American Animated Film of the 21st Century

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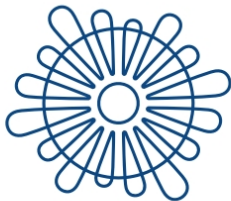**Undergraduate thesis / Završni rad**

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Odjel za anglistiku
Preddiplomski sveučilišni studij anglistike (dvopredmetni)

Vito Sikirić

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American Animated Film of the 21st Century

Završni rad

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Zadar, 2022.

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Zadar, 26. rujna 2022.

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1. Introduction

The 21st century has so far been a period of frequent technological advances, which left its impact on modern animated film as well, with all the new technology that led to visual experimentations and innovations in animation. When analyzing the history of animated film, the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century mark a sizeable shift in the style and storytelling of modern mainstream animated film, particularly in American animation. In the rapidly changing culture, animated film had to adapt and move on from the traditional, classic Disney-like forms of the 20th century.

While Disney largely dominated the preceding century in the animated film business, the 21st century saw the rise of some new studios. However, this paper will largely focus on the three studios that have so far been the most successful in the 21st century – Disney, Pixar and DreamWorks. The section about Disney will deal with how the studio adapted to the changing industry and culture with *Frozen* as an example, while the sections about Pixar and DreamWorks will deal with the unique ways in which each of them brought change to the mainstream animated film, with the analyses of *Ratatouille* and *Shrek* respectively as examples, while taking shorter sections to break down some other characteristics of each studio present in other films. The goal of this paper is to understand what makes modern American animated film modern, and since Disney, Pixar and DreamWorks have all brought radically, distinctly different and equally important contribution to modernizing American animated film, instead of analyzing only one film to represent the others, this paper will analyze three films, each standing as an example for the output of its own studio, while also examining some important features present in the other films of these studios.

2. Disney Animation Studios

In a rapidly changing culture of the 21st century, it was becoming clear that tradition would not work for much longer. The princesses had to dream bigger than a happily ever after with a prince, the characters had to be engaging, active and diverse, and the themes universal while within the confines of different cultures. Gone was the time of classic, Euro-centric, white fairytales and it was the time for Disney to make way for more racial diversity and feminist themes in their films.

2.1. *Frozen*: A Fairytale for the Modern Times

What likely stands as a prime example of modern Disney is also their most commercially successful film thus far, the smash-hit *Frozen*. With its subversive narrative which fit the modern times perfectly, it exemplifies what today's audiences want from Disney princess films. However, a part of it still remains traditional, even with these new storytelling developments.

Let us examine the ways in which Disney still keeps to a formula while updating it for audiences with new demands.

At first, *Frozen* seems to have the basic set-up of a classic Disney princess film. There is a kingdom, magic, the well-known "dead parents" Disney cliche, musical numbers, and, of course, a prince. However, there are also two princesses instead of one; Anna and Elsa. Anna initially seems to be the main character of the story, with Elsa being built up as a potential sympathetic villain. But from the very beginning, there seems to be a focus on the relationship between these two sisters and the film does not appear to be romance-oriented. Anna is also more akin to the modern Disney princess than the traditional one. In that way, she is similar to Rapunzel from *Tangled*, another Disney princess hit from three years before. Anna looks and acts significantly more casual than, for example, Snow White, Cinderella, and even the Disney Renaissance princesses, such as Belle and Jasmine. She does not wear extravagantly beautiful gowns and does not have a particularly graceful aura to her. However, that does not leave Anna without charm. She is very bubbly, optimistic, and often humorous in her clumsiness. This imperfection potentially makes the modern Disney princesses more relatable and realistic to the audiences of today. This is further signified through her attire of everyday clothes and not overtly regal gowns, illustrating a more relevant, realistic princess for children to relate to (Wilde 144).

Though, Anna is not without her typical Disney princess traits; she is very romantic, naive, and has a beautiful singing voice. All of these traits play further into the more subversive elements of the narrative. Soon enough, in comes Hans, the prince character. He is everything Anna dreams of - good-looking, charming, polite, warm and considerate. Everything between him and Anna seems a little too perfect, especially during their duet, "Love Is an Open Door", during which they literally finish each other's sentences. Everything seems to be going in a predictable direction, but in a slightly self-aware tone. The forementioned scene in particular can be read as satirical in its predictability, theatricality and traditionality (ibid. 147). However, the cracks in the perfect narrative start to show in one crucial line – "You can't marry a man you just met."

This line is the first time the film begins to challenge well-established Disney norms and themes and this subversion continues to grow throughout the film. Perhaps the biggest surprises come in the climax of the film. The charming, perfect prince Hans turns out to actually be the villain of the story, only deceiving Anna in order to take her throne, going as far as attempting to kill Elsa and leave Anna to die from a curse. If up until this point the film has not buried the "love at first sight" trope, this is where it became clear Disney was leaving old-fashioned

romantic beliefs in the dust. Moreover, the acts of heroic sacrifice and true love are not performed by male characters, but female characters. In fact, it is Anna who saves both herself and Elsa. As Hans attempts to attack Elsa with his sword, Anna gets in the way just as she freezes, which moments later undoes her curse and unfreezes her. Anna is not saved by a man she had just met. Instead, she is saved by her own love that she has for her sister (Garabedian 24).

However, this is not to say that the film is not without its tropes and cliches. As a matter of fact, Disney does not seem quite so able to let go of romantic storylines in their princess films. Yes, prince Hans turns out to be the villain of the story, but at around half of the movie, if not earlier, a new love interest for Anna comes into the picture – Kristoff. Although, Kristoff is an interesting example of a modern Disney love interest. A modern Disney male love interest, when he is there (*Moana*, for example, does not have a love interest at all, which is itself an interesting topic when discussing modern Disney) is usually not of royal bloodline and is not a man of the central princess' dreams. However, in a bit of a rom-com fashion, love develops more naturally between the two characters, as they begin to set aside their differences and see their true selves. All in all, a modern Disney romance is far more realistic, and most importantly, it is not central to the story and most certainly not central to the female lead's desires and character. The new heroines are very much agents in their own stories, even if a man may swoop in here and there to save the day.

But, what about the cases when the female leads have no love interest at all? Elsa is a perfect example of this. Throughout the entire film, she expresses no desire for a man and no love interest shows up for her. All love that she needs is that which she has for herself and her sister (Rodosthenous 224). This is the most independent a Disney princess has ever been at the time of release. Years later, *Moana* and *Raya and the Last Dragon* were princess films which had no love interest at all, but *Frozen* was the first time we got a princess that sought no romantic love. What is also an interesting development is that usually, in Disney films, a powerful female character with no interest in romance was villainous or had some sort of a derogatory representation. Elsa, on the other hand, is the lead of the story just as much as Anna, and her power and independence are shown as something to be celebrated, creating perhaps the ultimate role model for the young girls of the 21st century. Despite the power she has, Elsa is never represented as villainous, even though one would maybe expect things to head in that direction at the beginning of the film. What makes this film especially progressive in terms of feminist representation is having two female characters on the same side and on the same level. *Frozen* is progressive by the standards of its broader Hollywood context. It features two sisters

as reasonably complex protagonists, unlike many films featuring two women, which present a good one and an evil one (ibid. 221).

Based on all that was previously mentioned, it certainly seems like Disney is headed in a far more progressive direction. However, the studio still feels the need to cater to the more conservative part of its audience, one which is not quite as open to change, diversity and other modern liberal ideals. When taking *Frozen* as an example, this is not so much reflected in the film as it is in the promotional material. The studio did not seem to want the audience to see it as a film aimed at little girls, so a lot of the promotional content did not focus on the relationship between Anna and Elsa that is so central to the film, some TV spots outright avoiding showing the two sisters in the same frame and instead focusing on the parts of the film when Anna is on a quest with Kristoff, his reindeer Sven, and the famous comic relief sidekick, Olaf. This influx and focus on male side characters were supposed to help draw the boys in, along with the title being changed from *The Snow Queen* (as the Hans Christian Andersen fairytale it was based on) to *Frozen*, similarly to how the studio named *Tangled* (ibid. 224). Although, it certainly helped bring the film into the spotlight and spread its positive messages further.

Another progressive aspect that is sought after in the modern film industry (although, cautiously) is the LGBTQ+ representation. Surprisingly, Disney went as far as to deliver some of that in *Frozen* as well, becoming the first Disney film to feature a gay family. It is one of those "blink and you will miss it" moments that one is all too used to in mainstream Hollywood cinema of the 21st century, but for such a mainstream animated film and such a notoriously conservative studio, it was a big step. When Anna stops at 'Wandering Oaken's Trading Post and Sauna', Oaken introduces his family to her – a handsome blond man and four children are shown waving hello (ibid. 232). This was especially a big step when one considers how much of the LGBTQ+ population grew up on Disney's films, were inspired by them and continued to love the studio's work for years to come. Not only that, but many members of this group made significant artistic contributions to the studio. The world was finally getting safe enough for these groups of people and Disney was finally willing to follow along, despite the ever-present vocal criticism against it.

What is also important to note when looking at the LGBT aspects of *Frozen* is the queer reading of Elsa. Now, Disney is no stranger to queer-coded characters, but a lot of them have either been villains (e.g. Ursula in *The Little Mermaid*, Gaston in *Beauty and the Beast*, etc.) or comedic sidekicks (e.g. Timon and Pumbaa in *The Lion King*, LeFou in *Beauty and the Beast*). Even if queer-coding is not technically queer representation, Elsa is the first main Disney character that is thought of as fully queer-coded. Disney films had always contained themes

that queer people could relate to, such as wanting to break free from societal constraints, wanting to leave the place where one was born, self-acceptance and secret longing for true love. This is particularly expressed through musical numbers, such as "Part of Your World" in *The Little Mermaid*, "Reflection" in *Mulan* and "Belle" in *Beauty and the Beast*.

However, if these songs had queer undertones, "Let It Go" could be called a full-on coming out anthem. Elsa is a character who had to hide her true self her whole life and pretend she was someone she was not, which makes her isolate from her loved ones and repress her true self, living in constant fear of everyone seeing her true self. It is easy to see how some could read this as a closet metaphor. When Elsa's ice powers finally show through in front of everyone, she is initially terrified and runs away. This is where "Let It Go", the most notable musical number of the film, is placed. It essentially shows Elsa enjoying the new freedom she found after what she had feared the most – everyone seeing who she really is – has come true. She is no longer burdened and, in her own words, the fear that once controlled her can't get through her at all. Nearly every lyric in this song can be related to the queer experience, as well as the imagery of the scene, in which Elsa is initially closed off, but progressively starts using more and more of her powers, growing more and more elated in her newfound freedom, finally building a whole castle for herself out of ice and changing her outfit into what appears to be a more liberated one. Additionally, since the song is very positive and uplifting, this is where the film strongly assures us that Elsa is not the villain of the story and is the confirmed second protagonist alongside Anna (McLeod 172-179).

Overall, it is safe to assume that *Frozen* is the perfect example of Disney's modern striving for progressiveness and inclusivity that it has denied a large portion of its audience for years. It demonstrates strong feminist undertones and more realistic messages for children, even slowly making progress with LGBT representation. However, what about the modern racial inclusivity of Disney? Since *Frozen* is still a very Euro-centric fairytale with mostly white characters, we have to take a look at some other films when analyzing that aspect of modern Disney.

2.2. Multiculturalism in Modern Disney

Before Disney's 1990s Renaissance era, Disney films featured a predominantly white cast of characters. Near the end of the 20th century, that began to change, with films such as *Aladdin* and *Mulan* and one could even say *The Lion King*, which, even though it did not feature human characters, was heavily injected with African culture, particularly of countries such as Kenya, Tanzania, and South Africa. However, these films still had a largely Western feel to them while only really depicting another culture on a surface, aesthetic level (Anjirbag).

This westernized kind of diversity continued well into the 21st century. However, there was more and more effort to represent other cultures in a more authentic manner, most notably by hiring people from these cultures to work on films and doing research by interviewing members of these cultures. This was mostly done in recent films, such as *Moana*, centered around Polynesian mythology featuring an entirely Polynesian cast of characters, and *Encanto*, set in Columbia and featuring an entirely Hispanic cast of characters.

Even though Disney has come a long way from *Aladdin*, which despite getting acclaimed as a film on its own, drew heavy criticism for its Orientalist depiction of Middle Eastern culture, the view of other cultures is still heavily Westernized and Americanized. This can be noticed in the values and behaviors of the characters, some cultural inconsistencies (but not quite as much as before), and even the sense of humor of the characters. Though, in recent years the studio did not get quite so much criticism for that as it once used to. This could also be in part due to the true target audience for this diversifying and multiculturalism being largely targeted at American minorities. This is unlikely to be the most important reason since the studio aims to make money internationally as well, but domestic gross and acclaim is likely more important to the studio and therefore the films, in a way, while bringing this cultural diversity to the table largely mirror modern United States, even if the aim is to represent a culture outside of it.

The Disney Princess has also been redefined through films other than *Frozen*. While Disney has had its non-White princesses before, Tiana in *The Princess and the Frog* is the first Black princess, notable for her lack of desire for a love interest (similarly to Elsa in *Frozen*) and sharp focus on completing her personal career goals and making her dreams come true herself. This was the first time Disney made a true modern "career woman" out of their princess character and it was met to great acclaim.

Another non-White princess that helped redefine the Disney princess is Moana in her eponymous film, *Moana*. Many times when depicting a non-White character, Disney was criticized for giving the heroes conventionally attractive Euro-centric features while giving villains the features more typical of their race, but in an exaggerated, borderline caricatural manner. A prime example of this is *Aladdin*. However, the characters in *Moana*, including Moana herself, look distinctly Polynesian. Aside from her looks, what also makes Moana stand out as an example of a modern Disney princess is the fact that Moana is also the first Disney princess after Elsa to not have a love interest and consequently the first non-White Disney princess to not have a love interest. In *The Princess and the Frog*, Tiana may have prioritized her own hopes and dreams, setting out to make them come true herself, but there is still a love

interest that shows up in her story and that she ends up romantically involved with by the end of the film. Moana, like Tiana, has her ambitions and desires, but this time it all unfolds without a love interest ever appearing in the film. Moana is the hero and the agent of her own story, actively shaping her own story, with desires that do not include romantic love as a priority, which makes her, alongside Elsa, the ultimate modern Disney heroine.

Finally, let us take a short look at some other instances when another culture and/or race was featured heavily in a Disney film. Another Disney film based on Polynesian culture is *Lilo and Stitch*, set in Hawaii in presumably the early 2000s, the time of its release. Like *Moana*, it drew praise for realistic and culturally accurate character designs. There is also *Brother Bear*, heavily based on Inuit mythology, and for the most part depicting the culture accurately and respectfully. Most recently, there are *Raya and the Last Dragon* and *Encanto*, the former being a fantasy film set in an imaginary world inspired by South Asian cultures, and the latter being a musical set in a Columbia, centered around the customs and relations of Hispanic families.

All in all, Disney Animation Studios has significantly progressed since the 1990s, producing more and more films set in different cultures, adding more characters of different racial backgrounds, and even slowly starting to experiment with LGBTQ+ representation. Things may not be perfect yet, or even satisfactory to some, but by inclusion of a diverse crew of artists and storytellers and valuable input from people who belong to the cultures the studio aims to represent, progress is happening. With diversity being sought after more and more in modern Hollywood, Disney has been catching up with the modern audiences successfully.

3. Pixar Animation

When taking a look at the entire history of animated film, it is safe to say Disney left the biggest impact. But when looking purely at the animated film of the 21st century, it could be said that Pixar was the biggest influence. The studio revolutionized animated film both in terms of storytelling and animation. After releasing the first-ever computer-animated feature length film, *Toy Story*, to immense critical and commercial success, CGI animation became the new big thing. Everybody wanted to achieve Pixar's level of success with this lucrative new animation style which left so much room for innovation. Most of those studios did not succeed and even those who did, never quite on Pixar's level.

What is very important to note when discussing Pixar is their mature and clever storytelling. The studio generally takes out-of-the-box concepts, such as sentient toys, a society of monsters powered on scaring children, a rat who has a dream of becoming a chef, etc., and develops these concepts in order to tell a story that expresses mature themes in a family-friendly

way. This kind of all-ages narrative is perhaps the most evident and the most refined in the studio's 2007 hit, *Ratatouille*.

3.1. *Ratatouille*: The Value of Creativity

In spite of nearly every Pixar film being met with high critical acclaim, *Ratatouille* is one that is particularly well-remembered and one that accentuates the core themes of the Pixar films. Pixar is a studio notable for the value it places on creativity over profit, despite being owned by Disney, the largest film company in the world. This sentiment is evident in a lot of their films, but *Ratatouille* is one of the few that directly recount the struggles that people (or in the film's case, a rodent) striving for success in creative industries face.

Most Pixar films start with an off-beat, unexpected premise – in case of *Ratatouille*, a rat who has a passion for cooking wishes to be a renowned chef. The previous chapter analyzed the occasional subversiveness of modern Disney films, but this very subversiveness may have been influenced by the often-subversive storytelling of Pixar, which is firstly reflected in these unique concepts that the studio builds a story on. This kind of concept also naturally implements an obstacle into the narrative. Rats are notoriously filthy animals and therefore having one or more in the kitchen of a restaurant could immediately close the restaurant down, which makes Remy the rat's dream that much harder to achieve. With this example, the way Pixar tends to immediately throw obstacles into their stories by merging ideas that one does not expect to go and should not go together is evident, thus creating conflict (Movshovitz 2).

What sprouts from these concepts is the typical Pixar underdog narrative. Pixar's main characters are often not particularly valued in their surroundings. If they are, they are not appreciated for who they truly are. In case of *Ratatouille*, we have Remy as the sort of an artistic, misunderstood child of a conservative family. All rats in his unit live the way rats usually live and therefore are not understanding towards Remy's desires. This, however, is no stranger to American animated film in general, since Disney's protagonists often face such problems, but while Disney's main characters are significantly more graceful in their uniqueness, Pixar's characters are appealingly odd, a lot more flawed and a lot more real. Remy being a rat makes him an outsider to both the world that he is a part of and the world that he wishes to be a part of. He does not have a beautiful voice with which he sings an inspiring song about everything he wishes to achieve. He has moments of pettiness and loses his nerves a lot (often to comedic effect), but his passion is so intense that it is infectious to the viewer.

Characters in the Pixar films are generally written to feel more realistic, and that is why black-and-white, good versus evil characterization often used by Disney is very rarely used in Pixar. In Pixar films, there are protagonists and antagonists, and while Pixar's antagonists are

also often outright bad people, that is not the case with several Pixar films and that is not the case with *Ratatouille*. There are several antagonistic figures in this film – Anton Ego, Skinner and Remy's father. However, Remy's father only feels antagonistic for a brief period of time, his lack of support for Remy's dreams being Remy's first obstacle. But this is largely simply a mirroring of traditional values in working class families, which will be discussed later on. Remy's father and the rest of Remy's unit is there largely to demonstrate the environment that Remy is born into but does not fit into. Skinner, the new chef of Gusteau's, the restaurant that Remy finds himself in, is the one character in the film who remains a consistently bad person throughout, but he is hardly the main force stopping Remy, Linguini and the other cooks at Gusteau's from achieving what they want.

The film's main antagonist is Anton Ego, a vicious food critic who ruined Gusteau's reputation after writing a scathing review of his restaurant, resulting in Gusteau's death. This sets up large stakes for Ego's eventual return to Gusteau's. But despite the imposing villainous grandiosity of Ego, by the end of the film it is clear that he is not an outright bad person. He has no intention of treating people unfairly, but he simply seeks to elevate good food for people to enjoy. As Ego himself says at one point in the film, he does not like food, he *loves* it. Therefore, while his strictness may be a menace and an obstacle to the characters and while Ego's elitist ideology may oppose Gusteau's (and Remy's) "anyone can cook" philosophy, Ego is not a villainous figure in a sense that he is a bad, immoral person (ibid. 75). Therefore, antagonistic forces of the Pixar films are largely there to challenge the protagonist's ideology instead of purely being forces of evil to fight against.

In a sense, nearly every character in *Ratatouille* is an outsider of sorts. Let us start from Remy's unit of rats. As noted in Mienel's *Pixar's America*, there seem to be imagery, characters and ideas which metaphorically connect the rats in the film to lower working-class families, simultaneously connecting to the experience of creatives who come from poverty to Remy and his journey. The character of Remy's father is in many ways a typical traditional "man" from the lower working class; he has no idealism, he is very practical and cynical, showing little warmth to his off-beat son who does not conform to his traditional values. Remy's brother Emile is content to just follow along and not re-think his position much. There is even the side character of a bodybuilder cousin who fits into the implied values of traditional masculinity of the film more than well. Aside from the characters, there is also a plot point in which the imagery seems to mirror the lower working-class immigrant experience. Near the beginning of the film, the rats are forced to flee the attic of the country house which was their home for a while, scattered over a pond with makeshift boats of twigs and garbage, homeless and lost

(Mienel 100-101). Remy, meanwhile, gets lost in the sewer. All this gives a slightly Dickensean aspect to *Ratatouille*, with references to Victor Hugo as well, particularly *Les Miserables*.

However, many human characters of this film are outcasts too. First of all, there is Alfredo Linguini, initially introduced as the garbage boy in Gusteau's kitchen. Linguini is completely out of place in the kitchen, he has no talent for cooking, and he is looked down at by the kitchen staff. Later on, after Remy and Linguini had already joined forces, Linguini gets closer to Collette, the only female cook at Gusteau's, who makes it very clear how hard she had to work to get where she is solely due to being a woman. During one of Linguini's and Collette's conversations, she explains to him the ways in which each individual member of the kitchen staff is an outsider (Clarke 159).

While Pixar may accentuate the idea of being an outcast more than other animation studios, what truly makes Pixar stick out is the overall story arc. For example, many Disney films start with the protagonist wanting something and then getting the thing they wanted by the end. For example, in *Moana*, Moana wishes to sail away to restore the heart of Te Fiti and she does, in *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel wishes to become a part of the human world and in the end she does, in *The Princess and the Frog*, Tiana wishes to open her restaurant and she does, the restaurant being almost exactly as she imagined it. In Pixar's films, things are not quite so simple. The studio does not look to directly subvert the tropes that Disney has set up for American animated film, but it does subvert the expectations that the audience had of the story.

Based on the kind of storytelling that mainstream animated film usually implements, one would expect that by the end things would go the protagonist's way. In case of *Ratatouille*, one would expect that Remy and the rest of the kitchen stuff save Gusteau's from being closed down. And while Anton Ego ends up being amazed by Remy's food and giving the restaurant a good review, the restaurant gets closed due to having rats in the kitchen, deemed unhygienic. However, this is not depicted as a sad ending, as most characters still achieved fulfillment in their own personal desires, with the staff working at a small bistro with Remy as a chef. At the end, Gusteau's may not have been saved, but the characters still keep on doing what they love the most – cooking, and with none other than Anton Ego as a regular guest (Booker 101). Things may never be the same again, but the film shows us that that is alright; the characters found fulfillment in ways that were different than what they originally imagined. It is not quite a rags-to-riches story in the vein of Disney. As Mienel puts it, it is more of a rags-to-moderate-riches story (102). However, while several Disney characters, especially classic Disney characters and Disney fairytale characters, find their happy ending in wealth, that does not matter in Pixar's stories, as the fulfillment of characters feels much deeper and coming from significantly more

internal influences rather than external. In Pixar's narratives, happiness is more of a state of mind and a matter of perspective. Some other examples that accentuate this theme would especially be *Up* and *Soul*.

However, what about the visual style of the Pixar films? After all, Pixar is the studio that revolutionized animation after putting out the first full-length computer-animated feature film ever, making a long-lasting influence on not only American animated film, but animation in general, with hand-drawn animation becoming a thing of the past, for better or for worse, and nearly every mainstream American animated film being computer-animated. In today's abundance of CGI animation, Pixar still manages to stick out. *Ratatouille* is just one of several examples of how Pixar makes their world feel stylized and slightly cartoon-ish, but very much lived in. In a way, *Ratatouille* has the look of a photorealistic cartoon. The characters, both human and rodent, have exaggerated features which make room for playfulness and underlines the characteristics of a certain character. As John Lasseter breaks down, the animators at the studio seek to apply the principles of traditional 2D animation to 3D computer animation. Still, the animation retains a certain grounded quality to it in some films, especially when compared to the films of, for example, Illumination.

Something that also distinguishes Pixar's style from the other studios is the affinity towards purely visual storytelling. Most of the studio's films have dialogue most of the time, but out of all the mainstream American animation studios, Pixar is the one that experiments with non-verbal storytelling the most. Some fine examples of this kind of non-verbal experimentation are to be found in the famous and renowned "Married Life" sequence from *Up*, in which we see the life of a couple from their marriage to the wife's eventual death decades (or in the film time's case, four minutes) later without a single line of dialogue. But the Pixar film where non-verbal communication and expression is the most utilized is *WALL-E*. Throughout the first act, there is little to no dialogue uttered at all and when verbal communication does show up in the film, it only increases around the midpoint, and even after that, it is not consistently present, which is very rare in mainstream animated film. In *Ratatouille*, this is evident in the scenes where Remy interacts with the human characters, mostly Linguini. In the world of *Ratatouille*, while we see rats speak among each other and humans speak among each other separately, rats and humans do not understand each other, and all the communication that Remy directs towards Linguini is non-verbal. However, through expressive character animation and visual storytelling, no words need to be uttered.

3.2. The Pixar Narrative

Even with the way in which Pixar brought revolution to animation as we know it, what the studio may perhaps be the most notable for is its storytelling. In mainstream animated film, the films are largely targeted at children, and therefore, mainstream animated films often (but not always) tend to stay away from overly heavy topics. This is not the case with Pixar.

It has previously been mentioned that Pixar does not shy away from making their characters fail to achieve their goals, the studio prioritizing the changes in characters' lives to come from internal influences rather than external. This manifests on a smaller scale in films such as, for example, *Ratatouille* and *Onward*. In *Onward*, we would expect Ian to meet his father at the end, but in an act of selfless brotherly love, he gives the opportunity to his older brother Barley, finding strength within himself over the course of the film and realizing that while he did not have a father in his life, he had the figure to unconditionally love him, support him and take care of him in Barley, and only near the end of the film does he begin to value that.

This kind of character arc also sometimes manifests on a much larger scale, and with far more complex topics. *Soul* and *Up*, for example, tackle existential topics of the meaning of life, beauty in the mundane, and moving from death. These are the kinds of themes that one would probably not expect to work in a film targeted at children, but the whimsical animation and characters make these films as accessible to children as much as to adults.

Let us look a little further into the way Pixar handled these themes in these films. *Up* opens with two children – Carl and Ellie, obsessed with the idea of adventure, and Carl swears to take Ellie to Paradise Falls, a place she has seen in a book that she wants to visit. This way the film eases its young audience into the film by opening with the main character being a kid, even though we follow him through most of the film at a very old age. Then, the film moves on to the forementioned "Married Life" montage, in which we see Carl and Ellie live their life together, trying to save money for their eventual trip to Paradise Falls. However, some financial inconvenience always stops them and just as they are supposed to go, Ellie dies. Most of the scenes for the rest of the first act retain this emotional heaviness and seriousness that is very uncommon for a mainstream animated film, as Carl is threatened eviction, but strongly opposes leaving the house where he has so many memories with Ellie. Then, in what could be called the inciting incident of the film, Carl uses a large number of balloons to turn his house into a flying vehicle and to, in a way, take Ellie to Paradise Falls, the house representing Ellie in his mind as he struggles to move on from the fact that she is gone. The moment the house flies, the film brings back its sense of whimsy and warmth to recapture the attention of the younger part of the audience.

Not only that, but Carl also gets a young, comical companion, Russell, who serves as a sort of a juvenile perspective on Carl. As the duo lands close to Paradise Falls, while they make their way there, they make a few quirky animal companions, once again lightening the mood for kids while keeping in touch with the overarching theme as Carl obsessively takes care of the house in desperation to get it to Paradise Falls. There is even a villain in the film to make it more exciting and adventurous in the literal sense. At the end of the second act, however, Carl is left alone in his house, having reached Paradise Falls. This is where the film once again devotes itself fully to its deeper themes. Carl comes to an emotional epiphany, as he goes through Ellie's old adventure book from her childhood, but finds it filled with pictures of the everyday Carl that she shared with Carl, ending with a message – "Thank you for the adventure. Now go have your own."

Carl comes to a realization that the fact that he and Ellie never made their trip to Paradise Falls, they still shared a beautiful life together, and the fact that it was a normal everyday life does not make it any less than it was. This is followed by a climactic action set-piece to engage children one last time, at the end of which Carl's house flies away, standing as a sort of a symbol for Carl letting go of Ellie and the life he had with her while embracing good new things in life, such as his fatherly relationship with Russell. These transitions from a classic adventure film to a psychological drama, however, are not as jarring as one would expect, since the film is scattered with subtle hints towards Carl's inner journey. Throughout the trip, Carl is very aggravated and unhappy in this adventure that he thought he wanted, the balloons on the house keep snapping and the house keeps receiving minor damage. Right before the climax, as Carl reaches his emotional resolution, he throws furniture that weighs the house down in order to make it float to go save Russell, metaphorically shedding the baggage of his grief and letting of his old life to embrace a new one.

The story of *Up* showcases how Pixar intertwines heavy themes with children entertainment, and another worthy example of this kind of storytelling is *Soul*. This film follows Joe Gardner, a music teacher who has wanted to be a jazz pianist all his life. However, when he finally books a gig with a renowned jazz act, he (presumably) dies and is transported into a non-physical world of souls. As complex as this kind of theme is, especially by the standards of a mainstream animated film, the character design of souls and the visual look of the "soul world" have a charming, kid-friendly quality to them. Accidentally, Joe reaches "The Great Before", a place where souls are being prepared for life on Earth. Joe is assigned the notoriously difficult soul called 22 and their banter makes up a lot of the film's humor, making the film

more light-hearted while simultaneously continuing to constantly be in touch with its subject matter, as 22 learns about life on Earth.

Joe desperately wants to go back to Earth and continue his life, so him and 22 make a pact to restore Joe to his body and have 22 remain in The Great Before forever. 22 begins to fall in love with life as she experiences it, not having one particular passion, but just generally having great admiration for little things in life. However, Joe is determined to return to his life, convinced it has only truly begun now that he found success in his desired career field, but when he goes back to it, he is surprised by the mundanity of it, the way it is still the same everyday life. In a moment of emotional epiphany similar to the one in *Up*, Joe comes to a realization that his life was just as beautiful before his big break and decides to give it up in order for 22 to experience it. He is still restored to life as a reward for bringing 22 to Earth, but the point is clear, and this time Joe intends to "live every moment of it". This may be the most consistently serious Pixar film in the sense that it sticks to its themes throughout most of the runtime, unlike *Up*, which made digressions from its core themes even while intertwining them with more kid-friendly subplots. However, *Soul* is an optimistic film filled with vibrant, appealing animation and an often-humorous banter between its two main characters, all while breaking down its big themes in a way that is digestible for all ages.

What might truly make Pixar's output stick out is the accessibility and universality of it. The studio is not afraid to tackle complex themes and it does so in a way that is comprehensible to its younger audiences, but without talking down to them. With unique concepts, revolutionary animation style and clever, mature storytelling, it is understandable why the studio is met with such high critical regard.

4. DreamWorks

While Disney made the greatest impact on animated film in general and Pixar made the greatest impact on the animation style of the 21st century with their revolutionary use of CGI animation, one could argue that no studio had the impact on the overall tone, feel and formula of the mainstream animated film of the 21st century quite like DreamWorks. DreamWorks is a sort of an anti-Disney studio in the sense that one of its goals was to tear down the formula established by Disney. It even has roots in rivalry against Disney, due to one of the studio's heads, and the head of its animation department, Jeffrey Katzenberg, being an ex-Disney studio chairman and acrimoniously parted ways with the studio after failing to secure a promotion to President from CEO Michael Eisner. The mutual animosity was heightened by an ongoing disagreement regarding how much money Eisner owed Katzenberg following his departure (LaPorte 2010, 9–13).

Initially, the studio was possibly the most experimental mainstream animation studio, producing films in various different animation styles and radically different tones. However, the studio found its formula with the megahit *Shrek*. This chapter will deal with how the studio challenged and subverted traditional animated film with the *Shrek* franchise and what exactly are the characteristics of the studio's style that made such immense influence on modern animation.

4.1. *Shrek*: The Ultimate Modernized Fairytale

The first *Shrek* film begins with a classic fairytale storybook opening, reminiscent of old Disney princess films. However, this opening is brutally cut short by a green hand tearing a page out of the book. Next, we see a shot of an outside lavatory and hear the flushing of a toilet, implying Shrek quite literally excreting on a fairytale. As he violently exits the bathroom to Smash Mouth's "All Star", the tone of the film is established loud and clear. This may technically be a fairytale, but it is absolutely not the kind that the audience is used to.

Let us look further into the fairytale subversion aspect of the film and the breaking and mocking of conventions largely set by Disney. Most significantly, the main character is an ogre, the kind of character that is usually a villain. In a way, Shrek is initially portrayed as this kind of character, except the difference is that he is the protagonist. He enjoys his simple life and gets a kick out of scaring and overpowering humans who come to attack him. However, over the course of the film's runtime, the goodness and fragility that he has buried underneath his tough exterior begins to show more and more. As the character himself says it, he has layers. Thus, Shrek may be said to be promoting "the revolutionary idea that beauty is more than skin deep" (Takolander and McCooey, 2005: para. 33), planting the positive idea in viewers' minds that a strong personality will shine through, regardless of one's looks (Lacassagne, Nieguth and Dépelteau 35). This rejection of beauty is something which in most cases strongly opposes the traditional fairytale. Traditional fairytale characters (at least the protagonists) were always very beautiful in physical appearance, as much as those same fairytales would send a message about true beauty being within. Even in exceptions, such as *Beauty and the Beast*, the "ugly" character's physical appearance turns conventionally beautiful in the end. But in *Shrek*, the ending is the exact opposite, and it has everything to do with one of if not the most subversive animated princess of all time, Fiona.

Initially, Fiona appears to be much like a Disney princess. Conventionally beautiful, with a beautiful singing voice and in anticipation of a handsome prince to come and save her from her curse with the power of a true love's kiss. Fiona herself is highly willing to play into this narrative, but when her savior proves to be nothing like she expected, she starts proving to

be nothing like anyone expected as well. She openly belches, steals the eggs of birds (by deceiving them into singing with her in a very classic Disney princess fashion), is very good at martial arts (single-handedly saving the two main male characters, Shrek and Donkey, from Robin Hood and his gang), and finally, is secretly an ogre herself, turning herself into one every time the sun sets. Fiona turning into an ogre is a part of her curse, and due to this she is unable to fully love and accept herself.

When she is brought before lord Farquaad, whom she does not love, Shrek interrupts the wedding. Shrek and Fiona kiss and consequently, Fiona's curse is broken – only she does not turn into a human, but into an ogre, and this time for good. However, Shrek loves her even in her apparent "ugliness" and this helps her fully accept herself as she is. In portraying a heroine who is far from society's expected standards of what is considered "beautiful," and yet who is still shown as happy, healthy, and loved, Shrek is sending a positive message to viewers that beauty is, indeed, in the eye of the beholder and that confidence and personality are what will ultimately shine through and make someone attractive. If young girls (and, indeed, young boys) grow up with that mentality, perhaps women's relationships to their bodies will finally change for the better (ibid. 38).

This way, we get a different "happy ever after" than we are used to. In turn, let us examine the way in which *Shrek* presents the idea of "happily ever after". The fact that there are several sequels to the film already challenges that idea. However, this is not the only way in which this idea is challenged. In fact, *Shrek 2* deals with this idea and the illusion that it creates as one of its core themes. Not only does the second film in the series present the classical fairytale narrative as unrealistic, but as problematic too, potentially drawing certain parallels at marginalization of certain groups and privilege of other groups in the real world. In another subversive storytelling move, Fairy Godmother is not a kind, helpful companion, but the main villain alongside none other than Prince Charming, who is also her spoiled son. The perfect fairytale narrative is in fact her scheme to rule the kingdom.

The Fairy Godmother shows open disdain towards Shrek and urges Fiona to leave him for Prince Charming and become human again. When Fiona is resistant, she blackmails Fiona's father, King Harold, into secretly giving her a love potion. It is eventually revealed that Fairy Godmother has power over him because she gave him his own happy ending, turning him into a human from a frog, revealing Fiona's parents to be the *Shrek* universe version of the princess and the frog from the eponymous Grimm fairytale. This manufacturing of a traditional "happy ever after" is Fairy Godmother's job, further proven with her potion factory. "Happy ever after" is in this case not real, but merely a societal expectation perpetrated by capitalism and

consumerism. The kingdom itself, Far Far Away, is even designed to mirror Los Angeles and the ever-present capitalism in modern, particularly American society. This ideology establishes a consumerist and superficial understanding of happiness that stresses the importance of a stereotypical happy illusion over true individual happiness. Happiness is nothing one can find or define for oneself. Rather, it is an ideologically prescribed social good that stresses consumption, wealth, beauty, and love as important prerequisites (ibid. 66).

We also see the film's characters fall into the trap of this ideology. Shrek attempts to accommodate himself to it by taking a potion that will turn him into an attractive human, thinking that that would make Fiona happier. At one point, Shrek finds Fiona's old diary from her teenage years and we see that Fiona used to dream about Prince Charming saving her. As a part of Fairy Godmother's conspiracy to take over Far Far Away, Prince Charming poses as transformed Shrek, while Fiona herself is transformed back into a human for a brief time, with true love's kiss sealing the spell for good if done before midnight. However, Fiona finds herself unhappy in her seemingly perfectly constructed and traditional fairytale ending. In the end, when Fairy Godmother's plan is revealed, we get a similar ending to the first film, except this time it is both Shrek and Fiona shedding their conventionally attractive human form, and fully by Fiona's own choice. Fiona rejects the classic fairytale narrative and finds true happiness in something that feels real to her.

Before moving on to the more stylistic and technical elements of *Shrek* that represent DreamWorks, let us look a little further into how marginalization of certain groups feeds the capitalist, consumerist machine run by Fairy Godmother. Human beings are a presumed majority in the population of the world of the *Shrek* films, and are therefore the perfect target to create profit disguised as a fairytale around. Additionally, due to the tradition of fairytales being centered around beautiful-looking humans, everyone who is in any way different is oppressed. We can see this in the first film already, with how Lord Farquaad intends to "purge" his kingdom of magical creatures. In the second film it is further proven with open unacceptance Shrek comes across and in the way Fiona and her father have to hide their true selves, her being an ogre and him being a frog (ibid. 9). This is another aspect in which DreamWorks refer to the modern state of the world, largely straight white supremacy, and therefore make their films feel more relevant than Disney ever did.

This referring to the modern world is a big trademark of DreamWorks' films and a lot of their humor is based around that. Summers points out two examples to be found in *Shrek 2*. First, let us mention a scene in which Shrek and Donkey go through a forest when Donkey points out a bush resembling Shirley Bassey. The humor is not found in any kind of mocking

of its subject, in this case Shirley Bassey, but in the fact that Donkey knows who Shirley Bassey is. (Summers 35-36) A fairytale world setting is one radically different from our modern world and therefore seeing bits of our modern world in such a setting makes a viewer surprised and amused. One could argue that the humor comes from the unexpectedness of the joke. As for the other DreamWorks films, they may not have a fairytale setting, but they still have the kind of setting and characters that make references to the modern culture surprising.

For example, *Shark Tale* is set deep under the sea in the society of marine animals and *Madagascar* takes place on several exotic locations with exclusively animals as main characters. In that kind of surrounding, the viewer does not expect references to things from our world that these characters are supposed to be so cut off from. Another example of this referential gag in *Shrek 2* is found in the scene where Pinocchio, Gingerbread Man and the rest of Shrek and Fiona's friends are "watching the Magic Mirror". This is already a fine example of this kind of referential humor, with the mirror acting as a TV as the characters "switch channels". They eventually come across a show called "Knights", the *Shrek* universe's version of the American reality TV show "Cops", which shows the life on the job of police officers. What enhances the humor is how "Cops" is adapted to this story world, like for example with how the pepper spray is replaced with a paper mill, a helicopter with a hot-air balloon, police cars with horse carriages, etc. (Summers 47-48) A lot of *Shrek 2* is filled with this kind of humor, even in the forementioned capitalism satire of Far Far Away and its resemblance to Los Angeles. These references also tend to be adult-oriented often, with many subtly sexual jokes (e.g. Big Bad Wolf reading a Playboy-like magazine called "Pork Illustrated"), but what makes this work especially well is the brevity of these jokes. DreamWorks' films get these jokes over with quickly, so they do not break the pace of the scene, particularly for those who did not understand the reference, especially children.

Another way in which DreamWorks makes their films feel modern and in touch with the current culture is through the studio's frequent use of pop songs in their films. Before DreamWorks, this was rare in American animated film, with original musical numbers being most frequently used, but DreamWorks turned pop songs into a staple in American animated film. Sometimes this is used to tie into the referential humor, one of the better examples noted by Summers (83). In *Shrek the Third*, Snow White is required to cause a diversion for Fiona and the other princesses to break into a castle. Snow White sings a song with clear similarities to "A Smile and a Song" from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. The melody, the high-pitched voice of Snow White, the graininess of the sound and the way in which Snow White interacts and dances with birds are very reminiscent of Disney's iconic classic. Suddenly, Led Zeppelin's

"Immigrant Song" starts playing and, singing the introductory vocals, birds attack the walking trees guarding the castle.

Additionally, one of the ways in which DreamWorks made an influence in their usage of pop songs is through the now famous (and sometimes infamous) dance party ending. This was certainly not the first time in history a film ended with a dancing celebration, but DreamWorks popularized it with the first *Shrek* film and then while continuing to do it with their other films (such as *Shrek 2*, *Megamind* and *Trolls*), created a part of the modern animated film formula that would be utilized by many studios other than Disney, Pixar and DreamWorks. One of the more popular examples is Illumination's *Despicable Me*.

Lastly, one of the crucial and most influential aspects of DreamWorks' films is the way they utilize star performance. Some of the referential humor also ties into this. When taking the *Shrek* films as an example, this is the most apparent in the character of Puss in Boots, voiced by Antonio Banderas. The character is designed to emulate the look and character of Zorro, an iconic character famously played by Banderas. Puss wears some similar clothing items, he speaks with the same accent and his overall personality is reminiscent of Zorro. He even carves the initial of his name with his sword the same way Zorro does. However, the most extreme example of this kind of star performance is found in *Shark Tale*, with the main character made to look as much like Will Smith as a fish could possibly look. Though, *Shrek* shows a more nuanced (but still apparent) approach to this that is more frequently present in DreamWorks' films. Wherein most other studios used their stars in a less noticeable way DreamWorks makes their stars very apparent by molding their characters to represent them.

4.2. The "DreamWorks Decade" and the Influence of DreamWorks

When analyzing American animated film of the 21st century, one could note that Pixar had the biggest impact on the art of animation itself with their revolutionary use of CGI animation. However, DreamWorks may have had the biggest influence on the writing and style of the 21st century animation, especially in the 2000s, which Summers calls the "DreamWorks Decade" (163). During this decade, encouraged by the massive success of *Shrek*, animation studios saw a potential money-making formula. There were even a few subversive fairytale films in the vein of *Shrek*, such as *Hoodwinked!*, a humorous, often parodic detective retelling of Grimm's *Little Red Riding Hood* and *Happily N'ever After*, an equally parodic retelling of *Cinderella*. Major animated films also often included main character dynamics similar to the one between Shrek and Donkey, such as *Open Season* and *Ice Age*. Pop music became common in mainstream animated film and dance party endings became a well-known modern animated

film cliche. DreamWorks found a new formula that worked better than anything else at the time and most if not all animation studios at the time at least attempted to follow suit.

Even Disney and Pixar, despite their focus on their own authenticity, attempted to replicate the DreamWorks formula at certain points. Disney's most apparent attempt at this was *Chicken Little*. In this film, Disney attempted to be self-aware and mock their own brand and this was affirmed from the very beginning, when the film opens with breaking the fourth wall and satirizing of cliches such as a storybook opening and the iconic sunrise opening shot of *The Lion King*. The film also includes pop songs in its soundtrack, exaggerated characters, and some of DreamWorks' trademark referential humor. However, the film received a poor critical reception and this was when Disney's attempts at replicating DreamWorks stopped for the most part. While Pixar never attempted to follow the formula as fully as Disney with *Chicken Little*, one can see traces of it in *Cars*, with some referential intertextual jokes, popular songs, and the "DreamWorks kind" of star performance in Larry the Cable Guy's performance as Mater. (Summers 167-169)

Even though DreamWorks was not without its more serious films, such as *The Prince of Egypt* and *How to Train Your Dragon*, the studio made an impact in bringing a style that was more cartoonish, light-hearted, and less serious back to the world of mainstream animated film. One of the best more recent examples is Illumination's *Despicable Me* franchise, which only amplified this cartoonish aspect. In a way, Illumination made a trademark for itself by giving their films the look and feel of an old-fashioned Saturday morning cartoon. The characters have highly exaggerated features, such as Gru's comically large and pointy nose, the humor is a lot more slapstick-oriented, and the famous Minions are tailor-made for marketability towards children. The hand-drawn cartoonish look translated into CGI animation is not only present in character design, but in the backgrounds as well, making Illumination's films significantly more distinct than simply a box office successor to DreamWorks.

Another notable studio with a DreamWorks-like output is Blue Sky Studios, operating under 20th Century Fox until the studio's acquisition by Disney and famous for its *Ice Age* franchise. The influence is particularly evident in *Ice Age*, a good example being the character dynamic between Manny and Sid and its similarity to Shrek and Donkey's dynamic. The studio's films are not without their referential humor either, like for example, a short musical number in *Robots* that is directly referencing *Singin' in the Rain*. Speaking of music, this studio's films also have instances of dance party endings, most notably *Rio*. Sony and Warner Bros also used these new-established tropes to their advantage, Warner Bros using references to their IPs pretty much constantly in their *Lego* movies and Sony overdoing the same in *The*

Emoji Movie to some very negative reactions. However, Sony is also one of the studios that is building its own identity on the foundations of the DreamWorks formula, coming up with a unique 3D animation style in *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* and continuing to experiment with that in *The Mitchells vs. the Machines.*

While some other, newer formulas for a successful modern animated film were found in the meantime, the influence of DreamWorks and the DreamWorks Decade can still be felt. As for DreamWorks themselves, the studio produced some films with a more grounded (but not unhumorous) storytelling, such as the highly acclaimed *Kung Fu Panda* and *How to Train Your Dragon* films. The studio at this point is not on the same level of success like in the 2000s, but it still enjoys moderate success and its influence on animated film as we know it today can still be felt, particularly in their humor, quirky, offbeat characters, and use of pop music.

5. Conclusion

Along with the modern culture, American animated film as we know it changed rapidly and dramatically. Disney, while still retaining some of its traditional form, such as musical numbers and fairytale-like settings and narratives, learned how to merge this style with the needs of today's culture. Pixar, while their hot streak of critical acclaim broke with *Cars 2* and a few other less successful films, still retained their reputation for creative and mature storytelling. DreamWorks may have lost some of its initial popularity, but this studio's stylistic influence is perhaps felt the most in modern animation.

The 2000s were a highly experimental period for American animated film. However, after that decade, one could argue that a new formula has been established and that this period is for the most part over. While recently there have been more experimentations when it comes to the animation style due to constant technological advancements of the 21st century, the storytelling and the cultural assimilation and updating of American animated film is becoming more concrete and established year after year. In spite of a constantly and rapidly changing modern culture, American animated film adapts itself very well for the most part, frequently generating critical acclaim and big box office numbers, perhaps establishing a reputation of the most creative, unique, and technologically innovative "genre" in the film industry of today.

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7. American Animated Film of the 21st century: Summary and key words

In the rapidly changing culture and sudden technological developments of the 21st century, American animated film had to accommodate to its vast worldwide audience. The classic, wholesome, often fairy-tale narrative largely utilized and popularized by Disney had to be changed to fit into the transforming values of the modern society. With American animated film industry of the 20th century being largely dominated by Disney, 21st century saw the emergence of some other major animated film studios. This thesis most notably deals with three studios – Disney, Pixar and DreamWorks, analyzing the distinct style that each studio employed in order to accommodate itself to the demands of the audience of the new millennium. The thesis also examines the impact which these studios left with their output.

Key words: animation, update, change, subversion, storytelling, influence, culture

8. Američki animirani film 21. stoljeća: Sažetak i ključne riječi

S obzirom na brzo mijenjajuću kulturu i nagle tehnološke napretke 21. stoljeća, američki animirani film se morao prilagoditi svoj širokoj publici iz cijelog svijeta. Klasičan, ugodan, često bajkovit narativ, kojeg je većinom koristio i popularizirao Disney, morao se promijeniti kako bi se uklopio u transformirajuće vrijednosti modernog društva. Premda je američkom industrijom animiranog filma uglavnom dominirao Disney, u 21. stoljeću su se pojavila novi veliki studiji animiranog filma. Ovaj rad u osnovi govori o tri studija – Disneyu, Pixaru i DreamWorksu, te analizira svojstven stil koji je svaki od ovih studija iskoristio kako bi se prilagodio zahtjevima publike novog tisućljeća. Ovaj rad također sagledava utjecaj koji su ovi studiji ostavili sa svojim radom.

Ključne riječi: animacija, prilagodba, promjena, subverzija, pripovijedanje, utjecaj, kultura