

Make(Over): An Integrated Rhetorical Analysis of Masculine Transformation in Disney
Animated Film

by

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Abstract

This thesis analyzes patterned constructions of paternal, hetero-masculine heroism in three contemporary CGI animated Disney films: *Wall-E* (2008), *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012), and *Big Hero 6* (2014). Wall-E the robot, Ralph the avatar, and Baymax the automaton, are male-identified “artificial figures” who are positioned as inferior and insufficiently masculine because of their flawed physiques or social anomalies (Kakoudaki 2-3). Through processes of transformation, these seemingly unconventional males learn to present and perform their gender in ways that comply with hegemonic ideals of hetero, patriarchal masculinity. There are three main rhetorical strategies used in each film to map the male characters’ transformations. Juxtaposition, discipline, and reward are employed to project a set of ideals about gender, to correct deviance from these ideals, and to reward conformity. The artificial figures in the three films analyzed in this study reveal the latest trend in male-focused Disney animated makeover narratives.

All three Disney animated films employ the makeover motif to reinstate dominant conceptualizations of masculinity despite occasional attempts to counter some of the male body types, gender role stereotypes, and male/female power dynamics found in previous Disney animated stories featuring male characters. Wall-E appears to be a fragile, dirty, broken low-class labourer; Ralph is emotionally stunted and banished from his community; Baymax is fat, androgynous, and desires to care and nurture, which are traditionally “feminine” characteristics. However, although these animated films present slightly revised versions of masculinity by incorporating postfeminist characteristics into the narrative fold, as a whole, the films do not alter, in any significant way, conventional presentations of masculine physical supremacy, traditional gender roles, as well as patriarchal and hetero-normative structures. As my analysis

demonstrates, it is more accurate to view these films as promoting the illusion of progress, particularly through the transformation narratives featured in each film.

Thus, this dissertation answers a broad question about Disney's masculine makeovers: what type(s) of male bodies and masculine roles are considered ideal according to these animated films? To answer this guiding question, I address the following sub-questions: how do the films through their visual, aural, and kinesic modes give preference to particular models of masculinity and how do these accounts of masculinity act upon audiences in a combined sensorial-ideological way?

Drawing on concepts and methods from gender scholarship within Disney Studies, postfeminism (Angela McRobbie and Rosalind Gill), gender order theory (R.W. Connell), rhetorical criticism (Kenneth Burke), rhetorical materialism (Carole Blair), social semiotics and multimodality (Carey Jewitt), structural Marxism (Louis Althusser), cine-psychoanalysis (Laura Mulvey), cultural materialism (Mikhail Bakhtin), and cultural studies (Stuart Hall), this study examines the symbolic choices and patterns used by Disney filmmakers not only to characterize the gender of their artificial figures but also to uphold particular idealizations of masculinity.

The communication of ideology through film is not limited to the literal meaning of the narrative. It also occurs through emotional appeals enacted by the aesthetic elements of the films. The affective dimensions of these films and their capacity to instruct (in an ideological sense) and arouse (in an embodied, material sense) can shape the audience's perceptions of gender and social relations.

This study thus engages in a modified approach to ideological rhetorical criticism that accounts for the sensorial and affective dimensions of film. I call this method integrated for it attends to both the individual and collaborative functions of three symbolic modes: visual, aural,

and kinesic used to promote hegemonic constructs of masculinity as well as to provoke embodied reactions in audiences that strengthen their identification with the characters and their makeover journeys. As a whole, this thesis uncovers how meanings about paternal, hetero-masculine heroism emerge in the interaction of these three symbolic modes and what types of messages these films articulate, reinforce, or suppress to the embodied and emotionally-involved audience.

Keywords: Disney animation, gender, ideological criticism, makeover, postfeminist masculinity, rhetorical criticism of film, robots, transformation narrative.

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Chapter One – Introduction

In this thesis, I identify and critique patterned constructions of paternal, hetero-masculine heroism in three animated Disney films: *Wall-E* (2008), *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012), and *Big Hero 6* (2014). Focusing on expressions of masculine transgression and conformity, my dissertation contributes to scholarship that studies both changes to and continuities within the construction of gender in Disney animated productions. My study adds significant new findings to this body of research by centering on contemporary transformation quests featuring male-identified “artificial figures” who submit to processes of conversion to attract female affection, recuperate a masculine sense of self-worth, or gain legitimacy and status as conventional heroes (Kakoudaki 2-3).

My fascination with the transformation motif emerged as I read scholarly criticism about the apparent feminist themes in second-wave Disney princess films as well as more contemporary Disney films starring ostensibly “empowered” female leads. Overall, the findings of scholars examining the development of female protagonists in Disney animated storytelling pointed to the preservation of patriarchal idealizations of femininity despite surface-level reconfigurations of its female protagonists over the years. This led me to wonder whether and to what extent Disney has altered the conventional hero template in such films as *Wall-E* (2008), *Wreck-It-Ralph* (2012), and *Big Hero 6* (2014).

Make(Over): A Common Motif in Classic and Contemporary Disney Animated Films

The transformation narrative has deep historical roots in Disney animated storytelling. Through such classic films as *Cinderella* (1950) and in more contemporary productions, the makeover is presented as the pathway to salvation. Cinderella, Ariel, Mulan, Tiana, Merida,

along with many other Disney princesses, are physically re-shaped into glamorous garb to attract a dashing royal suitor. As Mary Celeste Kearney explains, the use of sparkly special effects in these makeover sequences signify “the supernatural yet normative physical transformations supposedly necessary for heterosexual coupling” (268).

The list of Disney male characters who are subjected to makeovers is also extensive: the Beast, Aladdin, and Tarzan undergo training until they closely approximate the characteristics of civilized males. Upgrades, alterations, and improvements deliver desirable outcomes for the makeover subjects. By submitting to cosmetic changes, style advice, physical training, and life coaching and by conforming to standards of beauty and civility, the newly transformed are rewarded with opportunities ranging from physical attractiveness and hetero-sexual romance to social acceptance and upward mobility. In male-oriented transformation narratives, humour replaces glamour.

Since *Cinderella* (1950), Disney has transformed both the look and qualities of its female characters on several occasions, beginning by replacing demure princesses with rebellious teen daughters (Byrne and McQuillan 66-67; Henke, Zimmermann Umble, and Smith 437). During the period known as Disney’s Renaissance, in the late 1980s through to the late 1990s, heroines defy patriarchy and often resist the paths that are imposed upon them by controlling figures in the films (*The Little Mermaid* (1989) and *Mulan* (1998) are two examples). Years later, Disney expanded its princess line-up, making room for new female characters whose bodies defy the classical image of sleek, white femininity featured in early Disney princess films. Modern transformation tales, including those featured in *Brave* (2012) and *Moana* (2016), for example, supply a surface where princesses initially look and act in ways that break convention. In the final stages of their transformation, however, the princesses eventually conform to patriarchal

and hetero-normative expectations just as their predecessors did decades before. The main difference, it seems, is that the seemingly autonomous and empowered heroines are now permitted to pursue their dreams so long as they submit to male dominance and direction (Seybold 1-2).

Disney's male characters have also evolved over the decades, from nameless characters (*Cinderella*) to brutish princes (*Beauty and the Beast*). The Beast, Aladdin, and Tarzan represent a revised model of masculinity that Disney embraced in the 1990s when it began to cast males in leading roles, temporarily breaking the pattern it had established with its princess films. The shift of focus resulted in a revised performance of masculinity, known as the 'New Man' model where inadequate male characters were taught to subdue their selfish and brutish behaviour through disciplining practices (Jeffords 165). In the mid 1990s, Disney acquired Pixar Animation Studios to fill a gap in the boy market. During this period, "most of Disney's male-oriented films" were produced by Pixar, including *Toy Story* (1995), *A Bug's Life* (1998), *Monsters, Inc.* (2001), *Cars* (2006), and *Wall-E* (2008) (Cheu, "Girl Cultures" 54). To make the Pixar films more appealing to an implied audience of boys, Disney re-invented its lead male characters as toys, bugs, monsters, cars, and robots. In Pixar's boy stories, hetero-sexual romance is either downplayed or substituted with homosocial bonds (Gillam and Wooden, "Post-Princess Models of Gender" 5). Overwhelmingly, the main narrative tends to follow the growth of an outcast who displays a lack or excess of masculine characteristics. Their imperfections put each of the animated male characters on a transformative journey designed to shape them into conventional idealizations of masculine heroism.

The central male characters in the films in my study are pressured to meet the demands imposed upon them by their partners, neighbours, and dependents who ask them to be brave but,

emotionally open, to resist performing masculinity in ways that emphasize brute strength and aggression unless it is to take down villains. In the end, the recuperated heroes, with assistance from their love interests, comedic sidekicks, or younger pals, retain the physical image of masculine strength and valour, only now Disney has attributed caring qualities and more socially inclusive gender roles to male-identified characters. It has also positioned male characters as vulnerable and crisis-inflicted while female characters are constructed as confident and successful, in comparison (Macaluso 2, 4). In this way, Disney's newer male characters have been given a postfeminist update.

The films' emphasis on the self-monitoring and self-disciplined male in crisis is characteristic of Rosalind Gill's "postfeminist sensibility," meaning, a set of stable themes and common ideas found in and across cultural products which provoke both pro- and anti-feminist sentiments ("Postfeminist Media Culture" 148-149). The entanglement of pro- and anti-feminist ideals in postfeminist culture is rooted in neoliberal values, according to Gill ("Postfeminist Media Culture" 147). Neoliberal capitalism is an economic order that prizes individuality and autonomy to the point where systemic inequalities and other "structural problems are denied" (Kearney 265). Messages about choice, authenticity, and self-fulfillment are defining features of postfeminist texts produced for a contemporary female audience who have been taught that (hetero)sexual desirability, for example, is attained through self-monitoring and self-discipline – acts which appear to be driven by personal interest as opposed to cultural influence. The idea that one can attain (hetero-sexual male) approval and attention through physical changes, for instance, negates the possibility of acting purely out of self-desire. This paradox is often apparent in makeover narratives which feature prominently in postfeminist media texts. While Gill initially identified "the feminine" as "the ideal disciplinary subject of neoliberalism,"

(“Postfeminist Media Culture” 156), the sociology and media studies scholar now claims that males are subjects of postfeminist media culture also. The prominence of postfeminist media starring hetero-sexual male protagonists has inspired research from feminist film and media studies scholars, including Gill, whose study of “lad lit” fiction reveals patterned constructions of unsuccessful male characters “who need rescuing” (“Powerful Women, Vulnerable Men” 194). Conditioned by neoliberal values, the un-heroes of postfeminist media often recover a sense of identity and power through makeover narratives emphasizing choice and change.

However, beneath the glamour and humour of these makeover montages and despite the surface-level changes to Disney and Pixar’s modern makeover subjects, we find interventions designed to correct physical and social anomalies as well as to convert the unique individual, who is flawed or lacking somehow, into a more conventional body and role. Subordination and conformity are essential components of the Disney makeover motif. Eager to please their superiors or peers and desperate to escape their oppressive milieus or to rid themselves of their deficiencies, Disney’s heroes in-the-making eventually submit to higher powers, social standards, and/or gender norms. In these makeover narratives, subordination and conformity are presented not only as the means to achieve a normalized appearance and existence but also as the key to their freedom and power. By mimicking the look and modelling the actions of ideal subjects, many of these characters upgrade (and sometimes trade) their unique bodies and seemingly progressive roles for something more conventional.

My dissertation extends research on the makeover narrative in Disney animated films by conducting a rhetorical analysis of the gendered transformations that the male characters, Wall-E (in *Wall-E* (2008)), Ralph (in *Wreck-It-Ralph* (2012)), and Baymax (in *Big Hero 6* (2014))

undergo. Before introducing my research questions, methods, and key findings, I provide context for my study with brief plot summaries and character descriptions for each film.

The Films, the Characters, and their Transformations

Wall-E (2008) is an emotionally-touching film filled with a sense of nostalgia for a simpler time. Set in the distant future, this Pixar film stars Wall-E, a ‘bot’ designed to clean the debris left by humans. A sense of loneliness is conveyed in early scenes through a lack of dialogue and an abundance of ambient sounds, from the dust that settles as Wall-E wanders to the feedback emitted from speakers hanging above the buildings. Feelings of isolation dissipate with the arrival of Eve. Eve’s presence sets in motion a series of romantic adventures which propels the pair to restore life on Earth. Hetero-romance in *Wall-E (2008)* arouses excitement in the audience; it invites audiences to further engage with the fairy-tale plot and identify with the loveable characters. By drawing and narrating robot characters with gendered bodies, roles, and hetero-normative relationships that mirror those Wall-E observes in the segments he watches from *Hello, Dolly! (1969)*, the film instructs audiences about the need for (hetero-paternal) stability in a chaotic world fraught with senseless consumerism, urban development, and environmental pollution.

Released by Disney in 2012, *Wreck-It Ralph* is a family-oriented animated film about friendship, justice, and belonging. It follows the life of a miserable character named Ralph who has been banished from his community for the havoc caused by his body and bodily actions. By day, Ralph is an antagonist in a game called “Fix-It-Felix, Jr.” His muscularity and clumsiness, while useful in his role as arcade-game villain, prove to be a liability in his social life. A life of hostility and humiliation has turned Ralph into a brute and bully. Driven to prove his worth and

to assume the role of hero by winning a medal, Ralph journeys through several games within the arcade until he eventually reaches “Sugar Rush” where he befriends the feisty young Vanellope. Like Ralph, Vanellope is a video game character who lives inside an arcade. The mismatched pair bond during rescue missions and joint attempts to save the arcade from an evil character. Ralph’s domineering behaviour and impulse for violence lessen once he assumes the role of coach and care-taker. Still, Ralph retains his “manly” physical attributes while meeting Vanellope’s demands for kindness and affection. The film further advances the conventional image of masculine physical supremacy when Ralph makes the ultimate sacrifice in defeating the villain. This act of bravery pays off for Ralph as he is rewarded with social acceptance and female attention. The crisis that Ralph initially experiences as an ostracized male aggressor is resolved by reverting to a traditional version of masculinity which celebrates brute strength and male bravado. In narrating a tale about a reformed antagonist, Disney’s *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) justifies the use of physical violence as a means to do away with evil and to save the young and vulnerable from King Candy, the film’s true villain. In the end, the sensitivity Ralph demonstrates (albeit reluctantly and sometimes begrudgingly) is not enough to resolve his crisis of masculinity. Reverting to conventional physical prototypes, we are instructed, is the surest path toward acceptance and belonging. The story of an anti-hero who lives in a hostile environment and who is burdened with a set of contradictory gender norms and expectations may foster empathy from and identification with (younger) audiences whose exposure to contemporary popular media have taught them to want to look like hard-bodied warriors and to act like compassionate heroes. Slight additions and modifications to the archetype, including a male character’s capacity to show physical restraint and to express emotions when appropriate,

appeal to the shifting conversation about what masculinity means and what boys and men ought to look and act like today (Jeffords 163-164).

Big Hero 6 (2014) addresses experiences of loss, longing and loneliness from the perspective of a grieving adolescent. Hiro Hamada, the film's protagonist, is a 14-year old roboticist in-training who embarks on a violent quest to avenge his older brother's death by battling against a masked villain with the help of a robot named Baymax. Programmed to provide personal medical care, Baymax's directive is to help and heal the injured. His physical limitations and unconventional occupation as nurse 'bot' drive Hiro to change the robot's appearance and behaviour. In *Big Hero 6 (2014)*, we witness a transformation wherein Baymax, a once affable character, becomes aggressive following a makeover and training program led by Hiro. Through this program, the young male protagonist projects gendered fantasies onto his robot by appropriating images of super-bodies and then downloading these exemplars and applying these to Baymax's code. The film encourages audiences to laugh at the incongruity of a fat body in a tight suit and to chuckle at the implausibility of the makeover. Mocking humour directed at Baymax's body from other characters in the film invites audiences to disassociate from the robot character and sympathize with the plight of its human protagonist. However, Hiro's obsession with concealing and costuming his robot friend stops once he learns about the destruction and distress he inflicts through these unnatural alterations to Baymax's brain and body. While Baymax returns to his original state and shape (naked and fat) and resumes his role as nurse 'bot', he retains the characteristics of a warrior during rescue missions despite the disappearance of his super-hero garb. In this way, *Big Hero 6 (2014)* allows audiences to enjoy alternative physical constructions of masculinity without completely disrupting established images of masculine super-heroism.

Research Questions, Methods, and Findings

A basic question fuels my interest in Disney's masculine makeovers: what type(s) of male bodies and masculine roles are considered ideal according to these animated films? To answer this guiding question, I address the following sub-questions: how do the films through their visual, aural, and kinesic modes give preference to particular models of masculinity and how do these accounts of masculinity act upon audiences in a combined sensorial-ideological way?

The goal of my integrated rhetorical inquiry is therefore to identify and interpret shapes, sizes, sounds, and silences, as well as other symbolic choices and patterns that function to preserve patriarchal masculinity despite the addition of postfeminist qualities, such as caring, inclusive, and vulnerable expressions of masculinity. To date, postfeminist inquiries into makeover stories in male-oriented Disney films have received scant attention.

As well, unlike most of the existing scholarship critiquing Disney's treatment of gender which tends to focus on a single symbolic mode within a single film, my approach emphasizes symbolic interactions within and across different modes in three films. This analysis shows how the interaction of visual, aural, and kinesic modes, each of which may seem inconsequential on its own, produces ideologically-loaded ways of thinking about male-identified characters and their makeover journeys. I call this method integrated for it attends to both the individual and collaborative functions of these three modes in the films to promote hegemonic constructs of masculinity as well as to provoke embodied reactions in audiences that strengthen their identification with the characters.

As a whole, this analysis demonstrates that there are three main rhetorical strategies used in each film to map the male characters' transition to conformity. Juxtaposition, discipline, and

reward are employed to project a set of ideals about gender, correct deviance from these ideals, and reward conformity to dominant narratives of masculinity. First, the films present the original characters as anomalous or deficient by comparing them to idealized others. In *Wall-E* (2008), this occurs through a simple binary between the empowered female (Eve) and the bumbling, demoralised male character (Wall-E). In *Wreck-It-Ralph* (2012), a loveable repair man named Felix functions as the antithesis of hegemonic masculinity, a version of masculinity that Ralph embodies whenever he is constructed as a destructive brute. In *Big Hero 6* (2014), the rhetorical strategy of juxtaposition occurs when Hiro uses popular images and clips from karate films as exemplars of masculine heroism for Baymax. The second main makeover strategy that my rhetorical critique discovers is discipline. By casting shame upon the male characters' corporeal and/or emotional excesses and lacunas, each film demonstrates to audiences that makeovers are necessary. In *Wall-E* (2008), expressions of masculinity that contest the alpha male type are mocked through displays of effeminacy. In *Wreck-It-Ralph* (2012), the male protagonist's physical excess as well as his intellectual and emotional limitations are sources of mockery up until the moment he uses his brawny physique to save the vulnerable from destruction. In *Big Hero 6* (2014), this strategy occurs through acts of ridicule directed at Baymax's fat and effeminate body. In the end, glory comes to the makeover subjects who master the teachings imparted to them, often by their female companions and/or younger instructors. *Wall-E* (2008) and *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) reward male characters who conform to male heroic ideals with romantic attention from female characters while *Big Hero 6* (2014) rewards the re-designed hero by admiring his new physique. Importantly, it is in all three strategies – the mocking humour, training episodes, and the glory of the makeover – that a striking paradox emerges: the entanglement of progressive and traditional formulations of gender.

The tensions between discipline/freedom, subordination/empowerment, and individuality/conformity, which are articulated through the narrative arc of each transformation story, are common in makeover shows across all media and genres (Weber 1-5). What appears to be unique to the makeovers enacted by the films in my corpus, however, is the use of superficial promotions of progress in the service of tradition. In each film, conventional constructions of masculine heroism are carried into the present era despite the addition of new male-identified figures, revised characterizations of masculinity, and alternative storylines. In significant ways, the made-over bodies that are drawn and dressed for a contemporary audience of children and their families resemble the simplistic images of mighty male heroes found in early Disney animated films. As well, despite the addition of more socially-inclusive gender attributes and roles, such as the nurturing father-like figure and the compassionate male nurse, each character is situated and thrives within patriarchal, hetero-normative environments.

Research Implications and Contributions

In recent years, I have had the opportunity to teach a senior seminar primed by my research interests. The seminar surveys scholarly debates about the fantasies Disney communicates in its animated features, edutainment films, theme parks and attractions, and merchandise. Conversations with students and questions posed in class affirmed my beliefs about Disney's (invisible) influence in many aspects of our lives. Because of their popularity and mass-distribution, these animated films have the rhetorical potential to shape and reinforce beliefs about the types of characters they engender. With this dissertation, I provide a framework through which to analyze the construction of gender ideologies communicated by symbolic elements and features as well as rhetorical strategies that, due to their commonplace, naturalized

status, may be largely invisible and inaudible to audiences, or otherwise under-acknowledged and unchallenged.

My analysis also contributes in valuable ways to rhetorical criticism of film by interrogating the interplay among a constellation of symbolic modes rather than focusing almost exclusively on the visual. Although the study of visual communication through the medium of film has received considerable attention in rhetorical research in recent years (Blakesley 111-112), to my knowledge, integrated rhetorical analyses that attend to the interplay among different symbolic modes have yet to gain currency. My attention to the affective dimensions of these films and their capacity to simultaneously instruct (in an ideological sense) and arouse (in an embodied, material sense) likewise, I believe, offers a novel approach to the rhetorical study of film.

Finally, the lack of research examining character and story re-design in male-oriented transformation narratives in Disney indicates there is room to explore how the studio revives the traditional physical template of masculinity, incorporates postfeminist notions of heroism, and replaces standard romantic storylines with more progressive plot points without altering, in any significant way, conventional representations of masculine physical supremacy and traditional gender roles and power dynamics. The fact that the three characters my analysis focuses on are either under- or un-examined by Disney scholars presents an opening to examine the cultural fantasies projected onto these male-identified figures who initially struggle to meet the physical, emotional, and/or social performance of traditional, hegemonic masculinity. My study expands our understanding of how seemingly simple on-screen symbolic elements and features can bring life and meaning to complex, contradictory conceptualizations of gender. Thus, one of the key critical aims of my research is to show readers – from undergraduate students to seasoned

scholars in the fields of media, communications, and rhetorical criticism of film – how these characters enact dominant cultural perceptions of masculinity even while they appear to challenge tradition.

Chapter Overview

My dissertation is divided into seven chapters, including this introduction. In **Chapter Two: A Review of Scholarship**, I provide the theoretical groundwork for my research which is situated within critical approaches to gender in Disney animated media. I begin with an overview of Disney's political, economic, and cultural influence before reviewing relevant research as well as gaps in the scholarship on gender construction in over eight decades of Disney animated productions, exploring the work of cultural theorists, semioticians, and media scholars who study the normalizing power of the medium and the symbolic elements and features used to gender Disney characters.

In **Chapter Three: Methodological Approaches**, I explain my integrated methods which combine ideological rhetorical criticism with material rhetorical perspectives of film. Using ideological rhetorical criticism as my principal methodological foundation, I describe the procedures I followed to locate and explicate prevailing constructs of gender in visual, aural, and kinesic systems of meaning. I explain why the rhetorical criticism of film along with examinations of audio-visual symbol-use in a range of texts beyond films provide the necessary theoretical foundation to analyze both the meaning and material effects of the selected films and the male characters they feature. I also describe the additional steps I took and the observational matrix I developed to account for the sensorial or affective dimensions of these films. Other chapter features include an explanation of key methodological terms, clarification of my guiding

research questions, as well as my rationale for selecting *Wall-E* (2008), *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012), and *Big Hero 6* (2014) and their male leads as artefacts for my hybrid analysis. I end Chapter Three with a reflection on my experience with this methodological process.

Chapter Four: An Integrated Rhetorical Analysis of *Wall-E* (2008) is the first of three chapters where I analyze the moments and the means by which dominant and subversive ideologies of gender are projected onto and produced through the films' central male characters. Each film receives its own chapter. The task of this chapter and the two following chapters is to make visible the kinds of male bodies and gender roles Disney brings to life through strategic symbol-use. The arguments I make in Chapters Four to Six centre on the films' respective makeover motifs where characters' bodies and/or behaviours change until they conform to a model of masculinity considered to be traditional to North American culture. Focusing on Wall-E's social transformation, Chapter Four traces the titular character's maturation from a lonely weakling to a hetero-sexual partner, provider, and protector. In particular, I analyze the disciplining practices, including the mocking humour employed to highlight Wall-E's deviance from established hetero-masculine norms and expectations. I also attend to the symbolic and sensorial appeals used to recuperate Wall-E's hetero-masculine persona. Based on this analysis, I argue that *Wall-E* (2008) offers a conventional presentation of masculinity through its emphasis on normative gender roles, divisions of labour, and asymmetrical power relations which are foregrounded by the male protagonist's over displays of hetero-sexual desire and eventual ability to "win the girl."

The theme of masculine socialization is further explored in **Chapter Five: An Integrated Rhetorical Analysis of *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012)**. In this chapter, I analyze the rhetorical strategies animators used to transform Ralph into a loveable hometown hero. *Wreck-It*

Ralph (2012), I argue, is an animated film with a conformist message about fitting in to established norms of masculinity on physical and/or social level(s). Pressure to conform to masculine ideals of heroism, I argue, comes from: female sidekicks who tame, temper, and “train” unruly male characters by showing them the value of restraint and the need to take care of the young and vulnerable. Ralph’s transformation is also driven by social pressure from outsiders who mock his physical excess and fear his aggressive outbursts. Shaming practices and other punishing norms are highlighted here again, only this time, I focus on constructions of masculine monstrosity and grotesquerie. I note the ways in which the film corrects Ralph’s excesses and lacunas and repositions his physical and emotional imperfections as resources. Ralph’s hard and labouring body, I argue, is essentialized when used as an instrument of war and as a tool for service.

In **Chapter Six: An Integrated Rhetorical Analysis of *Big Hero 6* (2014)**, I continue my analysis of the transformative processes and training programs designed for Disney’s male characters with emphasis on the rewards and punishments for those who satisfy or fail to satisfy expectations. Particularly, I focus on the physical changes Baymax undergoes under Hiro’s leadership. Prior to his makeover, the nurse ‘bot’ is consistently de-valued by Hiro for the way he looks and acts until bodily upgrades are applied and martial arts training begins. Compared to *Wall-E* (2008) and *Wreck-It-Ralph* (2012), the film appears to disrupt gender norms by mocking the stereotyped image of super-hero masculinity, but my analysis suggests that the parodic episodes give at best an illusion of critique, which allows Disney to strike a safe balance between competing models of masculinity. My central claim in Chapter Six is that the type of male body that appears most often and most prominently – and hence is most endorsed – during the film’s climactic episodes is that of a hyper-muscular super-hero. This is accomplished in large part

through the film's rendition and treatment of Baymax's grotesque physique: the fat and feminized male body is subject to abuse and other disciplining practices that aim to contain and change it into a normative super-hero masculine body. The reward for conforming to an idealized male body image comes in the form of social acceptance and widespread admiration from Hiro and his friends. Ultimately, *Big Hero 6* (2014) shows us how undesirable male bodies can become normatively masculine through physical transformation and training. This leads to a brief discussion of a post-biological deterministic reading of humanity that is incorporated into fictional stories starring artificial male-identified characters.

In the closing chapter, I revisit and reflect on what I consider to be the most compelling results of my analysis of the production of gender in contemporary Disney animated features. In **Chapter Seven: Conclusion**, I also review the significance of the selected research methods, noting their potential contributions to the development of ideological rhetorical criticism and to expanding critiques examining gender construction in contemporary animated studio productions. The final chapter also addresses conceptual and methodological limitations and provides suggestions for further research in the theoretical and critical orientations I draw upon in this dissertation.

Chapter Two – A Review of Scholarship Examining the Construction of Gender in Disney Animated Films from 1937 to 2019

Introduction

The aim of Chapter Two is to provide the thematic groundwork for my research, beginning with an overview of Disney's global presence as well as the political, economic, and cultural power it exerts upon an audience of children and their families. Notable themes and trends, repeated use of rhetorical selections and strategies, and glaring gaps within the scholarship examining the rhetorical production of gender in Disney are also explored. The sources I draw upon focus on conventional constructions of gender and hetero-sexuality in Disney animated media throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The historical timeline is important because it underscores how little things have changed in the way Disney animates characters who take on gender-specific roles, submit to gender power differentials, and are situated within patriarchal, hetero-normative milieus over 80 years of storytelling.

A Background to the Critical Scholarship on Disney

Generating a record revenue of over \$69 billion in 2019, The Walt Disney Company is an ever-expanding cultural producer and internationally-recognized media brand with a cultural presence that extends well beyond the screen. The American entertainment juggernaut has built an industry around princesses, heroes, and fairy-tale endings all of which are universally accessible in theatres, on DVD, via Netflix and Hulu, through digital movie-viewing services, cable networks, radio stations, publications, interactive games, amusement parks and resorts, clothing and merchandising, and so forth (Fiscal Year 2019 Annual Financial Report). Disney's goods and services are interconnected, meaning that films and other products are linked to

related media, such as games, books, and other consumer experiences available via multiple platforms. The interaction or synergy of two or more media produces a combined effect as each product or service advertises the other. In some cases, the availability of a product is prolonged with a series of live-action re-makes of animated hits, the re-release of classic films, or with the theatrical release of a sequel. Moreover, consumer interest in a beloved Disney character may be renewed with the opening of a new attraction at one of the Company's many parks. Its ubiquity and popularity make it nearly impossible for audiences to be truly disconnected from Disney.

Disney's growing power and presence invites the attention of cross-disciplinary scholars concerned about the way it produces and disseminates cultural ideals using integrated marketing and ongoing promotion from their expansive collection of products. A site of contestation, Disney is criticized for the way it teaches consumers "into particular ways of being and buying" (Sandlin and Garlen 191). Similarly, Giroux and Pollock argue that "The penetration of the Disney empire into every aspect of social life consistently reinforces Disney's self-image as an icon of American culture" (94). Disney is, consequently, more than a global corporate giant; it is also, as Neal A. Lester suggests, a dominant producer of cultural constructs, serving the dominant views and values of a particular kind of American society (294).

Through its films, parks, merchandise, and other assets, Disney is shaping the thoughts and actions of a vast global audience that continues to expand as Disney further diversifies its holdings. This section of my literature review explores the work of scholars who start from the premise that Disney operates as a pedagogue. Henry A. Giroux and Grace Pollock write from a political economy perspective, claiming that Disney implicitly communicates mainstream values and capitalist ideologies in its animated features and built environments (xiv). In their work, Katherine van Wormer and Cindy Juby echo a similar sentiment: "Our major concern is that

such messages may have more to do with the promotion of consumerism, loyalty and the acceptance of stereotypical images ... in the interest of global capitalism” (579). The vast production and distribution power of the Walt Disney Company continues to make it a critical target. While the field of critical scholarship about Disney is substantive, I will limit my review to one primary site (Disney animated feature films) with emphasis on the identity construct of gender.

Selected Research Analyzing the Animation of Female Characters in Three Generations of Disney Storytelling

Analysis of gender in classic and contemporary Disney films is possibly the most common critical approach in Disney Studies scholarship. With contributions from historians, cultural theorists, feminist scholars, and others, the research in this area mostly examines how the exemplary female is physically constructed and socialized throughout Disney animated storytelling. Disney scholars also identify prevailing themes and rhetorical strategies Disney employs to characterize its female protagonists into ideal bodies and roles.

The retrograde characterization of femininity is a common finding as well as a shared concern amongst scholars in this area. For Rebecca-Anne Do Rozario, Disney’s female figures are “caught up in a perpetual time loop” that is “detached from social progress,” meaning the films are “detached from the problems of culture in which they were conceived, made, and marketed” (36-37). Do Rozario describes these female characters as “anachronistic” (34-35). Do Rozario cites Henry Giroux, as many Disney scholars do, who claims that this nostalgic longing results in female subordination. By making “a claim on the future through [a] nostalgic view of

the past” Disney “presents a retrospective picture” which secures its continuity in both the present and future (Giroux qtd. in Do Rozario 35).

Critical studies of second-generation princess films, that is, films released after Walter Disney’s death, starting in late 1980s and ending in the late 1990s (Do Rozario 35), identify some notable differences in how the princess genre is enacted compared with the first-generation period, but overall this scholarship raises concerns about unchanging constructs of female disempowerment. According to Beth Wiersma, female protagonists emerging in the 1990s remain stereotypic and similar to the female portrayals featured in Walt Disney Animation Studios’ first full-length animated film (iii-iv). This argument, that Disney continually reproduces fixed and outdated gender constructs, fails to account for the progressive changes observed in Disney princess films produced at the end of the twentieth century. Do Rozario, however, claims that in second-generation princess films, Disney used increasingly progressive gender traits to animate its female characters. Films like *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *Pocahontas* (1995), and *Mulan* (1998), for example, feature young attractive female protagonists who actively challenge patriarchy and pursue a life of adventure. Disney’s heroines defy their status, whether royal, noble, or peasant by escaping from the oppressive kingdoms ruled by their fathers. A valuable feature of Do Rozario’s work is her analysis of the visual and kinesic elements employed to animate Disney’s more progressive princesses. The Disney scholar links the revamped performance of femininity to the characters’ changing physiques. Specifically, Do Rozario describes how Disney’s newer princesses are drawn with an expanded colour palette (e.g. most princesses are non-white) and a wardrobe that exposes rather than conceals the female form (e.g. most wear clothing that reveals their small waists and

muscular legs). These are dramatic transformations when compared to the ballerina-dancing princesses of the past, claims Do Rozario (46-47).

However, like first-generation films, Disney animated films released in this period are criticized for retaining select physical features as well as for perpetuating unyielding gender roles which place female figures in subservient positions (Lacroix 223). For example, Disney is criticized for perpetually circulating a version of young femininity that values a particular set of beauty ideals which exaggerates physical attributes (e.g. large eyes, thick eyelashes, long hair), physical discipline (e.g. characters who are in control of their bodies and movements), as well as storylines of damsel-in-distress passivity (Bell 109-112).

As the timeline shifts from the late 1930s to the late 1980s and beyond, critical interest in the hyper-sexualization of the next generation of Disney princesses emerges. Celeste Lacroix's intersectional analysis shows the value of examining the visual construction of the exotic female Other. Drawing on Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Lacroix points out the distinguishing physical features of the submissive, white female protagonists of the 1930s to 1950s and the active, ethnic bodies of the subversive female leads of the 1980s and 1990s. Disney's white female protagonists, she writes "occupy the least active and mature bodies, whereas the women of color are represented as both physically mature and athletic" (Lacroix 221). Ideological formations of whiteness and femininity produce princesses drawn with small frames and delicate features (Lacroix 220). This distinguishes white female protagonists from heroines of colour who are unequivocally exotic, foreign, and hyper-sexualized, in contrast (Lacroix 218). Their darker skin tones, almond-shaped eyes, athletic physiques, and curvaceous figures position Disney's princesses of colour as objects of male desire. Writing about the "eroticized body" of Disney's Pocahontas, Leigh Edwards' claims the titular character "performs a crucial gender role ... [as]

the racialized native sexual object for the colonizing male subject” (154). Overt displays of sexuality are expressed through physical maturity which is made apparent by the lack of clothes used to dress the bodies of Pocahontas along with sister princesses of colour from Disney’s second-wave of animated princess films. As Lacroix explains, these are women “whose sexualized presence is privileged above all else” (222).

Do Rozario, though, argues that beneath the surface of their hyper-sexualized bodies, we find elements of heroism, egalitarianism, and autonomy (47). Jill Henke, Diane Zimmermann Umble, and Nancy Smith likewise claim that in the second-wave of Disney animated films, female protagonists are portrayed with a greater sense of selfhood (437). Unlike the princesses of the past, Disney’s modern heroines (referring to the princesses of the late 1980s and 1990s) are willful and disobedient (Henke, Zimmermann Umble, and Smith 437). Rather than passively performing domestic chores and obeying their fathers, the princesses initially refuse to conform to social expectations regarding the role of women as obedient and dutiful daughters. In comparing the characterization of male and female protagonists in both the first and second-wave of animated Disney films, Whelan observes how second-generation Disney animated films portray heroines who are adventurous, playful, selfish, disobedient, rambunctious, aggressive, etc., all traits that are conventionally masculine (28).

Eleanor Byrne and Martin McQuillan show how Disney modified the father-daughter relationship in second-wave princess films with the animation of female rebellion against patriarchal rules (67). Thus, the heroines of the late 1980s and 1990s seem especially assertive and rebellious when compared to their eccentric and soft-hearted fathers (Byrne and McQuillan 67). This suggests that it is not only the fathers who are sources of power but also the young daughters, eager to disrupt their power and retain it for themselves. But, the trouble with this

theory is that it negates the way most of the transformative quests from this period present female characters who initially defy the paternal (their fathers) only to later embrace their roles as wives and, presumably, as mothers as well. It also overlooks the fact that most princess films culminate with some kind of resolution where fathers and daughters make amends through a compromise involving gender-role conformity. In the end, the daughter, seeking atonement with her father, becomes less defiant. The caring but tough father comes to accept his daughter's transgressions after she submits to the patriarchal, hetero-normative system within which she is situated.

Thus, despite being linked with notions of power, freedom, and exploration, much like their male counter-parts, the female protagonists of this era are eventually brought under control. Towbin et al. explain that despite the appearance of uncharacteristic gender traits, the heroines of the late 1980s and early 1990s experience similar narrative trajectories to the princesses of the past (24). They note: "Act[s] of bravery or independence on the part of female characters are often followed by a 'twist' in the plot that places her in a one-down position to a male" (Towbin et al. 38). Henke and colleagues provide a similar perspective, emphasizing the juxtaposition between powerful male characters and dis-empowered female characters in select Disney films. They claim that the fate of the modern princess seems to be determined by her hetero-sexuality, adding that Disney animated films of this period generally feature "heterosexual narratives in which the 'perfect girl's' destiny is a monogamous relationship with a (white) man" (Henke, Zimmermann Umble, and Smith 440). Although each heroine is animated with a sense of autonomy and a spirit of adventure, the films "nevertheless reinforce[s] stereotypes of girls whose identity is determined first by romantic relationships and later by

their role as selfless nurturer[s]” (Dundes 354). The focus on marriageability removes any possibility for these characters to subvert hetero-gender norms by the films’ end.

Understanding how Disney incorporates seemingly progressive narratives into earlier films featuring female leads, as is the case with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), is significant as it lays the foundation for a motif that is repeated in the films in my corpus. Described as a character who spends much of her time cooking, cleaning, and caring within the confines of a house, Snow White finds her place in the conventional role of domestic labour. Byrne and McQuillan add that many of the film’s references focus on the “interiors created and nurtured by women” (60). This is in contrast to a new kind of narrative that emerges during Disney’s animation renaissance in the late 1980s through to the late 1990s. Byrne and McQuillan note: “The first two films in the second wave of the Disney canon, *The Little Mermaid* [(1989)] and *Beauty and the Beast* [(1991)], signal a change in the kinds of experiences of gender that Disney has felt it necessary to address” (66). These films feature strong-willed female leads who abandon familial duties in the hope of fulfilling personal desires. Ariel, Belle, Jasmine, Pocahontas, and Mulan embark on journeys of self-discovery only to find themselves at the mercy of patriarchy and hetero-sexual normativity. This view is supported by Hoi Cheu, who shows how Disney’s *Mulan* (1998) projects pro-feminist images and ideals in the service of patriarchal family values (“Feminist Film Theory” 2-7). By placing female protagonists into more socially inclusive and progressive roles – as rebels and warriors, for example – Disney demonstrates that it is responsive to socio-cultural changes, including those brought on by the demands of second-wave feminism. But, by reinforcing traditional beauty standards and by restoring a patriarchal order, as *Mulan* (1998) does, these films also function as vehicles of conservative ideology.

In all but one princess film released during this period, Disney's heroines are united with their male counterparts. Although Pocahontas' story does not end in matrimony, she too is caught in a patriarchal society. In the case of Pocahontas, Dundes claims the character's individuality is subsumed by her responsibility to family and community (353-354). The same can be said of other princesses who put aside their personal quests to care for their fathers, husbands, or friends.

There is one more common theme within the critical discourse of girlhood and princesshood that I wish to explore before turning to current trends in the animation of Disney's female protagonists. Filmic constructions of motherhood, stewardship, and domesticity are discussed extensively in the scholarship on Disney; however, few studies examine the presentation of fatherhood and mentorship in the Disney canon. Presumably, this is because Disney associates reproductive labour and both the physical and emotional work involved in care-taking with saintly girls and women who sacrifice their own dreams and desires to serve and care for others. One important exception is Suzan Brydon's "Men at the Heart of Mothering" in which she argues that the father character in Disney's *Finding Nemo* (2003) enacts a stereotypical performance of motherhood. After comparing Disney's historical discourse about parenting and mothering, Brydon acknowledges that there is the possibility of change and growth regarding traditional, gendered family roles in Disney films. Brydon is especially optimistic about the discourse surrounding the role of the mother and what it means to "mother." Like gender, role constructs, including parenting or mothering, are part of a package of behaviours to be performed. American feminist scholarship, as Brydon tells us, has provided us with descriptions of what it means to "mother": "an all-consuming act of binding oneself to the

everyday nurture of the physical, mental and emotional lives of children [or other dependants] to the exclusion of that same nurture of oneself” (133).

In most, if not all of the films in the first- and second-wave, the beloved princesses exhibit what Lauren Dundes refers to as a “female pattern of care” (356). *Pocahontas* (1995) provides a good illustration of this. In Dundes’ view, the titular female character “sacrifices to ensure the welfare of others, regardless of her own needs and ambitions” (355). She describes the heroine’s maturation from selfish daughter to selfless nurturer as “gender-specific moral growth” (355), adding that “self-sacrifice encouraged during adolescence is training for motherhood” (359). Thus, in second-wave Disney animated films, heroines evolve from selfish girls to selfless women.

Disney has since deviated from this trend with the release of *Brave* (2012). The emergence of strong-willed female characters who pursue their goals, despite objections from others, is certainly a sign of progress. By animating a princess who defies patriarchal standards of beauty and femininity, *Brave* (2012) presents an alternative to the well-groomed and tiny-waisted heroines of the past. According to Fisher, with *Brave* (2012) as well as with *Frozen* (2013), Disney has attempted to “overturn the trope of the damsel-in-distress” by telling stories about protagonists who are not solely defined by their heterosexual relationships (“Frozen was our most important feminist film”). Pro-feminist messages are similarly integrated into the sequel (2019) as sisters Anna and Elsa are joined by other female leaders to undo the wrongs inflicted upon the Northuldra by patriarchal colonialism. Following in the footsteps of Elsa from the *Frozen* films, Moana does not pursue a love interest but a personal calling which takes her across the ocean. The titular female character from the 2016 animated film is a girl of royal Polynesian descent and a product of a culture where a matriarch and patriarch happily co-exist.

Moana's upbringing, which is a departure from the often oppressive, patriarchal social structures of earlier Disney princess films, prepares her for the leadership role that awaits her. *Zootopia's* (2016) Judy Hopps also leaves behind the comfort of her parents' hetero-nuclear family home in Bunnyburrow to fulfil a lifelong goal: to solve crimes in the big city. The film's plot centres on the adventures of a tiny female bunny cop who struggles against all forms of discrimination on the basis of her stature and species (she is the only non-predator officer in the police force). Elastigirl, the female protagonist in *Incredibles 2* (2018) resumes her crime-fighting duties after years of caring for her husband and children. Gender roles are reversed in the sequel to *The Incredibles* (2004) as Helen Parr (Elastigirl's non-superhero identity) responds to a call to restore the public's trust in superheroes while Mr. Incredible struggles at home (Macaluso 4).

The image of the autonomous and empowered heroine who seeks self-fulfillment marks a change in the overall construction of Disney's heroines, albeit, as Samantha Seybold observes, the feminist developments are promoted alongside storylines that still subject female characters to gender power differentials (14). Critics and scholars have commented on the re-circulation of traditional standards of beauty in recent Disney films and promotional materials. Princess Merida, the protagonist in Disney's *Brave* (2012), was the subject of controversy when in 2013, Disney attempted to re-design her physical appearance by altering her body proportions so as to produce a slightly older-looking and more sexualized version of the rebellious teen princess ("Disney retreats from Princess Merida makeover"). While Disney eventually retracted the image of the "the glammed up version" of princess Merida from its website ("Disney retreats from Princess Merida makeover"), it successfully re-booted the classic image of the white, slender, and conventionally attractive princess that same year with the release of *Frozen* (2013). The film's focus on Anna's concerns about how men will judge her physical appearance prior to

the ball and Elsa's visual transformation during the dramatic musical number "Let It Go" positions female characters as willing participants of female objectification (Rudloff 8-9, 13-14). The co-existence of contradictory messages about female empowerment and subservience in *Moana* (2016) and *Zootopia* (2016) is similarly criticized by Seybold who claims that the secondary male characters in these films function as leaders and protectors for the young heroines to help them attain their individual quests in dangerous settings (the ocean of the South Pacific for Moana and the backstreets and alleys for Judy Hopps) (2, 9). Finally, despite the positive characterization of "the successful, independent, and empowered woman-at-work" in Disney's *Incredibles 2* (2018), the film "subtly suggests that women and men cannot successfully coexist as strong, independent individuals together" (Macaluso 4, 8).

The animated characters and stories that have been reviewed thus far are largely based on fairy and folk tales, re-fashioned to suit Disney's corporate interests and mainstream ideologies. My review of the literature analyzing the physical attributes and social roles attached to female characters in films that span over three distinct periods in Disney animation is purposefully selective. At this point, what is missing from the review are scholarly sources that examine the animated construction of male characters in Disney. This brings us to the next major sub-section of the literature review which centres on the rhetorical construction of masculinity in animated films produced by Pixar and Disney, starting in the late 1990s.

Selected Research Analyzing the Animation of Male Characters in Three Generations of Disney Storytelling

Critical observations about the male protagonist template in early Disney animated films are uncommon. Perhaps this is because lead male characters are largely absent from princess

narratives and whenever they do appear, they are characterized as two-dimensional figures. For example, Towbin et al. claim that in first-generation princess films, Disney portrays masculine characters who “use physical means to express their emotions, ... are not in control of their sexuality, ... are naturally strong and heroic, ... [and] have non-domestic jobs” (28-30). Male figures in early Disney princess narratives play little import to the plot. First-generation Disney fairy tales, after all, emphasize the experiences of passive princesses who await keys to their kingdoms, often by way of marriage. The focus on female protagonists during the first- and second-wave of princess films has given us little insight about Disney’s male characters (Wooden and Gillam xi). A small body of scholarship, including the work of Jessica Birthisel, Ken Gillam and Shannon R. Wooden, Susan Jeffords, and Michael Macaluso, comprises the bulk of relevant criticism on the gendered bodies and roles of male characters in Disney animated media. These sources extend the basic account of masculinity offered by previous research and investigate changing configurations of male protagonists over the decades, namely: authoritative, the ‘New Man’, and post-feminist models of masculinity.

Until recently, scholars analyzing exemplars of masculinity in Disney animated features have focused on the presence of controlling patriarchs who must father their rebellious teenage daughters. For example, Litsa R. Tanner et al. describe some of the unique narrative features that characterize Disney’s father figures whenever their on-screen presence is prominent. The authors claim that a common feature in Disney animated films released since the late 1930s is the image of “fathers as controlling, aggressive, protective disciplinarians that expect their children to earn their love rather than giving it unconditionally” (Tanner et al. 363). Do Rozario explains that the absence of the mother in folk-tales and fairy-tales, which Disney often takes as its source material, “inadvertently reproduces the weight of male power” in classic Disney films (42).

Patterns of hegemonic masculinity also pervade CGI animated films, including those produced by Disney's Pixar after the millennium, claims Jessica Birthisel (336). In films such as *Monsters, Inc.* (2001) as well as *The Incredibles* (2004) and *Cars* (2006), big and strong male bodies are constant sources of power (342). As well, hetero-sexual pursuits, domineering masculine behaviours incited by competition, or tensions between male characters who struggle to gain respect, power, and "mates" (Birthisel 347) are among the patriarchal norms that Birthisel observes in and outside of the Disney archive as late as 2010 (349).

Raewyn. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt's concept of "hegemony," which refers to the assumed authority of certain types of individuals or groups over others, provides insight on the often invisible and unquestioned assumptions that inform dominant conceptualizations of masculinity in classic and more contemporary animation. Hegemonic masculinity follows this definition by describing "the currently most honored way of being a man" (Connell and Messerschmidt 832). To understand the power that hegemonic masculinity yields over opposing or contrasting forms of masculinity, it is important to note that masculinity, as a concept, is both relational and hierarchical (Connell and Messerschmidt 832). The ideal male is constructed in opposition to female bodies but also in contrast to subordinate male bodies. This ordering of masculinity excludes men and boys who rank low in a social hierarchy that places the superior males at the top (Connell and Messerschmidt qtd. in Birthisel 342). Thus, "hegemonic masculinity is contrasted against subordinate masculinity that excludes men and boys 'from the circle of legitimacy'" (Connell qtd. in Åström 300). This inner circle of acceptance is reserved for males who occupy socially-dominant positions of power, often deriving from their superior physiques. Elsewhere, Connell observes that "True masculinity is

almost always thought to proceed from men's bodies – to be inherent in a male body or to express something about a male body” (45).

While there remains much more work to be done in investigating hegemonic constructions of the hetero-normative, patriarchal male protagonist template in Disney, scholars have written extensively about other versions of masculinity in the Disney universe. For example, Ken Gillam and Shannon R. Wooden analyze Lightning McQueen and other anthropomorphic male characters produced by Pixar for their feminine qualities. In “Post-Princess Models of Gender: The New Man in Disney/Pixar,” the authors praise Pixar for promoting a revised model of masculinity, “one that matures into acceptance of its more conventional “feminine aspects”” (Gillam and Wooden 4). The animation studio, they explain, constructs male protagonists who “experience a common narrative trajectory, culminating in a common ‘New Man’ model” (“Post-Princess Models of Gender” 3). Exposed vulnerability, fearless sensitivity, and homo-sociality are defining characteristics of the revised masculine ideal Disney crafts beginning in the 1990s (Gillam and Wooden, “Post-Princess Models of Gender” 5). Although their work does not explicitly examine traditional “feminine aspects” which this new model of masculinity incorporates, their description of Disney’s ‘New Man’ implicitly points to a pattern where seemingly progressive presentations of masculinity reinforce narrow constructions of femininity. The quest for manhood, in most cases, involves the absorption of what Gillam and Wooden call characteristically feminine traits (“Post-Princess Models of Gender” 4). To my knowledge, there are few studies that examine what the feminizing of the male protagonist means for constructions of girlhood and womanhood. The analytical chapters of my dissertation attempt to fill this gap by describing how the man’s quest for change comes at a

cost to the female characters who are positioned as inferior and also relegated to conventional gender roles.

Primary male characters who undergo changes in films like *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Hercules* (1997), and *Tarzan* (1999) help to advance the image of the ‘New Man’ – the hard-bodied and domineering males who learn warmth and kindness, often from the young females who nurture them (Jeffords 165). Susan Jeffords is widely referenced in the scholarship that examines narratives of masculinity in this period. Focusing on the hero’s journey instead of the princess’s, Jeffords describes the muscular male physique as a curse or burden, suggesting that what men thought they were supposed to be – strong, protective, powerful – has somehow backfired and become their own evil curse (164, 167-168). The curse placed upon these brutes, as punishment for their lack of regard for others, can only be recuperated through acts of love and self-sacrifice which often stem from feminine teachings, explains Robyn McCallum (118). Referring to Disney’s adaptation of *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), Jeffords observes that “Belle is consistently cast as the Beast’s teacher” (168). Belle along with the entire house crew attempt to teach Beast how to perform the role of a gentle man. This is a pattern that is repeated in the films in my study where unsuccessful and un-heroic male characters, represented by Wall-E, Ralph, and Baymax, are placed onto a new path following their individual transformations. The result is a ‘New Man’, a slightly more subdued version of masculine heroism than earlier types, which, in addition to essentializing the male body, defines masculinity “as a social construction – a bundle of behaviours, a way of being in the world, which must be learned” (McCallum 117).

Overwhelmingly, Disney’s critics focus on the inner changes and not the outer-shells of Disney’s ‘New Men’ for most of these male characters already embody the ideal male physique. Rare are the studies that examine the physical makeovers that effeminate and grotesque male

characters passively undergo as part of their transformation programs. My research on the presentation of the fat and feminized male body (featured in Chapter Six – *Big Hero 6* (2014)) will, I hope, incite conversations around normative and non-normative physical constructions of masculinity within Disney’s makeover narratives.

Since 2000, another version or model of masculinity has surfaced in contemporary CGI Disney animation – the postfeminist hero – which Michael Macaluso describes as “a Disney man ... whose features fall somewhere in between these versions of hegemonic masculinity and the effeminate or absence of masculinity” (4, 6). Before I expand upon Macaluso’s definition and discuss the relevance of postfeminist masculinities to my research, it is important that I define the broad concept of postfeminism.

My understanding of the term is linked to the work of two feminist media scholars, Angela McRobbie and Rosalind Gill. Both approach postfeminism as a set of contradictory feminist discourses arising from media and popular culture (McRobbie 1; Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture” 148-149). I take as my starting point McRobbie’s assertion that “post-feminism positively draws on and invokes feminism ... to suggest that equality has been achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meaning which emphasizes that it is no longer needed” (12). The celebration of gender equality, female sexual freedom, and women’s economic independence, among other seemingly progressive messages pervading postfeminist media, circumvents the need for feminist political activity by suggesting that the goals of feminism have been met (McRobbie 11-12). Gill similarly engages with examples from popular media, showing us how postfeminism evokes the neoliberal language of personal choice, self-fulfillment, and female empowerment, but in doing so, reinscribes the female body as both an object of male desire and as a subject of intense scrutiny (“Postfeminist Media Culture” 153-156). The

empowered (white and hetero-sexual) neoliberal female subject is the embodiment of postfeminism. Her “body is visibly self-disciplined and glamorously adorned ... she performs in a way that serves to lessen the potential threat to patriarchy arising from her success in the labour force” (Kearney 265).

The simultaneous incorporation and repudiation of feminist ideals is apparent in makeover programs, which is one of several distinct themes Gill identifies as characteristic of a “postfeminist sensibility” (“Postfeminist Media Culture” 156-158). In transformation narratives, unsuccessful individuals are vilified for their deficiencies (Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture” 163). Transformations offer the potential for reinvention; this is an ongoing process that requires self-discipline and surveillance and often, a return to conventional gender roles and norms. This paradox is especially apparent in popular depictions of postfeminist fatherhood, which presents fathers as active participants who provide for their children emotionally as well as financially. Cultural images of fathers as involved and self-sacrificing care-givers have now become the masculine ideal, according to Hannah Hamad (7). The construction of “fatherhood as a manly pursuit” (Åström 116) is framed as sexually “desirable to women,” allowing the once vulnerable and crisis-inflicted male protagonists not only to recuperate their masculine deficiencies but to re-claim positions of power also as normative, hetero-patriarchs (Hamad 7).

Aside from recent investigations on changing constructions of fatherhood, postfeminist configurations of masculinity in Disney animated productions is an area of study that has not yet been sufficiently examined. Macaluso’s analysis of postfeminist heroes in recent Disney animated films is one exception, although his work tends to concentrate on the asymmetrical roles between the successful postfeminist female characters and their struggling, crisis-inflicted postfeminist male partners. Macaluso’s research, however, does confirm the existence and

recurrence of a postfeminist sensibility in recent animated films, namely, Disney's *Frozen* (2013) and *Incredibles 2* (2018). My research contributes to this emerging discussion, but focuses mainly on the transformative process as an opportunity for redemption. Exposing and critiquing the construction of the recuperated hero in Disney male-oriented films presents an opening for a study that examines how makeovers paradoxically contest and reproduce patriarchal discourses of masculinity.

Both the concept of the 'New Man' and the period in which shifting constructions of masculinity are documented by Disney scholars are relevant to my postfeminist reading of the masculine makeover motif because, like postfeminist accounts of masculinity, the 'New Man' reconfigures values associated with heterosexual masculinity by attributing caring qualities to men. Yet, postfeminist and 'New Man' models of masculinity can also revive traditional, patriarchal structures (Rumens 249-250). These configurations indicate the fluidity and hybridism of masculinity and as such, they should not be thought of as replacements for old and conventional formations of patriarchal masculinity, but rather, as amalgamations of masculinities that "can exist simultaneously" (Rumens 249).

The variety and discord of masculine configurations in postfeminist media culture raises questions about the state of masculinity as un-heroic and crisis-inflicted (Gill, "Powerful Women, Vulnerable Men" 194-197). Considering their contradictions, these updated and alternative versions of masculinity may turn out to be dated configurations of patriarchal masculinity taking form in new bodies and more socially inclusive roles, like fatherhood.

Overwhelmingly, Disney animated characters are part of larger narratives and discourses that reinforce traditional social hierarchies, placing female characters who exude physical beauty and hetero-marriageability at the top of an imaginary pecking order. Exemplars of masculinity

are similarly based on a hierarchical structure where male characters are praised for their strong and muscular physical appearance, for their ability to win the affection of female figures, for their exceptional skills as caring fathers who provide for their dependants, or for their acceptance into the mainstream now that they demonstrate a capacity for gentleness. As Wooden and Gillam state throughout their book, what appear to be broadly progressive texts promoting change are, in fact, overtly conventional tales about conformity.

Summary

The review of the critical literature on Disney confirms its status as a global cultural leader and recognizable brand that “promotes a largely conservative culture and ideology conducive to its own corporate interests” (Giroux and Pollock xiv). Contributions from Disney scholars provide a generative framework to explore how the American giant produces a mainstream worldview of gender – one that has been largely repeated, with minor variations, over more than 80 years and further reinforced through integrated marketing campaigns. This synergistic approach to marketing increases consumer exposure and expands engagement with Disney products both on and off-screen.

Despite long-standing and substantive criticism of the Disney princess motif, the Company’s classic female characters remain very much in circulation today with the re-release and re-makes of early films, and their ubiquitous presence at Disney’s parks and attractions as well as in many other sites The Walt Disney Company acquires year after year. Further, part of the hegemonic presentation of gender in Disney’s latest animated films is rooted in narratives that were written and drawn in the early twentieth century. A review of the literature on the rhetorical construction of gender from the late 1930s to 2019 shows that despite advancements in

animation technology and shifting cultural attitudes about gender, Disney does not produce more feminist characters and storylines, despite its attempts to occasionally diversify the overall appearance of its female and male protagonists as well as to modify the narrative patriarchal template by adding postfeminist attributes to its male characters, in particular.

Chapter Three – Methodological Approaches

Introduction

This chapter describes the research methods I employed to rhetorically analyze the masculine transformation narratives in *Wall-E* (2008), *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012), and *Big Hero 6* (2014). I begin with an overview of rhetorical criticism before describing ideological rhetorical criticism, the method of rhetorical analysis used in my research. The films were analyzed using a modified approach to ideological criticism that accounts for the sensorial and affective dimensions of rhetoric. In this chapter, I argue that an integrated ideological rhetorical analysis of animated film can reveal how body and role conformity materialize in a triad of symbolic modes and how their arrangement embeds audiences in its rhetoric in sensory-emotive ways (Dickinson and Maugh 260; Ott and Keeling 575). The term integrated is also apt given that I am combining two theoretical approaches to rhetorical criticism: ideological and material.

I begin with a description of key terms related to my methodological selections and outline the questions guiding my research. After justifying the selected films and providing a rationale for the characters under study, I outline the steps involved in doing an integrated rhetorical critique and describe the observational table I developed and used for my analysis. This section ends with a reflexive commentary on my embodied observations as a researcher who approached these films as sensorial texts. Specifically, I look at how my own abled-body played an important role in the process of attending to the multi-sensory dimensions of film. Finally, I discuss the complications and implications resulting from the research as well as the overall significance of my methodological selections.

Rhetorical Criticism of Film: A Qualitative Approach to Study Symbolic Modes and Functions

A qualitative research method, rhetorical criticism investigates how rhetoric achieves its effects on audiences. Understood within a Burkean context, rhetoric is the study of “words [or symbols] by human agents to form attitudes and to induce actions in other human agents”

(Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* 41-43). For Kenneth Burke, all language or symbol-use is a form of action (*On Symbols and Society* 77-79). According to Joseph R. Gusfield, this means that,

language must be understood by what it does, by how it affects the situation, the audience, to which it is addressed. Words are not empty folders, hanging in the air. They move audiences to responses and move the speakers to define and redefine their contexts. (Burke, *On Symbols and Society* 11)

However, verbal language constitutes but one of many symbolic systems “available for the communication of meaning” (Herrick 6). As James Herrick explains: “Musical notation and performance constitute a symbol system” just as “gestures, postures, and facial expressions allow actors to communicate with audiences symbolically but without employing the symbols of spoken language” (6). The rhetorical concept “symbolic action” thus refers to how symbolic systems or modes engage audiences by seeing, hearing, moving, thinking, and feeling in particular ways. As I aim to show, the symbolic action of the films under analysis is such that they touch and move audiences to identify with the male protagonists. At the same time, the symbolic actions of these texts equip audiences with strategies to think about and feel in certain ideologically-embodied ways because each one rhetorically enacts particular issues and emotions from a patriarchal, hetero-normative point-of-view.

In using language to name or describe a situation, rhetoric reflects certain aspects of reality while deflecting other possible selections of reality. Through his concept of “terministic screens,” Burke explains how language simultaneously selects, reflects, and deflects specific aspects of reality rather than others: “Even if any given terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a deflection of reality” (*Language as Symbolic Action* 45). Rhetoric thus constructs particular screens or worldviews that shape, frame, mediate, and constitute our experiences in the world. As Burke further explains:

We must use terministic screens, since we can't say anything without the use of terms; whatever terms we use, they necessarily constitute a corresponding kind of screen; and any such screen necessarily directs the attention to one field rather than another. Within that field there can be different screens, each with its ways of directing the attention and shaping the range of observations implicit in the given terminology. (Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action* 50)

While Burke uses the metaphor of terministic screens principally to describe the symbolic action of words, David Blakesley's *The Terministic Screen* shows its value for investigating the rhetorical action of film texts. The essays within this collection approach film as symbolic action by elucidating how symbolic selections and combinations in film can direct or deflect audience attention; “filtering what does and does not constitute and legitimize interpretation and, thus, meaning” (Blakesley 2-3). Like other symbolic systems, film is rhetorical in the sense that it “function[s] as a filter or screen, enabling some things to pass through clearly, obscuring or repressing others” (Blakesley 2). In this way, Burke's “terministic screens” is a valuable theoretical framework to examine how text, including film texts, communicate preferred versions

of reality through their symbolic modes, elements, and features. Therefore, I view the ideological-material analysis of the visual, aural, and kinesic symbolic modes of animated film as an important way of tracing the “terministic screens” that are enacted by my selected films.

To explicate and interpret the effects caused by the films requires an understanding of the “deliberate and conscious choice of symbols” employed by animators to induce such responses (Foss, *Rhetorical Criticism* 5-6; Foss, “Framing the Study of Visual Rhetoric” 307). My use of the term symbolic modes to name the communicative dimensions of film that I will be analyzing combines the terminology of rhetorical theory with concepts from social semiotics and multimodality. As Carey Jewitt explains, multimodal analysis moves away from abstraction and towards the materiality of semiotic systems; in this sense, symbolic modes are semiotic systems beyond strictly verbal language (2). In the context of my dissertation, the term modes refers to the use of visual, aural, and/or kinesic expressions employed by film creators to represent ideas or emotions, implicitly or by way of association or agreement. In linking semiotics and multimodality with rhetorical criticism, I not only locate and explicate three distinctive modes of symbolic action but also demonstrate how these modes are always interwoven and how their interaction is significant for meaning-making (Jewitt 15-16). Colours, shades, textures, lines, shapes, backdrops, lighting, camera positioning or angles are visual symbolic elements that persuade audiences to adopt particular points-of-view. I use the term symbolic elements to refer to specific aural and kinesic expressions as well, such as particular sounds or gestures. Symbolic features, including large eyes, raised eyebrows or other visual, aural, and/or kinesic details build characters’ physical profiles and/or elicit emotive responses, causing audiences to sympathize with characters. When visual symbolic elements and features are paired with voice-over-narration, dialogue, sound effects, and music, connections between characters and the audience

amplify as the latter adapts to the mood established by the films. Beyond their capacity to conjure up feelings of loneliness or emotive experiences through image, sound, and movement, these films affect audiences on ideological levels by presenting them with a limited account of what it means to be a hero, for instance. Body movements, which involve spatial positioning, posture, gestures, facial expressions, and their opposite, stillness, are also implicated in the production of a particular version of masculinity just as these features create moods of sadness, fear, or excitement, for example, and induce these in audiences.

Rhetorical criticism offers a systematic framework by which to examine these units of meaning and their implications. I developed an observational matrix inspired by Sonja Foss' four-step framework for rhetorical criticism from her book, *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*. These steps and the contents of the modified matrix I deployed are explained in detail in another section of this chapter. For now, I will discuss what motivated the adaptations and introduce the rhetorical orientations I drew upon to support one of my guiding assumptions: through symbolic selections and through the synchronization of image, sound, and movement, film has the capacity to instruct and arouse audiences.

Ideological Rhetorical Criticism

I use the term ideology to refer broadly to value-based systems of thinking about or frameworks for interpreting the world. An expanded version of this definition, however, includes the view that ideology is a social mechanism that subconsciously shapes our thoughts and actions. Like some of the rhetorical theorists, cultural theorists, and feminist scholars whom I cite throughout this dissertation, my use and understanding is influenced primarily by Louis Althusser's Marxist theories of ideology: ideology as a set of social practices and ideas produced

through a variety of mechanisms and institutions which have the capacity to affect belief and behaviour in ways that appear normal and obvious (96-97, 112-115). The Althusserian term “interpellation” describes the power of ideology and its effects on individuals. The central function of ideology, according to Althusser, is to “constitute” humans as subjects (116-117). Interpellation is the production or constitution of an ideological subject (Charland 138). To be interpellated is to occupy or enter into a subject position (Althusser 118). Interpellation is thus a rhetorical process in which individuals are encouraged to accept and internalize the values and motives they encounter in the discourse(s) that address(es) them (Charland 137-138). Following Althusser’s theory of interpellation, Maurice Charland claims that the process of interpellation “is ongoing, not restricted to one hailing, but usually part of a rhetoric of socialization” (138).

Ideology functions powerfully and inconspicuously to the point where its existence may go unnoticed and its effects unquestioned. This is a point that Marxist political philosopher and cultural critic Slavoj Žižek emphasizes in his 2012 documentary film, *The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology*, when, in the opening scene, he compares the function of ideology to a trash can from which we eat, claiming: “the material force of ideology makes me not see what I’m effectively eating” (*The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology* 2012).

The rhetorical critique of ideology, then, must involve an approach that makes it possible to expose the underlying attitudes and presuppositions that may otherwise remain unexamined (McPhail 340). Ideological rhetorical criticism provides critics with the tools to identify the communication of ideology(ies) and its operation in texts (Foss, *Rhetorical Criticism* 213-214). Prevailing belief systems and dominant social values are identified in the process. As I will demonstrate in the analytical chapters of my dissertation, diverse and competing ideologies can co-exist in texts despite the prevalence of a dominant ideology. By critiquing ideologies –

whether dominant or subversive in nature – we can become conscious of their presence and power, and subsequently, of the “legitimizing actions, policies, and silences relevant to the great issues of our time” (Wander 606).

Ideological criticism is the method I use to answer the overarching research question guiding this dissertation: what type(s) of male bodies and masculine role(s) are idealized in these animated films? I answer this main question by addressing the following sub-questions: how do the films give preference to particular models of masculinity and how are competing models of gender expressed to audiences?

When rhetorical critics are interested in rhetoric primarily for the privileging of the ideology of one group over that of other groups, their focus is on hegemony (Foss, *Rhetorical Criticism* 210). Thus, as a rhetorical critic, I focus on how animators renew and reinforce socially dominant notions of masculinity through rhetorical choices and strategies that may be easy to miss unless audiences are paying close attention to symbolic elements and features and their implied meanings.

In my research, ideological rhetorical criticism serves three main purposes. It provides a framework within which I explore the symbolic assortments and arrangements used to uphold gender ideals, particularly concerning the male body and masculine role conformity. At the same time, it serves as a lens through which I expose and interrogate hegemonic accounts of masculinity suggested by these films. I also use this method to examine whether and how the films incorporate new or alternative constructs of gender that potentially support or subvert a pecking order where physically superior and emotionally vulnerable male figures remain at the top while others are pushed to the bottom of Disney’s gender social hierarchy. For now, I turn to the procedures that critics often apply in the ideological analysis of texts and explain their

relevance to my integrated rhetorical examination of masculine transformation in *Wall-E* (2008), *Wreck-It-Ralph* (2012), and *Big Hero 6* (2014).

Ideological rhetorical criticism can enrich our understanding of how rhetoric functions on a micro-level with attention to the ways in which a multitude of symbolic elements and features combine to create conventional conceptualizations of masculinity. A central question to ask in an ideological rhetorical analysis is: how or through which symbolic elements and features are ideologies expressed? In the process of identifying or unmasking prevailing ideologies advanced by rhetors, critics scrutinize elements, from colour selections to musical composition, for their individual and collaborative functions in terms of shaping audience belief and behaviour. Selections and combinations of features, whether visual, aural, and/or kinesic, convey dense ideologies despite their simple and seemingly innocuous presence in film. To illustrate, I will synthesize some of my rhetorical interpretations about how the presentation of a male aggressor is marked by shapes, sounds, and gestures. The image of the temperamental brute that is individuated in Ralph, the lead male in *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012), emerges in a constellation of symbolic features: his square frame, the grunting sounds produced by his baritone voice, his penchant for physical violence and avoidance of affectionate gestures and contact. I write from the vantage point that all choices or decisions are rhetorical, meaning that the choices rhetors make are informed by ideology thus establishing a need to study how prevailing beliefs about masculinity are communicated. The question of how meanings materialize in and through symbol-use is emphasized here as a reminder of the importance of attending to what the films present to audiences. My aim in the next section is to outline and explain the process of doing ideological rhetorical criticism.

Critics' concerns with the ideological content of texts tend to focus on the ways rhetors influence their audience to adopt particular beliefs and behaviours that effectively shape the way the latter think about and act upon particular issues outside the world of film. Since the stated purpose of ideological criticism is to "explicate the role of communication in creating and sustaining an ideology," it makes sense to start with the basics; by exposing key elements that rhetors utilize to achieve their effects (Foss, *Rhetorical Criticism* 213). The first step I describe is part of a larger process developed by Sonja K. Foss and Marla Kanengieter "for the formulation of a message from an image" (315). I attended closely to the visual, aural, and kinesic dimensions of film guided primarily by their three-step procedure which is outlined in "Visual Communication in the Basic Course," only I extend their method and vocabulary, an approach that is inherently ocucentric, to also include audible elements (Foss and Kanengieter 314).

Steps one and two, "the identification of presented elements and the processing of elements" have been especially useful in terms of providing answers to foundational questions in my analysis of film: what do audiences see and hear in this frame, sequence, or scene? (Foss and Kanengieter 315). More precisely, what are the physical qualities of these symbolic elements? For example, are the shapes of the characters' bodies round or rectangular? Is the character close or distant from audiences? How does the male character's voice compare to others? What is or who is the source of the sound? How does the protagonist move and with what speed? Foss and Kanengieter describe presented elements as "physical data with which the viewer is confronted" (314). Ideological criticism, whether applied to film or other texts, generally begins with the observable or sensorial features employed by rhetors to invoke dominant, multiple, or competing ideologies. As critics identify and describe the presented elements within film, they also consider the meanings the selected symbolic element(s) and feature(s) is/are likely to have for audiences

(Foss “Framing the Study of Visual Rhetoric” 307). The exploration of preferred meanings is a crucial component of ideological criticism and it involves two phases, according to Foss and Kanengieter; “the identification and organization of the suggested elements” (315). Sample research questions relating to the identification of suggested elements include: “What kind of ideas, themes, or arguments are implied by a character’s excessively large and triangular-shaped body, his deep, baritone voice, and the slow and steady pace of his movements? Of greater significance to my analysis is the question of how preferred interpretations of masculinity emerge from a complex interplay among or between various symbolic modes, whether visual, aural, and/or kinesic. In approaching film as an integrated medium, I asked questions such as: what is significant or meaningful about the relationship between the close-up camera shot and the soothing background melody in this sequence? More generally, I questioned the possible meaning(s) generated by the interactions among features I considered to be salient. Next, I described the questions I asked to determine the significance of these rhetorical elements. I also discussed the limits of the interpretations I developed.

Returning to the process, critics then formulate an interpretation of the dominant ideologies expressed by suggested meanings, derived from the assortment of rhetorical features as well as their arrangement. In this stage of the analytical process, I considered both the physical and social constructions of masculinity thought to be ideal based on the presentation and organization of selected features and the meaning(s) they invoked within the texts and the wider cultural landscape in which they are part. The final step that Foss and Kanengieter describe does not involve deep reflection about how the politics of identity inform our interpretations of these texts nor does it acknowledge the role that prevailing systems of beliefs play in the formulation of messages and their ability to compel audiences to identify with characters, in the case of film

(Foss and Kanengieter 316-317). Perhaps this is because Foss and Kanengieter's basic method did not initially approach texts as serving ideological purposes. Elsewhere, however, Foss further develops this methodology by stressing the broader effects of a text's ideological content with the addition of a fourth step which involves exposing the effect(s) or purpose(s) served by the ideology or ideologies (Foss, *Rhetorical Criticism* 214).

David Blakesley's work on film rhetoric, especially his description of the wide-ranging functions of film in the broader culture, has further shaped my awareness of film's capacity to establish, stabilize, reinforce, critique, as well as to resist ways of thinking and being in the world (116). The following question, which has been applied to my analysis of my selected filmic characters, is influenced by Blakesley's insights: what values or belief systems do animators draw on to make their appeal(s)? Context plays a central role in the rhetorical analysis of ideologies as findings often lead to more complex revelations of what a text can tell us about the current state of masculinity, for example. The major results of my ideological analysis reveal that male characters are driven to transform themselves until they conform to an ideal(ized) version of masculinity which favours the strong, hetero-sexual male whose body is used as an instrument and whose capacity for gentleness often panders to postfeminist conceptualizations of socially inclusive forms of masculinity. In films such as *Wall-E* (2008), *Wreck-It-Ralph* (2012), and *Big Hero 6* (2014), Disney expands upon the male heroic ideal with the addition of non-conventional qualities, both physical and social, giving the illusion of progress. The fact that these male characters live in patriarchal and hetero-normative structures, however, suggests that these films are not completely open to changing nor challenging the ideals that support the power granted to each of these male-identified characters. By setting these stories in male-dominated settings, like the wrecking yard or battlefield, by casting female characters in lesser roles, whether as an erotic

object or child, and by promoting the male body as an essential source of power, the films foster identification with audiences as well. Audience identification with Wall-E, Ralph, and Baymax is assisted by the foregrounding of gender ideologies and sensorial features we may identify as “normal.”

Burke’s notion of “identification” is helpful to the extent that it explains the common sets of “substances,” whether assumptions, interests, experiences, or other, shared between filmic characters and audiences (Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* 19). Film encourages audiences to identify with characters, causing the former to become “consubstantial” with the latter “insofar as their interests are joined” (Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* 19). I apply the Burkean concept in my analysis when I ask: what kinds of ideological formations do animators draw upon to synchronize the characters’ experience with that of the audience? More generally, how do the films foster a sense of identification with audiences?

My overall goal in using ideological criticism is to identify select symbolic modes deployed in these animated stories, to find traces of both dominant and subversive ideologies about masculinity in micro-level details, from shapes to sounds, and to articulate their broader ideological functions. Because there is no single, definitive way to uncover how ideologies work in film, my approach incorporates insights from Disney scholars who attend not only to visual but also to aural and kinesic modes within the filmic construction of class, gender, race, and sexuality. While these scholars may not explicitly use ideological rhetorical criticism in their respective research, their findings certainly point to the symbolic action of film as well as the ideologies communicated through the visual, aural, and kinesic dimensions of the medium. Mostly, however, I draw on the research of rhetorical critics who blend together different

orientations and those who focus on multiple sources of expression to interpret and assess a text's ideological content.

The review of the critical scholarship on Disney led me to analyses that focus on the ideological functions of films' visual, aural, and kinesic dimensions. Disney scholars such as Lee Artz explore how stereotypes are communicated through the voices of certain characters. From Artz, I have learned that animated characters can be evaluated by "what they say and do, how they interact among themselves, how they are rewarded in the story, and, importantly in any audio-visual medium, how they look and sound" (7). Eleanor Byrne and Martin McQuillan's *Deconstructing Disney* likewise attends to the aural dimension of ideological construction, noting how Disney animates difference through specific auditory cues, including vocal selection, musical interlude, and lyrical content. They suggest that the high-energy melodies and catchy lyrics contain ideological content that might otherwise remain under-acknowledged:

Far from being mere adjuncts to the animated narrative, musical interludes between anthropomorphic action, these songs represent some of the decisive indices in which the Disney ideology is most securely embedded. (Byrne and McQuillan 8)

However, I have extended their aural and narrative analysis to include the film's kinesic features, drawing on research that provides an ideological interpretation of gendered movements in Disney animation. For example, Suzan Brydon's work on the constructed performance of mothering and Jessica Birthisel's examination of patriarchy and hetero-sexuality within and across a range of animated feature films are relevant not only because they take an ideological approach to film but also because they show how meanings about gender and their relations to power are bundled up in a constellation of modes beyond the visual. The integrated rhetorical

approach that I have used for my doctoral research thus contributes to and enriches the approaches taken by these Disney scholars.

In my review of the scholarship on ideological criticism, I encountered analyses of film that apply some of the procedures and concepts described above only without systematically adhering to the step by step process that Foss and Kanengieter developed to discover the ideologies embedded within. Thomas S. Frenzt and Janice Hocker Rushing as well as Thomas K. Nakayama are among some of the critics whose work I used as a model for doing ideological criticism of film. I draw on their research for other reasons as well: Frenzt and Rushing for their focus on both the presence and absence of visual elements and the role these play in the communication of ideologies and Nakayama for their close attention to the way visual and aural symbolic modes interact to advance dominant understandings of gender, race, and sexuality. Because my intent here is to highlight similarities in their methodological approaches, I begin by identifying the steps they follow to analyze both meanings and moods before discussing other insights gained from reading their respective approaches and interpretations.

Frenzt and Rushing's conjoined ideological/archetypical examination of the prey, the hunters, and the hunt for the shark in *Jaws* (1975), especially their attention to the ways in which film manipulates mood through imagery and cinematography, have modelled for me an approach that allows for the explication of the symbolic inclusions and omissions in the communication of ideology. The authors describe, in vivid detail, the film's opening scene where a "warm and sensual" mood is established as a result of "the blurred yellow and oranges" and the presence of "a beach picnic where attractive young people are roasting hot dogs" (Frenzt and Rushing 69). The warm and safe mood initially expressed by the presence of colour and imagery shifts once "the blonde soon-to-be victim and a young man run toward the water where the shark swims yet

unseen” (Frentz and Rushing 69). When Frentz and Rushing describe the meanings and moods conveyed by the presence of and relationship among the visual elements, they clearly draw on the first two steps outlined by Foss and Kanengieter. Frentz and Rushing also allude to the value of attending to the unseen. Paying close attention to moods conveyed through symbolic elements and features, such as the foreboding sense of fear communicated by the shark’s lurking presence, leads critics to the operation of ideology in texts, the third step in the application of ideological rhetorical criticism. As Frentz and Rushing’s study makes clear, the shark represents a “condensation of meanings” (79). It functions as an American hunter myth where males conquer the frontier while the hunters simultaneously (1) represent a new class politics and (2) reconstitute masculine heroism (Frentz and Rushing 79). On a more fundamental level, the shark, according to Žižek, functions “to unite all of these fears [e.g. of class struggle, of the feminine threat, etc.] so that we can in a way trade all these fears for one fear alone” (*The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology* 2012). Žižek’s insights foreground the value in attending to the fundamental function of ideology in constituting the fantasies and beliefs that structure our reality(ies) (*The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology* 2012).

Ideological criticism is also applied in Nakayama’s “Show/Down Time: ‘Race,’ Gender, Sexuality, and Popular Culture,” which centralizes the visual construction of race and gender in the 1991 film, *Showdown in Little Tokyo*. The procedures Nakayama invokes to rhetorically analyze visual markers of Asian and white masculinity are consistent with the steps outlined by Foss and Kanengieter and others who have applied this method after them. Focusing on various visual elements, including cinematography and imagery, Nakayama concludes that the film articulates a dominant ideology of white hetero-sexual masculinity with its visual presentation of “hyper[-]masculinized torsos; bulging arms, pectorals, and broad shoulders covered with

elaborate tattoos” (370-371). By directing audience attention to the fragmented bodies of these male characters which is marked in “the camera’s tight focus on the torso from waist to neck,” the film “ensures that our eyes never stray to a more sexual gaze” (Nakayama 371). As far as race is concerned, Nakayama claims that the image of the Asian Other is partially cued in aural and visual elements; the heavy background music combined with the camera’s emphasis on their muscular arms carrying swords as well as a gun “reinforces the cultural coding of a threatening atmosphere in a foreign (‘Oriental’) context” (371). The sequence Nakayama describes here underscores the intersections among race, gender, and sexuality in the visual and aural construction of the body. Nakayama’s integrated approach serves as another useful model for an integrated rhetorical inquiry.

I have also benefited from reading ideological analyses of built environments, such as commemorative spaces, with each applying similar methodological processes that engage with identity construction within these sites. Dickinson, Ott, and Aoki’s criticism of the American Buffalo Bill Museum reveals that the compelling historical narrative offered to tourists is communicated at the expense of “forgotten oppressions and rejections of the [Indigenous] ‘Other’” (“Memory and Myth” 102). Their assertion that the museum functions to deny pre-settler historical versions of the American West, preferring instead to collect, exhibit, and represent stories and texts that privilege images of White, rugged masculine heroism, is based on an analysis of the rhetorical practices museum staff employ to tell the myth of the American frontier (Dickinson, Ott, and Aoki, “Memory and Myth” 86-87). Elsewhere, their rhetorical analysis of the Plains Indian Museum brings an additional understanding of the design elements featured within the historical centre and the demands such features impose upon visitors (Dickinson, Ott, and Aoki, “Spaces of Remembering and Forgetting” 344). I adapt their

observations about how texts engage visitors on multi-sensorial levels and apply it to sections of my analysis where I describe how film embeds audiences through the senses of seeing and hearing.

Concerns about our embodied experiences and affective encounters, whether at the museum or at the movies, are well documented in the scholarship on rhetorical criticism, albeit most research in this area has been taken-up by those working from a perspective of rhetorical materialism. While there are many strands of materialism, the theoretical orientation I rely on considers how bodies are incorporated into or affected by the sites and senses encountered.

Material Rhetorical Criticism and Film Theory

To better understand how symbolic modes function alone and in association with one another to influence audiences' particular ways of thinking and feeling, I turn to critics who study rhetoric from a material perspective with their concern for matters relating to rhetoric and embodiment. I begin with the work of Carole Blair, who applies a framework for analyzing dimensions of materiality in physical spaces. In a widely-cited chapter within *Rhetorical Bodies*, Blair studies memorial sites to understand how the selection and staging of material objects (e.g. statues) and immaterial features (e.g. soundscapes), among other rhetorical choices, may be received by tourists. From Blair's perspective, materiality refers to the presence and assemblage of material and immaterial features (tactile and aural, for example) that constitute these memorial sites and their capacity to influence museum visitors in an embodied sense (Blair, "Contemporary U.S. Memorial Sites" 46). In "Reflection on Criticism and Bodies: Parables from Public Places," Blair records her embodied observations during several visits to the Holocaust Memorial Museum. While Blair's descriptions about the specific elements of architectural design

inside the space are limited, her notes describing their physical and psychological effects are extensive. Her detailed explication of the claustrophobia, disorientation, and anxiety she experienced in the presence of the construction materials and contents of the exhibits demonstrates how bodily responses to rhetoric is an important area of research (Blair 808).

Blair's question, "How does the text act upon people?," is one that I pursued by identifying rhetorical strategies, including the design choices rhetors use to deliver a particular mood or preferred experience to audiences ("Contemporary U.S. Memorial Sites" 30). I expand this line of inquiry by asking: how do symbolic selections and strategies encourage audiences to identify with the characters, adapting to their joy, fear, sadness, and other sentiments that may materialize in the intersections among visual, aural, and kinesic filmic elements? The integrated nature of my rhetorical study and its emphasis on both the meaning and material effects of film rhetoric calls for the formulation of an expanded framework; namely, an approach that allows me to locate expressions of gender and power in a constellation of symbolic modes and their ability to act upon audiences on two distinct but connected and reinforcing levels: the ideological and the embodied. Blair's statement that rhetorical critics "must ask not just what a text means but, more generally, what it does" emphasizes rhetoric's capacity both to shape thoughts and attitudes and to provoke sensations or experiences (Blair, "Contemporary U.S. Memorial Sites" 23). Similarly, Brian L. Ott and Diane Marie Keeling separate these effects, drawing boundaries between the two: "Whereas the symbolicity of rhetoric elicits primarily 'meaning effects,' the materiality of rhetoric induces principally 'presence effects' – that touch and move bodies in sensory-emotive ways" (575). However, though distinct, symbolicity and materiality function together. Greg Dickinson and Casey Maugh, for example, explicitly connect the sensorial and the ideological. In their multi-sensorial analysis of Wild Oats Marketplace, they scrutinize the

shopping site for ways that sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch combine to engender a nostalgic ideology of locality, naturalness and community (260). Their method is relevant for it centralizes the sensorial dimensions of a seemingly mundane experience (such as shopping for groceries or viewing an animated film) and links these to ideologically-loaded notions of place and belonging. A second and more pragmatic reason for citing Dickinson and Maugh is their focus on presented elements with references to the size of buildings, the sight of potted plants, fresh-cut flowers, colourful produce, and a range of other interior and visual design elements that, when combined, “sew[s] the visitor into the fabric of Wild Oat’s rhetoric” (265). I find their method adaptable to my study with its focus on the strategic use of basic observable features that promote a sense of comfort and connection; sentiments that film rhetors try to extend to the audience in the most persuasive way by appealing to their sense of sight and hearing, in particular.

Ott and Keeling’s “Cinema and Choric Connection: *Lost in Translation* as Sensual Experience” is another excellent model for the study of the material-sensorial elements and effects of cinema. Their framework, which also focuses on aesthetic selections and combinations of visual and aural dimensions, is more complex than Dickinson and Maugh’s as it examines the proprieties of these elements, their attendant meanings, and their embodied implications. Ott and Keeling describe how a state of ennui is partially realized by manipulating tempo and tone, the physical properties of sound and colour. Their attention to the central mood of loneliness in *Lost*, which is cued by disparities between the individual properties and the relationship among these elements, tells me there is value in naming, describing, and comparing sound and colour, or the rhythm of sequences and scenes, for example. Ott and Keeling imply that rhythm is expressed in a full range of filmic features: cinematography, soundscape, and colour composition, for

example; setting the pace for the desired level of engagement required of audiences (579). Rhythm delineates the established categories of visual composition and sound design. Its ‘presence’ can be sensed in three different ways: we hear it, we see it, and we feel it” (Block 198).

Further, I apply Ott and Keeling’s insights about the presence of rhythm and how it materializes in and among visual and aural elements to kinesic elements as well, which Devito describes as “bodily movements ... dependent upon ... particular social and cultural systems” (29). In my observational matrix, references to rhythm are separated into three categories for organizational purposes; in practice, rhythm is expressed in and among visual, aural, and kinesic components of film. Other filmic elements, such as the textured surface of bodies and clothes or the spatial arrangement of character and objects, are equally difficult to fit into a single category. These visual cues are generally associated with or accompanied by sound effects and other design elements that work together; they shape each other to give the impression of a smooth surface or to suggest that characters are in close proximity to each other. To this end, symbolic elements and their qualities in terms of tempo, tone, and texture function as expressions of value, producing what Ott and Keeling call “meaning effects” (575). This concept closely resembles Foss and Kanengieter’s “suggested elements” (315).

So far, I have discussed Ott and Keeling’s contributions to my understanding of the properties of visual, aural, and kinesic elements with some consideration of their meaning functions, with little attention to their observations about film as embodied experience. They do however also provide some insights for doing a rhetorical analysis that gives preference to the material. Their term “presence effect” emphasizes film’s capacity to create moods that transcend the boundaries between the fictional world of cinema and that of the audience. It is for this

reason that Ott and Keeling claim that film engages us as participants rather than as spectators (578). I extend the logic of their theory about audiences as participants and apply it to my own experience as a rhetorical critic whose body was affected in the process of studying the multi-sensorial dimensions of these films for the purposes of rhetorical analysis. As an affective medium, film has the capacity to act upon the whole body, affecting our impressions of characters and the general moods we experience (Blair, "Contemporary U.S. Memorial Sites" 46). The type of embodied experience I describe here aligns with Blair's account of materiality in "Reflection on Criticism and Bodies: Parables from Public Places." Blair's point is that more attention needs to be paid to the material presence of visitors at the Holocaust Museum whose bodies are actively incorporated in its rhetoric. She notes that rhetoric "teaches somatically" and needs to be understood in terms of what it does, or more accurately, how it acts upon the bodies of museum visitors, grocery shoppers, film-goers, and all others who become enmeshed into the two and three-dimensional worlds they inhabit (Blair, "Reflections on Criticism" 808).

By focusing on the materiality of our experiences, Blair suggests that bodies may be studied as both object and method. I understand the term body as object to mean the physical or material body; its physical, tangible features. My research considers the (im)material bodies of central male characters with attention to the multimodal design elements used to animate their physiques. Body as method, on the other hand, refers to sensual, perceptual ways of knowing (Ahern 38). Although I did not explicitly pursue this kind of embodied method in my research, my analysis aimed to explore how audience identification with the characters is induced through sensorial and emotional appeals.

Film theory serves as a bridge, linking the symbolic elements and features within the internal world of the film to the embodied effects within the external experiences of audiences.

Like rhetorical materialism, film theory accounts for the way rhetoric connects with audiences on emotional and visceral levels, beyond the sensorial experience of seeing and hearing. Film theorists like Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, for example, study films to understand what they do to our bodies, accounting for the emotions they arouse and the way they engage skin, muscles, and all. My rhetorical criticism of Disney animated films addresses questions about embodiment, including how films make audiences feel closely connected to what the films make us think about. In Burke's playful explanation, ideology and embodiment are inherently connected. Burke compares ideology to "a spirit that takes up its residence in a body;" it "makes that body hop around in certain ways; and that same body would have hopped around in different ways had a different ideology happened to inhabit it" (*Language as Symbolic Action* 6). As audiences, our bodies become enmeshed in the filmic texture as a combination of symbolic modes provoke sensations. In this sense, the material or embodied is connected to the ideological insofar as embodied experiences shape ways of seeing, hearing, moving, thinking, feeling, and being. As audiences, our bodies become enmeshed in the filmic texture as a combination of symbolic modes provoke sensations.

To illustrate how an integrated rhetorical approach to ideological and material criticism works within my research, I outline the process I undertook to identify and interpret selected symbolic elements and features in these films and articulate both the meaning and presence effects these are likely to evoke in audiences.

The Study: Applying Ideological-Material Rhetorical Criticism

Thus far, I have discussed ideological rhetorical criticism as my preferred methodological approach. I now describe how I applied this hybrid methodology to analyze how meanings about

patriarchal, hetero-masculine heroism emerge in a triad of filmic features and what types of messages these films articulate, reinforce, or suppress to the embodied and emotionally-involved audience. As outlined previously, the analytical process I employed consists of four steps. Each step will be discussed in greater detail after I provide a rationale for the three animated films as well as the characters I have selected as texts for criticism. I also discuss why I think Disney animation is particularly well suited for a study that examines the rhetorical production of gender.

Selected Texts: The Films, their Male Characters, and their Thematic Similarities

My rhetorical analysis brings together three animated films: *Wall-E* (2008), a post-apocalyptic romantic narrative, and *Wreck-it- Ralph* (2012) and *Big Hero 6* (2014), both buddy films that place their protagonists and sidekicks on hero quests. Despite their generic differences, all three texts reproduce ideals of masculinity that (younger) audiences are likely to identify with. Three central male characters were selected: Wall-E, Ralph, and Baymax. These films and the likeable figures they feature warrant rhetorical analysis because of their thematic similarities. In each film, we find a male-identified character who is forced to reinvent himself. All three films are similar in that they each express anxiety about the vulnerable, exposed, effeminate, and grotesque male body. It is through similar transformative processes that Wall-E, Ralph, and Baymax rid themselves of undesirable masculine traits and thus reclaim their status as powerful male characters with gentler sensibilities.

Wall-E the robot, Ralph the avatar, and Baymax the automaton, are all artificial figures. In the context of my study, the term artificial refers to “an imaginary being who is partially or fully anthropomorphic, mechanical, or constructed from a variety of technological or natural

materials and considered autonomous, animated, or capable of being animated” (Kakoudaki 3). These constructed male characters are positioned as inferior and insufficiently masculine until they are made over. Those whose physiques are deemed grotesque are subject to physical alterations where round shapes and soft surfaces are replaced with triangular figures made of hard canvases, for example. Similarly, bodies and roles considered to be insufficiently masculine, whether expressed through sounds of sorrow or suffering, nervous hand gesticulations or stillness, gradually fade away once these characters harden through the power they acquire following their physical or social transformations. In the end, Wall-E, Ralph, and Baymax fit into familiar formulations of masculinity with hints of tenderness, nurturance, and other qualities that defy Disney’s traditional hero type. When seemingly progressive changes to the male body or behaviour occur within these films, it is almost always intertwined with the trappings of conventions: Wall-E’s fear of Eve and all that is dangerous is secured within a hetero-sexual narrative; expressions of sympathy and acts of kindness toward others become part of the new Ralph, who retains his hard body as well as his use of brute force regardless of his inner transformation. Finally, Baymax’s physical alterations correspond with a shift in his role and relationship with the young boy, which sees the fat and feminized robot transform into the image of a ‘bot’ fighter and friend to Hiro.

The masculine figure made popular by Disney in both the first- and second-wave is repeated in contemporary animation, only this time, the makeover motif subtly incorporates echoes of the old macho hero-type with more contemporary postfeminist conceptualizations of masculinity which gives the impression of change and growth. Self-sacrifice, a desire to belong, and displays of care and nurturance for the young and vulnerable, are additional features incorporated into Disney’s masculine prototype – a trend that Susan Jeffords noted in the 1990s

with Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) (165-166). Yet, even today, Disney cycles back to traditional gendered performance as they continue to reward heroes who embody speed, strength, and bravery with acceptance from their peers and/or female affection. Overwhelmingly, the male characters who fail to conform to this model are subject to discipline, ridicule, or worse. In the case of villains, termination is likely, for the animated films tell us that these dislikable male figures will never achieve the image nor the ideals set out by Disney. By constructing Wall-E, Ralph, and Baymax so similarly to the heroes of Disney's past, it re-circulates out-dated understandings, assumptions, and expectations about body and role conformity which may promote structures or relations of inequality as well as other marginalizing practices. Returning to their possible cultural influence, these films articulate an ideology of masculinity in which acts of bravery, aggression, lust, affection, and forms of self-discipline "not only dominate, but 'normalize'" (MacKinnon 23). This view, however, oversimplifies the role of Disney, and of media, as an instrument of hegemonic capitalist ideology. Ideologically normative messages are not always accepted by audiences whose gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and class positioning leads to the differential reading of a text: dominant/hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional (Hall 125-127). Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model of media reception emphasizes the role of the audience and the context they bring to bear in the production of meaning. The meanings derived by audiences during the decoding process are influenced by their social positioning and as such, the dominant meaning of a text is never guaranteed. The same logic applies to audience identification with a character, which is never total nor guaranteed. However, while distance from characters and resistance to dominant meanings encoded in texts are certainly possible, Hall's work retains a strong focus on the limits of possible meanings: "Unless they are wildly aberrant, encoding will have the effect of constructing some of the limits and parameters within

which decodings will operate. If there were no limits, audiences could simply read whatever they liked into any message” (125). Given the demographic profile of the Disney films’ target audience (gender and age, in particular) and in light of Hall’s insights on the limits of polysemy in his audience reception theory, I take the position that young audiences who are experiencing these films are likely to share the texts’ encoded meanings regarding masculinity. These preferred meanings rest upon and pander to traditional understandings of masculinity that draw on other markers of privilege and difference to secure the place of the hard-bodied, labouring male who is presumed to be hetero-sexual. Images of robust male figures who protect loved ones and fight against evil dominate, generally subsuming preferred conceptualizations of body size, economic class, and hetero-sexuality through the use of familiar tropes and stereotypes that audiences may recognize.

When we add to this the range of senses and emotions invoked when experiencing these films, it becomes clear that the body is fully immersed into the narrative and also feels the reverberation of the hero’s journey: the ups (the joy and pride he experiences as he attains power and gains acceptance) as well as the downs (the loss, longing, and loathing he encounters along the way) (Griffin, Harding, and Learmonth 886). The films give rise to ideologies in an embodied sense by inviting us to experience these emotions which are often linked to expressions of male vulnerability. For example, the films provoke laughter whenever Ralph’s gut spills out of his tight armour; they evoke sadness anytime Wall-E stares into the distance, searching for Eve’s affection; and they create a mood of fear and anxiety when Ralph fights to save his friends from destruction. In each case, the emotions we feel connect closely with norms and expectations about body size, gendered occupations, and sexual orientation. Film viewing is far from a distant experience of observation as audiences are actively incorporated into the

stories and the protagonists' plight. The emotions the characters express in these moments often extend to audiences, resulting in a shared experience between film and spectator.

Identification is further induced through these films by virtue of their form. For audiences who inhabit the animated world created by Disney, a sense of connection with characters is assisted by cinematic strategies and animation technology that produce an illusion of realism. Close-up camera shots capturing expressions of sorrow, ambient noise featuring chatter in the distance, cued at the exact moment when tears begin to form, combined with slow and sentient gestures, gives characters a sense of humanity or substantiality that audiences identify as being true-to-life. The selection and layering of visual, aural, and kinesic features in each cel or frame is, as Blakesley puts it, an "expression of value, a choice among alternative means of representation or among the myriad objects that might be represented in the first place" (115). By directing our attention to a character's eyes instead of his feet and by cuing noise produced not by the characters but by ambient sounds in the background, audiences experience both the sentiments and the setting along with the character. As the results of my analysis show, meanings are established and reinforced by sequencing or layering symbolic modes which strengthens the films' impact both on ideological and material levels.

Rhetorical Analysis of Texts: A Multi-Step Process

In this section, I describe how the films were analyzed using a hybrid approach modelled on Foss and Kanengieter's basic procedure for doing ideological rhetorical criticism which I have outlined previously. Because there is no uniform way to uncover how ideologies materialize in films, I have modified the four-step process in two ways. First, by identifying and analyzing the salient visual, aural, and kinesic features film creators used to invoke characters

with preferred masculine bodies and roles which audiences are likely to recognize and relate to. Secondly, by exploring how symbolic modes work individually or collaboratively to foster identification with characters and to induce audience (re)action.

To help organize my findings, I developed an analytical table consisting of six columns: 1. film under study, 2. context for analysis (which contains scene summaries, significant frames, as well as important filmic techniques used by animators to create a mood, to develop character, or to build the narrative), 3. units of analysis (where I list and describe the presented elements; this column is further divided into three sub-categories: visual, aural, and kinesic), 4. units of analysis (where I list and describe the invisible and inaudible features used to reinforce particular meanings and/or moods), 5. additional notes from the analysis (which includes my observations about emerging patterns resulting from the interaction between or among the symbolic elements and features, and finally, 6. results of the analysis (where I record my impressions about what the features imply about masculinity. A sample table that I completed for the opening scene in *Wall-E* (2008) appears below (see table 1).

Table 1

A Sample Chart of Research Findings Used for the Analysis of *Wall-E* (2008) Where the Most Significant Findings are Highlighted in Yellow

<i>Wall-E</i> (2008)	Context for Analysis:	Units of Analysis: Presented Elements	Units of Analysis: Neglected Elements	Additional Notes from Analysis: Emerging Patterns	Results of the Analysis: Suggested Meanings
Scene 1: <i>Out There</i>	Scene Summary: Audiences learn that planet Earth is inhabitable. Amidst mountains of debris, a solitary robot	Visual: -The scene opens with images from outer space before zooming in on planet Earth. -Brown and grey hues are prominent. -Cloud and dust are visible in the opening sequences.	Visual: -In the opening scene, there is a lack of blue and green hues. -With the exception of Wall-E's	-The contrast between aural and visual features in the first minute of the film is telling. Hope fades as the camera zooms in on a barren landscape. Meanwhile, the upbeat song from the	- Barren landscape - Abandoned wasteland -Organic life exists. -Wall-E: a sentient robot whose industrious

	<p>cleans the wasteland. No other sign of organic life seems possible until a cockroach emerges. Together, robot and insect journey across the barren landscape.</p> <p>Film Techniques:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Aerial shots of the cityscape, mostly providing an aerial view of buildings and garbage. -Many wide shots of the cityscape with emphasis on Wall-E's movements. -A few low-angle shots of Wall-E's core appear as well. <p>Frame Selections:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Wall-E's movements are first introduced at 2:13. -At 2:38, a tight close-up shot of Wall-E emphasizes his core. -At 2:49, the first sign of organic life appears as a cockroach emerges from a pile of debris. -The camera reveals a profile of Wall-E's body, emphasizing his 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mountains of debris appear in the background. These piles look like sky scrapers. -Wall-E's core consists of rigid lines that combine to create a set of quadrilateral shapes. -Images of Wall-E's lunch box are prominent in this scene. -Wall-E's ocular features are made up of circular shapes. -Logos for "BnL" (Buy N Large) are visible on outdoor signage. <p>Aural:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The song: "Put on your Sunday Clothes," from the musical, <i>Hello, Dolly!</i> (1969), plays in the background. - The sounds of scratchy speakers are audible as soon as the opening song fades out. -Wall-E's moving tracks are audible. -The soft sound of moving clouds and dust or dirt is heard. -The sounds of a living creature are audible in this scene. -The first sound emerges from Wall-E at 2:58. -At 3:12, we learn that Wall-E has control of the background music. He plays, records, and stops music. Wall-E has some control of the film's aural features. -An exchange of vocal sounds between the robot and the cockroach (Hal) is 	<p>eyes, there are few circular shapes in Scene 1.</p> <p>Aural:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -There is no dialogue in the opening scene. <p>Kinesic:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -There are very few upward or vertical movements in this first scene. 	<p>1969 musical continues to play despite the apparent gloom.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The fact that Wall-E is in control of the song is noteworthy. This suggests that <i>Wall-E</i> (2008) is a film that is aware of its own construction. This could make audiences uneasy as the relationship between the cinematic body and the spectral body is open. - Narratively, there is emphasis on the relationship between robot and insect. In one sequence, viewers observe Hal, the cockroach as it enters Wall-E's core. As Hal, the cockroach, crawls inside of Wall-E, sounds of pleasure (e.g. laughter) are audible. In an earlier sequence, overlapping sounds of excitement are audible as the robot and the cockroach interact. Visual and aural features combine so as to confirm that a special relationship exists between machine and organism. 	<p>nature helps him to cope with his solitude.</p>
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	<p>“boxy” posterior at 2:55. -At 3:00, the robot reaches for Hal, the cockroach. -At 3:28, we observe an establishing shot of a wasteland. Wall-E’s movements are in focus. The camera then zooms out to reveal a panoramic view of a barren setting. The title “Wall-E” fades into focus.</p>	<p>heard from 3:18 to 3:20. -As the title appears, eerie music (emphasis on piano chords) plays in the background. <u>Kinesic:</u> -We see Wall-E’s movements before we see his face, core, and tracks. -Wall-E’s fast-moving tracks are often emphasized in this first scene. -Wall-E’s movements are similar to a garbage truck. -Wall-E’s core opens and closes with the push of a button. -His robotic rhythm is emphasized in this first scene as he collects, compresses, and crushes piles of debris. -Wall-E’s eye movements reveal a range of facial expressions, from surprise to confusion.</p>		
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I completed one table for each of the three films. Each table ranged from 177 to 293 pages depending on the total number of frames and/or scenes for each film and the extent of the monologue and dialogue I transcribed with the help of sub-titles. I then undertook the four steps I described earlier for each film, working on one film at a time.

Step 1 - Columns 3 and 4: Identifying Presented Features: Crank, Pause, and Repeat

The analysis began with the identification of the primary symbolic elements and features in these films for suggestions of gender transgression and/or conformity. Within each film, we find gender normative constructs operating at micro-levels, from the lines that give shape to a character’s over-sized body to vocal qualities used to voice to the protagonist’s longing for

hetero-sexual partnership. This initial step served as a way to name, classify, and describe these basic components or micro details based on three distinct symbolic modes.

In the first sub-category, I attended to visual elements and cinematic strategies: the colours, textures, lines, shapes, sizes, background settings, lighting, camera shifts, angles, and perspectives by which films communicate meanings and moods to audiences (see table 1). I relied on the established vocabulary of film rhetoric, visual communication, and film theory to effectively identify and later interpret visual data using cinematic terms. David Blakesley, Bruce Block, Sonja K. Foss and Marla Kanengieter, as well as Brian L. Ott and Diane Marie Keeling are key sources of influence in this area, helping to enrich my vocabulary of the visual and cinematic techniques while extending my understanding of what these visual cues mean and what they do to or demand of audiences. The second sub-category contains notes relating to the manipulated soundscape that rhetors employed to deliver ideological expressions or to emotionally engage their audiences (see table 1). Character voices (their accent and diction as well as their vocal properties in terms of pitch, tempo, and volume), voice-over narration, monologue, dialogue, sound effects, and background music (score and soundtrack) were recorded with the assistance of the scholarship on sound studies and auditory rhetoric. Katherine Fargo Ahern coins the term “auditory rhetoric” in her doctoral dissertation, which she describes as the study of sounds produced with choice and intention (1-2). All sounds, whether ambience (meaning the sounds produced within a particular setting such as a police station) or audio effects (such as the high-pitched sound produced by a ringing door-bell or a hammer, for instance) are the result of a process of selection, production, and editing and thus are rhetorical for they influence what and how we hear. My inquiry into the rhetorical dimensions of the films’ soundscapes is also influenced by sound studies. I mostly drew upon the work of Robynn J.

Stillwell, Jennifer Fleegeer, as well as Johnny Wingstedt, Sture Brändström and Jan Berg for they provide a consistent vocabulary to study the elements of sound and more importantly, because they bring aural elements into conversation with visual and kinesic features in film. In the third sub-category, I directed my gaze to the body movements of characters with a focus on posture, gesture, and a range of facial expressions used to animate Wall-E, Ralph, and Baymax (see table 1). I also attended to the characters' spatial positioning, meaning where they sat, stood, or moved in relation to others as well as the overall speed of their (in)actions. Through their elaborate descriptions of bodily performances, Suzan G. Brydon, Elizabeth Bell, and Lisa Perrott have expanded my vocabulary of the kinesic features animators draw upon to give life to inert objects and fictional characters and their capacity to engender a sense of empathy and identification in audiences.

Studying one film at a time, my strategy for the analysis of presented elements was fairly systematic; I established a set of criteria for the selection of presented and neglected elements, which I describe below. I then studied the films in 60-second increments, starting with aural features, followed by the examination of kinesic attributes, and ending with an analysis of visual elements. I employed a rigorous process of revision during the second screening of each film as I reviewed the notes of my initial observations, only this time I screened the films on a scene-by-scene basis to examine, once again, the symbolic elements and features of significance. This second phase also included occasional reviews of the scholarship on visual communication, film theory, rhetorical criticism, and sound studies to ensure accurate use of terminology. Finally, this first step ended with a third screening, performed on a scene-by-scene basis for each film which considered the integration among the three symbolic modes. By amplifying sound, freezing

frames, and repeatedly viewing on-screen motion, I set out to locate and explicate some of the most meaningful rhetorical features that often proved hardest to identify.

I first focused on the aural features simply because I thought it would be the least complicated unit to study. I began the project under the (false) assumption that sound would be easy to identify and describe once I developed knowledge of and acquired the language of sound. I soon learned that close attention to sound demanded far more physical and emotional focus than I would have ever imagined. To fully engage in my sensory capacity, I amplified the volume on my headphones and turned off my computer screen. By limiting visual distractions, I could heighten my auditory sense and clearly identify the sound world of animated film. Over the course of a minute, a series of sounds are intermittently combined with dialogue, music, and instrumental melodies, for example. Before I could make sense of these sounds and their suggested meanings, I identified and described all that was audible in each minute of each film. As part of this process, I also transcribed every line of dialogue by enabling the sub-title feature for each film. Reading sub-titles helped to ensure that my transcriptions were as accurate as possible. During the second round of aural observations, I reviewed each scene and my notes describing the presented elements in this sub-category with the aim of finding features that I may have missed initially, while correcting possible errors in my notes. I often reviewed the scholarship on sound studies to ensure I was properly identifying and describing aural elements of significance. Aural features were then highlighted in yellow if they met the following criteria: related to a central male character, functioned as expressions of masculinity with emphasis on body or role conformity, and/or served as a means to unify the experience of the characters with that of the audience (see table 1). I applied the same criteria when identifying, describing, and highlighting the other two symbolic modes under rhetorical examination.

Visual markers such as colours, textures, shapes, and backdrops were relatively easy to identify and describe given that our culture is primarily visual. Rare were the moments where I had to question the type of shape or shade I was referring to in my recorded observations of visual features presented in each film. The same logic applies to the naming and descriptions I produced for characters' bodily performances which I group with visual elements here since both required the same approach although they are organized as distinct sub-categories in my table (see table 1). The process of analyzing these features was made easier once I added a large-screen monitor used for the purposes of playing, pausing, and replaying frames I believed to be rich with visual and kinesic signification. Again, visual and kinesic cues were assessed based on whether they were related to one of the three central male characters under study, whether they helped to advance an ideology about the male physique and/or masculine behaviour, and whether or not these features helped to foster identification or induce audience reaction in a way that drew them closer to the characters. These findings were then highlighted (see table 1). Particular meanings about gendered bodies and behaviours became hyper-visible once I began to freeze frames and replay tracks; practices that helped to focus my attention on a number of subtle aspects that I would have missed had I not engaged in multiple screenings of these frames and sequences. I paused and repeated frames and sequence until I felt satisfied I had fully explicated relevant visual and kinesic data. From this process, one that demanded deep focus and absolute quiet, I have learned about how replaying frames in slow motion for a split second can yield meaning from a simple movement of the hand or a quick roll of the eye. Finally, I screened each scene from every film one final time and then compared my final observations to my earlier findings to locate elements or patterns I may have missed as well as to limit errors in my list and description. I occasionally returned to the literature on visual communication and composition,

rhetorical criticism of film, as well as sources that examine the relationship among the symbolic elements and features to ensure proper use of terminology.

So far, I have discussed the process I undertook to record and review the visible and audible; however, in addition to these steps, I included another step in my rhetorical analysis, noting patterns of omissions. To effectively name and describe the non-presented elements within each film, I employed a similar approach to the one I outlined above. Listening and viewing frames in 60-second increments, I tuned-in and looked-out for repeated absences and immediate or stark contrasts in visual, aural, and kinesic features. I then asked myself a series of questions as guidelines for distinguishing significant omissions from those I considered to be irrelevant to my analysis: are these absences directly related to the central male characters, including their bodies? Does the absence of visual, aural, and/or kinesic elements and features promote or obscure ideals about masculinity in ways physical and/or behavioural? Are these missing elements enabling audiences to see, hear, move, think, and/or feel a particular way in relation to each story and its central character(s)?

Once I identified and classified rhetorical features I deemed to be significant (by their presence and absence in each frame) and after I screened each scene a second time and reviewed my notes and relevant literature to ensure accuracy, I screened the films a third time on a scene-by-scene basis to attend to patterns resulting from the interaction between or among the different units of meaning. Listing the connections or combinations between or among the elements proved to be an effective strategy for it generally led me to their suggested meanings. The process itself and the results of my third and final screening are outlined in the next section where I describe the second step of my ideological rhetorical analysis of these films.

Step 2 - Columns 2, 5 and 6: Exploring the Suggested Meanings of Features

The second phase of my analysis involved a careful consideration of the “ideas, references, themes, allusions, or concepts that are suggested by the presented [and non-presented] elements” (Foss, *Rhetorical Criticism* 216). My approach involved a review of my observations of the presence and absence of symbolic elements and features, a return to the scholarship on sound studies, in particular, and taking record of key frames and sequences as well as techniques I considered to be significant in promoting ideologies about the physical and/or social construction of masculinity. Before describing the meanings and moods suggested by the features under study (which I recorded in column 6), I returned to my notes in columns three and four in the tables, starting with the aural mode (see table 1).

The rhetorical analysis of the films’ aural features taught me that a great deal of meaning about gender and other identity constructs, namely, size, is addressed to the ear. I started to take note of the meanings that emerged whenever the symbolic modes interacted. I recorded these observations in the fifth column of the table (see table 1). As I examined the films, scene-by-scene, focusing on the interactions among and between the elements during my final screening, I noticed that constructions of masculinity are generally reinforced or accentuated through a combination of elements operating at the same time. In the process, I was also reminded of the often taken-for-granted ways in which we give meaning to sound. A triumphant tune, for example, can express a sentiment of hope. When the body of an armed and muscular protagonist is paired with an instrumental melody, a characterization of masculine heroism is reinforced through visual and aural modes. On the other hand, a deep growl, when combined with the sounds of pounding fists and flailing arms produced by a large male body, can establish expressions of masculine aggression.

In the process of analyzing a triad of symbolic modes in the selected films, I came to appreciate how visuals can give voice to certain characterizations of gender. The process also taught me to appreciate how sound can help to visualize markers of size, class, and sexuality (Nardi 79). The central male character in *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) provides an excellent example of how constructs of gender and class are complemented at various levels: through unkempt appearance, worn attire, poor grammar, and aggressive body movements. Ideological formations became increasingly visible and audible once I started to explore the relationship among these elements and their suggested meanings.

I was inspired to review Stillwell's integrated analysis of sound, music and cinematic cues in *Die Hard* (1988) as well as Wingstedt, Brändström, and Berg's integrated account of narrative music and visuals in film for they list the rhetorical practices through which meanings and/or moods are established, reinforced, and sometimes contradicted. I also reviewed my notes about the joint meanings that emerged from these modes whenever they interacted (which I recorded in column five) (see table 1). The ideas, themes, or arguments supported by the combinations between or among the presented elements were then recorded in the final column. In the sixth and final column, "Results of the Analysis," I also noted instances where symbolic interactions affected my impressions of the central male characters and the overall mood I experienced (see table 1). I interpreted aural, visual, and kinesic cues from the perspective of the audience by repeatedly asking myself the following question: when combined, what do the features explicitly or implicitly say about the bodies and behaviours of the characters in my corpus? Finally, I highlighted the suggested meanings and moods, in column six, that advance either dominant or subversive gender ideology and then recorded summaries of the scenes as well as the key frames and sequences, along with the cinematic techniques (featured in the

second column) as a way to remind myself of how the films express or condense meanings about the characters and their respective journeys toward masculine transformation and conformity (see table 1). Column two functioned as a short-cut to explicate how ideologies are created and sustained in each scene (see table 1). This practice proved to be useful during the third step of my integrated rhetorical analysis, which I discuss below.

Step 3 - Identifying, Evaluating, and Articulating Ideologies Communicated by the Films

The third step involved a review and interpretation of suggested elements explicitly communicated or implied by rhetorical features of import leading to the formulation of ideologies and the functions they serve. I began by reviewing the highlighted text in columns two through six (see table 1). Returning to the set of criteria I used in the first step, for the selection of presented elements, as well as the foundational question I asked myself when describing their suggested meanings, I reconsidered whether the highlighted material played a significant role in promoting hegemonic accounts of masculine heroism. I also reflected upon the affective impact communicated by the elements or lack of, especially in terms of their ability to foster identification. The remaining content served as the basis for summaries of findings I created for each animated film. These served as frameworks for the articulation of the multiple and sometimes competing ideologies emerging from the elements and the themes, ideas, and arguments they implied. A sample summary of my findings from *Wall-E* (2008) appears below (see table 2).

Table 2

A Template Summarizing Research Findings for *Wall-E* (2008)

A Summary of Findings Based on an Integrated Rhetorical Analysis of Film
Wall-E: a hard-working masculine machine:

- Wall-E, whose name stands for Waste Allocation Load Lifter-Earth Class, moves to the rhythm of a garbage truck. His body consists of rigid lines that create a quadrilateral shape. With his angular form and robotic limbs, Wall-E labours in the dumping grounds; he collects and compresses the trash that has been left on Earth.
- Scene 4 constructs Wall-E as your average working, ‘blue-collar’ man. A high-angle camera shot captures some of Wall-E’s work tools: his BnL lunch box and his audio player/recorder. The camera later produces a wide shot of Wall-E’s clean-up efforts. In the following sequence, (which fade into one another), we learn that Wall-E is hard at work.
- In the final scene, Wall-E performs his role as a Wall-E. He pursues his directive in a way that is mechanical. His blank expressions and muted presence strips him of his humanity. In this way, Wall-E returns to his roots as a robot that collects and crushes piles of debris on Earth.

Wall-E: a hard-bodied, hyper-masculine hero:

- Wall-E performs for Eve, his female robot counterpart, in a way that is characteristically hyper-masculine. His machismo is emphasized in Scene 8, in particular, he leans forward and pounds on his chest. Rather than showcasing his loving interior, this scene emphasizes the exteriority of his hard body. In one sequence, Wall-E demonstrates his “impressive” physique and power by extending his limbs before lifting heavy objects. His performance continues as audiences witness a chest-pumping gesture following a display of garbage compression. As the garbage tumbles out of his core, Wall-E vocally expresses his enthusiasm: “TADA!” She produces the following sound: “OUUU.” She communicates her hetero-sexual interest.
- In other instances, Wall-E reacts with violence and aggression (behaviour that is characteristic of a prototypical “alpha male” when experiencing feelings of rejection). Near the end of Scene 7, for example, Wall-E constructs a robot from garbage in an attempt to impress Eve. An upset Wall-E kicks a pile of metal pipes as he observes Eve, who appears uninterested.

Wall-E: a soft-hearted hetero-sexual male who struggles with his solitude:

- Wall-E is the sole inhabitant of planet Earth. Other than the companionship of a cockroach, Wall-E lives a solitary life. The film shows that a special relationship exists between machine and organism at the beginning of the film. The two interact vocally (they attempt to talk to one another) and haptically (the insect crawls on Wall-E’s core). Wall-E’s appreciation for organic matter is evident throughout the film as he tirelessly cares for the plant that promises to restore Earth and its environment.
- Overall, the film makes clear that Wall-E is more than an industrious robot. Through tight close-up shots and ambient melodies, the film constructs Wall-E as a sentient being who longs for human contact. This characterization is particularly evident in Scene 3 when the film takes audiences inside Wall-E’s truck. This scene highlights Wall-E’s humanity; he is a collector of cultural artifacts that provide a connection to a vibrant past. A television screen and video cassette recording of *Hello, Dolly!* (1969) plays in the background. Tight close-up shots of his eyes and hands combined with the romantic song, “It Only Takes a Moment,” communicates his desire for female companionship.

The content featured in the summary of findings here (see table 2) and those that appear in the summaries I produced for *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) and *Big Hero 6* (2014) represent the central ideological tenets of every film, including prominent and recurring ideological formations of masculinity. These summaries, which range between eight and ten pages, also explore intriguing similarities and differences from one text to another where repeated rhetorical strategies emerge. As I will make clear in Chapters Four to Six, the results show that, collectively, the films evidence a familiar motif in the transformation of central male characters

which ultimately promote a narrow and traditional model of masculinity despite the semblance of more progressive gender characterizations featured pre- and post-transformation.

Step 4 - Uncovering the Functions Served by the Ideology or Ideologies in the Films

The fourth and final step involves a discussion about the functions or consequences of the ideologies on those who experience the animated films (Foss, *Rhetorical Criticism* 220). This process, which proved to be both interpretative and perceptual, began with a review of the content featured in the summaries I produced for each film (see table 2). Once again, I considered the ideological formations that were repeated in each film with the aim of uncovering the overarching systems of beliefs about masculine makeovers communicated by the films. I asked: what are the preferred or dominant readings of masculinity in these filmic frames, sequences, and scenes? Put differently: what do these films want us to think about in relation to physical and/or social formations of masculinity? What do they want or demand from us? Because my approach also captures the embodied functions of these films, I asked myself another central question: how do visual cues, including cinematic techniques, aural, and kinesic symbols act on the body (Blair, “Contemporary U.S. Memorial Sites” 30)? Using my own embodied experience as a baseline for the explication of the films’ effects, I reflected upon and then recorded my observations about how individual frames, sequences, and scenes work together to encourage or discourage me “to act or move, as well as [to] think” in particular ways (Blair, “Contemporary U.S. Memorial Sites” 46). The dominant thoughts and actions the films enabled in specific instances were then incorporated into the summaries and then expanded upon, with references to relevant scholarship in the analytical chapters of my dissertation.

An analysis of the mix of visual, aural, and kinesic features and what these say or do to us can provide insight into how film works to uphold or secure preferred ways of thinking and feeling. While a discussion of the ideological and embodied effects of these films will be addressed in more depth in the following three chapters, for now, I will briefly argue that, when combined, the films generally reinforce conventional understandings of heroic masculinity; constructs that privilege strong and stable hero-types. In the preceding sections, I described the steps I followed to carry out this research according to the procedures outlined by Foss and Kanengieter (which were later revised by Foss herself) and subsequently applied by other rhetorical critics whose research I also drew upon. My integrated rhetorical criticism was also inspired by the work of scholars from other theoretical orientations, namely: visual communication, sound studies, and film theory. What is missing from this discussion is a description of the approach as well as the tools that I used in the process of rhetorically analyzing the sensorial dimensions of films. Below, I reflect on the important role my body (my sensory capacity) played in the process of conducting a hybrid rhetorical analysis of animated film.

Reflections on Attending to the Multi-Sensorial Dimensions of Film

Close attention to the visual and aural, I argue, is made possible through the use of the body. There were many instances where I became more aware of my own physicality and positionality as important components of the research process. For one, the process has taught me to adopt more focused practices of looking and listening with the help of certain (material) objects and (embodied) techniques. I carefully selected the tools I needed and the spaces I felt were most conducive to a research environment. Noise-cancelling headphones and an additional desktop monitor enabled me to fully immerse myself (my body) in the films in a way that

heightened my senses and reduced distractions. My research depended on my sensory capacity in ways that I had not anticipated. Without the full use of my hearing, I could not produce quality research in the way that I initially expected. Similarly, physical pain in my lower back meant that I could not sit nor give my full attention to my analysis for long periods of time. My healthy body and sensory perception unexpectedly became necessary tools for rhetorical research. The methods I applied and the results I produced were partially influenced by my physicality.

It is my position that particular values and interests inform our encounters with and experiences of text, including analyses of film. I recognize that looking, hearing, feeling, thinking, etc., are embodied experiences. As individuals, critics bring their own kinds of preferences and biases to the research process. Personally, I am likely to select and reflect upon certain symbolic elements while deflecting other possible aspects of the filmic texture. For example, I identify as an auditory learner and may be more likely to attend to auditory elements over other sensorial dimensions. With care and attention, I worked to minimize the impact of the partialities I adopted in the process of analyzing data and building theory. The observational table I used was designed with the intention of maintaining focus on all three symbolic modes in a systematic fashion.

Summary

This chapter explored the methodological approaches I employed for the rhetorical analysis of specific male characters in selected Disney animated films. It is my hope that both the table I developed (see table 1) and the procedures I followed functioned as more than just a template for an integrated analysis of film but, also, as a model to be used for the purposes of conducting an integrated analysis of symbol-use. The intended outcome is a close examination of

how these rhetorical features work together in these films to create or contribute to preferred understandings of gendered bodies and roles. The study of ideological formations requires a systematic approach involving a series of necessary steps to understand and evaluate the functions of rhetoric. However, depending on the research question(s), the study may call for a hybrid method requiring additional tools and techniques.

As I discussed above, the process proved to be a much different experience than I expected initially. To my surprise, my healthy, abled-body and overall sensory capacity became a critical component of the research process. I have also discussed how my positionality influenced my observations and findings while noting other challenges that emerged in the process of applying an integrated approach to ideological rhetorical research. The results of my rhetorical analysis are featured in the following chapters. Chapters Four to Six offer rhetorical critiques and discussions of symbolic selections and strategies used in the construction of some of the least examined male-identified artificial figures featured in Disney animated films as of late. It is to the analytical components of my dissertation that I now turn.

Chapter Four – An Integrated Rhetorical Analysis of *Wall-E* (2008)

In Scene 16, audiences are introduced to a female character named PR-T who works as a beautician. She asks Wall-E: “Just a trim?” PR-T then exclaims: “Uhhum,” as she fixes his appearance before complimenting him on his new look. She says: “You look gorgeous.” In response, Wall-E vocally expresses a mix of fear and surprise as he catches a glimpse of his reflection. (*Wall-E* 2008)

Introduction

I begin the first analytical chapter of my dissertation with a sampling of exchanges between a beautician ‘bot’ named PR-T and Wall-E, the film’s titular male character, for two reasons. First, to foreground a discussion that examines the rhetorical selections and strategies the film employs to gender its characters. These lines of dialogue also effectively capture how masculinity is framed as inherently “broken” and thus in need of repair in this film as well as in the other two films under analysis. The remaining sections of this chapter will show how Wall-E is repeatedly ridiculed until he convincingly performs the role of a paternal, hetero-sexual partner (Wooden and Gillam 14-15). Chapter Four includes many references to Eve’s femininity in contrast to Wall-E’s masculinity. This is because Eve’s presence in the film plays an important role in defining Wall-E’s identity as a hetero-sexual male. The asymmetry between Wall-E, whose name stands for Waste Allocation Load Lifter-Earth Class, and Eve, an Extraterrestrial Vegetation Evaluator who serves as the film’s primary female character and future hetero-partner to Wall-E, plays a crucial part in reinforcing the possibility of hetero-sexual love between the pair.

Much like the film, my analysis follows the titular character's maturation, first by focusing on his initial characterization as a silly and sensitive male before discussing his social transformation into a hetero-partner, father, and martyr. As such, the three sub-sections featured in this chapter provide evidence of the changes Disney makes to Wall-E's role as the male protagonist navigates through various rites of passages, leading to a metaphorical transition into manhood and fatherhood.

Arguments

As this chapter is the first that discusses the findings emerging from my integrated rhetorical analysis of the films, I provide readers with a glimpse of some of the key gender roles and relationships that are repeated in all three films.

In the case of Wall-E, the character, his power partially derives from the hard surface and angular contour of his body. However, despite the strength that emanates from his hard exterior, Wall-E disrupts the conventional physical image of the central male character in Disney by taking the figure of a small and outmoded male 'bot'; physical traits that are uncharacteristic when compared to the young and muscular figures we find in previous Pixar animated films featuring male protagonists, including *The Incredibles* (2004) and *Cars* (2006), for example. Yet, Wall-E overcomes his initial characterization as an un-heroic male 'bot' through his interaction with and controlling actions toward Eve. *Wall-E* (2008) mocks the fragility and anxiety the central male character expresses in the presence of a powerful and mysterious female while simultaneously stressing and securing the place of hetero-masculinity and a life of domesticity.

Thus, in this chapter, (1) I show how effeminacy is subject to discipline as is the anomalous male body. (2) I also argue that Eve's primary function is to harden and eventually

cement Wall-E's role as a hetero-sexual, paternal homesteader (Wooden and Gillam 14-15). For Eve, this means eventually conforming to the image of mother. (3) As well, the film's stress on Wall-E's desire for Eve, which is primarily communicated through the scopophilic male gaze, suggests that Wall-E is a powerless observer who finds satisfaction in watching Eve – the object of curiosity for the lonely 'bot'. The film, as a whole, exhibits a voyeuristic gaze when it focuses on Eve's body from a detached, third-person male point-of-view. (4) Finally, I claim that Wall-E can express sensitivity and timidity so long as his role as a hetero-sexual paternal protector is secured.

The crux of my argument here and elsewhere is that the films use postfeminist models of gender for their primary and secondary male characters as surface-level promotions of masculine change and growth. While *Wall-E* (2008) may tempt critics to praise what appears to be an inversion of gender-role stereotypes or the collapsing of traditional models of gender at first, these postfeminist performances of masculinity are used strategically to show their deviance from the idealized image of heroic masculinity. The disciplining of the anomalous male body and unconventional masculine behaviour is an important rhetorical strategy featured in all three films.

Discussion of Research Findings and their Cultural Implications

To support the arguments outlined above, here, I describe my observations and findings from *Wall-E* (2008) which are based on specific assortments and arrangements of rhetorical features employed to present a hetero-masculine hero whose body and behaviour occasionally deviates from hegemonic accounts of masculinity, a hierarchical gender order that is largely based upon male physical strength (Connell 45). I start with a description of filmic frames and

sequences where Wall-E's body is marked as powerless. Next, I discuss the film's construction of the inherently powerful hetero-male. Throughout, I provide a wide range of examples from the film where the male protagonist demonstrates his hetero-sexuality through dramatic performances of physical strength, occasional acts of gallantry, and, most problematically, through undetected objectifying gazes and non-consensual touch. I also discuss how Wall-E's role as an industrious 'bot', combined with his identity as a hetero-sexual male, positions him as a particular kind of hero: a martyr.

Mocking the Unfit and Insufficiently Masculine Male

Wall-E's body is marked as powerless through displays of vulnerability, timidity, cowardice, and incompetence, particularly during his initial encounters with Eve. A visual description of Wall-E's physique, coupled with a descriptive account of the kinesic cues that animate his movements is my entry into this discussion about the disciplinary practices used to mock Wall-E's body and behaviour.

Shortly after the film's opening sequence, audiences are introduced to a boxy robot drawn with rigid lines filled with unappealing colours with hues of yellow and brown combined with desaturated hints of orange. His figure, when reduced to lines, shapes, and colours make simplistic predictions about his characterization as an uncomplicated industrious machine who blends into the bland dumping ground where he works. Middle age is inscribed onto his rugged body with its "replaceable parts, rivets, and cogs and wheels" evocative of "classic robotic fantasies and industrial technologies" (Kakoudaki 110).

The figure of the simple, rugged male becomes even more pronounced when we shift our gaze downward, to the lower parts of his physique where we observe his quadrilateral shape.

Animators limit the power that flows through his hard and industrious body by associating simple and straight lines with the “bland, industrial, ordered, and rigid” (Block 106). This characterization is confirmed in Scene 2 when the camera brings us closer to a weathered billboard sign promoting his kind: “Wall-E Working to Dig You Out” (*Wall-E 2008*). The sign provides viewers with a glimpse of Wall-E’s directive as a labouring robot. With his angular form and metal core, Wall-E, whose name stands for Waste Allocation Load Lifter-Earth Class, is exclusively designed for labour. The power that emanates from the rigidity of his body is partially undermined by both the restrictions of his movements and the physical demands of the job which is expressed on the surface of his robotic body. The rugged persona suggested by his appearance further demonstrates how the hard-working ‘bot’ carries the requirements of his work on his body. Using limited range of motion, the labouring ‘bot’ collects and compresses mountains of trash left by humans long ago. The rhetorical construction of the outmoded male is inscribed elsewhere on his body, making it difficult for Wall-E to escape from this figuration as a physically battered ‘bot’. We can return to the visual composition of lines to understand Wall-E’s limited capabilities by assessing the directions in which he moves. While there are eight potential directions for on-screen movement, Wall-E’s are restricted to simple horizontal and vertical motions (Block 105).

Initial constructions of the film’s titular character position him as outmoded and incompetent; his lack of mobility is clear and distinct, particularly when compared to Eve’s youth and prowess. Distinctions between older and newer forms of mechanics are more explicitly communicated in Scene 5 with the arrival of Eve (Kakoudaki 110). The visual contrast between his weathered physique and her seamless and glossy figure produces distinctly gendered versions of the two robot characters while also highlighting the generational gap between them.

The differences that Disney animators inscribe onto Wall-E and Eve's gendered bodies and roles, even when obscured by unconventional features, help to advance the film's hetero-normative narrative. While this is a discussion that I return to later, what is important to note now is that Eve is defined by her youthful and healthy female body, conditions that are necessary for procreation.

From the onset of her introduction in Scene 5, Eve out-performs and over-powers Wall-E with her physical strength, high-tech weaponry, and steely resolve. Wall-E, in contrast, lacks the physical qualities and behavioural traits we find in both classic and more contemporary animated films featuring athletic, aggressive, and competitive male leads, including those featured in the super-hero sub-genre. Kaysae Baker and Arthur A. Raney provide a snapshot of the types of gender roles prominently featured in the American super-hero fare:

Historically, most of these characters were male and were defined by their muscularity and strength, as well as their keen minds and problem-solving abilities. In contrast, female heroes have been defined by their passivity: innocent and selfless in situations of forced submission whether through physical confinement, muteness, or death. (28)

Curiously, in Wall-E's case, the hyper-masculine traits linked with the traditional super-hero, are mostly absent. The film displaces the role of the masculine warrior and protector, in a very conventional sense, by placing muscles, guns, and lasers in the hands of its powerful female character who draws her weapon in the face of danger. Violence is often embodied in Eve whose power emanates from some of her most striking physical characteristics, most of which pivot around her role as a mystery woman. The menace in her smoky blue eyes, the curves of her voluptuous body, and the laser-arm gun she holds in her hand as early as in Scene 5 (see fig. 1)

reinforces the image of a slightly dangerous and unpredictable female who displays aggressive tendencies until she is controlled and contained by powerful male characters in the film; the space ship's captain and auto-pilot.

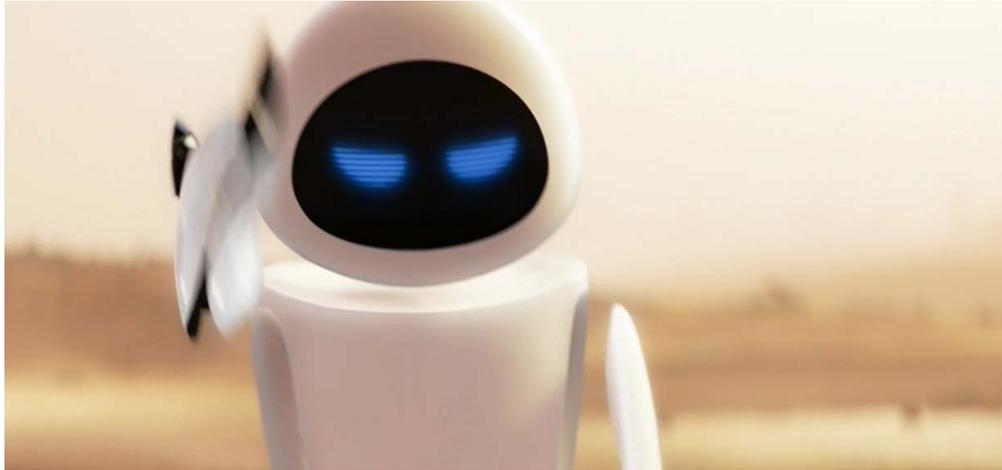


Fig. 1. This frame, captured at 17 minutes and 38 seconds, shows Eve moments before deploying her laser arm gun in Scene 5; from *Wall-E*, directed by Brian Stanton, performances by Ben Burtt, Elissa Knight, and Jeff Garlin, Walt Disney Pictures and Pixar Animation Studios, 2008, DVD.

The film's male protagonist appears fearful and defenseless in the presence of Eve. Wall-E's compulsion to conceal himself in the face of danger is one of the strategies used to position him as weak or inferior. Screeching sounds and intense instrumental background music confirm his panicked state in moments where he shrinks inside himself to avoid the unknown. Nowhere is this more evident than in his early encounters with Eve in Scene 5 where Wall-E hides from her once he becomes aware of the threat she presents.

When Wall-E is not hiding from Eve and his pursuers, he moves with a sense of panic and urgency. Scene 21 provides a good example of this. In the frame at 58 minutes and 43 seconds, the camera cuts to an external shot of a smaller space craft where Wall-E is trapped. His movements are visible within the window's frame. With his wide eyes and flailing arms, Wall-E

expresses a blend of fear and frustration until Eve arrives to save him. Similar events transpire in Scene 25 when Eve protects Wall-E from Auto, the auto-pilot who threatens to alter their mission to return to Earth. However, this time, panic fades as his body limps with weakness. His fear worsens as he is forced into submissive situations where he is sometimes unresponsive and unable to protect himself from his pursuers. For example, he does not attempt to take control, when, in Scene 13, Eve's body is strapped to a stretcher before being subject to poking and prodding by robots aboard the Axiom, the large space craft carrying Earth's remaining population. In Scene 14, his limbs move in opposite directions, causing him to lose complete control of his own body. He is presented as defenseless and immobile, when, in Scene 18, he is picked up, poked, prodded, and pampered by a unit of working bots inside the repair ward.

In one of the final scenes, Wall-E appears lifeless after being struck by Auto. His fragility is obvious near the end of Scene 25. Wall-E's eyes are barely open as he rests comfortably in the arms of Eve, scared and squeamish. Nervous and fearful in the presence of male characters who intimidate him, Wall-E's inclination to conceal himself continues in Scene 27, where he is often positioned behind or beside Eve during the action sequences. In one instance, Wall-E is carried by Eve while she defends them both using her weapons (see fig. 2). In these moments, Wall-E hides from Go-4 and Secur-T, the police-bots who patrol the Axiom, and later, he weakly struggles to wrestle power away from the evil Auto.



Fig. 2. Eve carries a frightened Wall-E in Scene 27. The frame at one hour, 16 minutes, and 18 seconds is captured from another robot's point-of-view; from *Wall-E*, directed by Brian Stanton, performances by Ben Burtt, Elissa Knight, and Jeff Garlin, Walt Disney Pictures and Pixar Animation Studios, 2008, DVD.

A close reading of his animated body and its movements suggest that Wall-E is also significantly more emotional and excitable than Eve, traits uncharacteristic of Disney's classic male protagonists (Towbin et al. 28). Male emotional vulnerability, when expressed in the form of fear or anxiety, is to be interpreted as cowardly; un-heroic characteristics likely to provoke laughter from audiences. For example, Wall-E's body becomes a source of comedy whenever he under-reacts with trepidation or anxiously over-reacts. Uncontrollable body movements, in the form of shaking and shivering, combined with animated expressions of fear, entice audiences to laugh at this exaggerated performance of masculine cowardice.

In *Wall-E* (2008), the message about what it means to be a masculine hero is partially achieved through the disciplining norms of ridicule at the beginning of the film which sets the stage for his transformation later. The joke of the cowardly male intensifies during a brief makeover sequence in Scene 18 (see fig. 3). Audiences learn that, up until this point, Wall-E is unable to achieve alpha male status partially because he is mistaken for a woman. Here, we

observe Wall-E's reflection in a mirror. The mirror reveals an exaggerated image of femininity, complete with long and thick eyelashes, bright eye shadow and full, red lips (see fig. 3). The application of powder and lipstick during the cross-dressing sequence seems to complete the look animators had in mind when they designed Wall-E with unconventional masculine traits. The film's cross-dressing sequence locates Wall-E's effeminacy in a recognizable form that is necessary if we are to discipline unwanted or undesirable masculine bodies and behaviours. Effeminacy is explicitly drawn on the surface of Wall-E's body to mock what he lacks: physical supremacy complemented by a powerful, confident presence. Further evidence of Wall-E's characterization as a feminized male occurs during what I am calling a violation sequence in Scene 18. While Wall-E is dressed as a woman, Eve's lifeless body is penetrated by machines and robots working inside the repair ward. When combined, Wall-E's cross-gendered performance of femininity and the passive, powerless approach he takes while Eve is penetrated by others produces an effeminate and submissive male character.



Fig. 3. A mirror reflects the makeover Wall-E receives from a beauty 'bot' in Scene 18 at 52 minutes and 46 seconds; from *Wall-E*, directed by Brian Stanton, performances by Ben Burtt, Elissa Knight, and Jeff Garlin, Walt Disney Pictures and Pixar Animation Studios, 2008, DVD.

In the absence of youthful and muscular physique, weapons, and masculine bravado, Wall-E is not, the film tells us, a suitable hetero-partner for Eve, at least not at the beginning. In this way, the film frames Wall-E's failure to lure the young and beautiful "princess" as a struggle of normative hetero-masculinity. To become an acceptable hetero-partner to Eve, Wall-E must travel down a path that sees inadequate males transform into conventionally heroic male figures. While it is true that the film, at times, presents an alternative to the active and aggressive hero, as a whole, *Wall-E* (2008) reinforces asymmetrical roles and relations for males and females. This is accomplished as the film progresses by having the female character assume conventional gendered roles: first as a mysterious, seductive woman and later, as a nurturing care-taker whose plant-sustaining womb holds the key to humanity's future. The unrestrained, exotic female provokes a change in Wall-E. For what appears to be the first time in his monotonous life, Wall-E has a purpose: to pursue the beautiful woman and to save her from the 'bots' working under the control of the evil auto-pilot. Both his romantic and rescue pursuits form the basis for the subsequent change in their individual roles and relationship which is framed within a hetero-romantic and domestic-homesteader ideology. Like Wall-E, Eve too must change if she is to become an acceptable marriage partner and mother. Her young and fertile female body remains long after the displacement of the transgressive woman who appears in early sequences. Slowly and subtly, Eve is subject to the controlling actions of male characters; conditions that are required if a formerly feisty female is to inhabit Disney's dream world of hetero-romance and domestic family life.

Securing Hetero-Sexuality via the Male Gaze

Thus far, my analysis of *Wall-E* (2008) has focused on the male body and behaviour as

tired and timid. But, while Wall-E's timidity serves as a source of comic relief, particularly in moments where his fear of Eve and others becomes visibly pronounced, the film adopts a more serious mood whenever Eve becomes the object of male viewing pleasure. In this second subsection, I outline sequences that position Wall-E as a powerless "peeping Tom" by describing the mix of fear and fascination he appears to derive when looking at Eve, before detailing instances where undetected practices of looking evolve into unsolicited acts of touching. The following examples show how Wall-E exhibits scopophilic eroticism (see fig. 4) (Mulvey 845). By emphasising his fixation with her body from Wall-E's point-of-view, the film confirms not only his hetero-sexual desire but also showcases Wall-E's obsessive involvement with the perfect woman.



Fig. 4. Wall-E sets his eyes on Eve for the first time. Her reflection appears in the glass lens covering his eyes in Scene 5 at 15 minutes and 54 seconds into the film; from *Wall-E*, directed by Brian Stanton, performances by Ben Burtt, Elissa Knight, and Jeff Garlin, Walt Disney Pictures and Pixar Animation Studios, 2008, DVD.

In her classic essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey offers a feminist, psychoanalytical critique of how classical narrative cinema employs a dominant male frame for viewers, resulting in female objectification. Through examples of classic Hollywood

live-action cinema, many of which apply to contemporary animated Disney fiction, Mulvey identifies different forms of sexual visualizations; practices of looking that reflect, reveal, and reinforce the language of patriarchy in cinema. Scopophilia, for example, “arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight” (Mulvey 840). *Wall-E* (2008) adopts a scopophilic look by emphasizing Wall-E’s desiring eyes and shifting posture as he directs his gaze toward Eve’s voluptuous figure. In Scene 5, Wall-E often repositions his body to get a closer and better look at Eve without the risk of being seen. Beyond the combination of tight close-ups and medium long shots of her body, most of which are taken from Wall-E’s point-of-view, obvious markers of feminine youth and beauty mixed with undertones of sexual maturity and availability make Eve a desirable, erotic object for the viewing pleasure of the male protagonist who hides in fear of the mysterious female (Mulvey 838).

Later in the same scene, wipers rapidly move back and forth to clean his glasses while he watches Eve from afar. Unbeknownst to Eve, Wall-E observes her movements as she floats above the wasteland. The aural features in this sequence are also telling. Wall-E produces a sound expressing his awe as he watches her spiral movements in the air. Female sexual objectification is expressed kinesthetically through her erect body posture and in her subtle hip movements during a captivating dance sequence which Wall-E observes from afar. The vocal features used to animate her voice match her feminine figure and movements. For example, In Scene 8, Eve repeats the word, “Directive” in a voice that is distinctly young and feminine (Eve is voiced by Elissa Knight) (*Wall-E 2008*). Later, she repeats Wall-E’s name with a seductive tone. The cadence of her speech and the raspy quality of her voice intones her occasional role as temptress. There is also a tactile sensation suggested by the smooth and glossy surface that

covers her curvy body. When taken together, Eve's body, voice, and movements position her as a desirable sexual object for the male gaze.

Wall-E adopts a scopophilic look again in Scene 7 when the camera forces us to observe Eve's fragmented physique from Wall-E's point-of-view. The film produces a masculine experience for viewers as Eve's body is framed and imagined via the male observer. In one sequence, for example, the camera moves from left to right, first exposing Eve's torso before revealing her face and facial expressions. The camera tilts downward to expose parts of her lower body until we reach her hand. When the camera shifts to Wall-E, we learn that he is positioned behind her. Here again, an unsuspecting Eve is vulnerable to the probing male gaze. The start of Scene 20 offers another view of Wall-E's scopophilic gaze. The scene opens as Wall-E gazes at Eve's posterior (see fig. 5). His physical position(ing) gives him an advantage. While she is focused on task completion (her fingertips stroke a keyboard), he stares at her fingertips. In this sequence, Wall-E embodies the traits of a "peeping Tom" who also seeks to control and possess the object of his hetero-sexual desire.



Fig. 5. The titular character gazes at Eve's posterior in Scene 20 at 56 minutes and 17 seconds; from *Wall-E*, directed by Brian Stanton, performances by Ben Burtt, Elissa Knight, and Jeff Garlin, Walt Disney Pictures and Pixar Animation Studios, 2008, DVD.

While Wall-E's infatuation with Eve is initially expressed through distant gazes and smitten looks, his infatuation with her deepens once her program de-activates for the first time. In Scene 10, Wall-E takes control of Eve's unresponsive body as he rolls and rows her along a series of romantic adventures in both rain and shine. To gain complete control of her body and its movements while she sleeps, Wall-E wraps a string of Christmas lights around her waist (see fig. 6). He draws her along a series of stops during an impromptu "date." Non-consensual romance ensues.

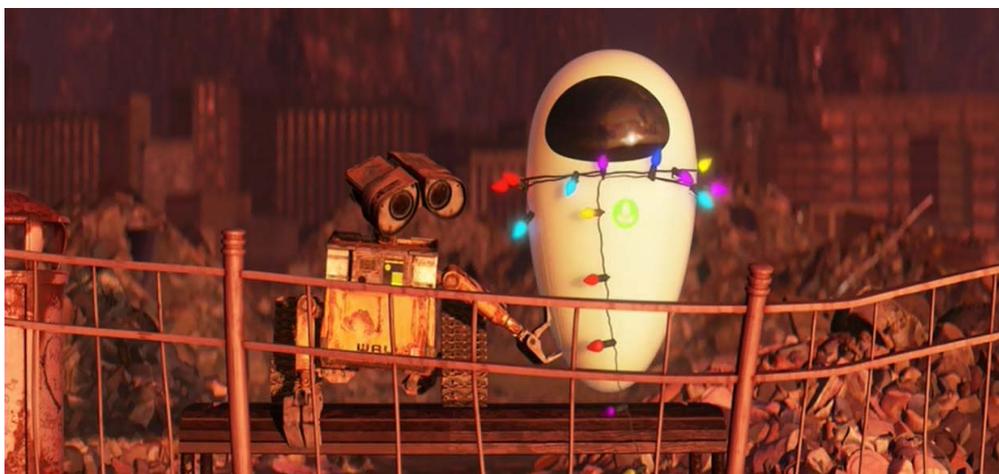


Fig. 6. In Scene 10, Wall-E makes physical contact with Eve, cupping the bottom of her unresponsive body in an attempt to hold her hand at 30 minutes and 48 seconds into the film; from *Wall-E*, directed by Brian Stanton, performances by Ben Burtt, Elissa Knight, and Jeff Garlin, Walt Disney Pictures and Pixar Animation Studios, 2008, DVD.

Up until this point in the story, consent to engage in any form of physical contact is neither given nor implied. Wall-E's dissecting gaze is frequently challenged through flashes of shame or disapproval from Eve. Aural and kinesic elements further communicate Eve's uneasiness around Wall-E in the first half of the film. In Scene 5, for example, Wall-E is the unsuspected spectator of Eve's graceful performance, until she becomes aware of his gaze. The background melody ends abruptly once his presence is known. This aural disruption reveals

Eve's objection to Wall-E's unrelenting gaze. The weapon she fires in his direction shortly thereafter is another sign of her discomfort, only this time, she uses violence in an attempt to disrupt the visual pleasure Wall-E derives from making her his object of desire. Eve refuses his advances shortly after their introduction in Scene 8 and again, in Scene 9, when they seek refuge inside Wall-E's truck. In both instances, Wall-E attempts to hold her hand, a romantic gesture modelled by a hetero-sexual couple in *Hello, Dolly!* (1969). Later, in Scene 20, Eve declines Wall-E's invitation to sit next to him by reminding him of their mission to safeguard the plant. By justifying or explaining her refusal, Eve suggests that she is otherwise open to his offer now that she sees him as a trusted partner and not as a threat. Consent, however, is not yet established during the "date" sequence in Scene 10 when Eve becomes the unconscious subject of Wall-E's unsolicited touch. Tempted and impatient, Wall-E forces romance on Eve who was otherwise unwilling. With his eyes set on the bottom of her oval shape, Wall-E reaches for her hand. The frame at 30 minutes and 48 seconds in Scene 10 reveals a medium shot of Wall-E's hands and fingers as they clamp onto Eve's lower body (see fig. 6).

Objectifying practices of looking and touching escalate in Scene 16 as we learn that Eve's body has the capacity to bring life to our barren planet. Eve is simultaneously looked at by the male voyeurs who emerge as representative of power (the captain who controls the ship and the auto-pilot who controls the captain) while also displayed as sexual object for the audience through detached, point-of-view shots (Mulvey 842-843). The erotic male gaze that is created for the audience functions to control and dis-empower the female figure who is initially marked as mysterious and powerful. By centralizing male power over the female body and by controlling the direction of the filmic gaze, that is, the way Eve is to be looked at, the Captain and Auto possess the attributes that Wall-E lacks.

Her mysterious plant-sustaining uterus is a source of anxiety for the males who attempt to reclaim a sense of power by subjecting her to sadistic and controlling acts. These acts involve “investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery” by forcefully confining and objectifying her through the voyeuristic male gaze (Mulvey 844). The camera captures the restrictions imposed upon her motionless body in Scene 16 at approximately 43 minutes and 50 seconds. Audiences observe her oval shape as her body is strapped onto a transportation cart. Immobile, Eve lies flat on what appears to be a stretcher while she is scanned by a red laser (see fig. 7). Viewers are reminded of her lifeless state; she is both mute and motionless. The juxtaposition between the active sadistic voyeurs and the passive female body as object of male curiosity extends beyond the visual level. Narratively, Eve loses agency; her development as a character repeatedly freezes in sequences where she suffers a death-like coma (Mulvey 838).

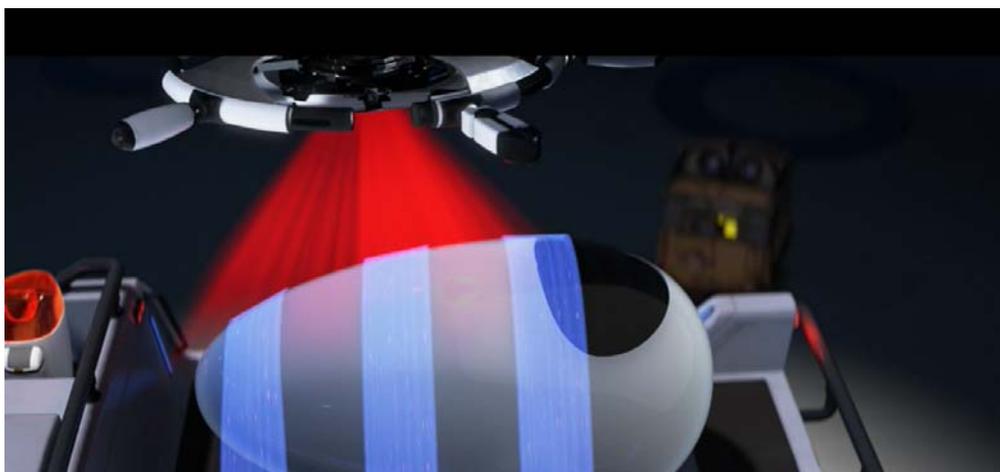


Fig. 7. Eve is inspected by Auto in Scene 16 at 43 minutes and 50 seconds; from *Wall-E*, directed by Brian Stanton, performances by Ben Burtt, Elissa Knight, and Jeff Garlin, Walt Disney Pictures and Pixar Animation Studios, 2008, DVD.

Beyond being subject to the gaze and touch of ‘bots’ working under the command of Auto, Eve’s open body also becomes the object of male curiosity and exploration when, in Scene

16, the ship's captain demands that Eve undergo inspection: "Let's open her up" (*Wall-E* 2008). A tactile procedure involving poking and prodding begins as the interior of her body becomes available to the wider male gaze (see fig. 8). The sequence schematically traces the pleasure derived from both the male gaze and touch while Eve involuntarily endures a procedure performed by a crew of robots. Incapacitated, Wall-E expresses long and loud sounds of pain when observing Eve's exposed body nearby, a departure from the gazing and touching we witnessed earlier when Wall-E himself initiated physical contact with Eve without her consent and cognizance in Scene 10. By emphasizing Wall-E's distress during what I am describing as a sequence depicting acts of violation, the film attempts to erase our memory of his controlling actions during their "date" in Scene 10 and then positions Wall-E as innocent and romantic compared to the evil male 'bots' who objectify and penetrate Eve inside the ward room and later, inside the captain's quarters.



Fig. 8. The interior of Eve's body is revealed to a small group of onlookers in Scene 16 at 49 minutes and 58 seconds; from *Wall-E*, directed by Brian Stanton, performances by Ben Burtt, Elissa Knight, and Jeff Garlin, Walt Disney Pictures and Pixar Animation Studios, 2008, DVD.

The act of dissection relegates the female body as the exhibitionist object of the curious medical male gaze. Marked as mother machine, a common trope explored by communication scholar Thomas LaMarre, Eve's lifeless body is subject to repeated acts of inspection and assessment performed by males who exert physical and intellectual control (234). After learning that Eve's abdominal cavity does not contain a specimen necessary for re-greening a barren life on Earth, the captain discards Eve's worthless body. He claims she: "Must be defective," and then orders Go-4, the security-bot, to send her useless body to the repair ward (*Wall-E* 2008). Soon after, the captain issues the following order: "Have them run a diagnostic on her" (*Wall-E* 2008). These simple lines of dialogue underscore the dichotomy between "the scientific gaze as objectifying, reifying, and quintessentially male" while the objectified body, "which has been constructed as female[.]" is interpreted as open and available for inspection as well as worthless due to her inability to reproduce (Wells 58). As the film reminds us, the entire fate of humanity is at risk without a womb which can only be found inside a young and healthy female body. By incorporating the trope of the maternal figure, *Wall-E* (2008) puts the open and vulnerable pregnant body under the control of the (male) medical gaze. Returning to Scene 16, the inspection episode marks the moment where male interest and curiosity intensify as the interior of Eve's body is fully revealed. Only this time, Eve is partially awake.

Restrained, Eve displays mixed reactions once she becomes aware that she is the object of the searching male gaze. At one point in the same scene, she attempts to cover her exposed body. She reacts in a very different way, however, after being tickled by a foreign object. Eve's facial features and body posture suggest that she derives pleasure from the act. She giggles and makes cooing sounds after a robotic arm sprays, wipes, and polishes her face following the invasive procedure. Once again, the inner-workings of her body become objectified under the

metaphorical microscope of the (male) medical gaze. A similar sequence occurs in Scene 18 when the injection causes Eve's organs to become visible to voyeurs. The film clearly frames Eve as an object of ongoing examination when, in Scene 24, the captain slaps a cord and hub onto her head. The instrument renders visible the invisibility of her emotions and experiences. Her body becomes accessible and available to curious observers. Eve is physically penetrated one last time near the end of Scene 25; only, the intrusion becomes increasingly violent. In one sequence, Auto forcefully inserts a long metal pole inside Eve's core before disposing of her body by pushing her down a dark chute. Traumatized, Eve loses all consciousness and mobility as violent actions are inflicted onto her body by a maniacal male assailant.

We can add another layer of modality to better understand Auto's constructed performance as an evil automaton. Kinesthetically, Auto's tactile behaviour towards Eve (first he penetrates her and then disposes of her body) positions him as powerful while she remains not only powerless but worthless also. In the aftermath of this disturbing sequence, audiences follow Eve's lifeless body as she floats inside a trash chute where garbage flows nearby. Figuratively, her discarded body becomes associated with the trash that surrounds her lifeless body at the beginning of the next scene.

The film's villain avoids punishment for the violence and pain he inflicts upon Eve. He is, however, eventually extinguished or de-activated for disrupting the socio-cultural order (Wooden and Gillam 121). If we return to the figure of the unresponsive female victim that is individuated in Eve in what I am referring to as a metaphorical assault sequence, we see that her body experiences a mechanical shut down in the aftermath of this violent act. This, in effect, temporarily disavows her ability to incubate a plant or specimen and thus, prevents her from fulfilling her directive in the film; that is, to help Wall-E reforest the land to ensure sustainable

living on Earth. In this way, it seems that the villain's greatest violation is not associated with the violence he inflicts upon Eve. Rather, Auto is punished for disturbing the natural order of things; of a woman and man's ability to procreate, to re-populate an infertile planet.

The problematic framing of the female body as both sexual and medical object of the active male gaze raises troubling questions about Eve's role in the film and the part that male characters, like Auto, play in the destruction of the mysterious woman who defies the traditional image of the domestic, passive princess who eventually marries and mothers. Eve's feminine excess combined with her masculine aggression give her the nuances of gender transgression and reinforce her deviance in early scenes. As motherhood becomes a significant narrative pivot, however, Eve's body becomes less mysterious to fellow characters and audience members alike. Once her womb is revealed, her body becomes associated with fertility and docility. In this way, Eve absorbs both the physical attributes of a non-maternal figure who seduces and threatens the male order and the contrasting image of the woman whose virgin body is discovered by men.

Because Eve is only mildly defiant and not completely evil, she is not subject to destruction but to a form of dis-empowerment and displacement, an act that is carried out by the separate efforts of the film's hero and villain who cowardly look at (Wall-E) and forcefully touch Eve (Auto) while she remains incapacitated. Eve is not figured as the anti-thesis to Wall-E, the hero or Auto, the villain, but as a mysterious female who ultimately embodies the traditional role of a woman as wife and mother. Her role in the film advances rather than threatens the hetero-normative patriarchal agenda of this film. When I first recorded my observation of Eve, I associated her presence with Wall-E's hetero-sexuality. But while Eve serves as a hetero-partner to Wall-E, she functions as well to reinforce the hierarchical positions of power between strong males and submissive females. The film's efforts to re-naturalize hetero-sexuality and the

stabilization of relations between males and females is most commonly expressed in the gender role divisions and hetero-normative relations we observe between Wall-E and Eve (Halberstam 35). In tracing Wall-E's maturation to hetero-masculinity, my analysis shows how un-heroic male characters can effectively attain hegemonic ideals of hetero, patriarchal masculinity, as observed in previous Disney films, even if this achievement involves controlling actions directed at an unwilling female Other. As Eve loses her mystery and agency, the male characters in the film assume power and authority through practices of looking and touching, positioning Eve as an exhibitionist object of male curiosity. Through these simplistic binaries and other systems of opposition, the film reproduces hegemonic assumptions about acceptable expressions of femininity and masculinity and then attaches expected social roles to these gendered bodies so that the female performs as a seductress, or more problematically, as a lifeless but desirable object, while the curious male is free to look from afar, and later, to touch her body without invitation. The power imbalance between the male who looks and touches without consent and the open and available female body is significant to Wall-E's socialization into manhood and fatherhood. Eve, meanwhile, follows a conventional trajectory of feminine maturation, eventually functioning as "a reproductive conduit" and later assuming her "natural" role as mother (Mallan 14-15). In the third and final sub-section of my analysis of *Wall-E* (2008), I further discuss how the film naturalizes hetero-sexuality and stabilizes gender roles and relations between men and women (Halberstam 35).

Fulfilling Hetero-Desires and Maternal/Paternal, Homesteader Dreams

Eve's arrival reveals two aspects about the way audiences should interpret the lead male character. Most obviously, Eve's presence confirms Wall-E's hetero-sexual identity and role as

father and martyr. Looks of admiration set in motion his obsession with her body, including the womb she carries inside her oval form. Below I discuss the rhetorical significance of Eve's abdominal cavity; however, I first explore how their initial meeting and subsequent encounters characterize Wall-E as obsessive yet harmless. Expressions of hysteria and attempts to hide from Eve present an excitable and cowardly male subject for viewers, one that does not align with conventional expectations of heroic masculinity. While one may be tempted to read this as a somewhat progressive move on Pixar's part for creating a timid male lead, I interpret this figuration as a means to negotiate certain aspects of masculinity while closely safeguarding some "essential" traits, including hetero-sexual desire. In Wall-E, we find a figure who has been created with the addition of postfeminist masculine characteristics.

Wall-E's characterization as an anxious and fearful male who clearly lacks bravado begins to shift, albeit only briefly and slightly, in Scene 11. For the first time, he moves vertically as he climbs atop a ladder outside the space craft. However, fearing for his safety, the small 'bot' hides inside his rectangular core as the space ship prepares to launch. The brief act of bravery is thus somewhat undermined by his fear of heights. A similar pattern occurs in a later scene where fleeting constructions of conventional heroism are eventually replaced with timidity and fragility. Scene 18 depicts Wall-E in an action sequence set inside a repair ward aboard the Axiom. The film adopts a more conventional image of masculine bravery as Wall-E escapes from confinement by using a laser to cut the glass inside his cell. He attempts to rescue Eve and a group of 'bots' from experimental testing, only he fails to fulfill his mission. In another instance of bravery, Wall-E steals and fires a weapon. Violent displays of bravery position him as a hero, a role that is short-lived. At the beginning of Scene 19, Wall-E is celebrated for his rescue efforts. His body rises to the top of a crowd of cheering robots before he falls. At the end of this

sequence, his small body is positioned low to the ground. He is also mute, with the silent background making audiences more aware of his trembling sounds and movements. This sequence affirms that Wall-E is not the kind of hero who will lead the group into battle. More generally, Wall-E opposes the image of the hyper-masculine, heroic predecessors that dominated the crop of animated action adventure films for children in the past few decades. This is not to say, however, that Wall-E is completely unlike these characters given that his identity and role as a hetero-sexual protective male, for example, has been closely safeguarded throughout the film.

I interpret this to mean that leading male characters in contemporary films featuring masculine makeovers, like *Wall-E* (2008), can freely express their emotions, even if these have not been traditionally linked to masculine heroism, so long as their sexual identities and gender roles as hetero-sexual males who labour the land and protect their loved ones are clearly established. The retention of hetero-sexual paternal masculine identity allows Disney to balance the image of the nervous and fearful male figure the film sometimes presents. To effectively demonstrate how the film modestly inserts a hetero-normative agenda and domestic homesteader ideology into the narrative fold, I return to early scenes and sequences where nostalgia or longing for hetero-partnership and paternal care are first presented.

From the opening scene, audiences learn that Wall-E is the sole inhabitant of a barren planet. Other than the companionship of a cockroach, Wall-E lives a solitary life without a purpose outside of his occupation as a garbage dispenser. The interplay of light instrumental music in the background with a series of tight camera shots in the foreground makes clear that Wall-E is more than an industrious robot. Through tight close-up shots and ambient melodies, the film rhetorically constructs Wall-E as a sentient being. In the first scene, for example, we are introduced to a robotic figure drawn with disproportionately large and expressive ocular features.

Two round shapes gaze at the audience; a sad and anxious mood is established as the lone robot displays a blank expression in a close-up camera shot. Facial expressions and body movement are especially significant here and elsewhere for they are used to establish audience identification with Wall-E. By bringing viewers in closer proximity to Wall-E via close-up shots and through melodic audio tracks that play in the background, audiences are invited to experience the loneliness Wall-E expresses initially. Shortly after the film's opening sequence, we sense, through cinematic techniques, background music, and other narrative-building devices, that a lonely Wall-E desires contact with living matter. For one, the film shows that a special relationship exists between machine and organism. Wall-E and the cockroach interact vocally and haptically. The juxtaposition between a small, harmless insect resting on a larger and presumably unpredictable 'bot' may be an attempt to humanize the machine. Further, Wall-E's appreciation for organic matter is evident throughout the film as he tirelessly protects the plant that promises to restore Earth and its environment. In the process of humanizing Wall-E, animators also slip in certain traits that position Wall-E as a sensitive and sympathetic male.

In some ways, the figure of the sensitive male protagonist may be interpreted as charming. After all, male vulnerability is what attracts female attention and affection in this film. It is no accident nor coincidence that Wall-E is animated in the form of a small robot with a big heart for all living creatures and for all things created in an idealistic past. Scene 3 highlights both his humanity and desire for hetero-sexual companionship when the film takes audiences inside Wall-E's truck. In this scene, audiences learn that the robot collects cultural artifacts, providing a connection to a vibrant past. A combination of medium and close-up shots of utensils, Christmas lights, and a full range of consumer products, including toys, are among the items that appear inside his dwelling. More significantly, however, a television screen and video

cassette recording of the 1969 film, *Hello, Dolly!* plays in the background. Tight close-up shots of Wall-E's eyes and hands combined with the romantic song, "It Only Takes a Moment," communicate his desire for what Walter C. Metz describes as "a nostalgic, provincial life" which includes a longing for an idealized hetero-sexual romance and domestic family life (261).

Wall-E's identity as a hetero-sexual male and his desire for a prolonged and passionate courtship is confirmed in Scene 5. Expressions of passion are generally set in backgrounds where ambient lighting and romantic melodies, including Louis Armstrong's "La Vie en Rose," set a romantic mood. Wall-E's infatuation with Eve is evident in Scene 7 where he is constructed as a clumsy fool who falls in love. Aurally, the juxtaposition of the crashing sounds of shopping carts and the jazz song in the background reinforce Wall-E's characterization as an awkward, love-struck male. He communicates his desire for Eve through a series of nervous vocal inflections and hand gesticulations: he whistles, clears his throat, taps his hands together, and leans forward in the hopes of persuading Eve to reciprocate his love. At one point, in Scene 10, a smitten Wall-E engraves their names inside a heart on a lamp post. His sexual desire for Eve grows deeper when, in Scene 16, audiences see the world through his point-of-view. A hazy cloud fills the corners of the frame as Eve speaks in a voice that is inaudible and in a language that is unknown. Her message is interrupted by his infatuation. Wall-E repeats her name in a slow and soft voice; vocal expressions of his affection for her. Eve's attraction to Wall-E develops at a much slower pace, however. She appears reluctant to accept his offer of friendship as well as any of his romantic advances, at first. In some instances, Wall-E reacts aggressively to her objections; this reproduces the stereotype of the emotionally illiterate male who responds with anger in the presence of fear or vulnerability. Near the end of Scene 7, for example, an upset Wall-E kicks a pile of metal pipes after he fails to impress Eve. In these moments, the film presents Wall-E as a

potential male partner to Eve by drawing on a narrow and conventional model of hetero-normative masculinity. His machismo is emphasized again in Scene 8 whenever he pounds on his chest, emphasizing the hard exterior of his body. In another sequence, Wall-E demonstrates his impressive physique and power by extending his limbs before lifting heavy objects. His performance continues as audiences witness a chest-pumping gesture when he compresses garbage inside his core. As the garbage tumbles out of his mid-section, Wall-E exclaims: “Tada!” (Wall-E 2008). This time, Eve responds positively to his overt displays of hyper-masculinity. She communicates her hetero-sexual interest through cooing sounds and other vocal expressions, such as: “Ouu!” (*Wall-E* 2008).

By constructing a sensitive fool as its male lead in a romantic tale, *Wall-E* (2008) produces a laughable and likable character for audiences. Wall-E’s weakened state helps to position him as a charming male figure who Wooden and Gillam describe as a “loveable loser,” a male character who plays a passive and comical role in the plot (xxiv). The trope of the foolish boy or man is a common theme featured in contemporary postfeminist stories about boys and boyhood, claim Wooden and Gillam, and this animated film exemplifies this (xxii). Also referred to as beta or omega males, these comical male characters often inhabit small bodies and generally demonstrate a lack of effort and effectiveness due to laziness, incompetence, insecurities or perhaps a combination of these undesirable traits. Wooden and Gillam go on to describe beta or omega male[s] as characteristically lazy, cool, and comical – a response to [their] inability to achieve the status of alpha male” (xxiv). As a love-struck “loveable loser,” Wall-E never fully assumes the role of the alpha male, the violent action hero featured prominently in male-led action-adventure stories (Wooden and Gillam xxv). He does, however, eventually attain a higher position within the spectrum of masculine hierarchy through his risky

acts of bravery and compassion for all living matter in the universe. The position that Wall-E eventually “earns” is also attained through the process of “winning” Eve. The film’s paradoxical construction of a sensitive male who inevitably matures into the image of a postfeminist hetero-male figure shows how films like *Wall-E* (2008) are in some ways responsive to changing cultural attitudes about masculinity while also resisting changes that could threaten the cultural dominance and desirability of hetero-masculinity.

The prospect of hetero-sexual romance finally materializes in Scene 22. The frame at about 59 minutes and 11 seconds shows the robot lovers as they adventure in the night sky. Different spirals emerge behind Wall-E and Eve; visual traces of their respective movements. A bold blue line travels steadily, consistently across the screen; a representation of Eve’s calm and controlled movements, which is a departure from the unpredictable and aggressive behaviour displayed in her initial figuration as seductress. Wall-E’s tracks are curvy and clumsy, in comparison. Despite the visible differences between the traces of their movements, their lines intersect. Wall-E’s loopy white lines mangle around Eve’s blue tracks. Their trajectories are bound to connect. These visual details, combined with features I described earlier, foreground the film’s emphasis on hetero-normative coupling and attendant asymmetrical expectations for women and men. Beyond marking her body as a seductress, the smooth and wavy lines produced by Eve’s feminine form also position her as a potential hetero-sexual partner to Wall-E and, later, as mother to humanity. Wall-E’s rigid and awkward tracks, however, reinforce his image as practical and productive, yet foolishly charming male who protects Eve and the plant she carries inside of her.

The womb is a crucial feature in this film because it reifies audience understanding of gender roles and relations in the most basic of ways. The womb that appears inside Eve’s

exposed female body shows how even robot characters are bound by conventional roles which reposition females as sexual objects and nurturing mothers. Feminine youth and beauty are drawn in the curves of her oval-shaped body; design elements that remind audiences of her dual role as temptress and care-taker. As Kakoudaki observes, Eve's body is "as self-contained and opaque as an egg, designed to respond or glow, to be intuitive in its function in its original cultural context and truly mysterious outside it" (110). Eve embodies the figure and traits of a mother-to-be. Her womb is used to incubate a plant and secondly, her behaviour changes significantly once she is dis-empowered and then forced into submission by the male characters in the film, first through acts of sexual objectification and violation and later, when Wall-E instructs her to nurture the life that grows inside of her. The film associates Eve's body with feminine nurturance and sacrifice without providing alternative models of female embodiment and subjectivity. In many ways, the robot heroine is a reincarnation of the classic Disney princess who, in the end, is required for service. Predictably, Eve cares for Wall-E while she continues to pursue her directive. Similar constructions of female nurturance are repeated near the end of the film when Eve takes on the dual role of nurse and mechanic 'bot'. She quite literally fixes Wall-E's broken body by attending to his medical and mechanical needs. She procures objects with speed and steely resolve. Hoists, can-openers, computer hardware, and other items are used to repair or restore his distressed mind and body. Eve appears to be tied to her role as a mothering machine while retaining her sexually mature body for it inescapably links her with (male voyeuristic) pleasure and reproduction.

Constructions of both the temptress and mother figure are nowhere more evident than in Scene 31. In this final scene, Eve leans in, her face inches away from Wall-E's. Her eyes express mixed emotions; her care and concern for Wall-E is explicit in this emotionally intense sequence.

Audiences observe the female character as she uses her beautiful body to trigger reactions from an unresponsive Wall-E. She initiates physical contact by fluttering her eye lashes, shifting her torso, and pressing her fingers onto his chest. Wall-E, meanwhile, remains expressionless and unresponsive to her tender gaze and touch. Her role as seductress shifts to maternal figure when she sings him a lullaby. Her voice is coded as feminine by its soft, gentle, and soothing aural qualities. Maternal warmth is embodied not only in her voice, but in her pained facial expressions and close physical proximity to Wall-E.

Romance ensues at the end when Wall-E rises from a state of unresponsiveness thanks to the love and tenderness he receives from his female counterpart. His glossy eyes focus on Eve; Wall-E's fingers respond to her touch. They gaze into each other's eyes and hold hands as their robot friends appear in the background. A tight close-up shot near the end of Scene 31 reveals a moment of intimacy as the two lean toward each other until their metal foreheads finally touch. The animated film ends on a predictable note which sees Wall-E and Eve walk into the proverbial sunset, hand-in-hand, with the promise of a happily-ever-after. This tells us that, despite moments of instability where power sometimes shifts from the emotionally weak male to the physically strong female, traditional models of gender are safely secured, in the end, with Wall-E's role as a hetero-partner and father.

There is another important narrative detail that I must draw attention to before I can describe Wall-E's roles as masculine martyr and paternal hero. The film's investment in promoting hetero-normativity is emphasized when Wall-E symbolically plants the seed that will eventually grow inside Eve's fertile womb. In its subtle ode to human biology, the film reminds audiences that Wall-E, too, plays a seminal role in procreating life on Earth. As Metz explains:

This [episode of insemination] activates Eve's programming, causing her to mechanically shut down her personality and return to the ship with the plant safely monitored in her high-tech womb. Thus, in the span of a few minutes of screen time, the plant has transited from an accidental, deactivated refrigerated womb to Wall-E's equally low tech, and non-biological womb, to Eve's womb, a technological wonderland of plant-sustaining circuitry. (258)

A closer look inside his body reveals an abdominal cavity that resembles a womb. Only for Wall-E, the womb is not associated with reproductive labour but with a kind of productive work as he collects and crushes metal objects inside his mid-section. Meanwhile, the young and fertile female is bound by her reproductive organs and the sacrifices that are expected of her as an expectant mother and hetero-sexual partner to Wall-E. While Eve is clearly expected to incubate the plant inside her womb and to nurture the life growing inside of her, Wall-E, in contrast, is tasked to clean the debris left in an abandoned city. Physical exhaustion and masculine martyrdom are drawn on the exterior of Wall-E's rough and rugged body which is designed for manual labour. Markers of class are also covertly embodied in the monotony of his movements. A high-angle camera shot in Scene 4 captures his metal lunch box and cassette player; objects he carries with him during his commute to and from work day after day. The insipidness of the daily grind is expressed through the use of desaturated colours. Through the slowly dissolving transitions between frames, audiences witness the dirty and demanding jobs that Wall-E performs and the social position he occupies as a blue-collar 'bot' (see fig. 9). Manual labour is personified in both the restricted motions and repetitive actions that his rugged, male body performs. Metz describes this gendered account of productive labour using the womb as a metaphor for manual work: "Wall-E uses his womb, his trash compactor belly, to crush

detritus into skyscrapers of garbage. His womb, seeing as Disney definitely wants to construct him as the film's romantic male lead, is surprisingly productive" (257). I agree with Metz; their respective wombs serve as symbolic features of gendered labour divisions; with the male body relegated to physically-intensive and productive work, such as compiling and compacting seemingly large and heavy loads of trash while the female is expected to carry and care for what grows inside her. Both man and woman carry out their duties out of a sense of responsibility toward their mission – to continue the eternal cycle of reproduction. As masculine provider and protector, Wall-E must fight to preserve the plant that lives in Eve even if it costs him his life. The laughable male character who first appeared on screen virtually disappears near the end once the film places Wall-E in a paternal role. In assuming the role of the hetero-sexual paternal homesteader, Wall-E re-naturalizes gender roles while also elevating the role of the father to that of a martyr.



Fig. 9. Wall-E performs manual labour in a dumping ground in Scene 4. This still, captured at 11 minutes and 17 seconds into the film, shows Wall-E compressing and compiling piles of garbage left by human occupants long ago; from *Wall-E*, directed by Brian Stanton, performances by Ben Burtt, Elissa Knight, and Jeff Garlin, Walt Disney Pictures and Pixar Animation Studios, 2008, DVD.

The film not only ascribes certain types of bodies with gendered role expectations but also rewards constructed performances of femininity/motherhood and masculinity/fatherhood in very different ways. While the film celebrates Eve for saving the gluttonous humans aboard the ship (see fig. 10), the film's male lead, on the other hand, is worshipped for saving humanity from environmental ruin and rampant consumerism. The frame at approximately 1 hour, 21 minutes and 51 seconds in Scene 29, features visual, aural, and kinesic elements that, together, construct Wall-E as a martyr. Bright rays' glow around his frail body. His eyes close and his limbs extend while an angelic tune plays in the background. Wall-E's physical struggle is evident near the end of Scene 29 when humans and robots assemble around a fragile Wall-E who was struck by the maniacal Auto and then crushed by a piece of machinery. The crowd watches with anticipation as Wall-E faces the threat of death in the final moments of this scene. Beyond constructing Wall-E as a martyr, the film also positions him as a paternal figure who is rewarded for protecting Eve "and the life she's preserving in her abdomen" (Wooden and Gilliam 14-15). By foregrounding more pressing social concerns such as hyper-consumption and environmental pollution, *Wall-E* (2008) subtly weaves the threat of female infertility into its heavy-handed warnings about the state of humanity. The taming of the mystery woman, the non-maternal figure who embodies power and independence, is allegorical to the restoration of the planet, the repopulation of the human race, and the return of a hetero-normative and patriarchal system.

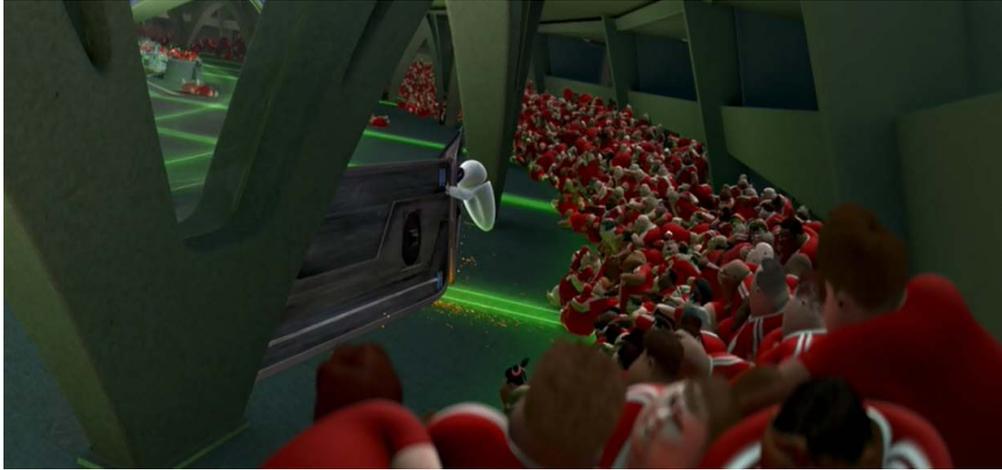


Fig. 10. Eve saves hundreds of helpless humans using physical strength in Scene 29 in this frame at one hour, 21 minutes, and 27 seconds; from *Wall-E*, directed by Brian Stanton, performances by Ben Burtt, Elissa Knight, and Jeff Garlin, Walt Disney Pictures and Pixar Animation Studios, 2008, DVD.

Summary

My work in this chapter focused almost exclusively on the social aspects of Wall-E's transformation as a hetero-sexual partner to Eve and as a paternal figure who saves humanity from ruin. The analysis and discussion highlight the process through which Wall-E is animated to naturally assume his rightful role as a masculine provider and protector despite the presence of a few traits considered to be uncharacteristically masculine compared to classic and more contemporary Disney animated films featuring male protagonists. If the protagonist had been drawn as a small and fearful male character without the prospect or promise of hetero-sexual partnership and had the secondary female character embodied the traits of an active and self-directed female character without having to revert to familiar roles and norms of femininity and female fulfillment, then perhaps this film would defy or even disrupt both genre and gender conventions. However, I maintain that *Wall-E* (2008) is a film about a man's journey into a

recognizable, culturally privileged form of masculinity. This quest is naturalized as the male protagonist grows into this role until, he attains the conventionally desirable image of paternal hetero-masculinity. I pick up threads of this conversation in the next chapter which examines a completely different kind of masculine transformation; one that sees a hard-bodied and uncivil male protagonist transform into a kind-hearted hero in Disney's *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012).

Chapter Five – An Integrated Rhetorical Analysis of *Wreck-It-Ralph* (2012)

In the first few seconds of the film, the voice of a male announces: “My name’s Ralph and I’m a bad guy.” The narrator continues: “Ahh. Let’s see. I’m nine feet tall, I weigh six hundred and forty-three pounds,” and admits: “I’ve got a little bit of a temper on me.” (*Wreck-It Ralph* 2012)

Later, at a “Bad-Anon” group therapy session for video game antagonists, Ralph confesses: “I don’t want to be the bad guy anymore.” This statement provokes other characters to gasp. An unidentified male character warns: “You can’t mess with the program, Ralph!” (*Wreck-It Ralph* 2012)

Introduction

Chapter Five opens with lines of monologue and dialogue from the first scene of *Wreck-It-Ralph* (2012) for two reasons. The first is that I want to provide a snapshot of Ralph, the film’s postfeminist male protagonist, a crisis-inflicted, self-proclaimed antagonist. The second purpose for including Ralph’s confession is that it illustrates the power that emanates from the shape and size of his brawny frame; this bodily excess is a constant source of shame until an inner transformation takes effect.

My analysis of this film mostly focuses on the relationship between the character’s physical surplus and his emotional limitations. The prevailing themes that frame this section explore this central contradiction and how the film’s male protagonist must navigate these tensions as part of his socialization as a gentle, burly man. I end this chapter by questioning the means by which Ralph learns to present and perform the role of a gentle man. At the same time, I

highlight the ideals underlining preferred physical constructions of masculinity in this film and, occasionally, the other two films under study.

Arguments

While there are parallels in the programs of growth that Wall-E, Ralph, and Baymax undergo in their narrative journeys toward postfeminist idealizations of masculine heroism, this film depicts a different variation of the path to masculine self-worth than what is featured in *Wall-E* (2008). Like Wall-E, who is socialized into masculinity in his relationship with Eve, Ralph learns to become a proper male role model through disciplining norms as well as his interactions with a female character, a young girl named Vanellope. However, while both films introduce the role of the female sidekick to teach these inadequate male characters important lessons about masculine role conformity, my analysis of *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) indicates a marked difference in terms of the results of their teachings. In the case of *Wall-E* (2008), Eve helps to harden Wall-E's image as a hetero-paternal figure. Here, however, I argue (1) that Vanellope's role in *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) serves to tame or temper the burly, bully type featured in early moments of the film. My other argument addresses the ridicule that is directed at his body and behaviour whenever Ralph looks or acts like an uncivilized brute. (2) Through examples, I claim that Ralph's corporeal excess, emotional volatility, and aggressive behaviour are re-directed toward productive and morally justified acts of violence, making the audience less likely to be repulsed by the character's impropriety. (3) I also argue that Ralph embodies the ideals of masculine super-heroism when emotional and physical outbursts are used for labour and combat. Put differently, redemption is possible for Ralph because his body is framed as an instrument and also because he demonstrates a willingness to curb his violent and villainous

inclinations while still exercising emotional reserve and restraint. Thus, *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) mostly reaffirms rather than reforms the image of the hard-bodied, labour-intensive masculine aggressor, leading to the social valuation of the physically-endowed male body built to serve and protect.

Discussion of Research Findings and their Cultural Implications

In this animated tale, the main character assumes many roles. He sometimes takes the figure of the hard-bodied brawn, the monstrous brute, and eventually, he represents physical excellence whenever he plays the part of the morally superior action hero. The titular character is heroic or virtuous whenever he displays both impressive physical strength and emotional maturity. He appears ridiculous and monstrous, however, whenever animators exaggerate Ralph's physique as well as his intellectual and emotional limitations.

The first two sub-sections of my discussion address the power that stems from Ralph's physique. I also describe how Ralph's anomalous physique and physical impropriety position him as an outcast. The juxtaposition between Ralph and other filmic characters helps to define the exemplary male body and behaviour. The second sub-section also centres on filmic expressions of masculine grotesquery with emphasis on visual and aural features that clearly mock his body whenever he misbehaves. Focusing on kinesic features, in the third and final sub-section, I dig beneath the surface of his hard-shell to showcase the vulnerable underside of Ralph who represents postfeminist fatherhood (Gillam and Wooden 4). The primary argument I make throughout is that the overt recuperation of the hard-bodied male, who eventually demonstrates a capacity for gentleness, disguises the film's endorsement of the physically-endowed male body

as an essential feature of masculine heroism. In the end, Ralph's physically impressive body secures Vanellope's happiness and the kingdom's happy, fairy-tale ending.

The discussion that follows is interspersed with illustrative examples from my analysis of how the film visually, aurally, and kinesthetically constitutes these characterizations as well as critical commentary about the ideals they espouse.

Essentializing the Hard, Labouring, and Powerful Male Body

The social valuation of the physically-endowed male body is the first construct I discuss. With this ordering, it is my intention to show how *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) does not attempt to over-turn the image of the mighty male warrior, a common trope featured in the super-hero sub-genre (Baker and Raney 28), in super-hero parodies (Brown 134), as well as in contemporary animated films for boys (Wooden and Gillam 70). The valuation of Ralph's physique is primarily evidenced by its constant and unchanging presence in this film, seeing as his role, first as antagonist and finally as hero, is always connected to his body. The film's focus on Ralph's super-body recycles conventional masculine ideals about physical empowerment even when he is humiliated for his corporeal surplus.

Within the first few minutes of the film, audiences are introduced to the narrator and protagonist (see fig. 11): an unintelligent male whose exaggerated figure and blue-collar brawn position him as physically impressive yet emotionally vulnerable. Initially, the film links bully violence with the familiar image of the superior male body prone to outbursts. This association is explicit in the opening scene during the confession sequence where Ralph identifies himself as a brawny man with a bad temper. His characterization as an aggressive antagonist with the capacity to incite fear is communicated through other symbolic elements beyond the sample

monologue that appears at the beginning of this chapter (see fig. 11). Because sound plays an important role in our understanding of Ralph's brutality, particularly in early scenes, my findings in this sub-section favour the aural above other elements.



Fig. 11. A medium shot of Ralph in Scene 1 at one minute and 47 seconds introduces Ralph as a video game antagonist; from *Wreck-It Ralph*, directed by Rich Moore, performances by John C. Reilly, Jack McBrayer, and Jane Lynch, Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2012, DVD.

Visually, Ralph's disproportionately large arms, clenched fists, and unfriendly facial expressions reinforce the image of the tough and temperamental male (see fig. 11). The visual rendition of Ralph's hyper-muscular physique is complemented by the recurrent use of low registers which advance a foreboding sense of fear. A heavy bass line is audible whenever Ralph moves on-screen; these sound effects carry important meaning about his wide and heavy-set frame. As Wingstedt, Brändström, and Berg explain, "the low register motif suggests large size and power in a way that a higher register would not. By experience[,] we know that large objects are required to produce sounds in the bass register" (199). They also note the "convention of film music that low notes express danger, violence and menace" (Wingstedt, Brändström, and Berg 199). In addition to the heavy bass line, the film features another pattern of sounds to produce a foreboding effect whenever Ralph expresses negative emotions. For example, the male character

often vocalizes his anger and frustration by yelling and grunting, sounds that reflect a particular model of masculine mis-behaviour, which the film attempts to correct by way of ridicule. The sounds produced by Ralph's flailing arms, pounding fists, and stomping feet generally complement the kinesic expressions of incivility displayed on screen. In early scenes, the character moves his limbs quickly and unpredictably; he raises his arms and throws his fists into the air to express his frustration. Other acts of violence include bottle throwing, cake smashing, and fist pounding. Beyond this, Ralph's facial expressions and bodily movements make him out to be a threat or menace which is consistent with his early characterization as bully (see fig. 12). Similar events are repeated in Scene 2 where Ralph upsets a pair of kids and other small and defenseless characters. An image of a volatile male whose body is unrestrained is reinforced aurally and kinesthetically.



Fig. 12. Ralph demonstrates a lack of control; he moves aggressively when frustrated in Scene 2 at 9 minutes and 48 seconds; from *Wreck-It Ralph*, directed by Rich Moore, performances by John C. Reilly, Jack McBrayer, and Jane Lynch, Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2012, DVD.

The film's reliance on the conventional hyper-muscular bully type is featured in an integrated context in Scene 4. This sequence marks the moment where Ralph meets the young

Vanellope, a feisty avatar who repeatedly mocks Ralph for his flaws which eventually sets in motion his self-transformative journey. However, before this transformative process can take effect, audiences are reminded of Ralph's menacing masculine presence. Combinations of high and low camera angles highlight noticeable size differences between the two. Sound effects also affect how we see and interpret his bulky body in contrast to her small and delicate frame.

Whereas Vanellope's animated movements are accentuated with light and wispy sounds, Ralph's movements are almost always cued with low and loud registers. The role that both aural and kinesic expressions play in meaning-making is further demonstrated in an action sequence in Scene 4. Here, audiences observe a frightened Vanellope who hides from Ralph, her pursuer. All is silent; the young girl is motionless until she is discovered by a grunting and growling man who towers over her. The combination of sound effects with visuals contrasts, shifting camera angles, and on-screen movements, in this instance, function to associate Ralph's body with the image of the hyper-muscular male aggressor.

When constructed as an antagonist in early scenes, Ralph's body is positioned as rougher, bigger, stronger, and thus superior to the sleeker, smaller, and more fragile bodies of other characters in the film. By defining what type of body shape and size qualify as physically powerful, *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) blatantly reinforces gendered expectations and cultural assumptions of the physically endowed male body as a source of power. The film ranks male body types according to what Wooden and Gillam consider to be "a tragically familiar social paradigm, whereby bigger, stronger, and more athletic men and boys are invariably understood as superior" (34). Animators working on *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) seem to have drawn upon historical templates of hyper-masculine action heroes within the Disney canon while also including features typical of Pixar's alpha male characters who:

stand for all things stereotypically patriarchal: unquestioned authority, physical power and social dominance, competitiveness for positions of status and leadership, lack of visible or shared emotion, social isolation. (Gillam and Wooden 3)

In many ways, Ralph's muscular exterior reflects and reinforces the image of the powerful brute, yet, occasional physical displays of emotional vulnerability contradict or evade the stereotypical figure of the masculine aggressor. Ralph represents the gentle and crisis-inflicted postfeminist version of the action hero popularly featured in earlier Pixar animated productions who, like Ralph, struggle with conforming to changing cultural conceptualizations of masculinity (Wooden and Gillam 73). The humiliation and isolation caused by his violent physical outbursts drive Ralph to partially break away from the temperamental and aggressive tactics typified in the previous generation of Disney animated films featuring male protagonists. I use the word partial here and elsewhere to emphasize that Ralph's makeover is exclusively social. As I will soon explain, Ralph's narrative journey toward heroism is always linked to his body, its capacity for physical labour, and his use of brute force in competitive and combative settings.

By associating violent feats and risky acts of bravery with the powerful male physique, the film frames the animated body of its male protagonist as an essential instrument. Ralph comes to embody allegorical elements of machinery and weaponry in the sense that his body is repeatedly treated as a tool, shield, and arsenal. Kakoudaki's description of the mechanical interpretation of artificial bodies in cultural discourse is relevant to my analysis of Ralph:

the arms can be imagined as levers, the knees as hinges, the lungs as bellows, the eyes as camera obscura, and whole-body systems can be mapped onto

technological processes as when the bones, muscles, and tendons are likened to lifting mechanisms of pulleys, ropes, and springs. (73)

There are many moments in the film where his body parts become aligned with the mechanics of machines. For example, Ralph's body is treated as a machine when, in Scene 7, he is instructed by Vanellope to force his way through a door, pump air inside a machine, and shoot targets, as well as to perform other physically challenging feats. Visual details make it so that audiences focus on Ralph's upper body with attention to his lungs and arms. One frame, at approximately 50 minutes and 21 seconds into the film, shows an exhausted-looking Ralph who uses his body to inflate a pump (see fig. 13). The physicality of the work he performs is further emphasized in the next scene.



Fig. 13. An action shot in Scene 7 shows how Ralph's body is used and abused as an instrument of play at 50 minutes and 21 seconds; from *Wreck-It Ralph*, directed by Rich Moore, performances by John C. Reilly, Jack McBrayer, and Jane Lynch, Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2012, DVD.

Ralph's lower body is mostly invisible during a chase sequence. His hands and arms slam into the ground. His upper body powers the cart, propelling it to move forward. His rigid body is the focus of this action sequence; Ralph stands tall from inside the cart before the camera

captures the mechanics of his movements. Every time his large hands touch the ground, a heavy bass is audible. Sonic features, such as low registers, reinforce the character's loud and heavy movements. Meanwhile, the bass line surges with the upbeat instrumental melody that plays in the background. Through the intensity of the music and the medium close-up camera shots that effectively capture the width of his figure, the film gradually repositions his role from local villain to hometown hero.

Another sequence in Scene 8 constructs Ralph as a heroic figure, however, this time the film also reveals his gentle underside. A range of visual, aural, and kinesic features come together to highlight both his sensitivity and selflessness without diminishing the power that emanates from his body. Ralph's physical size and strength prove useful once again when, in Scene 8, the film showcases his large fists. Audiences observe the male protagonist repeatedly slam his fists into the ground to construct a race track for his young friend. A cloud of dust begins to fill the bottom portion of the frame. Small pieces of rock fly into the air before the race track is fully revealed. These visual details are meaningful because they serve as reminders of Ralph's physical valuation if used to productive ends.

Through displays of rigidity and relentlessness, the film tells us that Ralph's body is reserved for particular and preferred (gendered) accounts of labour, including building, protecting, and saving the young and vulnerable. Like Wall-E, Ralph's directive in the film is to perform physically demanding jobs deemed "dirty and dangerous" (Demello 159). Ralph and Wall-E are similarly positioned as working-class heroes whose roles and accomplishments are partially defined by the physicality of their work. Both animated films armour their male protagonists with either metal surfaces or muscular frames. The films are similar in that neither alters, directly or explicitly, the hard and rugged bodily exterior of their leading male characters.

Their respective transformations are directed inward rather than outward. Because of this, Wall-E and Ralph are never faced with the threat of changing the surface or contour of their frames, nor are they required to alter their rugged appearances. For example, in Ralph's quest to become a postfeminist hero, he is encouraged to adopt more socially acceptable forms of masculine behaviour, which includes emotional maturity and social obedience, for it is his behaviour that is deemed undesirable and not his body.

While I am tempted to interpret Ralph's social development as progressive given the film's emphasis on the desire to transform the male brute into a sympathetic man, the character's unchanging muscular physique combined with the repeated performance of masculine aggression (despite the re-direction of violence and vigilantism toward morally justified ends) reproduces an essentialist reading of the male body which values male physical excellence above all else. Disney does not reinvent leading male characters by drawing new or alternative models of masculinity that see them become more intelligent or creative since brilliance and artistic talent are rarely located inside the brawny bodies of Disney's heroes (Wooden and Gillam 127). Even in the aftermath of Ralph's transformation, the male character does not embody the traits of a skilled artisan nor does he display the technical knowledge or brainpower we observe in Baymax, the subject of the next chapter. Verbal spars are limited and are always included in fighting sequences where physical combat is emphasized. A focus on his intellect, it seems, would undermine his physical attributes and athletic skills. The dichotomy between brains and brawns is complicated by the film's introduction of a third characterization: the emotionally literate male who is distinct from the intelligent male and, in some ways, in opposition to the masculine model of physical prowess. The introduction of the emotionally literate brute delivers a version of masculinity that is not solely based on physical excellence; however, the emphasis

on masculine essentialism continues to be a major thematic preoccupation in this film. *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) bridges the gap between the brainy and brawny male prototypes with the addition of the emotionally astute postfeminist hero who maintains his “tough guy” persona. Rather than releasing Ralph from socially gendered expectations attached to the brawny male super-hero, the film reinforces the value of his essential male superiority by changing the intentions that drive his actions and not the violent actions themselves. The brawny male body is constructed as a liability when it is used to express vengeance, elicit fear, or carelessly respond to emotional hardships. Ralph’s impressive physique is perceived as an asset, however, when it is used productively: to defeat evil and thus protect the young, small, and vulnerable from villainy.

The inner changes Ralph is eventually drawn to exhibit also yield rewards. Once Ralph conforms to postfeminist conceptualizations of masculinity, he is no longer disliked nor socially displaced by the Nicelanders, the small townfolk who also live inside the game. The more physical restraint he displays and the more expressive he becomes when sharing positive emotions, the better he is treated and regarded. At the start of the film, the main character is punished for his unruly behaviour and gratuitous acts of violence. *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) may tempt its audience to interpret this condemnation as a critique of male aggression; however, the film ultimately celebrates his physical brawn so long as Ralph’s body is used to fight against evil and defend the vulnerable. Displays of masculine aggression that were initially read as hateful are later interpreted as heroic. It is only once he learns to re-direct expressions of male volatility and violence towards evil-doers that he gains social acceptance from the lovable gang of arcade-game characters. Such a conventional construction of virile strength and bravery seems to reflect the familiar trope of the violent action hero whose “nature” cannot be denied nor completely altered. Nowhere is this more evident than in the last line of dialogue featured at the beginning of

this chapter where an unidentified male character gasps at the thought of re-writing the code that controls the game and its characters (*Wreck-It Ralph* 2012).

While I maintain that the film ultimately idealizes the essential role of the burly male body, it would be irresponsible of me to discount the way the film ridicules Ralph's exaggerated bodily imagery before it idealizes his physical prowess.

Shaming the Physically Excessive and Emotionally Illiterate Brute

Initially, Disney's *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) positions its brawny male figure as a misfit. Rather than directing its disapproval of Ralph's mis-behaviour onto his actions, the film often casts judgement onto his body. A social outcast like Ralph is subject to methods of discipline meant to identify and correct socially unacceptable or undesirable images of masculinity. Both his physical excess as well as his intellectual limitations are sources of mockery used to illustrate and amplify undesirable masculine behaviour.

If we examine the rhetorical techniques used to pitch Ralph's body and behaviour as a site of humour and humiliation, we notice that the film explicitly connects his excess with accidental acts of stupidity or volatility. Images of masculine buffoonery and occasional references to his monstrosity, which work together to maintain this characterization of Ralph as out-of-place, are partially communicated through his bulging shape, an element that is exaggerated both visually and kinesthetically.

This takes us to the image of the brawny man defined by both his excess (physical) and lack (diminished capacity for problem-solving and emotional expression). *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) presents Ralph as a grotesque fool and failure through a combination of modes, beginning with the visual. As with Baymax, Ralph's body and bodily functions are rendered ridiculous because

of the way they look and act. Ralph is to be interpreted as silly or stupid whenever his body defies norms of acceptable behaviour. This is the case in Scene 2 when saliva runs down his mouth and spills onto his chin after he bites into a cherry. Later, in the same scene, the visual juxtaposition of his bulging body contained inside a small train cart provokes laughter. Comedy ensues when Ralph's exaggerated body spills over the small door frame built for the small and sleek Nicelanders. The physical styling of the grotesque male body in these sequences is presented as ridiculous and burdensome.

This motif emerges in Scene 2 when Ralph clumsily falls through the floor, inadvertently destroying property and inflicting pain onto others. Scene 2 features another compelling example of the grotesque male body as burden. In this sequence, Ralph's identity is revealed despite posing as a soldier. Ralph's large mid-section fails him as he forces his way inside metal armour designed for lean soldiers (see fig. 14). Sound effects underscore the humiliation as Ralph physically struggles to squeeze his gut inside a tight, metal armour. Grunting, clinking, and rattling noises accentuate the visual construction of his round belly and also work to highlight his inability to conceal or contain himself. Visual and aural features are complemented by awkward physical motions. The film often enacts his role as a brawny fool through a combination of poor posture and clumsy movements. For example, once Ralph is confined inside the fitted suit, he loses control of his body and its movements. He trips and falls, eventually colliding into a wall. Later, he tumbles, bumps into, and brushes up against other soldiers. The association of the ridiculously grotesque with the failed or burdensome male body marks Ralph as inadequate and out-of-place.



Fig. 14. In Scene 2, Ralph poses as a soldier. His gut bulges inside the tight armour. This frame, captured at 16 minutes and 34 seconds, is one of many emphasizing his grotesque body; from *Wreck-It Ralph*, directed by Rich Moore, performances by John C. Reilly, Jack McBrayer, and Jane Lynch, Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2012, DVD.

Ralph's position as an outsider is reinforced through the visual contrast between his wide frame and rough surface and the small and sleek bodies of Felix, the loveable hero, and the Nicelanders. A good example of this juxtaposition is observed in Scene 2 where Ralph and the Nicelanders appear in the form of cake toppers (see fig. 15). Compared to the other figurines, Ralph is nearly triple in size. He is presented as unattractive; a wide smile, long tongue, and missing teeth are among some of the visual features observed in this frame. From the exterior, Ralph's large size, triangular shape, and furrowed brow signify the burly man's menacing presence. A closer look at his attire reveals a ragged t-shirt, a torn suspender, and missing footwear. His body is not dressed with the clean and colourful clothing that covers the small bodies of the Nicelanders (see fig. 15).



Fig. 15. Ralph is figured as both physically larger and unattractive compared to other characters in the film. The frame at 12 minutes and 51 seconds in Scene 2 emphasizes his enormity and monstrosity; from *Wreck-It Ralph*, directed by Rich Moore, performances by John C. Reilly, Jack McBrayer, and Jane Lynch, Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2012, DVD.

Disney maintains this characterization of Ralph as an outcast in Scene 4; only this time, his exaggerated body is framed as monstrous now that a bright green liquid covers the surface of his body. The camera accentuates this performance through a posterior point-of-view shot emphasizing his slow and steady footwork. Ralph grunts and moans as he crushes a bed of candy while roaming through a forest of lollipops inside a game called “Sugar Rush.” These expressions of monstrosity are somewhat lessened by subtle, yet, significant visual and aural features that diminish the threat of his monstrous body. A layer of white icing and a dash of colourful sprinkles appear above a sea of neon green icing covering his body. Sticky and crunching sounds are audible as Ralph crushes the candy beneath his feet. His voice is muffled by the thick layer of goo covering his face and mouth. Ralph is thus eventually figured as a goof and not a menacing monster, whose body has the capacity to provoke laughter above fear.

It is compelling to think through the ways in which this animated film explicitly condemns undesirable images of the male body and unruly masculine behaviour. Ralph’s

physical imperfections and impropriety fulfill two key functions in this film: they underline his poor social standing among the neighbouring Nicelanders and put in motion a transformative process where his excess is redefined as essential.

Based on my analysis of Ralph and other animated male characters in the Disney fare, including Baymax, I find sufficient rhetorical evidence to justify the claim that constructions of masculine buffoonery are only mildly linked with carnivalesque expressions of the grotesque male body. I use the Bakhtinian term “carnavalesque” to describe the way the film uses humour as a way to mock or parody normative images of male physicality through the caricature of the grotesque, the protuberant and excessive body that is individuated in Ralph. Humour surfaces from his open and loud body; the spit that runs down his face, the noise his belly, legs, and feet produce as he tries desperately to fit into the role of a masculine super-hero and to find his proper place amongst his neighbours (Bakhtin 26). However, Ralph does not embody the kind of grotesque realism or carnival body of Renaissance literature in the way Bakhtin describes it with its potential to represent the collective, public body, and to subvert established norms through parody (18-19). While Ralph’s body is humorously mocked, the laughter that it provokes functions as a way to discipline his flaws and failings and in doing so contains potentially subversive interpretations of bodily deviance within dominant valuations of masculine physical excellence. Carnavalesque expressions of the grotesque male body are employed to define the appropriate and exemplary type of masculine image, which is accomplished by way of shame and ridicule. Through the use of grotesque imagery and sounds, the creative team behind Ralph invest much effort to humorously degrade his body when presented as exposed and/or excessive. This humiliation continues with priority given to his physical excess over his intellect (or lack of) (Stallybrass and White 8-9). The film insists on constructing a male character who cannot be

both excessive and intelligent. As I explain in the next sub-section, it is only once animators exhibit his sensitive underside that references to silliness and stupidity dissipate.

Ralph's corporeal surplus, once mocked for its association with the grotesque, is eventually valued. The Nicelanders celebrate the superiority of his body, and its capacity for labour and combat when Ralph's super-heroic feats prove to be a source of production and protection. Ralph is granted permission to use his body in violent ways whenever the plot needs the burly man to save the day. This maturation or transformation does not occur, however, before Ralph's creators can effectively underline additional faults and failures. Herohood is realized once Ralph learns to comply with the behaviours that others, like Felix, model for him or that others expect of him. Such is the subject of the next and final sub-section of my findings from this film.

Taming and Transforming a Temperamental Beast into a Hero with Postfeminist Sensibilities

In *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012), evolving formations of masculinity are solely focused around behavioural improvements. The kind of socialization Ralph undergoes in this film is somewhat similar to the makeover featured in *Wall-E* (2008) in the sense that both male characters are animated to show restraint and to respect conforming norms of masculine behaviour. Though their respective paths unfold differently, with Wall-E's gradual transformation into a heterosexual paternal homesteader and Ralph's changing characterization into a virtuous hero who demonstrates compassion and nurturing behaviour, the two male characters are expected to adapt to evolving standards of masculinity. For Ralph, this means becoming notably constrained, physically speaking, and slightly more emotionally expressive throughout his quest. What makes *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) unique, when compared to *Wall-E* (2008) and *Big Hero 6* (2014), is the

film's insistence on shaming and then taming the temperamental male. The 2012 animated film follows the formula established in *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) whereby the once aggressive man must atone for his failures. Through his educational program, Ralph learns to repress emotions that are otherwise negative or unproductive as well as to re-direct his anger toward productive ends. Thus, the narrative resolution reinforces the status quo; Ralph is still physically strong and violent only he exhibits a softer, more sensitive underside now that he is aware and in control of his emotional outbursts.

The film's titular male character engages in self-discipline as he learns to correct and control his aggressive impulses so as to conform to established ideals of masculine resignation, which contributes to social order. When he is presented as composed and in control of his body and its functions, Ralph's ridiculous anatomy no longer provokes fear nor laughter. Rather, Ralph's body becomes associated with help and hope which contributes to the social valuation of physical excellence. References to masculine grotesquery and monstrosity fade away once Ralph learns to exercise self-discipline by internalizing the shame and punishment resulting from unregulated masculine behaviour. The silliness and stupidity once linked to his body also dissipate as Ralph is accepted amongst the neighbouring Nicelanders and thus becomes more endearing to audiences.

The figure of the male protagonist featured in the final moments of the film ultimately retains the physical traits of masculine might while also exhibiting additional, postfeminist characteristics, such as sensitivity and sympathy toward others. Before discussing my impressions of the gendered attributes governing cultural understandings of male protagonists and their bodies, I describe key rhetorical practices that contribute to Ralph's inner transformation and the sympathy he gains from characters and audiences alike.

Through dialogue between Ralph and Vanellope, audiences learn Ralph's backstory. In the moments where Ralph reluctantly entrusts his peers with his deepest insecurities, we are reminded that beneath his tough exterior is a wounded male who previously resorted to physical violence as an outlet to express emotional pain. Confessions like these establish vulnerability, justify volatility, and thus render Ralph sympathetic to audiences. As well, when Ralph shifts his gaze to the ground to avoid making eye contact with fellow characters, for example, we identify with the experience of discomfort and with the character's plight, by extension.

Beyond fostering a sense of identification and empathy with the audience, Ralph's slumped posture and dejected facial expressions communicate the burly man's powerlessness and emotional discomfort in the face of emotional vulnerability. For example, in Scene 1, an emotionally expressive Ralph faces a group of video game antagonists during a "Bad-Anon" meeting (see fig. 16). During this sequence, Ralph hesitates as he discloses his desire to change his image and role as the game's least popular character, which, as I have already mentioned, provokes an unidentified male character to vigorously defend the establishing norms and rules ingrained within "the program" (*Wreck-It Ralph* 2012). Ralph's large arms and hands cover most of his lower body. His face is turned to the right as he avoids making eye contact with others. Scratching and creaking sounds are audible as he fidgets and shifts his body as he speaks. The internal struggle Ralph experiences in this narrative quest is externalized through sights, sounds, and movements that clearly communicate his unease with emotional expressions, gestures of affection, and other displays of vulnerability. Ralph's posture is rich with gestural signification in the scene that captures one of his early interactions with Vanellope. His body is particularly rigid and withdrawn when the young girl attempts to befriend him. He displays reluctance to accept her offer of friendship, presumably because of the humiliation and isolation he endured.

Similar expressions of both physical and emotional discomfort are found in Scene 11 when a frustrated Ralph slumps while reluctantly apologizing to Vanellope. Ralph's mood shifts as shame and humiliation at his own sensitivity produce frustration. He directs his gaze toward the ground and avoids making eye contact with his young friend during this apology sequence. An emotionally exposed Ralph appears uncomfortable in a similar sequence, in Scene 2; however, this time, the action is set inside a bar. Once again, his large arm shields his face and its painful expression. Other kinesic features, including clenched knuckles and pounding fists, communicate the powerlessness and frustration he expresses in this sequence. Ralph's body language expresses anger for his inability to fit into the dominant cultural norm that governs understandings and expectations of super-heroes and masculinity, in particular.



Fig. 16. The film's male lead averts his gaze during a confession at a "Bad-Anon" meeting in the first scene at 4 minutes and 18 seconds into the film; from *Wreck-It Ralph*, directed by Rich Moore, performances by John C. Reilly, Jack McBrayer, and Jane Lynch, Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2012, DVD.

Eventually, the film's main character is animated to both appear and sound remorseful of his physically violent outbursts. In a moment of private reflection in Scene 9, for instance, Ralph's face and body are replete with sadness. He expresses remorse immediately after

destroying the young girl's cart with his bare hands. To better understand this imagery in an integrated context, it is important to describe camera techniques as well as aural effects. In this case, a sad mood is established as Ralph gazes at his fists. The camera showcases his large hands through a close-up shot that foregrounds his clenched fists (see fig. 17). While the camera focuses on his hands, audiences hear a light gasping noise and breathing sounds. Sound effects strengthen the sequence's affective impact. His slumped posture and vacant expression contrast the confident, alpha male persona established in earlier scenes. Private displays of guilt, regret, and feelings of sadness are similarly expressed in Scene 10. A sad mood is set through a long shot where Ralph appears to be particularly lonely, first in an empty train and then, inside an unoccupied penthouse. His large body seems strangely small inside the penthouse. The camera angle makes the setting appear both wide and empty. Ralph is exposed; his body is out-of-place. He eventually corrects his posture and changes his facial expressions without priming or pressure from others. The awkward and uncomfortable mood established through the interplay of visual, aural, and kinesic elements in these sequences makes it clear that although the film occasionally treats Ralph as a sensitive brute, it does so against a benchmark of traditional masculine stereotypes in which males are expected to be unaffected and unthreatened by their emotions. As the film makes evident, Ralph must always navigate the social dangers of emotional displays; the perceived consequences of allowing a man's inner feelings to surface (Wooden and Gillam 4). Despite the film's generally favourable depiction of the warm (and postfeminist) interior of Ralph's hard and tough exterior, a mild form of (masculine) resistance continues to linger in relation to public emotional displays and disclosures. Emotional disclosures and expressions are presented as sources of shame and humiliation, yet unrestrained bodily functions are not. The fact that Disney chose to construct a male character who suppresses his feelings for a good portion

of the animated story rather than bodily humiliations is indicative of the “tough guy” archetype who, it seems, cannot be both emotionally expressive and physically excessive at once.



Fig. 17. A close-up shot of Ralph's hands in Scene 9 reveals the enormity of his physique at one hour, 8 minutes, and 14 seconds; from *Wreck-It Ralph*, directed by Rich Moore, performances by John C. Reilly, Jack McBrayer, and Jane Lynch, Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2012, DVD.

To shield its main character from rejection and to protect him from humiliation caused by uninhibited expressions, physical or otherwise, the film presents Ralph as volatile in his interactions with all others, particularly before the start of his transformative journey. Gradual and occasional disclosures as well as moderate emotional expressions, combined with control of both his bodily functions and violent impulses, are key changes we observe in his quest to gain social acceptance and affection from others. It seems that animators have recuperated Ralph's masculinity by replacing negative characteristics, such as bullying violence and emotional volatility, with seemingly positive and progressive postfeminist masculine traits, including physical restraint and controlled aggression to be used in the service of justice. What remains, however, is a hard-bodied male whose physique and posture resemble the traditional male heroic

ideal. His body, with its muscular frame and its capacity for physical labour and morally justified violence, meanwhile, is idealized now that an imagery of monstrosity has disappeared.

Physical acts of bravery ultimately put him in line for his role as super-hero. This is apparent in Scene 11 when Ralph fulfills two rescue missions. The rescue sequences I am about to describe reconstruct the film's male protagonist as a heroic figure through medium shots stressing his physical size and strength. The film draws attention to his large arms and clenched fists as a transformed Ralph emerges through a brick wall to rescue Felix before saving Vanellope (see fig. 18). Light shines through the dark room after Ralph uses brute force to break into impenetrable spaces inside the King's castle. Ralph plays the super-hero again in Scene 13 as he uses his body as a weapon for battle and as a shield to protect the small characters who eventually befriend him. For example, Ralph fights a swarm of insects while his friends hide in fear. Low registers are audible as the film reminds us of his physical power. Sounds of struggle are also woven into this fighting sequence. Ralph's role as hero is further evidenced in Scene 14 which profiles Ralph's large frame as he flies across the bright blue sky. Meanwhile, an angelic melody plays in the background, an aural reminder of the changes he now embodies as hero. On the screen, viewers observe a determined Ralph who clenches the hand-crafted medal made by his young friend, Vanellope von Schweetz. With this visual signification, audiences are reminded of Ralph's gentle interior, despite the tough exterior he presents as super-hero. Once again, his body is positioned as hard and rigid moments before he strikes the surface of the mountain with a single fist. Two frames in Scene 14 provide further evidence of his physical strength; the frames at 1:23:48 and 1:23:49 paint a vivid picture of Ralph's new super-hero status. His transformation peaks near the end of Scene 14 when his heroic actions lead to self-inflicted injuries. Cinematic strategies, including a slow-motion sequence, accentuate Ralph's

descent. In this instance, his body floats with flying debris until his young friend races to his rescue. The slow-motion feature forces viewers to pay close attention to his lifeless body in the aftermath of the explosion. From this moment forward, the film's lead male character is celebrated for his strength and for the sacrifice he makes, suggesting that the dominant model of super-hero masculinity is primarily expressed through familiar images of physical excellence.



Fig. 18. In Scene 11, the film's protagonist embodies the persona of a super-hero after using brute force to rescue Fix It Felix Jr. at one hour, 15 seconds, and 25 minutes; from *Wreck-It Ralph*, directed by Rich Moore, performances by John C. Reilly, Jack McBrayer, and Jane Lynch, Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2012, DVD.

A large part of Ralph's transformation to masculine heroism requires that he physically protect the fragile life of his young friend, Vanellope, and the fate of the entire community of Nicelanders. His physical actions reveal both his hard body as well as his kinder underside. For example, Ralph uses his strength to construct a race track, to power Vanellope's race cart, to intimidate her aggressors, and finally, to save her life. Other than showcasing displays of physical might, the film positions Ralph as a caring disciplinarian and protective father figure. The bond that develops between the pair is significant for their interactions allow the male character to assume a fatherly role. For instance, when he first meets Vanellope in Scene 4,

Ralph reprimands her for her rude behaviour. Through Ralph, Vanellope is taught to show restraint and respect when addressing her peers. The vulnerable young girl also forces him to assume the traditional role of protector and provider. He grows quite comfortable in his (masculine) role as coach or mentor in Scene 9. In this sequence, Ralph gives Vanellope a “pep talk” before the race. His facial expressions and arm gesticulations soften; he opens his palms, directs his gaze toward Vanellope, and lowers his voice when he reassures her that she is fit to race. He later bends down on one knee to match her height. Ralph’s performance as a coach or mentor is convincing given the combination of visual, aural, and kinesic features used to express his softer underside. Later, in the same scene, Ralph’s image hardens as he shifts between two related roles: the caring coach and paternal disciplinarian. He takes a constraining approach to prevent her from racing after he learns about her hopeless fate. His large arms wrap around her tiny body. He also places his arms and hands around her to create a barrier, preventing Vanellope from escaping. To truly limit her mobility, he hangs her on a branch where she cries out in anger. This time, however, the visual contrast between their body shapes and sizes does not heighten his role as masculine intimidator, but instead, highlights the power that is granted to him in his newly found role as surrogate father. New meanings are generated from this juxtaposition as Ralph grows into the role of the protective father who asserts power and control over her. Similar sequences provide equally significant proof of his socialization into postfeminist fatherhood. For one, he becomes increasingly concerned for Vanellope’s safety in the aftermath of a crash in Scene 14. Audiences observe a frantic-looking Ralph who runs to Vanellope’s rescue after she crashes her cart. A similar expression of fear is visible when Ralph is forced to observe her imminent death, later, in the same scene. Although their roles are reversed near the end of the film as it is Vanellope who ultimately saves Ralph, this reversal does little to disrupt the image of

the mighty male protector the film works so hard to establish overall. In her role as female sidekick, Vanellope is reinforcing of and subordinated to the masculine image Ralph comes to embody as hero. Overall, however, Vanellope serves a specific function; that is, to indirectly transform the unruly brute into a more socially acceptable and desirable image of postfeminist paternalism.

The warmth and affection the leading male character eventually displays in his interactions with Vanellope are evidence of this transformation from masculine aggressor to loveable hero. In the process of becoming a kinder and gentler version of himself, the male character is taught important lessons about self-control and social obedience. His transformation is accomplished through discernible enhancements in terms of his emotional capacity, in particular. Ralph's composure and problem-solving skills come to replace the loopy stupidity and ridiculous monstrosity he was drawn to exhibit in earlier scenes. Throughout his narrative journey, Ralph is animated to appear and sound significantly less excitable and reactive in the face of adversity. Take, for example, an episode in Scene 11 where audiences observe a strange role reversal between Ralph and Felix. Felix's peculiar bodily performance includes frantic facial expressions and impulsive acts of aggression. He imitates Ralph using a combination of visual, aural, and kinesic features, all of which serve to parody expressions of masculine aggression. For instance, Felix deepens and raises his voice and (attempts) to use brute force by repeatedly hitting his hammer on cement. The frustrated character of the once-popular arcade game, "Fix-It Felix, Jr.," frowns and raises his small arms as part of his performance of brutish masculinity. Ralph, on the other hand, maintains a sense of calm and control even when provoked by Felix.

As a whole, *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) endorses the image of the restrained male. In the end, however, audiences learn one important caveat. While it is true that the leading male is asked to

curb all temperamental inclinations, violence and aggression remain acceptable if intended to help and support or to shield the young and vulnerable from undue harm. Ralph's animated body, after all, is designed to exemplify masculine empowerment; physical traits that are reminiscent of the classic action-adventure genre generally featuring broad-chested and hard-bodied male protagonists (Brown 133). Yet, the film also incorporates some aspects of the 'New Man' model by constructing its male protagonist as a gentle man with a hard-shelled exterior. Beneath the tough surface, dishevelled appearance, and sometimes menacing grimaces, lives a warm and loving man whose wide frame and brute strength serve as weapon and armour. Violent conquests are justified in these moments for they affirm his new, socially admirable role as mighty warrior and protector. The obvious lack of swords, guns, and other weaponry heightens Ralph's super-hero physique and positions him as more lawful compared to his nemesis, the socially deviant King Candy. Thus, the film idealizes the image of the rigid and relentless male whose heroic selflessness grants him the moral authority to carry out his violent mission against an evil criminal (Kort-Butler 53). King Candy, meanwhile, is figured as a maniacal character. A mood of suspense is established as the King tightly grasps his tentacles around Ralph's head, forcing him to witness Vanellope's impending death from above in Scene 14. At the same time, Ralph emits sounds of physical struggle while the King frantically utters anxiety-ridden rants, interspersed with diabolical laughter. These aural features underline the moral distinctions between the virtuous masculine super-hero and the evil King. Further, the stress the film places on King Candy's thin figure, physical shortcomings, and effeminate expressions, suggests that these undesirable accounts of masculinity are somehow linked with the flamboyant, which is marked as deviant. From the onset of his introduction, King Candy's hand and arm gesticulations are suggestively feminine. His facial expressions are often exaggerated; both his eyes and mouth

open wide to convey surprise and fear (see fig. 19). A faint lisp is audible whenever the King speaks. Kinesic elements, such as limp wrists and exaggerated facial expressions, meanwhile, are ridiculed. For example, Ralph refers to the King as “Your Puffiness” and “Nilly-Wafter” in Scene 5 (*Wreck-It Ralph* 2012). The combination of these features produces a gender transgressive evil male character; a marked difference to the masculine traits exhibited by the film’s hyper-muscular super-hero. For Meredith Li-Vollmer and Mark E. LaPointe, the archetype of the villain as “sissy” ridicules “excessive displays of femininity as a marker of [gender] deviance” which functions to reinforce hetero-gendered norms (103-104). Once the film secures Ralph’s role as hero who is presumed to be heterosexual, physical acts of violence, such as punching, hitting, grabbing, etc., are presented as heroic and productive, which ultimately place Ralph on the path to admiration. In this fictional world, redemption or rehabilitation is not an option for an evil figure such as King Candy. Reformation, however, is possible for a brute like Ralph whose tortured past and recent (sensitivity) training put him in line for his new-found role as hero who exhibits postfeminist sensibilities.



Fig. 19. King Candy, the film’s antagonist, is the physical opposite of Ralph. He appears for the first time in Scene 4 at 33 minutes and 46 seconds; from *Wreck-It Ralph*, directed by Rich

Moore, performances by John C. Reilly, Jack McBrayer, and Jane Lynch, Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2012, DVD.

For his gallant and selfless actions, Ralph receives several rewards, including intangible and material gifts. This includes two makeshift medals: one medal is a gift from Vanellope while the other comes from Niceland Mary. In one of the final moments of the film, viewers follow a small group of Nicelanders who head toward Ralph's home. Steaming hot pies appear in their hands as the Nicelanders make their way to his newly-built house. Later, Ralph is the proud recipient of a cake presented by a nicely dressed female Nicelander named Mary. A tiny figurine of Ralph appears at the top of the cake. A large gold medal hangs from his large chest. Tangible rewards, such as Vanellope's hand-crafted medal and Mary's home-made cake, reinforce the typical role that both girls and women play as care-givers and as "trophies" for good masculine behaviour.

In its celebration of the strong, active, and hard male body and its rejection of those undesirable behaviours associated with villainy, this Disney animated film slightly expands the definition of heroism to include occasional expressions of compassion and vulnerability, which oppose the arbitrary displays of emotional volatility Ralph exhibits early in this film. However, these additional traits are carefully contained within a dominant valuation of virile strength and super-hero bravery. The film tells us that the journey toward masculine redemption is highly conformist and conventional. For one, the impetus for the change in behaviour is the result of social pressure about what it means to be both a civilized gentle-man and a morally upstanding citizen. In his quest to gain social membership, the male protagonist uses his body; the only tool he knows will help to position him as capable and admirable, "to do what others who wished to protect society from criminals simply [cannot] do" (Kort-Butler 57). Lisa Kort-Butler's research

on depictions of justice in the super-hero cartoon genre points, albeit indirectly, to the essential role of the male body in the service of justice. Importantly, Ralph's eventual transformation into a more civilized version of masculinity, even when fighting crime, is always achieved through physical acts of bravery and to a lesser degree, through occasional displays of caring and protective paternal masculinity. Similarities between *Wall-E* (2008) and *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) may be drawn here in the sense that, while both films slip in postfeminist masculine characteristics, such characteristics are superficial. It is more accurate to view these Disney films as promoting the illusion of progress, particular through the makeover motif featured in the films. Like *Wall-E* (2008), *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) stars a male protagonist whose attributes sometimes disrupt genre conventions; however, in the end, the film re-centres masculine power and authority by emphasizing physical strength. While both *Wall-E* (2008) and *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) package masculinity primarily as a set of bodily behaviours and characteristics, they exemplify a recent trend in the Disney universe in which un-heroic male characters must confront past injustices, correct improprieties, control impulses, and moderately communicate their emotions in their parallel paths toward masculine socialization.

Summary

The transformative process involved in changing a lonely and laughable brute into a loveable hero was the focus of Chapter Five. Close attention to a range of symbolic elements and features used to articulate slightly evolving notions of masculinity in Disney's *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) reveals that this contemporary buddy film tends to privilege the masculine traits of athleticism and competition, linked with the super-hero archetype. By also incorporating select and moderate displays of masculine vulnerability and emotional sensitivity, the film panders to

postfeminist conceptualizations of masculinity, particularity with its focus on the crisis-inflicted male and the recuperated father figure. Despite the inclusion of gentler masculine traits, I maintain that the final version of masculinity presented in this film is unambiguously conformist and hegemonic, reflecting and perhaps reproducing older models of masculinity found in previous generations of Disney animated films featuring male leads. The practice of shaming the undesirable male body is a motif that appears in *Big Hero 6* (2014) as well. The next chapter affirms some of the findings and interpretations I discuss here; however, the discussion I turn to in Chapter Six is primarily organized around the physical upgrades that are applied into and onto the body of an unlikely hero named Baymax, the secondary male character in Disney's *Big Hero 6* (2014).

Chapter Six – An Integrated Rhetorical Analysis of *Big Hero 6* (2014)

Addressing Baymax, Hiro says: “If we’re gonna catch that guy, you need some upgrades.”

Later, while pointing at Baymax’s belly, Hiro adds: “Now, let’s take care of this,” to which Baymax responds: “I have some concerns. This armor may undermine my non-threatening, huggable design.” (*Big Hero 6* 2014)

Introduction

I begin Chapter Six with snippets of dialogue from *Big Hero 6* (2014) to provide a glimpse of the sexist and sizeist themes featured in the film’s makeover episodes. My analysis focuses on Baymax’s bodily upgrades and how these physical changes are expressed in features beyond only the visual. In this chapter, much like the preceding chapters, I show how dominant formations of masculine body ideals operate through visual, aural, and kinesic elements, which are literally projected into and onto the animated body of the film’s secondary male character.

Given that *Big Hero 6* (2014) presents a sequential trajectory of Baymax’s physical transformation, I present my findings in a linear way. I also link my observations and findings from *Big Hero 6* (2014) to a larger discussion about how all three animated films give prominence to certain physical exemplars of super-hero masculinity while mildly resisting constructs of the strong, aggressive, and competitive hero-type (Wooden and Gillam 70). As this is the last chapter which discusses postfeminist constructions of masculinity emerging from all three films, I sometimes incorporate key findings from previous chapters on *Wall-E* (2008) and *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) as a lead-up to the conclusion.

Arguments

This chapter and the two that precede it draw attention to the process of masculine socialization Disney presents in animated films starring male leads. In Chapter Four, I argued that *Wall-E* (2008) slips between two seemingly competing constructions of masculinity: one that highlights the power that is granted to Wall-E in his role as a hetero-male and another that emphasizes his emotional fragility and timid sensibilities. In Chapter Five, I showed how Ralph undergoes a highly conformist social transformation in his quest to gain acceptance and admiration from townsfolk. I also claimed that the film's male protagonist drops his initial persona as an aggressor while retaining both his muscular frame and bodily strength. *Big Hero 6* (2014) offers a consistent picture of super-hero masculinity only the changes are primarily physical rather than social.

All three Disney animated films use training processes and disciplining norms to slightly reform and reinstate dominant understandings of masculinity despite occasional attempts to counter some of the gender role stereotypes and gender power dynamics found in previous animated stories starring male characters. In *Wall-E* (2008), *Wreck-It-Ralph* (2012), and *Big Hero 6* (2014), we find a stable and coherent set of hegemonic attributes (physical and social) used to animate seemingly progressive postfeminist heroes.

In the case of *Big Hero 6* (2014), I show how Baymax is made-over by Hiro, the film's controlling male figure and protagonist, until the 'bot's' appearance quite literally fits into a desirable model of super-hero masculinity. Thus, in this chapter, I argue (1) that the ambiguous, feminized, and grotesque male body must be physically contained and socially controlled to attain this super-hero status. This connects to another argument: (2) that despite parodic elements used to critique masculine physical ideals in super-hero fiction, Baymax's prolonged appearance as warrior, and the admiration he receives from Hiro and others, suggests that the image of the

carved and chiselled male body is still the desired look for Disney's males. For all the possibilities that parodic episodes offer in terms of highlighting, questioning, and criticizing the absurdities of the conventional super-hero archetype, the film does not ultimately contest hegemonic ideals of super-heroism nor does it destabilize the image of the superior male body suited for action.

I also discuss how his physical makeover links with his shifting role and relationship with Hiro. Specifically, I show how (3) the cosmetic tune-up corresponds with a change in Baymax's relationship with Hiro into one that is more closely associated with friendship than with kinship. (4) Finally, I claim this film secures a post-biological, deterministic reading of masculinity. The film highlights Hiro's failure as an ill-intentioned roboticist whose obsession with containing Baymax's corporeal excess and re-coding his program turns a kind-hearted care-provider into a cold-hearted killer. Shame is cast upon Hiro for disrupting the natural order of things. As well, the return-to-nature theme, in these final scenes, affirms the view that Baymax is fixed and thus immutable to changing or competing gender roles.

Big Hero 6 (2014) does not offer a resistant or subversive reading of hetero, patriarchal masculinity, as a whole, because it explicitly shows us how male bodies marked as ambiguous and anomalous can effectively attain the masculine ideal through transformation and training. The masculine makeover we observe in this 2014 animated film is based, once again, on conformity and resignation (Wooden and Gillam 35).

Discussion of Research Findings and their Cultural Implications

This section of my work is divided into four sub-parts. I begin with a description of Baymax's feminized and fat body as well as its links to the type of care-giving behaviour

expected of Disney's mothers, in particular. Throughout both the first and second sub-sections, I describe episodes in which Baymax's body is ridiculed because of its ambiguity and excess before discussing the choices and conventions used to transform Baymax into an idealized image of masculine super-heroism. In the third sub-section, I describe the changes audiences witness during another round of upgrades where Baymax loses his innate desire to heal and nurture. Here, I emphasize his transformation into a cold-hearted fighter 'bot'. I conclude this chapter and the analytical portion of my dissertation with a discussion on the return-to-nature motif in *Big Hero 6* (2014) and what is suggested by the super-hero features and feats Baymax retains when his program is finally restored to its original state.

Feminizing the Insufficient Male Body and the Role of the Male Care-Taker

Baymax acts as a nurse 'bot' whose directive in the film is to diagnose ill bodies and restore them to health. His role is further defined through his parent-child relationship with a grieving orphan named Hiro. The monotonous labour that both Wall-E and Ralph perform in male-dominated settings is no match for the brain power and emotional competence required of Baymax. To call the film progressive, however, would be inaccurate given that Baymax is largely trivialized for what he does and for how he looks. To help the reader appreciate the relationship among Baymax's feminine physique, maternal behaviour, unconventional occupation, and his overall role as feminized object, I describe his face and mid-section before focusing on lower parts of his body, namely his feet and footwork. I also discuss other features that extend beyond Baymax's anatomy, such as voice and sound effects, for they also position him as unimposing and thus insufficiently masculine.

Big Hero 6 (2014) draws its secondary male character with ambiguity. Bodily ambiguity serves two purposes. It is used to contradict the conventional image of super-hero masculinity whose worth is grounded in his powerful physique. Yet, the ambiguous and anomalous male body inspires a series of physical and social tune-ups which has the clumsy and wimpy postfeminist male character transform into a paragon of heroic masculinity. The absurdity of the ambiguous 'bot' is most obvious in early scenes where physical markers of female sex appear on the surface of Baymax's body.

Unlike other characters in this film, Baymax is sketched without clothing (see fig. 20). Upon closer inspection of his exposed body, we see that Baymax is physically featureless in early moments of the film given the absence of distinguishable secondary male sex characteristics (see fig. 20). His body consists of round, soft, and hairless features (see fig. 20) which seem to align more closely with a narrow view of the older or aging female body. Bell claims that rounder shapes are typically reserved for female characters, specifically, mothers, grandmothers and fairy godmothers, who are called to nurture orphans and other vulnerable characters (118). Despite the lack of obvious markers of his masculinity, such as square frames, facial hair, muscles, genitals (or suggestions of genitals) (see fig. 20), the film marks Baymax as male. For one, Baymax is voiced by male actor Scott Adsit (*Big Hero 6* 2014). Secondly, Hiro, the film's protagonist, refers to the nurse 'bot' using masculine-specific pronouns.



Fig. 20. Baymax is introduced to Hiro in Scene 2 at 11 minutes and 24 seconds into the film. This still profiles his body in full; from *Big Hero 6*, directed by Don Hall and Chris Williams, performances by Ryan Potter, Scott Adsit, and Jamie Chung, Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2014, DVD.

The story that *Big Hero 6* (2014) tells about Baymax's body does not end with a visual and aural description of his ambiguously-drawn face and mid-section. His lower body also reveals a great deal of meaning about his role as a compassionate 'bot' who is voiced by a man but whose body is drawn as feminine. For one, Baymax's legs and feet do not exhibit strength; provoking, instead a sense of comfort or ease with occasional hints of humour (see fig. 20). His footsteps are steady and calculated, despite the challenges posed by his rounded physique. His characterization as an unimposing robot is affirmed at the aural level. Baymax's movements are almost inaudible in Scene 2 as he slowly approaches Hiro. The absence of sound does not create an impression of fear nor does it provoke excitement because of the consistency of his footsteps. The predictability of his footwork tells us when he is approaching. Repeated body gestures and a steady vocal range remind audiences that the robot character is not to be feared. Further, his hand and arm movements are slow and inviting. His voice is also soothing; his tone is tender whenever he speaks with Hiro and his friends. As well, lower registers are not part of Baymax's

vocal pitch and range as is the case with Ralph. The soft voice and the open expression of emotions in dialogue with Hiro, combined with the use of consoling statements, accent his role as mother figure.

Described as an embodied act or cultural performance, mothering is a role or practice that is not exclusive to female characters, claims Brydon (132). Within recent years, a new pattern is observed in the Disney universe of animated fiction where revised definitions of family and mothering have emerged. Brydon writes: “I find evidence that Disney is, at least on occasion, willing to reconstruct its representation of mothering, not necessarily of what mothering means but of who can perform it” (132). Baymax offers a perfect enactment of motherhood. His contributions are rarely recognized by those he cares for despite the fact that his presence is regularly required for both physical and emotional labour. Baymax’s constructed performance as mother is further evidenced by his propensity to nurture. The robot character closely resembles a mother figure whose primary responsibility is to provide unconditional (maternal) care to a grieving pre-pubescent boy named Hiro. Baymax behaves in motherly ways when he actively engages in physical and emotional comfort, guides the boy through adolescence, and bravely takes whatever action is necessary to protect Hiro and others from harm (Holcomb, Latham, and Fernandez-Baca 1972; Brydon 140) (see fig. 21). The highlighting of traits such as selflessness and compassion into a character who already embodies qualities that are characteristically feminine such as the innate ability to care for the emotionally hurt and to heal the physically injured, suggests that to be a mother, one has to be mainly feminine, in a conventional sense.



Fig. 21. Baymax carries his friends in this rescue mission in Scene 8 at 50 seconds and 26 minutes. Moments after, Baymax uses his body as a floatation device; from *Big Hero 6*, directed by Don Hall and Chris Williams, performances by Ryan Potter, Scott Adsit, and Jamie Chung, Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2014, DVD.

Evidence of Baymax's role as mother to Hiro may be better understood by focusing on a specific symbolic mode. Kinesthetically, Baymax and Hiro are rarely apart; their bodies are generally seen about a body length away from each other when they share the screen together. As well, Baymax regularly interacts with Hiro in physical ways with his gentle embraces and by occasionally cradling his face in his belly (Brydon 139) (see fig. 22). Gestures of affection like these affirm Baymax's role as mother over friend in earlier scenes. Beyond this, Baymax undertakes the role of surrogate mother whenever he puts Hiro's needs ahead of his own. He displays emotional competence whenever Hiro requires support during difficult periods of grief. He is caring without being tough; he is playful and protective of Hiro, but never competitive. The dissimilarities between Ralph as mentor or father and Baymax as surrogate mother are most obviously communicated by their differing roles and bodies. Whereas Ralph's square physique is clearly drawn according to conventional models of paternal, super-hero masculinity, Baymax's role as a maternal figure is emphasized by his smooth texture and round shape. The film focuses

on his hands and belly instead of his face and arms are another indication of his role as a motherly care-taker. The ‘bot’s’ hands are associated with helping and caring while his belly or womb functions as a source of comfort and support. For example, the robot character performs his dual role as a loyal care-taker and medical companion in Scene 6 when his large, inflatable body envelops Hiro after the duo fall from a window. Similarly, in Scene 8, Baymax carries his friends in his arms following a chase and crash sequence which lands them at the bottom of the water. His body also functions as a floatation device in the same scene. In the following scene, Baymax embraces Hiro to restore his body temperature. One-by-one, others join in a group embrace, each commenting on Baymax’s physique as an object of comfort. Fred, the eccentric nerd, compares their physical contact to “a warm marshmallow.” Honey-Lemon sighs in relief before commenting: “It’s so nice!” Wasabi adds: “Ah yeah! Ah that’s toasty.” Lowering her voice, Go-Go says: “Good robot” (*Big Hero 6* 2014). Here, dialogue is complemented by a soft and soothing background melody all of which reinforces Baymax’s nurturing body and role as a self-sacrificing care-provider.



Fig. 22. The pair are in close proximity in this frame featured in Scene 5. The still at 27 minutes and 45 seconds shows Baymax who carries Hiro; from *Big Hero 6*, directed by Don Hall and

Chris Williams, performances by Ryan Potter, Scott Adsit, and Jamie Chung, Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2014, DVD.

The essence of his character corresponds to the role of a care-taker whose selfless actions are largely unrecognized and whose body is of service to Hiro. Baymax's body, for instance, serves as a punching bag, landing pad, pillow and blanket, and as screen projector. Further evidence of Baymax's role as object is present in Scene 2 when the Hamada brothers describe the 'bot' as a "thing" made of components and embedded with code (*Big Hero 6* 2014). In the same scene, Hiro gazes at his older brother's creation while he circles around the 'bot'. Hiro pokes, prods, and presses his face against the vinyl canvas that covers Baymax's body while Tadashi lists the raw materials used to construct the 'bot' (see fig. 23). Here, Baymax assumes the role of the passive object whose open body is curiously inspected and deconstructed by the Hamada boys.



Fig. 23. This still captures Hiro who presses his head to peer inside Baymax's bodily interior in Scene 2 at 12 minutes and 45 seconds; from *Big Hero 6*, directed by Don Hall and Chris Williams, performances by Ryan Potter, Scott Adsit, and Jamie Chung, Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2014, DVD.

Visual emphasis falls on the male body as spectacle which is ambiguously framed by neither the male nor female point-of-view. In Chapter Four, I wrote about the way Eve's body is displayed via the scopophilic male gaze. Close-up shots of her face and body, occasionally revealing expressions of pleasure and pain, indicate that Eve is the object of male fascination. This is not the case with Baymax because the film adopts a humorous tone during the inspection episode. The mocking humour of the exposed grotesque male body in this sequence avoids any connections to or implications of the male gaze. As well, the fact that this buddy film is completely free of hetero-love cancels the possibility of an erotic spectral gaze. *Big Hero 6* (2014) does not leave any room for audiences to interpret the relationship between Baymax and Hiro as potentially homo-erotic because of its stress on motherhood and mentorship. As well, Hiro's preoccupation with Baymax's anomalous body renders any references to the heterosexual male gaze as inappropriate and implausible. Rather, Hiro's obsession with the bot's bodily androgyny positions Baymax as the passive object of Hiro's super-hero fantasies. As such, Baymax is the subject of discrimination and discipline not only because his body is unusually big but also because it is remarkably ambiguous if not effeminate. However, the ambiguity of his gendered body disappears once Baymax undergoes a physical makeover which is complemented by a series of training (behavioural) exercises in which he learns to present and perform culture's dominant construction of masculinity. This is a theme I will revisit again later once I detail the absurdities and inadequacies of the 'bot's' grotesque body.

Mocking the Grotesque, Effeminate, and Incompetent Male

So far, I have established how Disney's *Big Hero 6* (2014) draws upon feminine physical characteristics in its construction of Baymax whose role in this film is to provide care to those in

distress. His occupation, relationship with Hiro, and the challenges posed by his balloon-like figure lack the kind of power and control found in the bodies of male leads in mainstream super-hero films. This animated film makes clear that Baymax's marshmallow-like physique opposes the desired silhouette of masculine super-heroism. The figure of the outrageously obese male is by far the most problematic trope featured in all of the animated films under study. Associations between corporeal excess and physical incompetence confirm Baymax's low-ranking position within the hierarchy of masculinity which places the superior and strong bodies of super-heroes at the top (Connell and Messerschmidt qtd. in Birthisel 342). Negative attributes associated with the overweight male character are quite obviously featured in moments where the camera centres on grotesque imagery: the obtrusive, exposed, and abnormal body that is prone to protuberances and flatulence (Bakhtin 316). Paying close attention to the audio, visual, and kinesic elements presented by Disney in its design of Baymax's physique provides a more encompassing view of how the film's secondary male character is drawn and dressed as grotesque and feminine. Failure to comply with expected masculine body norms and abilities makes Baymax the target of fat shaming.

A description of the visual design of his body and the animation of his movements is a good starting point to discuss some of the sizeist and sexist tropes featured in *Big Hero 6* (2014). The versatile fabric and seamless surface used to cover his skin should not be overlooked as these are the visual elements through which the film invests Baymax with grotesque qualities and other undesirable physical attributes that clash with the male heroic ideal in super-hero fiction (Brown 134). Take, for example, the dialogue between Hiro and Tadashi in Scene 2. Set inside a lab at Tadashi's school, Hiro curiously circles around Baymax to get a closer look at the raw materials Tadashi used to fabricate the 'bot'. Turning toward his older brother, Hiro asks:

“Vinyl?” to which Tadashi responds: “Yeah ... Going for a non-threatening, huggable kind of thing.” This discovery incites one of many insults launched against Baymax’s body weight “It looks like a walking marshmallow,” says Hiro (*Big Hero 6* 2014). These lines of dialogue underline the importance of visual (and tactile) surfaces and the types of connections the film is making between soft and expandable textures and the bodies they contain. Unlike the form-fitting elastic body suits and metal breastplates worn by super-heroes suited for action and adventure, vinyl is pliable and thus a practical choice for Baymax whose body is designed for service. This construction of Baymax as a feminized object widely available for (mis) use is supported by scenes and sequences that focus on the warmth of his belly and the softness of his spherically-drawn figure. The lack of hair and muscle definition combined with the versatile canvas that covers his body gives a certain feel to the skin which the film genders as feminine. By linking fatness with femininity, this film reinforces the trope of the obese male body as “soft”.

Taken together, his exaggerated shape, excessive size, exposed materiality, the surface of his skin, and the frequent sounds produced by his bodily functions, make clear that Baymax’s fat body is feminized to provoke laughter. The association of corpulence with comedy in this film is most obviously communicated through visual and aural gags emphasizing Baymax’s physical excess and ineptness. An action sequence in Scene 6 provides a good example of this (see fig. 24). The scene follows the pair’s misadventures during their fearful escape from the masked villain and an army of micro-bots. There are many moments where Baymax’s size causes mobility issues: his head hits the ceiling and legs collide into furniture whenever his body is trapped in enclosed spaces. The robot character also proves incapable of escaping from enemies after failing to kick and punch his way out of captivity. Most problematically, however, Baymax

appears ill-suited for battle. Later, in the same scene, the young protagonist smacks and punches his large friend, urging him to make a fast escape. Hiro tells Baymax to: “Suck it in!” (*Big Hero 6* 2014). Soft thumps and squeaky sounds are audible as air deflates, allowing Baymax to squeeze inside of tight places. His body requires a tune-up once air releases from punctured holes covering his inflatable arms. Loud, high-pitched noises are audible as air fills Baymax’s balloon-like body. Near the end of Scene 6, the ‘bot’ is incomprehensible as he reports an attack to local police. Eventually, his large body lunges to the floor; Baymax lacks control of his limbs. His voice sounds more robotic as his battery is critically low. Concerned, Hiro asks: “What the ... Wwww ... What’s wrong with you?” (*Big Hero 6* 2014). Rather than responding, Baymax burps, laughs, and emits other bodily sounds, from beeping to buzzing noises. Annoyed, Hiro urges Baymax to: “Keep it together” (*Big Hero 6* 2014). The layering of natural sounds (e.g. farting noises) with expressions of physical struggle (e.g. grunting noises), and slurred speech, produces a comedic effect through which audiences are invited to laugh at his portly figure and clumsy feats. These audio-visual reinforcements further demonstrate Baymax’s incapacity to control his body and suppress his bodily deviations.

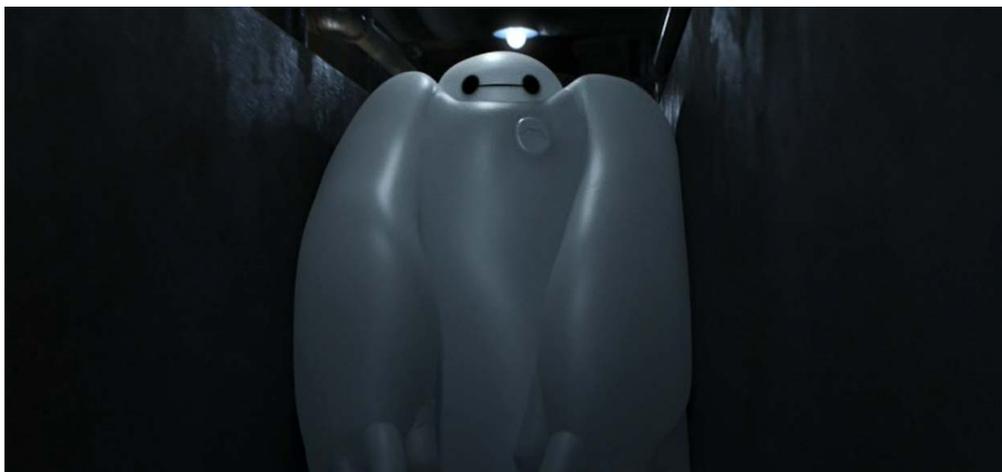


Fig. 24. The enormity of Baymax’s physique is apparent in this frame at 34 minutes and 9 seconds. In Scene 6, Baymax must squeeze his body to fit inside constrained spaces; from *Big*

Hero 6, directed by Don Hall and Chris Williams, performances by Ryan Potter, Scott Adsit, and Jamie Chung, Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2014, DVD.

The fact that Baymax's fluffy, balloon-like body produces squeaky sounds whenever he comes into contact with other objects on screen and that his bodily functions feature prominently on the film's audio track assures that he retains his status as a loveable goof and not as an object of desire. After all, Baymax exhibits the most grotesque qualities of all characters in this film and the other two characters included in this study. It is perhaps for this reason that Baymax, the only overweight male figure, is relegated to the role of the secondary male character who acts as the comical friend (Demello 194). Oversized male figures like Baymax and meagre males like Wall-E may be interpreted as insufficiently masculine because their bodies are not necessarily strong nor are they considered to be attractive, according to masculine heroic ideals featured in superhero films (Brown 134). Another way to interpret these findings is to proclaim that these male characters are slowly breaking down some of the gender tropes and sizeist stereotypes that have permeated animated films for decades (Baker and Raney 36). Unfortunately, the claim that *Big Hero 6* (2014) features more progressive social attitudes about masculine body weight is not only premature given that Baymax ultimately undergoes a series of physical changes but is also false because it is through these transformations that Baymax shows "how even the lowliest of males can and should" attain conventionally masculine attributes of super-heroism (Brown 132).

In the next sub-section, I describe the moments where Hiro attempts to contain the excess of Baymax's grotesque physique with a costume change and program upgrades. Through a close analysis of nearly all symbolic elements and features of his reconstructed body, including his new shape, texture, colours, and movements, I highlight the serious undertones of this transformation narrative. The version of masculinity modelled by Baymax in the aftermath of his

transformation aligns with traditional ideals of heroism as “persistent, strong, resourceful and capable of emerging victorious even against overwhelming odds” (Brown 146). Beyond describing his cosmetic tune-up, physical performance, and what this suggests about the masculinized bodies of super-heroes, I also discuss the shifting role that occurs in Baymax’s relationship with Hiro as he becomes a pal rather than a surrogate parent to the young boy.

Exaggerating Heroic Masculinity through Physical Disguise, Disciplining Norms, and Male Bonding

The film remodels its secondary male character on an exemplar of super-hero masculinity through a ritualized process involving body sculpting, martial arts training, and homo-social bonding. These changes are borne out of Hiro’s belief that Baymax initially lacks the strength, resilience, resourcefulness, emotional reservation, and bravery required of masculine super-bodies (Brown 134, 146). Scene 7 marks the moment where Hiro tells Baymax about his plan to physically transform him. The quote that appears at the beginning of this chapter is taken from this scene. The sequence continues as Hiro points to the problematic areas on Baymax’s body that require alterations and upgrades. Costume, equipment, and skillful talents mastered through training episodes help to conceal his bodily deviations and to compensate for that which he lacks. The changes Hiro applies onto Baymax’s body and the time he dedicates to rebuilding and reprogramming his late brother’s ‘bot’ marks my entry into these prevailing themes.

To make Baymax fit into the formula of a traditional Disney hero, the young boy schematically maps out the ‘bot’s’ transformation, and in so doing, articulates notions of masculinity that valorizes physical supremacy and violence over corporeal excess and sensitivity. Hiro masks Baymax’s grotesque qualities with armour and over-rides the code so as to further

hide evidence of the 'bot's' "essence" which Hiro deems to be undesirable. The desire to disguise and discipline the grotesque male body is a central theme in this transformation narrative. In my notes following the analysis of this film, I often used theatrical terms to describe Baymax's physical alterations. Words like camouflage and costume seemed like appropriate selections given the film's focus on masking Baymax's bodily exterior. At times, I also used military terms, including cover and contain, when referring to Hiro's efforts to take control of the clumsy male body and to conceal its grotesque attributes. The language I used to describe Baymax's bodily transformation is significant for it reflects, once again, some of the anxieties that are being played out in the film with regard to the exposed, flawed, uncontrolled, and boundary-challenging (male) body (Orbaugh 443). Of course, this note of anxiety is eventually remedied under Hiro's control and tutelage.

The makeover motif in *Big Hero 6* (2014) begins at the physical level and involves the application of raw materials constructed of leather and other unbreakable and impenetrable gear suited for super-heroes (see fig. 25). The film not only validates a particular body type by debasing its only corpulent male character and by encasing his gut inside a hard and tight body suit, but also constructs a preferred masculine persona: a skillful martial artist. The hard and muscular frame that is applied onto Baymax's body provides a solid foundation on and through which additional physical expressions of masculinity are inscribed. The hard and protective leather armour now covering Baymax's soft shell, in addition to the muscular torso sculpted into his armour, repositions the male body as an instrument of power and control (MacKinnon 37).



Fig. 25. Baymax receives his first makeover, complete with armour and pads in Scene 7 at 41 minutes and 40 seconds; from *Big Hero 6*, directed by Don Hall and Chris Williams, performances by Ryan Potter, Scott Adsit, and Jamie Chung, Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2014, DVD.

To address the issue of his physical incompetence, Hiro draws from more traditional models of hard-bodied violent masculinity to teach Baymax how to effectively perform this part. The stress on strength and athleticism in the frame at 41:40 in Scene 7 (see fig. 25) reinforces a preferred presentation of the male physique especially when we consider the scenes from karate films Hiro uses as a key source for images of masculinity (see fig. 26). Hammer fists, side kicks, knife hands, and simple punches borrowed from the art of karate are obvious illustrations of this. Baymax's performance in this training montage invokes endurance, discipline, and devotion. The result is a newly transformed Baymax who now appears as a recombinant image of hyper-muscular warriors from martial arts films.



Fig. 26. In Scene 7, Hiro uploads a program taken from a karate film onto Baymax's chip, enabling the 'bot' to perform athletic feats beyond his natural capability. This frame captures the moment Hiro applies the upgrades at 42 minutes and 26 seconds; from *Big Hero 6*, directed by Don Hall and Chris Williams, performances by Ryan Potter, Scott Adsit, and Jamie Chung, Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2014, DVD.

Baymax quickly puts his fighting skills to action when using his lower body strength to break down a door later in Scene 7. Under Hiro's command, Baymax also displays acts of aggression with his arms and hands when instructed to punch through a piece of lumber. Physical expressions of strength are complemented by banging and smacking sounds effects. While the aural track is loaded with sound effects stressing destruction, including the breaking of splintered wood, what is missing here are sounds expressing physical exertion and emotional distress. Meanwhile, an intense high-action melody invites audiences to share in the exhilaration of his triumphant transformation.

For Baymax, the reward for conforming to the hyper-masculine physical prototype comes in the form of widespread acceptance and admiration from Hiro and the gang. When Hiro proudly showcases the newly transformed Baymax in Scene 10 (see fig. 27), all gasp at the sight of the warrior 'bot'. Expressions of excitement are visible as the camera focuses on Hiro's face

once the newly figured Baymax comes to life. The camera slowly pans upward, focusing on the ‘bot’s’ lower body before moving to his mid-section and face. The final reveal sequence in the same scene concludes with a low-angle shot, producing a full profile of a wide-chested Baymax with muscles bulging out of his tight leather armour (see fig. 27). The film, through its cinematic effects and narrative trajectory, tells us that it is only by covering, extending, and hardening his exterior that Baymax can convincingly play the role of the super-hero. When disguised as a warrior, Baymax is no longer subject to the kind of physical and emotional abuse I described earlier. The glossy leather armour serves multiple purposes: to contain (unwanted, excess) fat, to mask his tender and caring side, as well as to shield him from harm. As well, Baymax’s relationship with Hiro changes as does his role as care-giver.



Fig. 27. Newly transformed, Baymax stands tall in this frame at 56 minutes and 49 seconds in Scene 10; from *Big Hero 6*, directed by Don Hall and Chris Williams, performances by Ryan Potter, Scott Adsit, and Jamie Chung, Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2014, DVD.

A different kind of emotional bond develops between the young boy and his robot companion in the aftermath of the first transformation. The motherly behaviour Baymax initially exhibits as a nurse ‘bot’ does not resemble the types of expression Baymax displays once his body is armoured with a built-in muscular breastplate. Once Baymax loses his soft belly, he is no

longer called to comfort and nurture the grieving boy. By covering his round and protruding core with a triangular canvas, the film does more than just contain excess fat; it also repositions his interactions with Hiro as one of play, not nurture (Brydon 139). A friendship between Hiro and Baymax flourishes in Scene 7; the pair become close once Baymax acquires a new body. Their homo-social bond is observed through aural and gestural expressions of male bonding. The fist-bumping gesture initiated by Hiro is one example of this. The fact that Hiro refers to Baymax as “buddy” in Scene 7 provides further proof of their blossoming friendship (*Big Hero 6* 2014). Another bonding episode is observed in Scene 10 as they stand close together atop a bridge. A similar shot is captured in Scene 11 as Hiro and Baymax bond in the backdrop of an evening sunset (see fig. 28). In both cases, the pair enjoy a quiet moment together after performing athletic feats in open spaces.

By associating rigidity and play with masculine bravado, and roundness and intimacy with feminine nurturance and sacrifice, the film advances a traditional orientation toward gender roles where nurturance is reserved for the pear-shaped figures of mothers and grandmothers “whose bodies are nonthreatening, available, and harmless” (Bell 118-119). Disney animators eventually distance the hard and skillful masculine body from maternal obligations by emphasizing Baymax’s newly-acquired physique as well as the power and threat it projects. Playful gestures in open spaces are additional indicators of homo-sociality. By constructing a space for homo-social bonding that includes the garage workshop (Hiro’s makeshift laboratory) as well as the battlefield (see fig. 28), *Big Hero 6* (2014) suggests that homo-sociality is acceptable under the condition that it is expressed through play and combat. This Disney animated tale may be read partially as a buddy film because of its emphasis on homo-sociality which, as I described above, is expressed through male-bonding rituals, including playful hand

gestures set in male-dominated spaces like the lab or garage, for instance. Both *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) and *Big Hero 6* (2014) fit within the buddy film sub-genre for they star male protagonists who develop close social bonds with other filmic characters. While *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) follows the adventures of a man and a young girl, there is plenty of rhetorical evidence to justify its inclusion in this sub-genre. Ralph's relationship with Vanellope is notably different from the dynamic we observe between Hiro and Baymax, however. For one, Ralph behaves in paternal ways toward the young girl. *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) places its male lead into a postfeminist fatherly role who provides for, protects, and punishes the unruly child in his care. This asymmetrical relationship between parent and child is similarly featured in *Big Hero 6* (2014) only it is the child who assumes a position of power over the wiser male character. In fact, Hiro plays the part of the fairy godmother who vows to transform a less than ideal character into an extraordinary hero while Baymax passively consents to his own subjugation.



Fig. 28. A bonding episode is observed in Scene 11 at one hour and 48 seconds. Baymax and Hiro enjoy a moment of quiet and stillness after an action sequence featuring speed and excitement, beginning in Scene 10; from *Big Hero 6*, directed by Don Hall and Chris Williams, performances by Ryan Potter, Scott Adsit, and Jamie Chung, Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2014, DVD.

His acceptance of the young boy's obsessions with his bodily deviations and limitations is animated and scripted with carnivalesque humour. In the next major sub-section, I describe carnival scenes and sequences that parody elements of hegemonic super-hero masculinity. Through examples, I show how the transformation narrative evokes ambivalence with the model of super-heroism Hiro envisions and engineers for Baymax.

Mocking and Maintaining Male Heroic Ideals

One of the most compelling lessons the film teaches audiences about masculinity and heroism is that both are based on constructed and learned behaviours (McCallum 118-120). In Scenes 7 and 10, viewers are granted access to the production of a super-hero. The gendered process of sculpting, costuming, and exercising is rendered visible to audiences who are encouraged to laugh at the extraordinary lengths Hiro goes through to transform Baymax's body so it attains the illusion of hyper-masculinity.

At one level, the film frames the male body as a site of subjugation. Positioned as socially inferior and physically powerless, Baymax must force his rounded physique into a form-fitting armour and master the skills of martial arts to perform an overtly gendered role that Hiro thrusts upon him. Yet, at the same time, it is difficult to ignore the parodic tone of this dramatic transformation where Baymax plays dress up and performs for Hiro and the audience in ways that are clearly unnatural and exaggerated. The findings I share in this sub-section return to the transformation montages featured in Scenes 7 to 10 that I described earlier for it is in these two scenes that contradictory themes come together without a clear indication as to whether the disguise and the discipline Baymax endures is desirable or undesirable. The carnivalesque image

of the costumed super-hero and other humorous indicators of his performance as an ill-suited warrior are examples of this ambivalence with the male super-body.

The tight leather suit worn by the hero-in-training offers more than a visual gag mocking the incongruity of a feminized and fat hero; it also plays on male heroic ideals. The makeover montage in Scene 7 has the qualities of a carnival scene with its temporary inversion of the low-ranking male character who imitates, through exaggeration, a recombinant image of super-heroism taken from the hard and skilled bodies of male martial artists. Both the costuming and performance briefly disrupt the assumption that gender, in general, and the hard and skilled masculine body, in particular, are somehow natural or essential. For one, Baymax's body serves as a screen upon which Hiro projects and programs cultural representations of masculinity from classic karate films. The screen Hiro uses to project and program images of masculine sport onto Baymax emphasizes the constructedness of this overly gendered process. The male heroic ideal featured in this scene is purely constructed and this construction is based on physical attributes and learned behaviours deemed to be hegemonic. The ritualized presentation of masculinity featured in Scene 7 is slowly deconstructed for audiences as the camera closely captures the armour and equipment that encases every inch of his bulging body as well as the behaviours Baymax acquires through training and programming. The costume and the code become precisely that, a costume, that Baymax puts on to performs a role he plays even if it contradicts his own physique and personality. It is Hiro's obsession with heroism and all that it entails that is the target of mocking humour in Scene 7. The film ridicules the ideals embodied within the presentation of super-hero masculinity Baymax models for Hiro, his friends, and audiences by exaggerating the image of male physical supremacy and the extensive measures involved in this dramatic makeover scene.

The absurdity of the conventional super-hero archetype is compounded by his grotesque attributes and his reluctance to fight. This results in an ambivalent image of masculinity in which the image of an ill-suited and well-costumed super-hero is an object of laughter. The suit itself becomes a parody which quietly mocks the stereotyped display and cultural ideals about masculine empowerment featured in classic super-hero films for generations. The costume is humorous but it does not clearly communicate, in the end, whether the super-hero type is desirable or not. The film conveys contradictory views about this persona by mocking the myth of the male heroic ideal while also ridiculing the bodies and behaviours that do not fit inside the super-hero mould.

The grotesque body that appears once again in Scene 10 does not sufficiently invert the image of the chiselled and athletic male body. The emphasis placed on Baymax's belly, buttocks, and bodily functions makes him the target of fat shaming once again. We are no longer laughing at the young boy's shallow masculine fantasies about powerful super-bodies triumphing over super-villains, however (Brown 147). Rather, we are laughing at Baymax; his failure to control his protruding body as well as his inability to conform to the image and role Hiro so desperately desires. The comedic trope of the grotesque body returns well after Baymax passively receives the first round of upgrades. The buttocks are one grotesque image "which protrudes from the body, all that seeks to go out and beyond the body's confines" (Bakhtin 316). Baymax's posterior is prominently featured in two ways. First, when Go-Go makes fun of his carbon fiber underpants in Scene 8, and later, when his large rear slams atop the small vehicle (see fig. 29). A rounded shape spills inside the car. Visual evidence of his grotesque body appears through quick camera angles that shift between interior and exterior shots of the vehicle, reminding audiences

that the lower stratum of his grotesque body cannot be properly contained nor can it be fully concealed.



Fig. 29. Baymax's buttocks appears inside the vehicle in Scene 8. His posterior leaves little room for others to sit comfortably in this frame at 47 minutes and 11 seconds; from *Big Hero 6*, directed by Don Hall and Chris Williams, performances by Ryan Potter, Scott Adsit, and Jamie Chung, Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2014, DVD.

The comedic aspects of these sequences are also communicated through motion and sound. The film stages a comedic performance where Baymax plays a passive role as object; his inactive body is repeatedly subject to inspection, assessment, and upgrades. In Scene 10, Hiro forcefully applies armour onto Baymax's left arm, forcing a large rubber shoe onto his right foot. Losing complete control of his body and its movements, Baymax falls to the ground and collides into a vending machine. The camera also showcases Baymax's emotional reaction after Hiro struggles to apply a large, leather casing onto his butt and belly (see fig. 30). A faint red glow covers his face, a visual response to Hiro's obsession with the unnatural act of enforcing a tight surface on his bulging body. As I have established elsewhere, sound design deserves close attention given that the high-pitched sounds of the 'bot's' movements contribute to this enduring characterization of the grotesque male body. A specific example is found in this sequence in

Scene 10 where soft thumps, clinking, and squishy sounds are audible as Hiro aggressively pulls and pushes the tight, leather suit onto Baymax's bulging belly. The episode provokes laughter directed at Baymax's failed attempts to look and play the part of a super-hero. Ridicule becomes a form of punishment for not meeting the expectations set by Hiro and the hegemonic models of masculinity he appropriates to reconstruct his late brother's robot.



Fig. 30. Hiro violently applies armour to Baymax's mid-section in this frame at 55 minutes and 49 seconds in Scene 10; from *Big Hero 6*, directed by Don Hall and Chris Williams, performances by Ryan Potter, Scott Adsit, and Jamie Chung, Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2014, DVD.

Hiro's concerns with maintaining the illusion of male physical supremacy in Scene 7 intensify in Scenes 10 and 11. The first round of alterations and upgrades fail for Hiro aspires to an image of hyper-masculinity Baymax can never attain nor can the 'bot' fulfill a role that was not intended for him in the first place. Scenes 7 to 12 reveal that no armour nor code can truly conceal and over-ride Baymax's code. The discussion I turn to in the final sub-section shifts away from Baymax's bodily exterior. The focus, instead, is on scenes and sequences emphasizing the inner workings of the code that determines his essence.

Re-Naturalizing Uncharacteristically Masculine Behaviours and Disguising Male Bodies

Despite his physical strength and the speed of his actions following his two transformations, Baymax is rarely characterized as violent. The film disassociates aggressive masculine behaviour from Baymax by emphasizing his postfeminist sensibilities and physical ineptness, and by directing blame to Hiro, the misguided robotics protégé. Baymax's reluctance to use violence also contributes to his unsuitability for battle. What we find beneath the surface of his suit and in his original program is a nurturing robot whose caring nature and moral sensibility is no match for the armour he wears nor for the weapons he carries. The 'bot's' behavioural transformation is more than a disguise, it is a vehicle through which the film cautions against making changes to one's inner self. Physical alterations to his body, on the other hand, are not challenged as vigorously nor are they addressed as quickly as issues caused by coding.

The findings I share in this sub-section show how Baymax's unnatural role as a 'bot' fighter is consistently undermined at visual, aural, and kinesic levels, following two rounds of alterations and upgrades. I return to moments in Scenes 7 to 10 that focus on the sensitive underside of the hard-bodied hero before jumping ahead to Scene 12 where Baymax is subject to additional modifications. This time, however, the 'bot's' code is over-written so that it coheres with his menacing exterior. The stress on his wickedness in these later scenes presents a problem for Hiro and his friends. The solution presented is a program reboot, meaning a return to Baymax's original state. Conflict resolves, first, through the 'bot's' return to his true self, and later, when his body resumes to its "natural" shape and size. Later, I discuss the rhetorical significance of a competing view of masculine physicality – the sustained presence of Baymax as

mighty warrior. For now, I describe the visual, gestural, and vocal expressions animators employ to remind us of Baymax's calling as a care-provider.

Over the course of the film, audiences are strongly encouraged to see, hear, and feel the soft interior of Baymax's hard shell. One example of Baymax's construction as a soft-natured figure disguised in a hard leather suit appears moments after his armoured body is displayed in Scene 10. The ground-up perspective used in this reveal sequence emphasizes his extraordinary width and the extent of his bodily transformation. This view of the powerful masculine body is interrupted by a butterfly that settles on Baymax's finger. The butterfly's presence and the 'bot's' playful pursuit during a training exercise is incongruous with the model of super-hero masculinity Hiro expects of Baymax. Beyond showcasing his unsuitability for battle at a physical level, the 'bot' also voices concerns about the alterations to his body and chip and pleads for a return to his original state. Dialogue between Baymax and Hiro is telling. Once Baymax's upgrades are unveiled in Scene 7, the newly transformed warrior 'bot' expresses reservation: "I have some concerns. This armo[u]r may undermine my non-threatening, huggable design," to which Hiro laughs and explains: "That's kind of the idea, buddy." Pointing to the leather armour that now covers Baymax's corpulent body, Hiro compliments his friend while clearly ignoring his objection: "You look sick!" (*Big Hero 6* 2014). Baymax also attempts to dis-identify with masculine traits of aggression in Scene 12 when he moderately objects to Hiro's orders. As the duo prepare to attack the masked antagonist, Hiro commands Baymax to destroy the villain. When Baymax speaks for the first time in Scene 12, he tells Hiro about his aversion to violence: "My programming prevents me from injuring a human being," to which Hiro responds: "Not anymore" (*Big Hero 6* 2014). At this point, Hiro ejects a chip from Baymax's chest only to overwrite it with a new set of code, forcing Baymax into the battlefield. This time, Baymax resists:

“Hiro, this is not what ...” He is interrupted by Hiro, who activates the upgrades despite Baymax’s objections (*Big Hero 6* 2014). A similar conversation is observed in Scene 13. Addressing Hiro, Baymax asks: “Are you going to remove my health-care chip?” Later in this scene, Baymax reminds Hiro of his directive as a care ‘bot’, programmed to help and heal. He tells Hiro: “My purpose is to heal the sick and injured” (*Big Hero 6* 2014).

Baymax is transformed, despite his pleas and protestations. Alterations to his code are done against a benchmark of stereotypes in which masculinity comes to be associated with emotional detachment and violent outbursts. The chip Hiro inserts into Baymax provides visual evidence of the ‘bot’s’ transformation. An image of a skeleton appears on the chip that contains a new set of code. As well, certain effects are visible once the upgraded chip is inserted and uploaded: his pupils dilate, the colour inside his visor changes from bright blue to blood red, and then, a shift in point-of-view casts Baymax as villain (see fig. 31). Meanwhile, in the background, combinations of visual and aural features, such as smoky red hues and a heavy bass register, suggest that Baymax is a ‘bot’ to be feared. In Scene 12, where this transformation occurs, Baymax is seen in various athletic poses and positions of combat. The frame at 1:10:24 provides a good illustration of this presentation of the physical male heroic ideal. His inner code finally matches his hard exterior. The coherence between his brain and body is necessary to Baymax’s success in battle scenes where Hiro expects him to instil fear in others with his menacing presence as well as to defeat the masked villain in a masculine contest typical of superhero films.



Fig. 31. This close-up shot, featured in Scene 12 at one hour, ten minutes, and 12 seconds captures the moment a new chip is inserted into Baymax. The ‘bot’ becomes violent for the first time in the film; from *Big Hero 6*, directed by Don Hall and Chris Williams, performances by Ryan Potter, Scott Adsit, and Jamie Chung, Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2014, DVD.

The part Baymax plays as a ruthless ‘bot’ fighter is short-lived, however. The loving and caring robot returns in the final moments of Scene 12 as he responds to Fred’s call for help. His role as a nurturer and healer is restored through an assortment of modes. Visually, Baymax’s eyes resume their original shape and colour. The background colour is blue; visual evidence that the good natured ‘bot’ has returned. Slow and gentle hand gestures provide further proof of his return as a compassionate care-taker. Once again, the animated film emphasizes Baymax’s helping hands as he reaches for his friend; a kinesic contrast to the violent expressions audiences witnessed during the high-action battle sequence moments before. In the same scene, Baymax apologizes to the group: “My health-care protocol has been violated ... I regret any distress I may have caused” (*Big Hero 6* 2014). The soothing background music mixed with confessional dialogue, gestures, and an optical transformation invite audiences to celebrate Baymax’s return. But while the film clearly favours a sensitive and selfless nurse to a brutal ‘bot’ fighter, the

protective armour remains attached to Baymax's muscular frame until his outer shell finally separates from his body in Scene 15.

Near the end of the film, audiences learn that Baymax is expected to fulfill his mission: to fight alongside his friends, defeat the masked villain, and save the city from destruction, regardless of his earlier protestations and despite the fact that he is now unarmed and otherwise naked. The 'bot' retains his heroic status, despite the suit's disappearance, because of the physical strength he exudes and the selfless acts he performs in the fighting sequences and later, during rescue missions. For example, in Scene 14, audiences observe Baymax as he carries the body of the lifeless villain in his arms after apprehending him. His might is communicated at the physical level; his long and large body is positioned vertically while the antagonist lies motionless, across Baymax's arms. Baymax stands victorious in the fight against evil. Of particular significance is the way the 'bot' makes the arrest. Baymax avoids harming the antagonist, despite having the means to cause physical injury. The 'bot' uses his bodily strength to lift and carry the villain to safety. His status as a sympathetic, postfeminist hero is partially defined by his non-violent actions; he is animated to exhibit compassion for others in the face of adversity.

Similar constructions of a compassionate warrior are observed in Scenes 14 and 15 where Baymax is frequently poised for action. His brawny frame is used as a necessary tool: to fly, fight, and rescue. A visual display of his physical strength is captured in the final scene where Baymax uses his body as a shield to protect Hiro after a large piece of debris threatens to harm them. Unfortunately for Baymax, the object strikes, propelling his fall. A high-angle shot shows an unresponsive Baymax whose protective shell sheds to pieces. Close-up camera shots reveal Hiro's pained expressions as he and Baymax embrace. The camera captures what we think may

be one of their final moments together in Scene 15. The ominous background music intensifies as the two hold hands for what is both the first and last time. The sound of stringed instruments contributes to the tragic mood that is established in this emotionally gripping sequence.

Meanwhile, the camera returns to a high-angle shot of Baymax as the naked nurse ‘bot’ falls further into the depths of a portal (see fig. 32). Through a combination of sights and sounds, including those I described above, the film confirms that Baymax is gone. All that remains of Baymax, from this moment on, is his chip. The loveable character is reduced to code and it is this code that determines the ‘bot’s’ true essence.



Fig. 32. Armour falls from Baymax at one hour, 26 minutes, and 45 seconds, revealing a partially naked ‘bot after Baymax is struck by an object inside the portal in Scene 15; from *Big Hero 6*, directed by Don Hall and Chris Williams, performances by Ryan Potter, Scott Adsit, and Jamie Chung, Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2014, DVD.

In the final scene, audiences observe the young roboticist at work replicating the code his late brother designed. Baymax is restored (see fig. 33). The synthetic texture that covers his inflatable body is exposed just as it was in the very beginning. Bulging muscles, protective leather armour, and sophisticated weapons have disappeared from his body. By rebooting the original version, *Big Hero 6* (2014) restores the image of the open, growing, and uncontrollable

body Hiro once ridiculed and repressed (Orbaugh 444). The figure that appears in Scene 15 is unambiguously grotesque. Baymax stands naked; his belly bulges without the leather casing. The soft, vinyl exterior matches his warm and loving interior (see fig. 33). His tenderness is reinforced kinesthetically. Nurturing acts, including gentle caresses are performed by Baymax, marking his return as surrogate mother to Hiro.



Fig. 33. At one hour, 31 minutes, and 20 seconds, a new version of the ‘bot’ is born; from *Big Hero 6*, directed by Don Hall and Chris Williams, performances by Ryan Potter, Scott Adsit, and Jamie Chung, Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2014, DVD.

While the return of Baymax is worthy of attention particularly because it is at odds with the model of super-hero masculinity featured so prominently throughout the film, my findings are far more focused on the overall physique and ongoing performance of masculinity idolized by Hiro and his friends. While *Big Hero 6* (2014) does present a less conventional view of the male physique in early and later scenes, reflecting some reconsideration of the presentation of masculinity commonly found in previous generations of Disney animated features, overall, the image of the superior male body dominates. On one level, the final presentation of the grotesque male body challenges the hegemony of the violent, hard-bodied hero by providing an alternative to the model of masculinity featured prominently in super-hero fiction. Baymax’s final return as

an undressed and unarmed nurse ‘bot’, however, does not fundamentally challenge the exemplar of male physical supremacy that is visually sustained in his hard-bodied physique elsewhere in the film. The presentation of male physical superiority is widely praised by Hiro and his friends while fatness is treated as a bodily deviation, requiring control and concealment. Interestingly, alterations to Baymax’s bodily exterior are never criticized with the exception of mild objections from Baymax himself.

Rather than challenging his outwardly appearance as a warrior ‘bot’ in disguise, characters critique the aggressive behaviour Baymax exhibits once he is programmed to kill. Criticism is directed to Hiro who is reprimanded by his friends for “upgrading” the program that transforms Baymax into a cold-hearted beast. *Big Hero 6* (2014) tends to displace violence in this action-oriented plot by removing guns, lasers, and other kinds of weapons as far away from Baymax as possible. By placing instruments of war in the hands of its misguided creator, Hiro, and the film’s antagonist, the masked villain, *Big Hero 6* (2014) clearly tells us that Baymax is not innately violent despite his foreboding appearance; he is only programmed to behave this way. The dangers of un-doing and over-writing code cause Hiro to reflect upon the acceptable limits of change. There is a note of caution in *Big Hero 6* (2014) that while the robotic body is open to reconstruction, human characteristics and roles are fixed. What is troubling is that a deterministic view of gender roles is being imported into the realm of the artificial. In the case of *Big Hero 6* (2014), Disney is reassuring us that, even in the age of robots, we still have fundamental, unchanged characteristics. These innate traits limit the kind of roles characters can assume. For example, Baymax’s inner code makes it so that he cannot be both a maternal caregiver and a masculine super-hero at once. Similarly, as I have discussed in Chapter Four, Eve cannot simultaneously assume the role of a seductress and mother.

Summary

In Chapter Six, I have argued that Disney's *Big Hero 6* (2014) sometimes engages in gender-norming practices in relation to physical transformation and training episodes. In this chapter, I categorized the most salient themes emerging from my integrated rhetorical analysis of Baymax by grouping them into several sub-sections each of which examined both the physical and social aspects of Baymax's transformations with discussions about both their progressive and traditional agendas. While the categories themselves are organized in a chronological format, taking readers through the linear timeline of Baymax's transformations, the titles of each sub-section capture the tensions between progression and traditionalism.

The juxtaposition between the tough surface of Baymax's physique and the sensitive underside of his inner self allows Disney creators to strike a safe balance between tradition and progress in the rhetorical construction of postfeminist masculinity. Disguising a soft-bellied 'bot' in armour is one of the rhetorical strategies through which the film reiterates and recuperates a traditional image of the male physical ideal. Parodic episodes that mock the super-hero stereotype demonstrate a playful and progressive orientation toward socially-inclusive gender roles. The type of work Baymax performs as medic and surrogate mother to Hiro extends the boundaries of culturally available positions for Disney's male characters. These progressive elements, however, are generally brief and are eventually weakened by repeated micro-aggressions targeting Baymax's anomalous body and unconventional occupation. What we find, in the final scenes of Disney's *Big Hero 6* (2014), is a narrow and conventional notion of masculinity as natural and thus immutable. The essentialist view promoted near the end is easy to miss and also unlikely to provoke criticism for, in addition to celebrating an alternate and positive image of the male body, the animated film also reduces Baymax to a set of data or code.

As such, the film produces a character that resembles a machine and not a man thus constraining or at least complicating possible claims of gender essentialism.

The next and final chapter of my dissertation further explores the stories of animated male characters, their crises, and how they express anxiety with changing male bodies and masculine roles through processes of transformation and socialization. Beyond drawing attention to this sentiment and practice, in Chapter Seven, I also discuss how audiences are encouraged to both interpret and act upon preferred interpretations of masculinity.

Chapter Seven – Conclusion

Re-Drawing the Past: Disney's Fidelity to Masculine Essentialism and Patriarchal

Authority in Animated Films Starring Postfeminist Male 'Bots'

Transformation is a common motif in classic and contemporary Disney animated films. Cosmetic tune-ups, physical training programs, and/or growth of character induced by a crisis of identity are recurring themes in Disney animated storytelling. This dissertation has explored a recent trend in male-focused Disney makeover narratives in which characters are given *new* bodies and roles, yet still conform to old characterizations of masculinity.

Throughout, I have pointed to concerns about constructions of paternal, hetero-masculine heroism which tend to be expressed in the physically unimpressive or socially abhorrent postfeminist male character. Each film equips audiences with the tools needed to work through some of the fears and desires brought on by changing images and ideals of masculinity. Across the films in my corpus, the solution seems to be to transform the imperfect, imperiled non-normative male until he more closely approximates a traditional version of heroism. The result is the reproduction of a dominant way of interpreting masculinity where physical characteristics, such as speed and strength, are promoted as essential and where resistance to such constructs of domination are ridiculed by way of mocking humour, in particular. Further, behavioural characteristics that oppose or threaten the status quo, such as timidity or vulnerability in the face of adversity, are also subject to discipline.

The idea that masculinity derives from the male body; that males must exert power through manual labour, exaggerated athleticism, and/or through the use of violence or control is repeated in *Wall-E* (2008), *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012), and *Big Hero 6* (2014). Underlying this ideal is an assumption that masculinity is not only defined by the body but also that it should be stable;

that male physical supremacy and patriarchal authority are inherent and thus immutable to change.

The same argument can be made of Disney, a company that maintains a fidelity to hegemonic ideals of hetero, patriarchal masculinity. As my analysis has shown, *Wall-E* (2008), *Wreck-It-Ralph* (2012), and *Big Hero 6* (2014) have much in common with their generic predecessors, be it *Aladdin* (1992), *Hercules* (1997), or *Tarzan* (1999). Each film reverts to well-rehearsed displays of masculine heroism, including male-led rescue missions incited by damsels in distress.

At the same time though, some things have changed in the newer animated films I have studied in terms of the characters' appearances and the generic stories Disney produces. The animated characters have been given new figures. The film genre has also been revised, replacing princesses and fairy-tale romances with 'bots' in buddy films. Themes that dominate constructions of masculinity in all three films have been updated to reflect a particular historical-cultural moment in which postfeminist sensibilities are promoted. The way the characters look, the work they do, the hetero-relationships or kinships the male characters develop with physically inferior or emotionally vulnerable characters, and the socially inclusive roles Wall-E, Ralph, and Baymax assume on their journey to heroism have expanded since the release of animated films featuring male protagonists in the 1990s. Disney creators have revised the characters they animate to include a frail-looking labourer and a large-bodied male nurse, for example. By updating how male bodies look and what male bodies do, the films show they are capable of absorbing and displaying changes in masculine roles and concerns about bodily masculinity. This, however, does not mean Disney is completely responsive to changes and concerns within the larger socio-cultural milieu. As the results of my rhetorical analysis confirm,

changes for the most part are superficial. The modifications to character design and the changes to their narrative trajectory are not profound; their suggested meanings are deeply political, however.

Always Incorporating, Never Inverting: Disney's Signature Approach to Masculine Transformation in the Selected Films

The makeover motif at the centre of these films constrains opportunities for alternative or subversive masculine constructions for the transformative quests generally focus on conventional physical presentations of masculinity. In the case of the films I have analysed, Disney's male characters are expected to fit into established physical masculine stereotypes. As my research shows, gendered bodies are assets when they perform laborious work in male-dominated settings, such as the wrecking yard and battle field, and when they produce at full capacity. Their bodies become liabilities when they are over-used, over-sized, or when they are under-utilized or under-sized. An excess of fat or a lack of muscles calls for concealment, control, and/or complete physical changes. Failure to conform to this conventional image of male physical excellence results in body shaming and sculpting. This is nowhere more evident than in the figure of Baymax, a balloon-shaped character whose body is repeatedly subject to sizeist and sexist tropes. The 'bot' is forced to cover-up his bodily imperfections and to bulk-up to compensate for what he lacks. The amount of screen time devoted to disciplining norms like these produces a lasting image of the masculine bodily ideal. The fact that Baymax resumes his original shape and size in final scenes is not enough to undo or undermine expressions of insecurity directed at the grotesque male body. Bodily difference and discipline have already been incorporated into the overall presentation of masculinity in *Big Hero 6* (2014).

Animated constructions of compulsory hetero-sexuality and patriarchal masculinity in which working male characters take on socially-inclusive roles through their encounters with female companions or through kinships with the young and vulnerable also reinforce hegemonic models of masculinity. The main characterization of masculinity in *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) derives from the titular character's bulky frame as well as his bulging muscles. Ralph's body functions as both the problem and solution to his poor social standing. Clearly, his muscular frame is a liability when it is used for destructive purposes. His body is a key source of masculine power, however, whenever he uses his weight to rescue Vanellorpe or when he raises his fists to overthrow King Candy. Violent conquests in the service of justice and protection position him as both physically superior and socially dominant. Ralph's new persona as super-hero now makes him the target of female sexual attention and affection. Consider the invitation he receives from a nameless female character as well as the pie he collects from a Nicelander named Mary after he defeats the enemy at the end of the film. These are rewards for abiding by and conforming to physical and social ideals of super-hero masculinity. Again, failure to adapt to these standards leads to consequences in which an unkempt and unruly brute, like Ralph, is insulted by and isolated from the neighbouring Nicelanders. In this film, the lead male is literally and symbolically incorporated into mainstream society. His rough and tough persona becomes noticeably "softer" once he adheres to social norms. While Ralph's persona as a gentle giant embodies both a hard exterior and a sensitive underside, his strong and superior body is what ultimately grants him entry into the fictional world in which he lives.

Even as The Walt Disney Company presents postfeminist characterizations of masculinity by expanding the boundaries of acceptable roles and occupations for their male leads, by highlighting their emotional fragility, and by occasionally refashioning the physical

presentation of their bodies, the changes we see and hear in *Wall-E* (2008), *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012), and *Big Hero 6* (2014) are ultimately contained within patriarchal and hetero-sexist frames. These films incorporate ugly, unruly, and “unmanly” male characters into the overall presentation of masculinity only to discipline and transform the grotesque, the disorderly, and the effeminate midway through the story. This grants Wall-E the opportunity to position himself as a desirable hetero-partner to Eve; it also allows Ralph to rise above his failings, leading to a rise in prominence. Finally, both the timing and frequency of Baymax’s makeover means he can sustain his role as super-hero for the majority of the film.

The Disney films in my study do not present inversions of socially dominant masculine norms but illusions of inversions. The main transformation narratives in these films collectively enforce hetero-sexual standards and patriarchal norms about masculinity even when progressive sensibilities, subversive moments or parodic episodes seem to suggest otherwise. At first blush, Wall-E appears to depart from tired masculine stereotypes with his frail body and frantic behaviour. On the surface, *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) seems to condemn male physical violence while *Big Hero 6* (2014) offers a temporary alternative to the proto-typical model of male superheroism. However, the male characters revert to old or established models of masculinity by desiring and eventually acquiring physiques deemed attractive, by gaining prominence in their surroundings, and by exerting power or finding purpose in their relationships with subordinate others.

The illusion of progress I described throughout functions as a mask in the same way that Wall-E’s obsessive gaze and unsolicited physical contact with Eve, Ralph’s rough persona, and Baymax’s armour and code act as covers for what hides inside. Embedded within these seemingly progressive characterizations of masculinity are “radically conservative

metanarratives” of gender politics (McCallum 116). Within the films I have studied, meta-narratives about patriarchy and hetero-normativity are cued in settings (e.g. patriarchal environments, including male-dominated spaces of work and play), relationships (e.g. heterosexual pursuits where male power and female subservience is assumed and where female characters serve as reward for males), and rivalries (e.g. patriarchal tensions that pit two male characters against each other for power and control). Overarching meta-narratives, like these, do not support or reinforce changing notions of masculinity and as such, these Disney films and others that precede them “are not necessarily indicative of more progressive social attitudes. Instead, they are shaped by and filtered through the patriarchal and conservative metanarratives that dominate the Disney culture industry” (McCallum 117).

Locating and Explicating the *Meta* Language of these Films: Why an Integrated Approach to Disney Animated Films is Relevant and Significant to Disney’s Critics and Audiences

Hegemonic ideals of masculinity are also reinforced in more subtle and complex ways. Colours, shapes, sizes, sound effects, vocal styles, gestures, and gait, for instance, used to animate Wall-E, Ralph, and Baymax give substance to these characters as well as the larger meta-narratives that play out in these stories. Through my analysis, I have shown how the films’ selection and combination of specific visual, aural, and kinesic elements produce characters and relations that primarily promote and reinforce a hegemonic understanding of masculinity. This kind of analysis foregrounds the constructedness of these characterizations, drawing attention to and thus de-naturalizing the culturally prevalent gender-role stereotypes and hetero-patriarchal structures that Disney continues to reproduce.

The term construction is relevant to my rhetorical analysis for it describes a creative as well as socio-political process. In animated storytelling, bodies and voices are designed from the imagination of a group of creative minds, produced with choice and assisted by the use of technology. Animated film is more than a medium; it is a highly produced craft that involves teams of creatives tasked with making decisions about vocal casting, colour selection, synchronizing sound to screen, voice editing, camera positioning, and much more. Unlike live-action film, where crews may lose direction over actors, settings, and other aspects of film production, animators, on the other hand, maintain complete control of the medium. Their creations, as Birthisel explains, are constructed “from scratch” (338). For Bell, animation is an art form that is precisely timed and carefully planned; “nothing accidental or serendipitous occurs in animation” (108).

It is therefore safe to say that the narrow and exaggerated constructions of gender that animate the artificial figures of Wall-E, Ralph, and Baymax are no accident, despite the fact that these characters need not conform to physical and social masculine norms given their status as robots and avatars. Wall-E, Ralph, and Baymax are humanized and gendered through visual character design. The scripts that guide these animated stories also contribute to their gendering. These characters are placed in patriarchal roles and are also positioned as superior in their relationships with inferior others. These characters are animated to look masculine even when their appearance departs from the chiselled and muscular bodies of their male predecessors. The fact that Wall-E, Ralph, and Baymax are, at times, visibly and audibly weaker compared to the male heroic ideal, makes these fictional males especially real and relatable. By imbuing the gendered bodies of mechanical and artificial figures with exaggerated physical presentations of masculinity, the films provide alternatives to the likes of Aladdin, Hercules, Tarzan, and other

hard-bodied heroes in Disney's archive. The characters' shared struggle to fit into changing conceptions of masculinity is another significant source of their humanity. The sexist and sizeist stereotypes, which are especially explicit in *Big Hero 6* (2014), help audiences interpret the robot character's plight as distinctly human. Baymax's struggles, however, are temporary and his failings are quickly remedied once he conforms. By graphically adjusting his animated body so that Baymax fits inside a hard and tight casing, the film positions the character as socially superior now that he models a masculine physical ideal that prizes muscularity.

Cultural familiarity with dominant images and ideals of patriarchal masculinity and hetero-sexuality, coupled with Disney's association with family-oriented content, further enables audience receptiveness to these dominant formations of gender. Disney's global reputation as a respectable, family entertainment media giant presents another good reason to study the characters it produces and the ideals they espouse. Disney's G-rated programming also means that it can target a very broad audience base, engaging both children and their families with their animated stories. As many of the Company's critics have shown, Disney targets children and their families with their seemingly innocent storylines and innocuous characters. What is often missed is the extent to which Disney reflects and reiterates dominant images and ideals of gender through taken-for-granted and easy-to-miss symbols.

Throughout, I have drawn attention to rhetorical selections and strategies within and across all three animated film, tracing the reiteration of hetero-masculine ideologies in visual, aural, and kinesic features and what these communicate about the state of masculinity. In addition to charting the ideological meanings expressed in and across three symbolic modes, my study has considered their embodied implications: how the combination of images, sounds, and movements on-screen affect audiences. I have tried to avoid the use of binarism when describing

the films' dual effects – one that I call ideological and the other affective or material (Rodje 176). This is because film is both a meaning- and mood-producing medium that deploys various symbolic modes to foster identification with and to induce preferred (re)actions in audiences. As I discussed in Chapter Three, it is the combination of these symbolic modes that evoke emotions and induces moods in audiences. To my knowledge, this attention to the integrated nature and dual effects of the symbolic action of film represents a novel contribution to Disney critical scholarship.

My research also contributes to Disney studies by demonstrating the value of attending not only to visual but also to aural and kinesic features with the filmic construction of gender in analyzing films. To date, Disney critics have taken primarily a visually-oriented approach in their examinations of gender. This has produced a well-focused, albeit partial, account of how Disney film creators “give moment and life” to gender through character design (Napier 238).

I also think that my interpretive and sensorial research approach offers a possible model for future rhetorical analyses of Disney film. The framework I formulated as a method for the systematic study of symbol-use allows for an interpretation of film that is not available to those who study film rhetoric exclusively from a visual or ideological rhetorical perspective. Building on the framework developed by Foss and Kanengieter, my approach differentiates among the three symbolic modes present in each second and in every frame, allowing researchers to see and hear the features that are present and those that are predominant at any given moment. This observational matrix or table is also useful in that it reveals how specific symbolic modes, whether visual, aural, or kinesic rarely function on their own to focus audience attention, advance ideals, and arouse certain emotions over others. The matrix allows rhetorical critics to identify patterns among the individual systems of meaning as well as to understand how these

symbolic modes function together both ideologically and materially. This approach offers a way for rhetorical critics of film to see and hear precisely how, for example, a sentiment of shame or a sense of anxiety is materialized in an instant through the selection, sequencing, and synchronization of bodily sounds with the sight of a bulging body. Methodologically, my research offers new insights into the rhetorical construction of masculinity, one that systematically studies how a triad of symbolic modes are expertly cued together at precisely the right instant to invite the whole body to affectively experience the sadness Wall-E projects with his eyes, the shame Ralph conveys whenever his body disappoints, or the thrill of the chase sequences and violent episodes in *Big Hero 6* (2014). The characters' emotional responses are seen and heard by audiences who may embody these reactions for themselves. My research thus provides a methodological resource to explicate what the individual elements communicate, how they intersect with other elements, and how they can potentially affect those who experience animated film.

My hope is that audiences and the public at-large may also find value in my research. In Chapters Four to Six, I point to the gender characterizations that audiences may identify with either because of the repeatability of the masculine ideals or because of the seemingly real and relatable physical and social presentations of masculinity featured in these films. My research explains the filmic techniques employed to pull audiences into these narratives and to closely connect them to male characters that are truly far from human. Not only are these animated characters created inside animation studios, Wall-E and Baymax are robots while Ralph takes the form of an avatar. To narrow the gap between the characters and the audiences, the films embed a blend of conventional and progressive gender tropes – the clumsy, love-struck male; the fragile anti-hero; the paternal protector; the brawny brute; the physically superior warrior – in their

anthropomorphic presentation of non-human characters. The practice of endowing artificial figures with complex and sometimes contradictory human physical traits and gender role stereotypes brings some sense of familiarity to stories that feature a novel crop of figures.

Make(Over): An Integrated Rhetorical Analysis of Masculine Transformation in Disney Animated Film may also provide insight about how audiences affectively respond to films in ways that might otherwise remain invisible, inaudible, or intangible. The scene from *Big Hero 6* (2014) in which Baymax presents as intoxicated (although he is merely losing battery power) provides a compelling example of the insidious effects of the construction of masculine impropriety. Farting noises and squeaking sounds, mixed in with other easy-to-miss expressions, reinforce the image of the grotesque male body. When textures, shapes, and sound effects are intertwined with other filmic features: limp gestures, wobbly body moments, rounded shoulders, captured through a low-angle camera position, meanings amplify. The construction of the grotesque male body does more than simply position insufficient, excessive, or effeminate male figures at the bottom of a masculine hierarchy; together, such constructs ridicule, criticize, and invite audiences to laugh not with Baymax but at his open, excessive, execrating body. On the surface, it might appear that the figure of the grotesque male nurse 'bot' is pushing the traditional convention of Disney's character design. However, as my research confirms, difference is always subject to discipline and audiences are affectively involved in the process as their bodies react to the mockery that ensues on-screen. My dissertation affirms what many other Disney scholars before me have argued: Disney offers limited options of available gender expressions even when the presentation of gender appears to deviate from the status quo. In Chapters Four to Six, I showed how each character is somehow animated with superficially progressive qualities. Only upon closer inspection can we see and hear the ways in which the film disciplines rather

than empowers difference. What my dissertation therefore provides is a lens through which audiences can closely examine what they see and hear as well as how they respond to filmic constructions of masculinity which may have an impact on the gendered lives they lead outside of these films.

Complications, Limitations, and Implications of Methodological Approaches and Research Topic

Full-length family-oriented animated stories featuring male leads that take the form of an artificial or mechanical being, be they robots or avatars, were selected for analysis. Including protagonists (whether male, female, or non-gendered) featured in American animated films produced by studios other than Disney would have extended the scope of my research but prevented me from conducting the kind of fine-grained analysis enabled by limiting my study to three films. My decision to restrict my corpus to Disney animated films released in the years before and after I began writing my doctoral studies was based on a motive to establish patterns in the way masculinity was animated in makeover narratives. It was important to me to study Disney animated films, exclusively, because of its international reach, global influence, and reputation as a wholesome provider of family entertainment. It would have been insightful to examine more closely the way Disney animates its female characters, only doing so would have taken away from my focus on expressions of masculine transgression and conformity. My analysis of *Eve* is the exception, however.

The hybrid research approach produced its own set of challenges and limitations as well. Since there are no widely agreed upon theoretical assumptions nor methodological procedures when it comes to an integrated rhetorical analysis, I expanded upon an approach that would

effectively help me to answer complex and integrated interdisciplinary research questions (Repko 3; Thompson Klein 196). Additionally, this kind of inquiry is complex because of its interpretive possibilities. Multiple interpretations of meaning are possible when analyzing rich texts, such as animated film. Within my research, I accept that there can be more than one way of understanding and explicating meaning from symbolic modes, elements, and features. However, at the same time, one of the strengths of ideological rhetorical criticism is its ability to produce a close reading of rhetoric to uncover the symbolic action of film.

I am also conscious that, by emphasizing what has been encoded in these films, I have paid insufficient attention to the decoding process, to the ways in which audiences engage with and respond to texts. I acknowledge that texts are polysemic and that it is possible for audience members to make meaning outside of the dominant ideological narratives offered by these texts. Films, as texts, do not necessarily determine conceptions of gender. Rather, they have the capacity to produce ideological-embodied effects.

Finally, since the practice of rhetorical criticism is often ideologically or politically motivated, it is important that I also identify the values and positions I brought to the task. Personal biases towards Disney, the corporate empire, have undoubtedly influenced my research. In my adult life, I became both fascinated and concerned with Disney's stylized approach to storytelling. Eddy von Mueller claims that the practice of "converting existing cultural materials into uncomplicated, unthreatening forms" is so closely associated with Disney that it is commonly referred to as "Disneyfication" (173). As I have demonstrated in the preceding chapters, "Disneyfication," the practice of rendering the strange into the familiar, is at work in all three films. The fictional characters that inhabit these fantastical settings bear a striking resemblance to their audience, narratively speaking. Their desire to refashion the male body in

ways that conform to an image of masculine physical supremacy, for example, produces an illusion of familiarity. In a sense, I view my work as a way of demystifying the sometimes taken-for-granted symbolic selections and rhetorical strategies used by Disney animators and all those who attempt to “Disneyfy” cultural texts. By making visible and audible the ideologies that are presented as natural, universal, acceptable, and desirable, I am engaging in a political project that aligns with some of my own beliefs and experiences. Rather than deny the set of values and subject positions that I hold, I claim them as they arise. As a starting point, I acknowledge that my analysis is largely influenced by my gender, race, economic and knowledge backgrounds, as well as the perspectives that I bring. I will continue to reflect on the personal and political biases I bring to my work as I enter a new phase in my life in the academe.

Why These Disney Films Matter in 2020 and Beyond: Looking Back and Looking Ahead

It is now twelve years since *Wall-E* (2008) was released. A lot has occurred in the past few years, a period filled with political and cultural engagement against gender discrimination and violence, in particular. One fact that seems as relevant now as it did when *Wall-E* hit theatres in 2008: institutions normalize violence against women and the scale of this problem is global. In October of 2017, public reports about sexual harassment and violence in Hollywood, in politics, the academe, as well as other industries and institutions worldwide gave rise to a movement led by debates about the power that is assumed and granted to men who occupy positions of influence. Calls for systemic changes in the way victims are treated, how harassment and violence are reported, and the ways in which business is generally practiced are among the changes resulting from the #MeToo campaign. What appears to be largely missing from such conversations, however, is the role that popular media, including animated film, plays in the

constructions of masculinity today and the implications of these constructions on young audiences. Thus, my dissertation stands to make a timely contribution to ongoing political activity against the problematic gender politics which surface in all three films under study but especially in *Wall-E* (2008).

As I described in Chapter Four, the power Wall-E eventually gains comes at the expense of Eve's dis-empowerment as the exhibitionist object of male curiosity. However, the animated film makes it difficult to perceive Eve as an object of desire or as a victim of Wall-E's controlling actions for she gains a partner in Wall-E and a purpose in her metaphorical pregnancy. The love affair between the pair of robots is equally troubling. *Wall-E* (2008) romanticizes sexual harassment by framing his love for Eve as a simple boy-meets-girl encounter. His gaze is meant to be interpreted as loving and not obsessive. Because she occasionally submits to his advances, Wall-E's efforts are eventually constructed as romantic rather than forceful.

In my view, obsessive gazing, non-consensual touching, and acts of physical aggression are the sorts of symbolic features that must be further researched in animated media targeting young audiences. This research could make more explicit the connections between constructions of masculine violence and aggression in Disney animated media and their broader implications. I also encourage Disney scholars to continue to complicate their critiques of male domination in animated films by going beyond the purely ideological to understand more fully the role of affect in the formation of masculinity. Future projects could bring together an ideological analysis of these modes of aggression and the visceral reactions audiences are likely to encounter whenever they see, hear, and feel their reverberations. The main difference between this proposed study and my own is that the former would attempt to understand how violence and fear are used in

Disney animated films to understand and experience masculinity. In the process, rhetorical critics may reveal whether and to what degree animated constructions of masculinity depend on violence and related ideal(s) of power.

There is also room to expand my small corpus by focusing on film and television sequels of *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) and *Big Hero 6* (2014). Disney, after all, has a history of creating sequels to hit-animated films years after their initial release. Such is the case with *Ralph Breaks the Internet* (2018), the second installment to *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012). In November 2018, fans of the 2012 Disney film finally reconnected with their favourite brawn-bodied antagonist and his feisty sidekick, only this time, the story had been updated to reflect wider changes in video game and Internet culture. This sequel presents an opportunity to further examine how masculinity is animated in an expanded narrative featuring the same lead characters who are implicated in a remarkably similar action-adventure plot. There are many aspects that could be interesting to analyze in *Ralph Breaks the Internet* (2018). Contrasts between references to the latest trends in Internet culture, complete with references to algorithms and retrograde representations of gender would make for a fascinating extension of my dissertation. There is also the question of whether Ralph plays, once again, the role of the super-hero and whether the film reincorporates both Ralph and Vanellope into a mainstream narrative where gender-roles are rigid despite the high-tech settings and the postfeminist conceptualizations of gender that feature so prominently in this film.

Similarly, there is the potential to shift focus away from Disney film and toward television sequels. *Big Hero 6: The Series* (2017 – to present), which is available on the Disney Channel, continues the story of the young roboticist and his robot medic only the comedy is set in the backdrop of San Fransokyo Institute of Technology where Hiro studies. Of particular

interest to me is the construction of the grotesque male body that is individuated in Baymax. Rather than focusing on the intersections between his body size and role as a feminized machine programmed to care and to nurture the ill, I would be curious to study the extent to which his physical appearance serves to downplay or undermine his intelligence. Examining the paradoxes between the physical and the intellectual would build on my analysis of this film and would also expand on the results of my analysis from *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) where I explore the trope of the dumb brute. Further research that engages with constructions of grotesque masculinity in Disney animated media in both original films and their sequels and the ideological functions they serve is warranted. Another possible research avenue would be to explore the question of whether and to what extent these sequels offer more possibilities for alternative characterizations of gender compared to their pre-texts. There is also the question of whether and to what extent difference and deviation from masculine hetero-sexist norms are erased from, further marginalized, or rendered impotent in these sequels (King 168).

Mostly, I see a need to apply a hybrid approach to other types of productions and consequently, other sites of consumption. Three-dimensional environments, including Disney's parks and attractions are rich sites in which to examine both the ideological and material effects of an expanded constellation of sensorial symbolic modes – visual, aural, kinesic, haptic, and olfactive. Inside the Magic Kingdom, Disney's global audience of children and adults are likely to be exposed to and engage with the likes of Wall-E, Ralph, and Baymax who appear not as two-dimensional figures but as full-sized, costumed characters. In extending my research to such material spaces, I would be aligning my rhetorical criticism more closely with Carole Blair's work which has been instrumental to my engagement with the material implications of rhetoric in this dissertation. In so doing, I would ask not just what the three-dimensional characters who

inhabit these tourist sites communicate to visitors, but, more specifically, what do these do? In particular, I would ask: to what extent do our shared concerns about the animation of identity politics in Disney's two-dimensional worlds relate or apply to its three-dimensional spaces, that is, the built environments and tourist attractions where these characters live? A related question that I might ask is: how are the rhetorical strategies that animators use to reinforce identification between characters and audiences different than those used by Disney Imagineers? How are they similar? Finally, in keeping with Blair's questions about rhetorical materialism, I would ask: how are visitors' bodies incorporated into or affected by the three-dimensional characters they meet?

In sum, it is my hope that the questions and discussions I have engaged with in the process of conducting this integrated research continue for as long as Disney expands its library of animated films, builds new rides and attractions at its parks, grows its market share, and spreads its influence on a global scale. Whenever I reflect upon my experiences in conducting this research over the last several years, I think what has surprised me the most is the implicit and repeated constructions of gender conformity and convention in G-rated Disney animated films that appear to challenge patriarchal narrative templates and character design. For me, this has forever changed the ways that I encounter film and the significance I attribute to each and every frame, including the colours, textures, shapes, sounds, music, and movements that are fully revealed whenever we allow our eyes and ears to experience the multi-sensorial fabric of film. As I conclude my dissertation, it seems appropriate to remind readers that symbolic modes matter and materialize in ways we may not notice even when they are right in front of us.

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