks and eccentrics—and most of all, as boys in men's clothing (whether these are the Hawaiian shirts worn by John Lasseter or the Scottish kilts preferred by Mark Andrews). Pixar director Lee Unkrich's remark to *Time* magazine's Richard Corliss that "Pixar is filled with people who don't get rid of their toys" (Corliss 37) reiterates a brand image of Pixar as a company run by "boys."

It had also become quite obvious after twelve noteworthy animated features that Pixar had avoided making a female a protagonist in any of its films. It was to be expected, therefore, that there were some qualms as fans and critics wondered whether thirteen might turn out to be Pixar's unlucky number.

A key component of the previously mentioned college courses is the analysis of representations of gender. As such, Disney's female "princess" protagonists are quickly raised for discussion by students, all usually quite familiar with Snow White, Aurora, Belle, Ariel, Pocahontas, Jasmine, and more recently, Tiana and Rapunzel. Finding scholarly discussions of Disney's princesses is not difficult, but when compiling assigned reading material on various aspects of gender, it soon becomes apparent that little attention is paid to female characters who are not the protagonists or the main love interest of the protagonist, even though the Disney animation universe is populated with a considerable number of human female characters. Of those not featured as heroines, it is the villains who are most memorable. Little scholarship exists on these, although Elizabeth Bell's discussion of Disney's animated female characters provides interesting insights into Disney's somatic time line, arguing that its construction of female villains, such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs'* Wicked Queen, *Sleeping Beauty*'s Maleficent, *Cinderella*'s Lady Tremaine, *101 Dalmatians*' Cruella de Vil, and *The Little Mermaid*'s Ursula "inscribe middle age as a time of treachery, consumption and anger in the feminine life cycle" (116).[3] One could add to this list the characters of Mother Gothel in *Tangled* and Madame Medusa in *The Rescuers*.

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LiVollmer and LaPointe investigate gender transgression in animated films and its association with villainy, notable in the "queering" of characters such as Scar (*The Lion King*), Jafar (*Aladdin*), and Hades (*Hercules*). However, it is the Disney princesses who continue to garner the most attention, both scholarly and popular, and who constitute a disproportionately high number of proposed essay topics by undergraduate students, especially (white) female students. Scholarly analyses of the Disney princesses/heroines include those by Stone, Bell, Do Rozario, Hurley, Davis, Zarranz, Lester, and Whelan, among others.

Pixar's thirteenth film, *Brave*, is the first to showcase a female protagonist, the Scottish Merida, a spunky princess in the mold of "Disney Renaissance" meets *The Hunger Games*' archery-loving Katniss. A film characterized by Gilbey as "not so much good . . . as significant" (51), *Brave* went on to perform respectably both at the box office and critically. Perhaps more intriguing is an upcoming project announced by Pixar/Disney's chief creative officer, John Lasseter—a film scheduled for release in 2015 that is set entirely inside a girl's mind (Newitz; Wakeman). Although both *Brave* and the "Mind" film are to be welcomed for their focus on girls, a review of the little girls who appear—with varying amounts of screen time—in the *Toy Story* trilogy, *Monsters, Inc.*, and *Finding Nemo* suggests that the boys at Pixar may be just a tad afraid of little girls!

Although sometimes tongue-in-cheek, my discussion of Pixar's construction of little girls is located within the context of a brand image of Pixar's animator-directors as "boys at heart"—that is, as Peter Pan types who have never really grown up. As such, they are, presumably, able to capture the imaginative idiosyncrasies that we would like to believe mark our children's perspectives on the world. Here I explore whether Pixar's films reflect a certain apprehension about little girls that can, perhaps, be likened to the way young boys often display a notable ambivalence toward girls. Thus, by the time *Brave* emerges as Pixar's first female-centered film, the girl-heroine has been transformed into a boyish young woman who in many ways—although not entirely—embodies what Lissa Paul labels "hero[es] in drag"—that is, "female characters who take on traditionally male characteristics in an attempt to subvert the kinds of traditional female roles the first and second wave Disney princesses have taken on" (qtd. in Whelan 28).

In an ethnographic study of same-sex friendships among preadolescent boys, Redman et al. note that young boys' friendships utilize strategies of "borderwork" that serve to "other" their schoolmates on the basis of race and ethnicity, gender, and/or class. Among these strategies, a key aspect of the boys' heterosexual same-sex friendship is expressed in the form of insulting remarks about their female classmates and general expressions of contempt for, and distancing of themselves from, the feminine.

The marketing strategies of media corporations not only appropriate any existing differences in boys' and girls' entertainment tastes and preferences, but also actively entrench these. According to a *New York Times* article, the "Disney Channel's audience is 40 percent male, but girls drive most of the related merchandising sales" (Barnes 2). Disney initiated a drive to recapture a worldwide market of boys aged six to fourteen, which market researchers say accounts for $50 billion in spending; in 2009, Disney launched the television channel and Web site Disney XD, which reflects this revived target audience (Barnes). The courting of boys has proved lucrative for the company, as Pixar's *Cars* franchise attests, generating revenues of $2 billion annually and $10 billion since its launch (Szalai, "Disney: 'Cars'"; Szalai, "Walt Disney").

These developments have resulted in some re-visioning of Disney's traditional fare. Even as it has revived the princess trope to reinforce its highly profitable Disney Princess brand, the company has updated its "princess" protagonists to include a career-focused, African American heroine, Tiana (*The Princess and the Frog*, 2009), and the spunky Rapunzel (*Tangled*, 2010). Whelan argues,

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> Essentially, since *The Princess and the Frog* didn't garner as much income as Disney might have hoped, this perceived failure was placed at the feet of America's boys, who allegedly stopped seeing princess-themed films—or rather, had begun to respond to Disney's aggressive marketing scheme that began in 2000, linking all things "princess" with girls. (31)

Film critic Alonso Duralde makes explicit one of the concerns about a film with a princess—or perhaps any female—protagonist: "Things have been tough for female characters in Disney cartoons of late. When 'The Princess and the Frog' yielded 'disappointing' returns—i.e., it made gobs of cash but not the usual oodles—the studio retitled 'Rapunzel' as 'Tangled' so as to dispel *the supposed stink of girl-heroine*" (emphasis added).

Although both films can be welcomed for their updated representations of heroines as independent, intelligent young women actively pursuing their goals, this comes at the cost of being forced to share most of their screen time with their respective love interests.[4] However, even earlier, in a 2007 documentary titled *The Pixar Story*, John Lasseter noted that when the company began making animated feature films, they wanted to make something that was distinctively different from Disney's animated features: no musicals, no fairy tales, and although he did not say it explicitly then, no princesses.

Brave's original director, Brenda Chapman, was the first woman to direct a Pixar film,[5] and the response of production designer Steve Pilcher on hearing Chapman's pitch is telling: "Brenda was telling me about it, and my eyes glazed over. *Princess, king, mother-daughter, ancient kingdom*—all words I didn't like to think about" (qtd. in Stein 38).[6] Pilcher, as it happens, did sign up to work on the film on the grounds that it subverted the princess narrative. However, it is not just princesses that make the boys at Pixar cringe; some commentators have argued that Pixar has an aversion to girls in general. It can be argued that until the release of *Brave*, the most consistently successful animation studio in the world had relegated girls to the backseat of supporting roles. To be fair, adult females such as Elastigirl (*The Incredibles*), Dory (*Finding Nemo*), and Eve (*WALL-E*) and, to a lesser degree, Jesse the cowgirl in *Toy Story 2* have fared somewhat better than little girls; having been cast in roles as co-protagonists, they therefore have earned reasonable amounts of screen time—even if *Ratatouille*'s Collette and *Wall-E*'s Eve are "circumscribed within the orbit of . . . masculine desire" (Booker 101). *Up*'s Ellie retains a continued presence even in her screen absence (after she dies), *Finding Nemo*'s Dory substitutes for the more frequent male sidekick, and Elastigirl reverses the role of damsel in distress, leading the quest to rescue her kidnapped superhero husband.

Merida, Pixar's only female protagonist to date, is an adolescent rather than a little girl. It is, in fact, notable that the protagonists of Pixar films are rarely children. Shepard (3) notes that "since the 'Classic' Disney films of the 1940s and 1950s there has been an aging of the protagonists in children's films while the age of the viewing audience has remained the same," arguing further that "[t]he replacement of child protagonists by anthropomorphized animals and objects causes Pixar's films to forfeit the opportunity to offer constructive narratives about children navigating the precarious terrain of childhood. Through Pixar films, children may be learning that the best thing for them to do is to grow up as quickly as possible" (2).

Such criticism is based on several assumptions: first, that animated films are necessarily targeted to children; second, that a child protagonist is required for a child viewer to be able to identify with the dilemmas posed in the plot and its resolution; and third, that animated films are a primary source of learning for children. In fact, research on child development and learning reveals not only that "even 3 ½-year-old children can discriminate fantasy characters from real characters" (Richert et al. 44) but also that "they do not necessarily transfer information taught to them by a fantasy

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character [in oral stories, film, television, and/or literature] to real-world problems" (63).

Any study of contemporary Disney and Pixar—and this is equally true of DreamWorks Animation or of other studios such as Twentieth Century Fox—will reveal that (Hollywood's) animated feature films are not so much children's films as they are family entertainment; arguably, even that label may be too restricting. Pixar director Lee Unkrich has stated, "We don't make movies for kids. Our mission is to make films for everybody" (qtd. in Corliss).

Despite the label "kiddie movie" that many people still uncritically append to any animated film, it is quite apparent that contemporary children's films cater to both children and their parents. However, the popularity of Pixar appears to be widespread among adolescents and young adults too—a claim I admittedly make based on my experience teaching a university course on youth-oriented films. Krämer (295–96) argues that "the traditional children's or family film has been upgraded with a heavy injection of spectacular adventure to appeal to teenagers and young adults as well as their parents," resulting in what he labels as "family-adventure movies."

The demographics in the domestic US market after the opening weekend reveal not only that the audience of *Brave* was more gender-balanced than expected, but also that teenagers made up 12 percent of the audience. Cunningham observes that "audiences skewed female at 57 percent and 55 percent were under 25 years of age. Families made up 66 percent of the crowds, couples 22 percent and teens 12 percent. Concerns that the female heroine would keep young males away vanished."

Some scholars, such as Shepard, argue that Pixar's films do not deal with the kind of issues that help children vicariously experience their fears and find reassurance in a satisfactory outcome. This appears to be an unfair argument. *Finding Nemo*, for instance, addresses one of the most deeply rooted fears of a child and also of a parent—that is, loss of or separation from a parent or child. As such, it simultaneously addresses issues of interest to both parents and children. *Toy Story*, consumerist as it may be, also speaks to the bonds that children form with their toys, as well as their parents' nostalgia for those items; the film reverses the familiar perspective we already have of a child's distress at losing a favorite toy. In all the *Toy Story* films, a child's sadness at losing his or her toys becomes the toy's fear of—and hurt at—being outgrown, abandoned, discarded, or replaced. Pixar's films are notable, in fact, for reversing a familiar perspective. In *Finding Nemo*, a child's fear of loss of a parent becomes a father's anxieties and overprotectiveness. In *Monsters, Inc.*, children's fear of monsters becomes the monsters' fear of human children, and screams of terror are transformed into a productive force, a source of energy. Perhaps it is just such a reversal along gender lines that we also see in Pixar—that is, little girls are not so "sugar and spice and everything nice," but rather, they embody toxicity to varying degrees (though not always seriously), becoming a source of fear, pain, or humiliation to a number of male characters in several Pixar films.

Shepard argues, however, that "in Pixar films there is a tendency to expunge the child characters" (5). Where child characters do exist, she criticizes Pixar's depiction of children (in general, not girls specifically) for its use of what she calls the "demon-child trope," arguing that

> Pixar's participation in the demon child narrative and their simultaneous avoidance of positive representations of children may highlight the changing view of children in American [culture] and their increasing marginalization . . . The "demon child narrative" is a narrative told by the dominant culture (in this case, adult) about the oppressed minority (children) to an audience of children. The Pixar film texts for children's consumption portray primarily negative representations of children. (10–11)

Although conceding that Boo in *Monsters, Inc.* "is a thoughtful revisioning of the 'child as demon' tradition" (11), Shepard views other

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nonnegative child characters such as Andy in *Toy Story* and *Toy Story 2* and Russell in *Up* as marginal characters or as mere sidekicks. It could be argued, however, that Russell is more than a sidekick; he is a co-protagonist. Pixar's films generally have two central characters who embark on a psychological and/or physical journey together or who are part of some kind of twosome in which their interaction is key to the characters' growth. These twosomes include Buzz and Woody, Marlin and Dory, Sulley and Mike, Mr. and Mrs. Incredible, Remy and Linguine, and in this vein, Carl and Russell. Merida, like most Disney princesses, appears to walk alone, but her mother, the Queen turned Bear is, arguably, a co-protagonist.

There are several memorable little girl characters in the Pixar films. In this article, I discuss Molly, Hannah, Bonnie, and Daisy in the *Toy Story* films; Boo in *Monsters, Inc.*; and Darla in *Finding Nemo*.

Molly in *Toy Story* (1995)

In *Toy Story*, we meet Pixar's first little girl, Andy's baby sister Molly, who shares a room with her brother. She is introduced early in the film, after Andy play-stages a bank robbery in which Mr. Potato Head, as a one-eyed bandit, is foiled by Sheriff Woody. Mr. Potato Head is ignominiously dispatched to Molly's crib, which serves as the town jail and where Molly gleefully gives the "criminal" his just deserts by pounding him against the rails of her crib with great relish, scattering his (detachable) body parts. Despite the cute blonde curls, Molly manhandles and humiliates the grumpy spud (or what is left of him) as she slobbers all over him, earning herself the title of "Princess Drool." Mr. Potato Head rails not against being made the villain in Andy's play, but against the indignities he suffers at the hands of Molly, reminding the viewer (especially parents in the audience?) of the inclusion on his box of the ubiquitous age guideline familiar to most viewers: "Ages 3 and up." This, however, is only the first scene in which a little girl becomes the source of indignity, humiliation, and/or terror for one or more of the other characters in a Pixar film.

Hannah in *Toy Story* (1995)

Appearing a little later in the *Toy Story* film is Hannah, the younger sister of vicious Sid, the toy-torturer who lives next door to Andy. Hannah appears to be about the same age as Andy, although neither she nor her brother is ever seen interacting with Andy in the film. When we first meet Hannah, she is being tormented by her brother, who regularly mutilates her dolls and creates the toy mutants that populate the dark corners of his room. After snatching her Janie doll, he runs up to his room, where he is seen performing what he calls a "double-bypass brain transplant" in which he replaces the doll's head with that of a toy pterodactyl. He then taunts his sister with the dinosaur-doll. Hannah appears to be a normal little girl despite her brother's torment and his "creative destruction" of toys—both hers and his own—but it is precisely in her very familiar girl-play of tea party that we see the humiliation of one of our protagonists, the macho, deluded space ranger Buzz Lightyear. To Buzz's consternation and humiliation, Hannah, who cannot find her Sally doll, turns him into "Mrs. Nesbit," dressing him in a frilly pink apron (with a dark pink heart emblazoned on it) and a blue, flowered hat. She then sits him down to tea with several headless "Marie Antoinette" dolls (possibly the result of more of Sid's surgical activities, but which obviously have not hampered Hannah's ability to play with her dolls).

Buzz's humiliation and despair are both sad and comic. He has just discovered that he is in fact a toy and that he cannot fly. Additionally, he has severed his arm in a fall, which is now being used as a tea stand. To add to his woes, Woody arrives to witness his humiliation. Woody gets Hannah to leave the room momentarily by mimicking her mother calling and then rushes in to rescue Buzz—the damsel in distress!—from the indignity of being dressed in drag, seated at a girl's tea party. Buzz, how-

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ever, begins to laugh hysterically, seemingly drunk on tea.

BUZZ: One minute you're defending the whole galaxy . . . and suddenly you find yourself suckin' down Darjeeling with Marie Antoinette and her little sisters.
WOODY: I think you've had enough tea for today. Let's get you out of here, Buzz.
BUZZ: Don't you get it? You see the hat? I am Mrs. Nesbit!

Woody slaps Buzz (with his own detached arm!) to snap him out of his despair. Buzz soon sobers up but stays depressed.

It is apparent from the many user comments and blogs on the Web that many viewers find this scene extremely funny. The scene raises interesting questions about gender conventions, gender identities, and gender as performance—and how these manifest in youth culture. In attempting to understand how gender identity and the performance of gender are utilized in this scene to elicit humor, one cannot divorce the scene from the context of the broader narrative that positions Buzz both as deluded and as an "alpha male," the latter referring to a model of traditional masculinity encompassing a number of traits: muscularity, aggressiveness, competitiveness, emotional inaccessibility, and the pursuit of social and physical dominance (Jeffords; Gillam and Wooden).

Gillam and Wooden, drawing on Susan Jeffords's discussion of masculinity in Disney's animated films, argue that Pixar's alpha males experience self-growth toward a more balanced "New Man" model of masculinity through a process of emasculation:

> As these characters begin the film in (or seeking) the tenuous alpha position among fellow characters, each of them is also stripped of this identity—dramatically emasculated—that he may learn, reform and emerge again with a different, and arguable more feminine, self-concept . . . The decline of the alpha-male model is gender-coded in all of the films. (5)

Mallan and McGillis cite Susan Sontag's well-known essay "Notes on Camp" when they argue that "the pleasures both children and adults gain from viewing such performances can be attributed to the visual disruptions of gender/sex relation and their assumed naturalness; consequently, gender becomes a laughing matter and the camp performance is indeed one of 'failed seriousness'" (4). However, they go on to argue that "while camp may embody the unconventional, the abnormal, there is a fine line between its mocking of gender [conventions] and its embracing of gender divisions" (5). The scene's humor, then, is predicated on conventional notions of gender and is deeply embedded in the appropriation and reproduction of traditional gender stereotypes, without which the scene would fail utterly in its comedic function.

Within camp's arsenal of strategies, "drag," or cross-dressing, is prominent. As the performance of a gender through exaggerated use of costume elements associated with that gender, drag is used here to evoke very traditional notions of femininity. After all, who other than the server actually wears an apron to a tea party? Buzz's tea party scene is funny precisely because his costume is so incongruous on a very conventionally masculinized character, but also a character who the viewer feels is safe from any actual—and therefore, subversive—feminization.[7] As with actual drag performances, the costume is coded as (highly) feminine but does not overdetermine gender positioning. It provokes both sympathy and laughter in the viewer, perhaps simultaneously, because it never diminishes Buzz's perceived masculinity—that is, there is never any actual ambivalence regarding, or an undermining of, gender identity.[8] Kate Davy notes (and Paul Wells cites her commentary) that "female impersonation provides, in short, a seemingly endless source of fascination because, unlike male impersonation, the man who appropriates his 'opposite' is not simultaneously effaced by it" (137).

Although this moment of gender transgression is funny, it is also highly poignant. For a

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moment, Buzz embraces the identity of Mrs. Nesbit. This momentary disruption of Buzz's alpha-male identity not only allows Buzz to *substitute* an identity for the one he has just lost; assuming that of Mrs. Nesbit also allows Buzz to *mourn* the loss of his identity as a space ranger, giving vent to his emotions—as women are socially permitted to do. Thus, Mrs. Nesbit is a transitional identity, permitting an emotional release for Buzz and a safe object of amusement for the viewer, before Buzz reclaims his identity as a (very) male space ranger toy. If, as Judith Butler argues, gender is performed, it is nevertheless constituted in a series of acts that are repeated in order to sustain the illusion of gender. Thus, a momentary oppositional performance of gender is here clearly accepted by the viewer as cross-dressing, a transitory performance, whether for entertainment, deceit, or in this case, emasculation-as-therapy.[9] Additionally, one can observe that Hannah does not see fit to have Buzz Lightyear attend her tea party as himself, but rather has to transform him into a female character. As such, she reproduces what Wohlwend describes as "dominant, tacitly agreed-upon ways of 'doing gender'" during children's play (11). Wohlwend's ethnographic observation of preschoolers during play noted that some children become quite disconcerted by others who transgress accepted norms of gender performance and may react by taunting the transgressive child or children in an attempt to enforce gender-normative behavior. Thus, "play is never an innocent site; its elasticity can be used to challenge gender stereotypes but also to reproduce them" (Wohlwend 19).

Hannah is not done, however. Later, after Sid has had the tables turned on him by his toys, Hannah exploits his newfound terror of toys by taking revenge on her brother via her doll Sally as she chases Sid, who is screaming "like a girl." The balance of power has been reversed not only between Sid and his toys, but also between Sid and his little sister; even worse for Sid is the humiliation of being menaced by a toy—a girl's toy at that. Thus, it is little girls and dolls that are able to "tame" the sadistic Sid. Similarly, Stinky Pete the Prospector too gets his comeuppance by being made a girl's toy. He finds himself in a pink Barbie backpack next to a face-painted Barbie doll, faced with the prospect of having his mint condition defaced by his artistic new owner.

Hannah does not reappear in the *Toy Story* sequels, and Molly, Andy's little sister, appears only briefly in both sequels. In *Toy Story 2*, Molly's only noteworthy presence is when Woody refers to her as a possible new owner for Jesse the cowgirl. In *Toy Story 3*, her appearances—now as a tween—are brief but seem to reintroduce the theme of toys being discarded by their young girl owners without much sentiment: Emily, in *Toy Story 2*, drops Jesse the cowgirl off in a donations box. Similarly, Molly tosses her Barbie into the donations box without so much as a moment of hesitation and then returns nonchalantly to reading her magazine, while Daisy in *Toy Story 3* accepts a replacement Lotso teddy bear, turning the first one into an embittered villain.

In the audio commentary included in the tenth anniversary edition of *Toy Story 2*, John Lasseter, along with his codirectors Lee Unkrich and Ash Brannon and cowriter Andrew Stanton, states that a number of female animators worked on this sequel, admitting that "the first movie was made by a bunch of guys about the toys they had as kids and played with. It's very much a boy's movie!" They also comment on the fun they had buying toys on the company's credit card, clearly enjoying their ability to indulge their boyishness. Also noteworthy here is the commentary on the role of (female) producers Helene Plotkin and Karen Robert Jackson and Lasseter's wife, Nancy, as well as Joan Cusack (who voices Jesse) in urging the filmmakers to provide "a strong female character." Although Jesse the cowgirl is constructed as a passionate and exuberant character, it is unclear what makes her a strong character. Admittedly, the montage of her backstory—narrated via the song "When Somebody Loved Me"—as a toy outgrown by her owner, Emily, is

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one of the most moving sequences in the film. At the end of the film, Jesse's role in saving Woody as he almost falls out of the airplane luggage hold is a reversal of the plot action in the original screenplay, in which Woody rescues Jesse. The filmmakers credit Joan Cusack for reversing this "damsel in distress" plot element in the film.

Boo in *Monsters, Inc.* (2001)

Monsters Inc. is Pixar's fourth feature film. Utilizing the childhood fear of monsters in the closet as its premise, the film depicts the terror of children as productive labor, their screams generating the energy that powers the city of Monstropolis. The protagonists, Mike and Sully, work for a corporate powerhouse, Monsters, Inc., which collects the energy generated by the screams of human children. Early in the film, human children—regardless of gender—are positioned as highly toxic, with a firm warning issued to trainee scarers by the company's CEO, Henry J. Waternoose: "There's nothing more toxic or deadly than a human child. A single touch could kill you! Leave a door open, and one can walk right into this factory, right into the monster world."

From this setup, we can expect that a human child will do just that, but the film's use of an adorable little girl, to be named "Boo" by the company's champion scarer, Mike "Sully" Sullivan, generates both the drama and the humor that follow. The notion to viewers, including children, that a cute little toddler with enormous eyes embodying the Disney "cute" factor could elicit such fear among a city of monsters (including those who are professional scarers) is, of course, hilarious—but only because the audience understands little girls to be really all "sugar and spice." Or does it?

Stamp sees it somewhat differently, situating the viewing parent in a somewhat congruent position to the scarers of Monsters, Inc., whose trademarked slogan, "We Scare Because We Care," is likened to a not unfamiliar rationale used in parenting:

> From the opening scene of the film . . . children are understood more as being a mortal danger *to*, rather than being *in* mortal danger *from* monsters. The inversion is a neat one: kids are really the ones to be scared of, they're the *real* monsters. In this sense, this is very much a film made *by* parents *for* parents, whose fear and horror of their offspring, of the responsibility that comes with them, runs deeper and lasts longer than the child's perplexed powerlessness before the adult world. This might be why we place them under so much surveillance . . . don't *we* scare because we care? (73)

Scherman contends that "'Boo' in *Monsters, Inc*. is constructed as a monster when not in her own society, illustrating [a] social constructionist model of disability" (16), one "whose only disability is society's act of exclusion" (16), and that "the films [Disney's *Lilo & Stitch* and *Monsters, Inc.*] . . . create a tension between the tradition of casting deviant bodies as monstrosities and the possibility that the monster, like 'Boo,' is *us* . . ." (16). For us as viewers, Boo has the "right body [in the] wrong world" (17). Thus, although Boo turns out to be of no actual threat, she is perceived by the monsters as highly toxic.

Boo's presence in Monstropolis is, however, not without negative consequences. That she does, in fact, wreak havoc—however inadvertently—becomes the source of the film's humor, deriving from the seeming absurdity that a two-year-old girl could be the source of much fear and/or consternation to anyone, much less monsters. Unlike the alarm elicited by Darla in *Finding Nemo*, the viewer remains at ease, resulting from the knowledge that Boo poses no threat to the protagonists, and is charmed by the bond, however predictable, that develops between Boo and Sully.

However, Sully's protective, almost parental attachment to Boo imposes a strain on the long-standing bond of male friendship between Mike and Sully. Although this turns out to be temporary, Boo is given the role of creating a wedge between adult male characters and

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is toxic to their male bond. This is ultimately resolved, though, when Mike joins forces with Sully to get the toddler safely back home.

Darla in *Finding Nemo* (2003)

Although Pixar has created several villainous characters (Syndrome in *The Incredibles*, Muntz in *Up*, Lotso in *Toy Story 3*, etc.), they generally have a backstory that helps explain their turn to villainy, unlike the unmitigatedly evil animated villains for which Disney is famous.[10] Not quite villains, but embodying the role of antagonist in two Pixar films, are two human children: Sid in *Toy Story* and Darla in *Finding Nemo*. Both are constructed to evoke terror or dread, among the other characters as well as in the viewer. Both are also referred to as "demon-child" or "devil-child" by bloggers, in fan fiction (where the word "Darlaphobia" captures the feeling evoked by fish and viewer alike [Dai-chan]), in YouTube clips, and so on. Shepard has condemned the use of the child-as-demon trope seen in the characters of Sid and Darla.

Named after Pixar producer Darla K. Anderson, Darla must rank as one of the scariest little girls in non-horror animated film.[11] Easily recognizable with her red hair in pigtails, her freckles, and her dental braces, Darla is first introduced to us via a photograph as the eight-year-old niece of the dentist Philip Sherman, who scooped up little Nemo while out scuba diving. Sherman takes the little clownfish back to the aquarium in his dental rooms in Sydney, intending to give the fish as a gift to his niece.

The viewer's attention is first drawn to Darla in a photograph, against a background of broken glass on the frame (the result of Nigel, the pelican, knocking it down during his visit to the Tank Gang when he first meets Nemo). The picture depicts Darla holding a plastic bag with a fish, visibly dead, as it floats upside down. Darla's photograph is moved by the dentist from the windowsill and placed alongside the tank. Thus, Darla is introduced to both Nemo and viewer as a toxic character from the outset. Nemo learns of her reputation as a fish killer when his tankmates relay the story of his predecessor's untimely end at Darla's hand. Chuckles, it turns out, was killed by shaking.

Nemo successfully completes his initiation into the "eternal bonds of tankhood" and is christened "Sharkbait" by the Tank Gang, led by Gill, a Moorish idol. Gill informs the fish (and the viewer) that Darla will be arriving in five days. Darla, we soon learn, is as terrifying when happy as when upset. The film engages in a steady buildup of tension as the fish await the arrival of the nightmarish little girl. Frequently shown from the point of view of the fish in the aquarium, Darla is often rendered in close-ups, her face distorted as it is pressed up against the glass wall of the tank. When she does finally arrive (after a false alarm) to the screeching soundtrack from Alfred Hitchcock's famous shower scene in *Psycho*, the Tank Gang gasps her name in terror. Although the *Psycho* soundtrack evokes laughter among those who recognize it—because its association with a little girl seems like a decided overstatement—Darla lives up to expectations.

Our next view of Darla is in close-up, as she terrorizes the maternal starfish, Peach, by trying to dislodge her from the glass wall of the aquarium while singing "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" in a high-pitched voice. The *Psycho* musical motif is repeated when, in long shot, Darla turns toward the viewer on being called to the dentist's chair. Again, the scene is simultaneously unnerving (the tapping on the fish tank and the endangering of Peach) and funny, since Darla is standing on a chair in order to look into the aquarium, emphasizing her small size.

The mayhem that ensues is similarly both unsettling and hilarious. Marlin and Dory arrive in Nigel's pelican pouch. Nemo, now in a plastic bag, feigns death and almost gets thrown away. Although Nigel's distraction rescues Nemo from the trash can, Darla picks up the plastic bag. Undoubtedly, Darla's most dread-inducing action is her vigorous shaking of the bag containing Nemo. Seeing that Nemo is in grave danger, Gill puts a rescue plan into motion, catapulting out of the tank onto Darla's head and causing

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her to drop the bag, which bursts. Gill heroically springs Nemo into the dentist's mouth-rinse sink so that he can escape into the sea.

In the audio commentary, the filmmakers refer to Darla as a "ticking clock." Nevertheless, as frightening as her actions are, it seems a little harsh to characterize Darla as similar to Sid in *Toy Story*, as Shepard does, describing both as "unattractive . . . with braces [and] wide, cruel smiles."[12] Sid's smile is cruel because it is his intention to harm the toys and to torment his sister, but Darla does not mean to harm Nemo or the other fish. At the same time, the fact that Darla means no harm to Nemo or to any other fish seems to make her interaction with them seem even more perilous, since "toxicity" lies in her enthusiasm rather than malice and is, therefore, less likely to elicit any rebuke from the adults around her. In fact, Darla clearly *likes* fish, declaring, "I'm a piranha, there in the Amazon!" to her uncle as she tries to clamp down on his hand, and she displays great excitement on being told that her birthday gift is a fish.

Bonnie and Daisy in *Toy Story 3* (2010)

In *Toy Story 3*, we meet two little girls, Daisy and Bonnie. Daisy appears only fleetingly and functions to explain Lotso's transformation from lovable bear to toy villain. At Bonnie's house, Chuckles the Clown tells Woody the story of how Lotso (short for Lots-o'-Huggin' Bear) was a beloved toy belonging to Daisy, who was also the owner of Chuckles and Big Baby. Her favorite, however, was Lotso—who, together with Chuckles and Big Baby, was left behind at a rest stop one day while Daisy and her parents were out for a drive. Lotso determinedly led the lost toys back to the house, only to find Daisy snuggling with a new Lotso bear. Hurt turns to anger as Lotso turns away, exclaiming, "She replaced us!" (although he was the only one replaced). Thus, Daisy too joins the ranks of Pixar's little girls whose roles are toxic, here turning the huggable bear into an embittered villain. A bear scorned, his fury turns a day care center into a prison for toys, and he rules the toys at Sunnyside Daycare with a fur-covered, strawberry-scented iron fist.

It is in the character of Bonnie, however, that we find a healing touch. Bonnie is drawn and animated as a delightful, imaginative, and caring little girl. We first meet her when Andy's mother drops off a box of toys at the Sunnyside Daycare, and Bonnie hides shyly when greeted. Later, Bonnie finds Woody hanging on a tree while trying to escape from the day care (after failing to convince the other toys to leave and return to Andy). Bonnie puts Woody into her backpack and takes him home with her.

In her bedroom, Woody is enlisted to join Bonnie's tea party. In the *Toy Story* films, the tea party becomes the paradigmatic site of normative girl play. Hannah, in *Toy Story 2*, recruits Buzz to join her and her dolls, and in *Toy Story 3*, we see Daisy playing tea party with Lotso and her other toys (very briefly in a flashback), as well as Bonnie's tea party in which, as with Daisy's, the gender of the toys is no longer of relevance. This sequence, in which Woody meets Bonnie's other toys, depicts a little girl who is both boisterous and creative at play, with excellent improvisatory skills. The sequence is reminiscent of scenes of Andy at play in the previous *Toy Story* films, as when she tugs on Woody's pull string to hear that "someone's poisoned the waterhole." The film's director, Lee Unkrich, and its producer, Darla K. Anderson, make this explicit in the "Filmmakers' Commentary":[13] "We wanted to show how imaginative she was in her play and how fun she was too . . . we wanted this free, unbridled play . . . [and] to make Bonnie's play distinct somehow, and we did that by her inserting herself into the play."

Bonnie is the most benign of Pixar's little girls, even more so than Boo, because at no point is there any kind of toxicity associated with her; in fact, her role in the narrative is that of a healer. As Chuckles tells Woody, it was Bonnie who found him and fixed him up after he was broken at the day care by the highly toxic (to toys) toddlers there. In the "Filmmakers' Commentary," Unkrich and Anderson

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emphasize that they wanted to depict Bonnie as a worthy heir(ess) to Andy's toys because she has the qualities necessary for ownership of the toys/characters who have by now become beloved pop culture icons for the viewer—"they're in safe hands; they're in loving hands; they're in imaginative hands." No doubt, the words could apply equally to the way many parents view their children's consumption of Pixar's films.

Pixar's little girls range from the scariest, most "toxic" character, Darla, to *Toy Story 3*'s Bonnie, who is characterized by a complete absence of toxicity. What initially appears to be an aversion to little girls emerges as a more complex construction of little girls by the "boys" at Pixar. Although this is not a linear development, perhaps the advent of fatherhood over the period of development and release of the Pixar films—and especially the increased directorial role of filmmakers other than Lasseter (the father of five sons)—contributed to the amelioration of whatever drove the Pixar boys to make little girls a threat, perceived or actual, to the well-being of the other, especially male, characters in the Pixar universe.

By way of conclusion, it is worth emphasizing that my discussion here does not engage with questions of media influence, not in order to dismiss any possible media influences, but because the subject is beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, children are not the dupes many students assume they are. Students often make highly charged accusations of direct media influences on children—while, of course, excluding themselves as targets of such perceived influence. As Giroux and Pollock note, "the relationships among consumption, individual agency, and social belonging are far more complex than can be accounted for by a simplistic theory of indoctrination" (5). Rather, I wish to argue here that it is more productive to provide a forum for informed critique within both formal and informal educational contexts because "it is crucial to address not just the pleasure created by the object but the pleasure created by learning and critical engagement" (Giroux and Pollock 127) with entertainment and with other popular cultural texts and practices.

I would like to end by addressing Disney's sarcastic remark about professors telling filmmakers what their films "mean." I hope that I have not come across as attempting to tell anyone what the Pixar films I discuss "mean." Instead, I hope that I have raised some questions about patterns of representation and some possible ways of reading media representations in light of a diverse range of issues relating to film production, gender studies, early childhood development, parenting, filmic humor, and the pleasures of film consumption. Most of all, if I have given my readers (and my students) the sense that thinking critically about filmic texts and practices can be itself a source of pleasure—one that enhances, not destroys or reduces, the pleasures of film consumption—then I have achieved one of my primary aims as a professor.

NOTES

1. Taught at DePaul University in Chicago (Spring 2012) and, since 2005, as part of a course titled "Youth and Hollywood Cinema" at the Wits School of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. I wish to thank the dean, Professor Jackie Taylor, as well as staff and faculty of DePaul University's College of Communication, for the institutional affiliation and resources they kindly made available to me while I was conducting the research for this article. Special thanks to Kathleen Browne and Wilma Rodriguez and to the student assistants for all their administrative support.

2. Pixar's films have been box office and critical successes, except for *Cars 2*, which is generally regarded as the least successful of its first twelve feature films (both critically and at the box office), although the merchandising revenue generated by the *Cars* franchise is reported to generate $2 billion annually and to have generated $10 billion since its launch (Szalai, "Disney: 'Cars'"; Szalai, "Walt Disney").

3. That one cannot deny the appeal of such powerful women is perhaps captured in the now well-known quip by Woody Allen, in *Annie Hall*, that when his mother took him to see *Snow White*, and everyone else fell in love with Snow White, he immediately fell for the Wicked Queen (Zipes 41).

4. Rapunzel's goals, however, do not seem to extend beyond finding out more about the source of the lanterns.

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5. She was replaced mid-production by Mark Andrews.

6. John Lasseter, according to Stein, loved it.

7. Although it is outside the scope of this article, another relevant scene occurs in *Toy Story 3* when Ken entertains Barbie by putting on a fashion show.

8. This, I would argue, is more apparent in some of Disney's feminized villains, such as Jafar, Hades, or Scar (see LiVollmer and LaPointe).

9. Some other instances of cross-dressing in Disney/Pixar animated films include scenes in *Aladdin*, *Mulan*, and *The Lion King*.

10. Some of the more memorable Disney villains—many motivated by jealousy, sibling rivalry, and/or overarching ambition—include Snow White's wicked stepmother, the Queen; Maleficent in *Sleeping Beauty*; Cruella de Vil in *101 Dalmatians*; Scar in *The Lion King*; Jafar in *Aladdin*; Radcliffe in *Pocahontas*; Ursula in *The Little Mermaid*; Hades in *Hercules*; and Facilier in *The Princess and The Frog*.

11. Darla Anderson, in the visual commentary included as a bonus feature in the two-disc DVD of *Finding Nemo*, states that director Andrew Stanton was "getting back" at her for the numerous practical jokes she had pulled on him.

12. Darla's appearance is reminiscent of the protagonist Eliza in Nickelodeon's *The Wild Thornberrys*, in which the animation notably departs from Disney's famed emphasis on physically attractive protagonists.

13. This is included in the "Bonus Features" section of the DVD version of *Toy Story 3*.

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