

# **Towards Infinity And Beyond**

## **Branding, Reputation, and the Critical Reception of Pixar Animation Studios**

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
University of East Anglia, School of Film, Television and Media Studies  
May 2013

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## Abstract

American author and journalist Jonah Lehrer declared in 2012 that Pixar Animation Studios was ‘the one exception’ to the oft-cited maxim that, in Hollywood, ‘nobody knows anything.’ Patrick Goldstein of the Los Angeles Times spoke in similar terms in 2008, writing that, ‘critics and audiences are in agreement on one key thing: Nobody makes better movies than Pixar.’ Thirteen consecutive global box office successes and scores of industry awards would seem to suggest that Lehrer and Goldstein are correct. Yet it is important to recognise that such statements invariably refer to something intangible, something beyond a particular Pixar film or selection of films. There exists, in other words, a widely held set of meanings and associations about what the studio represents, and to whom.

This thesis argues that this set of meanings and associations – Pixar’s brand identity – is far from the fixed and unambiguous entity it is often seen to be. If the studio has come to be seen as guarantee of quality family entertainment, when did this notion become widespread? Have the parameters for ‘quality’ and ‘success’ remained constant throughout its history? I demonstrate for instance that Pixar benefited considerably from Disney’s wavering reputation from the late-1990s onwards. I approach branding as a discursive process, and one that brand producers sometimes have little control over, contrary to the implicit claims of most marketing literature.

Broadly chronological in structure, the thesis traces the development of the studio’s reputation by drawing on Barbara Klinger’s approach to historical reception studies. Individual chapters focus on how Pixar was discussed by critics and journalists at specific moments or in specific contexts, as it evolved from a computer graphics company to become the most celebrated film studio of all time. Ultimately, this is a case study of the cultural work involved in the making of a brand or an auteur, and how these meanings can shift over time.

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# Acknowledgements

Completing this thesis has been the most challenging project I have ever undertaken, and I am forever indebted to everyone who has helped me along the way. I would like to thank the University of East Anglia, School of Film and Television Studies, for generously funding my research, and to the entire school's faculty and postgraduate community for their ongoing suggestions at various stages.

I am particularly grateful to my co-supervisors, Rayna Denison and Keith M. Johnston. Their patience, guidance, feedback and advice throughout the last three years have been invaluable. Somehow, they consistently managed to say exactly the right thing at exactly the right time, and I always came out of our supervisory meetings with a renewed sense of buoyancy about my work. I could not have asked for a better team, either on a professional or a personal level. I am also eternally grateful (yes, yes, like the Toy Story aliens) to Peter Krämer, whose infectious enthusiasm for film studies inspired me to pursue a career in academia. It was also Peter who first encouraged me to focus my research on Pixar, and his assistance with the PhD application process will not be forgotten.

Special praise goes to my closest friends and colleagues in Norwich, a.k.a. Team TAMSONH: Hannah Ellison, Melanie Kennedy, Tom Phillips, Liz Powell, Rhys Thomas, and Helen Warner. I feel genuinely honoured to have gone through this process with them, and thanks to their friendship, never once felt as though I was 'on my own like Tarzan boy'. It would be impossible for me to name everyone else who has assisted me during the writing of this thesis, but for going the extra distance when I needed it, I am also especially thankful for the contributions of folk superstar Oliver Gruner, and Gavin 'Give it to Holt' McArt.

My family, and especially my parents, Anne and John, have always provided unwavering support whenever it was called for. This thesis is dedicated to them, for bringing me into the world, fostering my love of film through an extensive home video library, taking me to Disney World, and of course for buying my ticket to see Toy Story all those years ago. My dog, Henry, has also played his part, and even though he is illiterate and deaf, so will never read this or hear me say it, I feel he deserves a mention here too. Good boy.

Finally, huge thanks to my wonderful girlfriend, Caroline, who always continued to believe in me, even in the moments when I stopped believing in myself. I could not have done this without her support, companionship and terrible impressions. She means everything to me.

Richard McCulloch  
May 2013

## INTRODUCTION

### **-Locating Pixar- Developing A Discursive Approach Towards Brand Analysis**

Nobody in Hollywood knows anything. Pixar seems to know *everything*.

- Jonah Lehrer, Wired<sup>1</sup>

In June 2012, within days of Disney-Pixar's animated fairytale Brave (Mark Andrews and Brenda Chapman, 2012) being released in American cinemas, movie website Slashfilm published a lengthy article detailing 'the 15 reasons [it] doesn't feel like a "Pixar" film'.<sup>2</sup> Laremy Legel explained that 'Brave isn't a bad movie on merit, it's merely an average one ... But within the greater context of Pixar's previous work, [it] does come up short'.<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Turan of the Los Angeles Times made a similar point, opening his review by stating, 'If the Walt Disney Studios logo were the only one on Brave, this film's impeccable visuals and valiant heroine would be enough to call it a success. But Brave is also a Pixar Animation Studios film, and that means it has to answer to a higher standard'.<sup>4</sup> Even Variety's Peter Debruge, whose response was far more positive than either Legel's or Turan's, agreed that 'Brave feels quite different from earlier Pixar films'.<sup>5</sup> For critics, then, attaching the Pixar name to an animated film fundamentally changes the way(s) in which we interpret or otherwise assign value

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<sup>1</sup> Jonah Lehrer, 'Animating a Blockbuster: How Pixar Built "Toy Story 3"', Wired, 24<sup>th</sup> May 2010 <[http://www.wired.com/magazine/2010/05/process\\_pixar/](http://www.wired.com/magazine/2010/05/process_pixar/)>, Accessed 24<sup>th</sup> July 2012. Original emphasis.

<sup>2</sup> Laremy Legel, 'The 15 Reasons "Brave" Doesn't Feel Like A "Pixar" Film', Slashfilm, 25<sup>th</sup> June 2012 <<http://www.slashfilm.com/15-reasons-brave-doesnt-feel-like-pixar-film/>>, Accessed 13<sup>th</sup> August 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Turan, 'Not A Bull's-Eye', Los Angeles Times, 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2012, p.D1.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Debruge, "'Brave'", Variety, 10<sup>th</sup> June 2012 <<http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117947728/>>, Accessed 13<sup>th</sup> August 2012.

to it, ushering in a complex series of (largely positive) meanings and assumptions about the people and processes behind the production.

But what are these meanings and assumptions? The idea that Brave somehow *felt* different to Pixar's previous output was a recurring theme across reviews in the American press, yet few critics saw the need to clarify what this might actually mean. That the studio must 'answer to a higher standard' implies that this is at least partly a question of 'quality', but what does quality mean in this context? Legel's article is particularly illuminating here, eschewing any kind of formal analysis of Brave, and couching his assessment almost entirely in terms of what he felt was *absent* from it. Chief among his lamentations are the following arguments: the film 'doesn't ever fully pull at the heart strings (or the head strings)'; it lacks 'dramatic tension'; the dialogue is 'neither quippy nor dramatic'; it suffers from 'a serious lack of whimsy, [or] moments of pure silliness'; and it demonstrates too little ambition (i.e. a desire to explore 'new' and 'creative' story ideas).<sup>6</sup> Both implicitly and explicitly, he describes these features as being typical of all Pixar's films, suggesting that the studio has developed a reputation among critics for routinely striking powerful emotional and artistic chords with audiences. As Turan goes on to say in his review, 'It's hard not to be affected by the emotional ending of Brave, but the magic that is Pixar's birthright – a sense of unending enchantment ... is inescapably absent more often than not.'<sup>7</sup>

Tellingly, these are all abstract, highly subjective qualities. Pixar is positioned within these reviews as a director usually would be – the authorial presence credited with stamping its personality onto the film.<sup>8</sup> What the above

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<sup>6</sup> Legel, 'The 15 Reasons Why "Brave" Doesn't Feel Like A "Pixar" Film'.

<sup>7</sup> Turan, 'Not A Bull's-Eye'.

<sup>8</sup> While the director has historically been the figure most closely associated with film authorship, there are of course numerous exceptions, from writers and stars through to producers and whole studios. See, for example, Barry Keith Grant, ed., Auteurs and Authorship: A Film Reader (Maldwell,

examples demonstrate, however, is that the critical parameters for evaluating Brave were not grounded in the film's formal qualities (e.g. mise-en-scène, cinematography, repetition of narrative themes), nor were they comprised of ideological critiques.<sup>9</sup> Rather, the primary evaluative nexus point was the reputation of the studio that had made it. But how did the Pixar brand come to be defined in such a way? When was it that critics' perception of this company ceased to be about specific moments in specific films (if indeed it was ever about that), and moved into the less tangible territory of 'whimsy' or 'enchantment'?

Over the course of this thesis, I unpack the various ways in which this reputation has developed and shifted since the company's origins in the late-1970s. In some respects, it is an attempt to provide some historical context to a brand that has been written about by hundreds of journalists, but criticised by very few. My critical approach to studying Pixar is by no means an attempt to question or denigrate the subjective merits of its output, nor is it a polemic against popular culture or mainstream Hollywood filmmaking more generally.<sup>10</sup> Instead, my aim is to highlight the specificities of the studio's cultural history with a view to opening up bigger questions about the nature of branding and reputation. In particular, I argue that the Pixar brand has always relied heavily on the contrasting reputations of external agents, including studios, filmmakers, companies, industries, and marketplaces, as well as broader cultural trends.

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MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008). For an account of the various industrial, economic and cultural processes that impact upon notions of artistic creativity, see David Hesmondhalgh, The Cultural Industries, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (London: Sage, 2007). Alternatively, Caldwell sees authorship as an industrial process, the result of a complex series of interactions and negotiations between various members of the creative and executive personnel. John Thornton Caldwell, Production Cultures: Industrial reflexivity and critical practice in film and television (London: Duke University Press, 2008). See in particular, pp.232-9.

<sup>9</sup> Janet Staiger describes formalism, and then later, ideological critique, as the two primary approaches to film (and auteur) criticism and film analysis employed by the writers at Cahiers du Cinéma. See Janet Staiger, 'The Politics Of Film Canons', Cinema Journal, 24.3 (Spring 1985), pp.4-23.

<sup>10</sup> Note that I do, in fact, identify as a Pixar fan. While I do occasionally use my own experiences with Pixar and its films as a jumping off point for my analysis, the relationship between brand and fan is regrettably beyond the scope of this thesis.

Existing branding scholarship tends to downplay this process of interaction, preferring to see brands as unique sets of values that can be talked about in an isolated fashion.<sup>11</sup> The research presented here suggests that this is something of a fallacy, not only in Pixar's case, but for all brands.

### **Pixar as Benchmark**

In December 2009, shortly after I began the initial research for this thesis, Richard Corliss of Time magazine named WALL-E (Andrew Stanton, 2008) as the best film of the entire decade.<sup>12</sup> In doing so, he even went as far as saying that 'Andrew Stanton's masterpiece here represents the decade's full Pixar oeuvre, [and] also stands in for all the glories of animation, whether CGI, traditional or stop-motion, that provided the greatest measure of joy in the new cinematic millennium.'<sup>13</sup> While Corliss stopped short of giving Pixar sole credit, he nevertheless described WALL-E in metonymic terms – an example of animation that is, for him, so accomplished that it should be seen to 'stand in' for all other animation.

Such praise may be hyperbolic, but the sentiment behind it is far from unusual, as Pixar had become increasingly accustomed to critical acclaim from the turn of the new millennium. By the end of the decade, the studio and its body of work had emerged as a clear benchmark for American journalists; a set of reference points against which the respective merits of all Hollywood animated features

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, UEABrandleadership, 'What is Branding?', YouTube, 21<sup>st</sup> September 2011 <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CaT\\_aGNLqLo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CaT_aGNLqLo)>, Accessed 25<sup>th</sup> September 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Corliss, 'Best Movies, TV, Books and Theater of the Decade – "WALL-E"', Time, 29<sup>th</sup> December 2009 <[http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1949837\\_1949237\\_1949161,00.htm](http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1949837_1949237_1949161,00.htm)>, Accessed 1<sup>st</sup> May 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.



should be measured.<sup>14</sup> In many ways, this perception of Pixar as a guarantor of quality should not come as much of a surprise, since, in the words of Bill Capodagli and Lynn Jackson, ‘the preponderance of evidence attesting to their success is unquestionable’.<sup>15</sup> However, the very notion of ‘success’ is by no means objective. For instance, are we talking about commercial success, artistic achievements, industrial or technological advances, or something else? Since the late-1980s, the studio has received more than two hundred awards from various festivals and institutions, including twenty-three Academy Awards, five Golden Globes, five BAFTAs, and two Grammys.<sup>16</sup> Its financial success is even more impressive, having released thirteen consecutive hit films between 1995 and 2012 inclusive.<sup>17</sup> Together, those movies have accrued more than \$3.2 billion at the domestic box office, and over \$7.4 billion worldwide.<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, entire books and numerous articles have been written on the multitude of positive lessons the studio can teach us, with Pixar repeatedly held aloft as a master of storytelling,<sup>19</sup> a textbook example of how to

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<sup>14</sup> For the sake of consistency, this thesis focuses primarily on the studio’s American critical reputation, but it is worth noting that Pixar serves as a reference point/benchmark in many other countries as well, particularly in the UK.

<sup>15</sup> Bill Capodagli and Lynn Jackson, Innovate The Pixar Way: Business Lessons From The World’s Most Creative Corporate Playground (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), p.x.

<sup>16</sup> Figures correct as of 20<sup>th</sup> September 2012. For a full breakdown of these awards, see ‘List of Pixar awards and nominations (feature films)’, Wikipedia <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Pixar\\_awards\\_and\\_nominations\\_\(feature\\_films\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Pixar_awards_and_nominations_(feature_films))>, Accessed 25<sup>th</sup> July 2012. For a similar list for the studio’s short films, see ‘List of Pixar awards and nominations (short films)’, Wikipedia, <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Pixar\\_awards\\_and\\_nominations\\_\(short\\_films\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Pixar_awards_and_nominations_(short_films))>, Accessed 25<sup>th</sup> July 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Of course, defining what constitutes a ‘hit’ film at the box office is also a task that is far more complex than it might first appear. Are we talking about gross receipts, net receipts, or looking for the biggest return on investment? Do we insist that all ‘hits’ must appear in the annual domestic box office Top 10, or Top 20? If so, does drawing a line somewhere not make the distinction between ‘hit’ and ‘flop’ all the more difficult to discern?

<sup>18</sup> Neither figure has been adjusted for inflation. See ‘Franchises: Pixar’, Box Office Mojo, no date, <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/franchises/chart/?id=pixar.htm>>, Accessed 24<sup>th</sup> July 2012. Also note that each Pixar feature to date has reached number one at the domestic box office, and all but one placed among the annual ten highest grossing films for the year of their release. The one exception was Ratatouille (Brad Bird, 2007), which, having placed eleventh and grossed more than \$200 million, would still not be easily categorised as a failure.

<sup>19</sup> Pixar directors and employees are frequently invited to speak on this subject at animation schools across the United States, but particularly in California. See, for example, Jen Yamato, ‘Pixar Storytelling 101: 22 Rules Hollywood Should Learn’, Movieline, 13<sup>th</sup> June 2012 <<http://movieline.com/2012/06/13/pixar-storytelling-101-22-rules-hollywood-should-learn>>.

succeed in business,<sup>20</sup> and even as a kind of moral guardian whose films can help us to be more virtuous.<sup>21</sup>

As David Hesmondhalgh has demonstrated, uncertainty is one of the defining features of the cultural industries, as producers of texts (or ‘symbol creators’) struggle for consistency due to the ‘highly volatile and unpredictable’ behaviour of audiences.<sup>22</sup> It was this unpredictability, specifically in relation to the American box office, that famously prompted screenwriter William Goldman to declare, ‘the single most important fact of the entire movie industry [is that] NOBODY KNOWS ANYTHING.’<sup>23</sup> The success of Toy Story 3 in 2010, however, prompted Jonah Lehrer of Wired magazine to amend Goldman’s maxim so that it read, ‘nobody in Hollywood knows anything. Pixar seems to know *everything*.’<sup>24</sup> One of the most distinctive features of Pixar’s critical reputation is its perceived reliability, which had been explicitly expressed in national media as early as 2003, with British magazine The Business wrote that ‘Pixar is as close to a sure

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Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> August 2012; Andrew Stanton, ‘Andrew Stanton: The Clues To A Great Story’, TED, February 2012 <[http://www.ted.com/talks/andrew\\_stanton\\_the\\_clues\\_to\\_a\\_great\\_story.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/andrew_stanton_the_clues_to_a_great_story.html)>, Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> August 2012.

<sup>20</sup> The most obvious example of this is Bill Capodagli and Lynn Jackson, Innovate The Pixar Way: Business Lessons From The World’s Most Creative Corporate Playground (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010). Also see: Brent Schlender, ‘Pixar’s Magic Man’, Fortune, 17<sup>th</sup> May 2006 <[http://money.cnn.com/2006/05/15/magazines/fortune/pixar\\_futureof\\_fortune\\_052906/index.htm](http://money.cnn.com/2006/05/15/magazines/fortune/pixar_futureof_fortune_052906/index.htm)>, Retrieved 15<sup>th</sup> August 2012; Brent Schlender, ‘Incredible: The Man Who Built Pixar’s Innovation Machine’, Fortune, 15<sup>th</sup> November 2004 <[http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune\\_archive/2004/11/15/8191082/index.htm](http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune_archive/2004/11/15/8191082/index.htm)>, Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> August 2012; Jonah Lehrer, Imagine: How Creativity Works (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2012), pp.139-74.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Velarde, The Wisdom Of Pixar: An Animated Look At Virtue (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010); Todd Brewer and David Zahl, eds., The Gospel According to Pixar (Mockinbird Ministries, 2010). Note that the thematic and narrative analyses in these two books come from an explicitly Christian perspective. For a similar book written about the Christian teachings of Disney films, see Mark I. Pinsky, The Gospel According to Disney: Faith, Trust and Pixie Dust (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004). For a broader reflection on the ideological function of some of Pixar’s films, see M. Keith Booker, Disney, Pixar, And The Hidden Messages Of Children’s Films (Oxford: Praeger, 2010).

<sup>22</sup> David Hesmondhalgh, The Cultural Industries, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (London: Sage, 2007), pp.18-20.

<sup>23</sup> Jonah Lehrer, Imagine: How Creativity Works (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2012), p.144. Original capitalisation.

<sup>24</sup> Lehrer, ‘Animating a Blockbuster’. Original emphasis.

thing as exists in the unpredictable movie business'.<sup>25</sup> Roger Ebert agreed, writing in 2004 that Pixar 'cannot seem to take a wrong step',<sup>26</sup> while more recently, Los Angeles Times journalist Patrick Goldstein pointedly declared, 'critics and audiences are in agreement on one key thing: Nobody makes better movies than Pixar.'<sup>27</sup>

Goldstein's comment is especially telling, since he not only claims to be speaking on behalf of all other film critics, but audiences too, asserting as fact something for which he offers no evidence. As I discuss in more detail in Chapter 6, notions of consensus have become increasingly important in contemporary film criticism, with review aggregation websites such as Rotten Tomatoes providing film audiences with a heightened (but problematic) perception of what critics think about a given release. The idea that we can speak on behalf of audiences without having conducted any empirical research is even more problematic, as Martin Barker capably demonstrates in his work on the perceived failure of the Iraq War movie genre:

Judgements about success and failure are essentially rhetorical, but [these] rhetorics are part of the very arena we need to explore. And certainly, box office failure cannot be equated with simple rejection of a film's narrative and argument. People go to see, or stay away from, films for an indeterminately long list of reasons – and among those can be their awareness of the very debates about whether they will go or not.<sup>28</sup>

Barker's point here is that box office figures tell us only about the *number* of people who pay to see a particular film, and nothing at all about their opinion of it. Time and again, however, critics and journalists remind their readers that 'everyone'

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<sup>25</sup> Anon., 'Coy Story: Will Steve Jobs Jilt Disney?', The Business, 12<sup>th</sup> October 2003. Retrieved via Nexis UK.

<sup>26</sup> Roger Ebert, "The Incredibles", Chicago Sun-Times, 5<sup>th</sup> November 2004  
<<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20041104/REVIEWS/41006004>>, Accessed 5<sup>th</sup> May 2010.

<sup>27</sup> Patrick Goldstein, 'Why Pixar's top of the line', Los Angeles Times, 1<sup>st</sup> July 2008  
<<http://articles.latimes.com/2008/jul/01/entertainment/et-goldstein1>>, Accessed 1<sup>st</sup> May 2010.

<sup>28</sup> Martin Barker, A "Toxic Genre": The Iraq War Films (London: Pluto Press, 2011), p.74.

loves Pixar. As with the Iraq War movies, the ‘truth’ of this situation – for example, the extent to which audiences trust the Pixar brand, or what values they see as being most integral to it – is largely unknown, and therefore less significant than the fact that this rhetoric is repeated so often. The more a particular narrative of success or failure is alluded to, the easier it becomes to share in that belief; the prophecy is essentially self-fulfilling. If film critics and brand strategists alike both rely on imagined audiences/consumers to different degrees, it would be prudent to turn now to a discussion of what it means to talk about a brand.

## **Defining the Brand**

Branding has existed in some form since the mid-seventeenth-century, when it was used on cattle as a stamp of ownership, before later being used to indicate reliable production sources and quality for products such as wine.<sup>29</sup> Precise definitions are difficult to come by, but branding scholarship and marketing literature generally agree that a number of shifts occurred in the function of brands over the course of the twentieth century. Celia Lury places particular importance on the impact of broad changes to the retail industry, arguing that the burgeoning legitimacy of marketing science and consumer research led to a post-war integration between marketing and production.<sup>30</sup> This, combined with the rise of ‘self-service’ retail (e.g. supermarkets) meant that brands were now required to speak directly to the customer, performing the role of ‘silent salesmen’.<sup>31</sup> It became clear to marketers that they could add value to their products by defining them as having a ‘character’ that transcended functional properties alone. This idea continues to be of fundamental importance to brands, which are regularly given valuations that far

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<sup>29</sup> UEABrandleadership, ‘What is Branding?’, [YouTube](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CaT_aGNLqLo), 21<sup>st</sup> September 2011 <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CaT\\_aGNLqLo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CaT_aGNLqLo)>, Accessed 25<sup>th</sup> September 2012.

<sup>30</sup> Celia Lury, *Brands: The Logos of the Global Economy* (London: Routledge, 2004), p.22-3.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, p.22.

exceed the combined total of its assets and revenues. Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson point towards the divide between brands and the products they represent, writing that Nike for instance has established 'its sign, its slogan, its style, to the degree that the shoe as either a material object or a commodity is absent.'<sup>32</sup> Coca-Cola is currently seen as the world's most valuable brand, with reports in October 2012 quoting an astonishing value of \$77.8 billion.<sup>33</sup>

It is worth pointing out that, as observed by Jeff Swystun, the very notion of a brand means different things to different people: 'from a marketing or consumer perspective it is the promise and delivery of an experience; from a business perspective it is the security of future earnings; from a legal perspective it is a separate piece of intellectual property.'<sup>34</sup> He is correct to make these distinctions, and indeed none of these perspectives should be completely ignored when considering a brand, but the fact that he uses the phrase 'marketing or consumer perspective' is illustrative of a major problem with existing branding scholarship. Jonathan Schroeder and Miriam Salzer-Mörling have noted that most detailed studies of the subject are aimed at business and marketing audiences, and therefore adopt 'a practical, checklist approach' to branding.<sup>35</sup> The focus on creating and sustaining a brand invariably means that when acknowledged, the consumer tends to be reduced to an abstract and non-existent figure. Those who fall within arbitrarily delineated socio-demographic categories are consequently all expected to

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<sup>32</sup> Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson, Nike Culture: The sign of the swoosh (London: SAGE, 1998), p.79.

<sup>33</sup> Elliot, Stuart, 'List of Global Brands Keeps Coke on Top, and Apple Jumps Up', New York Times, 1<sup>st</sup> October 2012 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/02/business/media/best-global-brands-report-has-coca-cola-on-top-and-apple-climbing.html>>, Accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2012.

<sup>34</sup> Jeff Swystun, ed., The Brand Glossary (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p.14. For a far more comprehensive and scholarly expression of these ideas – a summary of the numerous ways in which brands have been defined in academic literature – see Leslie De Chernatony and Francesca Dall'Omo Riley, 'Defining A "Brand": Beyond The Literature With Experts' Interpretations', Journal of Marketing Management, 14 (1998), pp.417-43.

<sup>35</sup> Jonathan E. Schroeder and Miriam Salzer-Mörling, eds., Brand Culture (London: Routledge, 2006), p.3.

respond in a similar way to branding materials, an assumption which is problematic at best.

It is somewhat curious then that the oft-cited Jean-Noël Kapferer (borrowing from Kevin Lane Keller) refers to ‘the now classic definition of a brand’ as ‘a set of mental associations, held by the consumer, which add to the perceived value of a product or service.’<sup>36</sup> Therein lies the problem: despite most brand theorists and analysts agreeing that brands consist of sets of meanings and associations in the minds of their consumers (or potential consumers), such studies nonetheless ignore most (if not all) of the factors that actually impact upon meaning after the brand producer has done its part. Kapferer does note that there is a process of ‘decoding’, and acknowledges the impact of extraneous factors that ‘speak in the brand’s name and thus produce meaning, no matter how disconnected they may actually be from it.’<sup>37</sup> Short of enigmatically referring to them as ‘noise’ however, he surprisingly fails to explain exactly what these ‘extraneous factors’ are, despite in his view being contributors towards how consumers interpret brands. His implicit suggestion is also that consumers all ‘decode’ in the same way.

This view is understandable within such literature, in the sense that marketers’ interests will inevitably lean towards knowing what they themselves can do for their brand(s).<sup>38</sup> Building on work by Adam Arvidsson, Paul Grainge points out that this view is typical within brand management theory, which invariably assumes that ‘branding relies on the participation of consumers but on terms that have been forethought.’<sup>39</sup> He later adds that despite ‘the concentration of signifying

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<sup>36</sup> Jean-Noël Kapferer, The New Strategic Brand Management: Creating and Sustaining Brand Equity Long Term (London: Kogan Page, 2004), p.10. Kapferer takes the definition itself from Kevin Lane Keller, Strategic Brand Management (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998).

<sup>37</sup> Kapferer, p.10.

<sup>38</sup> See for example, Simon Middleton, How to Build a Brand in 30 Days (Chichester: Capstone, 2011).

<sup>39</sup> Paul Grainge, Brand Hollywood: Selling entertainment in a global media age (Abingdon:

power that accrues to corporate brands, [the marketing of entertainment] remains an uncertain process where companies are never fully able to fix the meaning of signs or capture consumers who move between media in increasingly fleeting ways.<sup>40</sup>

Some studies have emerged which concentrate on measuring consumer responses to brands,<sup>41</sup> but even these remain focused on the practical applications of the research (so that a company can measure the value of its own brand[s] for instance), and as such there are huge gaps in our understanding of how brands actually operate. What is needed then is a way of analysing a brand that manages to straddle the dynamic between producer and consumer, thus elucidating the process of mediation that takes place between the two. If a brand consists of a set of meanings and associations that is reliant upon both parties, we cannot ignore either end of this dynamic. Thus, in order to understand a brand, it is necessary to build up a detailed picture of the mediated discourses that sit between its producer and its consumer. Grainge in fact sees branding as a discourse, arguing that from this perspective, 'branding is less significant for what it might reveal about the "condition" of a given social moment, than for how organisations of meaning coalesce in particular ways'.<sup>42</sup>

Johan Fornäs has advanced similar theoretical ideas, arguing that 'culture is about the interaction between subjects, texts and contexts', and that the 'meaning of a text and the identity of a subject are [neither] objectively given in advance, [nor]

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Routledge, 2008), p.29.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p.43.

<sup>41</sup> See for example, Jennifer L. Aaker, 'Dimensions of Brand Personality', *Journal of Marketing Research*, 34.3 (August 1997), pp.347-56.

<sup>42</sup> Grainge, p.24.

are they individually or arbitrarily variable illusions.<sup>43</sup> Jonathan Gray takes a similar stance, arguing that media texts,

by [themselves] and studied in a vacuum, cannot truly help us, for “the text itself” is an abstract, yet ultimately non-existent entity, wished into creation by analysts. [They] can only ever exist through, inside, and across other texts, and through [their] readers.<sup>44</sup>

But how do we capture these theoretical ideas? While brand meanings to some extent do operate independently of a particular product, this view ignores the simple fact that, as Jean-Noël Kapferer points out, a brand cannot exist ‘without products or services to carry them.’<sup>45</sup> I extend this line of thinking to the Pixar brand, any analysis of which would be lacking without reference to the films the company has become known for. The films are however just one contributor to the Pixar brand (albeit the most economically central and widely visible one), and it is important not to see them as functioning independently of other relevant factors, from accompanying promotion and DVD features, to the Luxo lamp logo/ident, reviews and media interviews, merchandise, and tie-in deals (e.g. McDonalds or Burger King toys).

It is for these reasons that I contend an analysis of Pixar’s discursive surround is the most effective way of thinking about the way the brand has developed. A reception study of the ways in which the company has been talked about affords us a more holistic view of the brand than any other approach, preventing the urge to privilege either Pixar’s own attempts at branding itself, or the diverse range of individual consumer responses. For the purposes of this thesis,

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<sup>43</sup> Johan Fornäs, ‘The Crucial in Between: The Centrality of Mediation in Cultural Studies’, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 3.1 (2000), pp.58-9.

<sup>44</sup> Jonathan Gray, *Watching with “The Simpsons”: Television, parody and intertextuality* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p.3.

<sup>45</sup> Kapferer, p.10.



then, brands are texts (both generic and proprietary) that have not only been produced and consumed in different ways over time, but in different ways during the same period. In my first chapter for instance, I argue that the way in which Pixar was written about during their formative years (i.e. prior to their involvement with Disney in the late-1980s) suggests that the company were at that time so intent on selling the versatility of their computer hardware and software that there was little sign of any coherent brand, let alone early signs of metonymy. The Pixar name clearly meant very different things to different groups of consumers, and this uncertainty is reflected in the way they were written about.

As Kevin Sandler has argued in relation to Warner Bros. animation, ‘conflict and unpredictability [are] the banes of metonymy, [and] have to be eliminated’ for cultural consumption.<sup>46</sup> It follows then that Richard Corliss and other film critics would be unable to discuss Pixar in metonymic terms in the absence of a consensus about the quality of its output, what the studio stands for, and who its films appeal to. The more that writers refer to this consensus, the more it is taken for granted, making it a self-reinforcing set of discourses that have gradually coalesced into the set of meanings that comprise the Pixar brand.

What happens when a company shifts from one industry to another, as Pixar did? How is it that a company that at one point was seen by observers as a forerunner of computer graphics products has since become a critical darling, and the benchmark for all animated movies made in Hollywood? Clearly this discursive shift did not happen overnight, so at what point did the assumptions of the consensus begin to manifest themselves? Pixar has become increasingly eager to retrospectively tell ‘the story’ of its past, but to what extent is its own historical

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<sup>46</sup> Kevin S. Sandler, ‘Looney Tunes and Merry Metonyms’ in Kevin S. Sandler, ed., Reading the Rabbit: Explorations in Warner Bros. Animation (London: Rutgers University Press, 1998), p.9.

narrative contradicted by the ways that the company and its work were actually talked about at the time?

The word ‘Pixar’ itself – a fake Spanish verb meaning ‘to make pictures’ – was coined by a group of Lucasfilm employees in the early 1980s to be used as the name for the graphical imaging computer they were developing for George Lucas.<sup>47</sup> The word would later become the name for the company that sold the computer (and related imaging software) to a variety of (largely technical and scientific) industries, and Pixar was not explicitly referred to as a ‘studio’ until December 1994.<sup>48</sup> Since then, the meanings associated with the Pixar name have continued to evolve (even to the point that the word ‘Pixarian’ has emerged),<sup>49</sup> and over the course of my thesis I hope to trace these discursive associations and address gaps in the studio’s account of its own historical narrative. I am in other words seeking to investigate not only *what* Pixar means at a given point in time, but *how* this meaning has developed, and to whom it applies.

My research and analysis will therefore in a sense be historical in nature. I will be seeking to open up the abovementioned critical consensus, and demonstrate that the terms in which Pixar are currently discussed work to re-imagine the company’s past – a narrative that is far more complicated than has previously been acknowledged. However, the ultimate goal of this project is to

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<sup>47</sup> David A. Price, The Pixar Touch: The making of a company (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), p.63. Rather less fortunately, ‘Pixar’ does exist as a verb in Catalan, translating into English as ‘to piss’. Note that, in Catalan, the letter ‘x’ is pronounced in the same way as the ‘ch’ sound in English, but one suspects that this potentially negative connotation may still linger for some Catalonians. Unfortunately, this is something that I only discovered immediately prior to submitting this thesis, and I have not had time to fully explore its implications.

<sup>48</sup> This is at least the earliest example I have managed to find. Anon., ‘Computers come to Tinseltown’, The Economist, 24 December 1994, p.87.

<sup>49</sup> The use of this word was until recently reserved to refer to an employee of the studio, particularly prominent figures like John Lasseter, Ed Catmull, Pete Docter and Andrew Stanton. In a recent review of the Dreamworks animated film How to Train Your Dragon (Dean DeBlois and Chris Sanders, 2010) however, Richard Corliss used ‘Pixarian’ as an adjective: ‘In it’s loftier moments, it might almost be called Pixarian.’ Richard Corliss, ‘Dreaming up “How to Train Your Dragon”’, Time, 5 April 2010 <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1975321-2,00.html>>, Accessed 1 May 2010. The implications of this are discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

use Pixar as a lens through which I can examine the role media discourses play in the formation of a brand – an intervention that will prove to be of interest beyond the specificities of Pixar and other film studios. Since the early 2000s, there has been some exemplary research in the field of branding that has given more attention to the industrial and economic processes that impact upon meaning.<sup>50</sup> Lury, for instance, describes branding's progression from the implicit one-way communication of 'stimulus-response' (that is, from the product to the consumer), before it increasingly became conceptualised as an *exchange*.<sup>51</sup>

However, the ideas contained within this thesis should be seen as an attempt to provide a cultural model of brand analysis. This approach follows on from Douglas Holt's work on cultural branding, which he sees as being reliant upon 'brand stories':

A brand emerges as various 'authors' tell stories that involve the brand. ... The relative influence of these authors varies considerably across product categories. Brand stories have plots and characters, and they rely heavily on metaphor to communicate and to spur our imaginations. As these stories collide in everyday social life, conventions eventually form. Sometimes a single common story emerges as consensus view. Most often, though, several different stories circulate widely in society. A brand emerges when these collective understandings become firmly established.<sup>52</sup>

In Pixar's case, what I find is that some disagreement over the studio's branded reputation does occur, even after their critical reputation had been firmly established. Yet most of the time these anomalous discourses are subsumed by the broader studio narrative, which purports to guarantee quality and innovation at every turn. These narratives of reputation are thus central to the ways in which

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<sup>50</sup> See the aforementioned works by Lury, 2004; Grainge, 2008; Johnson, 2012. Also see Adam Arvidsson, *Brands: Meaning and Value in Media Culture* (London: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>51</sup> Lury, p.24.

<sup>52</sup> Douglas B. Holt, *How Brands Become Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2004), p.3.

brands are able to grow and change, playing a key role in their cultural legitimization. Mark Harris of New York Magazine presents a fascinating demonstration of this in relation to the Academy Awards, noting that, ‘a good Oscar narrative makes voters feel that, by writing a name on a ballot, they’re completing a satisfying plotline’.<sup>53</sup> He goes on to cite Oscar-winning fare such as Little Miss Sunshine (2006) and Precious (2009), whose respective wins offered a pleasing resolution to an indie underdog narrative and a Cinderella story (in relation to its first-time star, Gabourey Sidibe).<sup>54</sup> Reception studies will enable me to pinpoint some of these stories in a meaningful way, and I borrow my method specifically from the work of Barbara Klinger.

## Method

In her essay ‘Film history, terminable and interminable’, Klinger outlines a number of possible ways of undertaking a historical reception study, and argues in favour of a totalised approach to film history. Although she acknowledges that exhaustiveness in historical research is impossible in practice, Klinger maintains that it is nonetheless ‘necessary as an ideal goal’, so that we can get a sense ‘not of *the* ideology the text had in historical context, but its *many* ideologies’.<sup>55</sup> This ‘totalised’ approach enables the researcher to pinpoint the ‘historical prospects [available] for viewing at a given time by illuminating the meanings made available within that moment’.<sup>56</sup> Klinger thus draws on as wide a spread of materials as possible for each topic, but retains her focus by tying her research to specific moments in time and/or contexts of consumption. By applying a similar approach to Pixar’s reception, determining not only where journalists agree but also where they

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<sup>53</sup> Mark Harris, ‘The Red Carpet Campaign: Inside the singular hysteria of the Academy Awards race’, New York Magazine <<http://nymag.com/movies/features/63661/>>, Accessed 29<sup>th</sup> July 2012.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Barbara Klinger, ‘Film history, terminable and interminable: Recovering the past in reception studies’, Screen, 38.2 (Summer 1997), pp.108, 110. Original emphasis.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p.114.

disagree, I should be able to grasp the diverse set of meanings that were associated with the Pixar company name at any particular time. In short, it is an approach that allows us to simultaneously consolidate notions of text, context and subject.

Klinger refers to the uncovering of these ‘contradictory modes of [a film’s] social inscription’ as a synchronic approach – the attempt to understand the context for a film’s reception at one specific point in time. Yet, she also stresses the importance of thinking diachronically – acknowledging the ‘serial reinscriptions’ of the text and the ways in which meaning can change over time.<sup>57</sup> In terms of the structure of this thesis, I employ both approaches, but in a way that should enable me to maintain a coherent focus throughout. I borrow from the structure employed by Klinger in her monograph, Melodrama and Meaning: History, culture, and the films of Douglas Sirk, in which each individual chapter is ‘devoted to a specific institutional context or discourse’ relating to Sirk’s films.<sup>58</sup> Each of my chapters will accordingly consist of a synchronic analysis of the meaning(s) associated with the Pixar name at a given point in time or in relation to specific debates, as observed through print and online media. The juxtaposition of each of these chapters, however, will mean that the thesis as a whole will comprise a diachronic study of the broad discursive shifts that have taken place in the way media publications talk about Pixar, and ultimately how the current critical consensus has come to take the shape that it currently has.

Following on from Robert Allen and Douglas Gomery, Klinger argues that film reviews are of great value to reception studies researchers in the sense that they are ‘types of social discourse’ that have an ‘agenda-setting’ function; they have ‘not

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p.107.

<sup>58</sup> Barbara Klinger, Melodrama and Meaning: History, culture, and the films of Douglas Sirk (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), xvii.

told audiences what to think so much as ... what to think *about*.<sup>59</sup> Klinger goes on to argue that as a 'primary public tastemaker, the critic operates to [distinguish] legitimate from illegitimate art and proper from improper modes of aesthetic appropriation.'<sup>60</sup> Her method for evaluating the extent to which the critic does this is to consider the terms of reference that are being used. If, for example, the film appears in a critics' annual top ten list or is nominated for an award, what are the other films that are nominated or appear on the list, and on what grounds are the comparisons or references drawn? Are the critics making any evaluative assumptions about the film's intended target audience, and if so, how have they made this distinction? These are the kinds of questions I will be asking at each step of the way, and in doing so I will gradually build up a picture of the way a brand evolves from a company name into a complex and constantly evolving set of meanings.

It is worth pointing out that my work also relates in a number of ways to methodological approaches outside of reception studies, and particularly to genre studies by Jason Mittell and Rick Altman. Mittell for instance argues that genres are 'cultural categories that surpass the boundaries of media texts and operate within industry, audience, and cultural practices as well.'<sup>61</sup> He uses the example of the re-scheduling of animation that took place across the American television networks in the 1960s, which had the effect of changing how people thought about animation as

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p.69. While there is evidence to support this theory, the actual links between film reviews and box office receipts or audience interpretation have proven notoriously difficult to pin down. See Robert O. Wyatt and David P. Badger, 'Effects of Information and Evaluation in Film Criticism', Journalism Quarterly, 67.2 (Summer 1990), pp.359-68; Wyatt and Badger 'To Toast, Pan or Waffle: How Film Reviews Affect Reader Interest And Credibility Perception', Newspaper Research Journal 8.4 (1987), pp.19-30; Jehoshua Eliashberg and Steven M. Shugan, 'Film Critics: Influencers or Predictors?', Journal of Marketing, 61 (April 1997), pp.68-78; Suman Basuroy, Subimal Chatterjee, and S. Abraham Ravid, 'How Critical Are Critical Reviews?: The Box Office Effects of Film Critics, Star Power, and Budgets', Journal of Marketing, 67.4 (2003), pp.103-17.

<sup>60</sup> Klinger, Melodrama and Meaning, p.70.

<sup>61</sup> Jason Mittell, 'A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory', Cinema Journal, 40.3 (Spring 2001), p.3.

a genre – turning previously all-inclusive texts into ‘kids only’ fare.<sup>62</sup> By comparing the judgements and language observed in reviews and synopses of relevant TV shows, before and after the change in scheduling, he ascertains their perceived target audiences and the pleasures offered by them.

For Mittell then, genres are, like brands, malleable and amorphous categories, operating on a level beyond the specific products they are used to sell (or are otherwise associated with). The two areas differ however in that brands consist of proprietary as well as generic elements. Rick Altman has noted that, by definition, the latter can never be fully controlled by a single studio, whereas the former can be,<sup>63</sup> but Gray and Fornäs’ work would suggest that it is in fact impossible to fully control either element. If neither the studio nor the audience has full control over the meanings associated with a text, then our interest should be in examining their causes and/or implications, rather than attempting to reach a concrete definition of what the Pixar brand meant at a specific moment in time.

In this respect, it is worth noting that I have also found Sarah Churchwell’s study of Marilyn Monroe to be extremely useful in thinking about my approach to Pixar. In The Many Lives of Marilyn Monroe, Churchwell essentially undertakes a meta-biography of the eponymous film star – an attempt to understand the ways in which Monroe has been written about in biographical and journalistic accounts of her life. As she notes in a foreword, ‘this book seeks to understand the myriad stories in circulation about Marilyn Monroe, to read the public myth. It does not promise (or indeed endeavour) to reveal the “private woman”’.<sup>64</sup> The problem Churchwell has with the conflicting discourses surrounding Monroe’s life however

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<sup>62</sup> Jason Mittell, ‘The Great Saturday Morning Exile: Scheduling cartoons on television’s periphery in the 1960s’ in Carol A. Stabile and Mark Harrison, eds. Prime Time Animation: Television animation and American culture (London: Routledge, 2004), pp.33-54.

<sup>63</sup> Rick Altman, Film/Genre (London: BFI, 1999), p.115.

<sup>64</sup> Sarah Churchwell, The Many Lives of Marilyn Monroe (London: Granta Books, 2004), vii.

are comparable to the ways in which Pixar are often talked about by film critics, journalists and authors:

Each of Marilyn's many lives asserts as proven fact what another calls a total lie, and presents conjecture as if it were certain knowledge ... Biographies then promise to clear up these confusions, reveal the secrets, reclaim the lost soul. But these many lives help to create the confusion in the first place.<sup>65</sup>

As argued above, the problem with Pixar's discursive surround is more that critics seem far too eager to agree with each other as opposed to disagree. Like Churchwell however, I am seeking to question how this 'certain knowledge' came about, to 'understand the story that is produced by, and for, our culture',<sup>66</sup> and identify strands of discourse that have been lost, fought over, or re-worked over time. To this end, I will follow her lead in restricting myself to publicly available stories and articles about Pixar, for it is these materials that will ultimately provide the basis for any consumer's interpretation of the brand.

Although I do not wish to suggest that stars and brands operate in exactly the same way (certainly they perform different functions within the film industry, and are consumed in very different ways by audiences), there are a number of noteworthy similarities between the two. It is perhaps easier to conceive of a distinction between the 'private' and 'public' lives of a star than it is for a brand, but both are ultimately very real entities (i.e. a person and a company/product/service, respectively), wrapped up in a complex web of media discourses relating to, feeding off, and impacting upon the way(s) they are understood by the world. Just as many a biography of Marilyn Monroe has attempted to uncover the 'real' Marilyn, so too have a number of investigative articles sought to find out the 'secret' of Pixar's

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, p.7.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, vii.



success.<sup>67</sup> Following on from Gray and Fornäs' work however, despite the implicit claims of many a business or marketing textbook, brands mean nothing in the absence of consumers and context: there is no singular or 'pure' meaning waiting to be discovered by a skilled analyst.<sup>68</sup> Klinger's method of analysing the different ways in which films can and have been interpreted will thus be the most appropriate method of conducting my research, but Churchwell's method of organising her material is worth taking on board.

In order to focus her research and analysis in the face of the overwhelming quantity of writing about Monroe, Churchwell divides up her chapters into specific 'truths' about the star's life. For instance, there are sections on the disputes over her birth name, her first marriage, her alleged molestation as a child, and individual sections on various theories surrounding her death in 1962. Within each section, Churchwell summarises the range of narratives that have prevailed, explaining where reports have agreed, where they have disagreed, and the lines along which opinion has been split. Klinger divides up her work into different industrial practices and/or contexts, but I deviate slightly from her approach in that, like Churchwell, analyses will be separated into specific moments in the history of Pixar and then deconstructed in relation to related texts. I generally stop short of drawing

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<sup>67</sup> See for example, Lehrer, 'Animating a Blockbuster'; Chloe Veltman, 'Fun Factory', The Daily Telegraph, 31 December 2001 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/4727218/Fun-factory.html>>, Accessed 20 April 2010; Guy Adams, 'Pixar: The real toon army', The Independent, 23 September 2009 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/pixar-the-real-toon-army-1791624.html>>, Accessed 20 April 2010; Jessi Hempel, 'Pixar University: Thinking outside the Mouse', San Francisco Chronicle, 4 June 2003 <[http://articles.sfgate.com/2003-06-04/bay-area/17493262\\_1\\_pixar-s-emeryville-technical-director-bill-polson-pixar-president-edwin-catmull](http://articles.sfgate.com/2003-06-04/bay-area/17493262_1_pixar-s-emeryville-technical-director-bill-polson-pixar-president-edwin-catmull)>, Accessed 20 April 2010.

<sup>68</sup> A number of scholars have in fact described stars as 'human brands'. See, for example, Markus Wohlfeil, 'Life as a Jena Malone Fan: An Introspective Study of a Consumer's Fan Relationship with a Film Actress', PhD thesis, University of East Anglia, 2011; Matthew Thomson, 'Human Brands: Investigating Antecedents to Consumers' Strong Attachments to Celebrities', Journal of Marketing, 70.3 (July 2006), pp.104-19. Finola Kerrigan, Film Marketing (Oxford: Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann, 2010); Steven Albert, 'Movie Stars and the Distribution of Financially Successful Films in the Motion Picture Industry', Journal of Cultural Economics, 22.2 (1998), pp.249-70; Douglas C. Beckwith, 'Values of Protagonists in Best Pictures and Blockbusters: Implications for Marketing', Psychology & Marketing, 26.5 (2009), pp.445-69.

from both contemporaneous accounts of the stories and those written years or even decades after they occurred.<sup>69</sup> To do so risks ignoring the context for the stories being written, and as I aim to demonstrate over the course of my thesis, context is a huge determinant on the shifting ways in which brands work.

Pixar's history has been far less disputed than the life of Marilyn Monroe ever was, but the critical consensus around the studio invites similar questions to Churchwell's subject, as she writes, 'Put together, these texts create and circulate the myth of Marilyn Monroe. But that myth is more often referred to than it is explained, as if we all know what it is. The myth ... derives from the peculiarities of these accounts.'<sup>70</sup> By accumulating as many articles as possible relating to individual moments in Pixar's past then (for example, the purchase by Steve Jobs; the release of Toy Story; the takeover by Disney, etc.), I will be able to observe anomalous narratives that may have been lost over time, and determine the expectations and judgements of critics and journalists that write about the company and its output.

As Paul Grainge argues, 'Hollywood is now, more than ever, a brand industry',<sup>71</sup> and yet branding remains largely absent from film scholarship. Existing work on branding invariably takes a practical approach to the subject, privileging the role of the producer over the consumer in the construction of meaning. Borrowing the methodological approach to historical reception studies used by Barbara Klinger in her study of Douglas Sirk, over the course of my thesis I aim to challenge the innumerable assumptions made about the studio in media discourses. I will demonstrate that not only have the meanings of the Pixar name shifted dramatically

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<sup>69</sup> Although this is a technique I do use on a number of occasions, I only do so in order to illustrate the extent to which particular narratives or discourses have shifted and/or developed in the interim years.

<sup>70</sup> Churchwell, p.13.

<sup>71</sup> Grainge, p.178.

over the past twenty five years, but that the brand is never a fixed, agreed upon concept, and frequently consists of different and even completely contradictory ideas at the same time. By taking as wide a sample of reviews and articles relating to a particular moment as is possible, it will become apparent that certain narratives have been able to flourish in the public sphere, while others have been forgotten or re-worked. I am not seeking to uncover the 'true' meaning(s) of Pixar, but I believe that this study will shed light on the role played by media discourses in the construction of a brand, and the mechanisms that allow this to happen.

## CHAPTER ONE

### **-Booting Up- The Many Faces of Early Pixar**

A lot of people think that since we have produced, over the years, some of these fairly dramatic examples of computer animation for major motion pictures, that that is what our business is. It is not that at all.

- Alvy Ray Smith, February 1989<sup>72</sup>

‘Over 100 years ago, artists brought a line to motion. Through their magic, we would enter realms yet unseen.’ So read the intertitles that begin Leslie Iwerks’ 2007 documentary, *The Pixar Story*.<sup>73</sup> The camera pulls back to reveal a zoetrope, which immediately starts to spin before segueing into a montage of iconic animation from throughout the twentieth century. What follows is a film that traces the history of Pixar animation studios and those responsible for its rise to prominence, concluding with a shot of the same zoetrope we saw at the beginning. Although the title of the documentary promises a relatively objective historical narrative (indeed, *The Pixar story*), the intertitles, animation montage and zoetrope all work to frame this version of the story in a very particular way.

Given the studio’s critical and commercial success since the mid-1990s, it is not at all surprising that Pixar and its brand has come to be associated with popular animated feature films. There is, after all, a clearly observable correlation between the studio’s success at the American box office and the resurgence of animation as a mainstream filmmaking medium, with the number of animated features appearing in

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<sup>72</sup> John Durham, ‘Computer Guardian: Really dotty - A breakthrough in realistic computer animation’, *The Guardian*, 17 February 1989.

<sup>73</sup> *The Pixar Story* (Leslie Iwerks, 2007) premiered before final completion at San Diego Comic-Con on 26 July 2007, before being shown at a handful of other small film festivals and receiving a limited theatrical release (in fourteen cities) on October 23<sup>rd</sup> 2007. It was then shown on Starz (American pay cable television channel) on April 22<sup>nd</sup> 2008 before being released internationally as a DVD extra with the 2-Disc version of *WALL-E* (Andrew Stanton, 2008) in November 2008. Peter Sciretta, ‘The Pixar Story movie trailer’, *SlashFilm*, 16 April 2008 <<http://www.slashfilm.com/2008/04/16/the-pixar-story-movie-trailer/>>, Retrieved 5 March 2010.

the yearly Top 20 at the American box office increasing dramatically after the success of Toy Story in 1995. Even taking into consideration Disney animation's resurgent success in the early 1990s, the decade preceding Toy Story saw only six animated features make it into the domestic Top 20, compared with twenty in the decade that followed, and a further sixteen in the four years between 2006 and 2009 inclusive.<sup>74</sup>

Accordingly, the story being told in Iwerks' documentary is one of art, magic, fantasy, animation, and on a grander level, the history of cinema. As I will demonstrate in later chapters, the presentation of this particular narrative is illustrative of the ways in which Pixar has come to be understood since being taken over by Disney. I argue, however, that such a representation is at best misleading, since it ignores or plays down the significance of the work that Pixar was doing prior for much of the 1980s. This chapter will therefore analyse the variety of ways in which the company was written about in its formative years, from its early days as part of Lucasfilm, through to independence, but prior to the production deal with Disney and work beginning on Toy Story (John Lasseter, 1995).

Far from simply being a scaled-down version of the Hollywood animation studio it has since become, the Pixar brand was seen to represent very different things to different groups of people during the 1980s – simultaneously a computer hardware manufacturer, a rendering company, an animation house, and a medical imaging company to name but a few. Animation was certainly important, but represented only a very small amount of what the company actually did at the time, more appropriately thought of as a part of the burgeoning computer industry than a part of Hollywood. I will begin with a discussion of the company's special effects

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<sup>74</sup> The only non-Disney (fully) animated film to make the Top 20 in the decade preceding Toy Story was Universal's An American Tail (Don Bluth, 1988). Anon., 'Movie Box Office results by year', Box Office Mojo <<http://boxofficemojo.com/yearly/>>, Retrieved 2 March 2010.

work, which was perhaps its most widely visible output during the early years, and opens up a number of issues that are central to understanding the origins of the Pixar brand.

### **The Genesis Sequence: The Lucasfilm Graphics Group and Hollywood Special Effects**

While evidence from box office figures and more recent journalism may suggest that it is appropriate to do as Iwerks' documentary does and contextualise Pixar's history with references to animation, this view has resulted in many journalists falling victim to historical determinism. If we begin by thinking about Pixar as a behemoth of twenty first-century popular animation, we are in danger of seeing prior events as being causally linked to what would come later: *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* (after this, therefore because of this). Projecting forwards to what was at the time an unknown future may well be a convenient way of linking events together, but as Robert Allen and Douglas Gomery have argued, 'the qualities that make for a good story are not necessarily those that make for good history.'<sup>75</sup>

Wired journalist Austin Bunn provides an example of problematic historicisation in his 2004 article on Pixar, in which he describes a special effects shot produced for Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan (Nicholas Meyer, 1982). The shot had been created by people like Alvy Ray Smith, Ed Catmull and Loren Carpenter, who would later go on to found Pixar:

A comet streaks through space and collides with a planet. On impact, it kicks up an atmosphere, then water, then mountains, and eventually life. It's a spectacular 20-second swoop, and, as a digital special effect, it's still gripping after 22 years. Cinematic wonder has a notoriously short half-life -

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<sup>75</sup> Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, Film History: Theory and Practice (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985), p.44. Cf. Capodagli and Jackson, p.28 – 'The hand appeared so realistic and the movement so natural that it was used in the 1976 science-fiction movie Futureworld, the very first film to utilize three-dimensional computer graphics. And the rest is history'.

the gleaming hull of the “Titanic”, that whole “Matrix” wire-fu moment. But watch those 20 seconds of the Genesis Effect from Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan, and there’s only one conclusion: You are looking at the birth of Pixar.<sup>76</sup>

This passage raises a number of issues, and serves as a useful example of the discourses that have enabled the Pixar brand to develop in the way that it has. Bunn’s closing sentence is particularly telling, illustrating the narrow scope of journalistic accounts of the studio’s origins. For him, there is ‘only one’ way of interpreting the sequence from Khan, and that interpretation lies clearly within the boundaries of landmarks in the recent history of Hollywood special effects. Moreover, Bunn appears to be suggesting that one can infer that it represents ‘the birth of Pixar’ merely by watching the sequence – a self-reflexive Genesis Effect, perhaps. Beyond describing what happens on-screen though, he offers little explanation as to what exactly it is about the sequence that makes it recognisable as a product of Pixar, or what was soon to become Pixar. The implication is that its ‘spectacular’ and ‘gripping’ qualities are enough to deduce its authorial origins, since presumably he considered nobody else capable of producing such an accomplished effect at that time.

This is not representative of how such sequences were talked about when the film was released however. As the relevant technology began to catch up to the demands of filmmakers, by the middle of the 1980s computer graphics were being used with greater frequency in Hollywood movies. Sherry McKenna, then executive producer and vice president of Digital Productions, suggested the benefits of the technology in an interview with the San Diego Union-Tribune in August 1986, in which she rhetorically asks, ‘Isn’t it stupid to blow up an airplane when you can do

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<sup>76</sup> Austin Bunn, ‘Welcome to Planet Pixar’, Wired, 12.6 (June 2004)  
<[http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/12.06/pixar.html?pg=2&topic=pixar&topic\\_set=>](http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/12.06/pixar.html?pg=2&topic=pixar&topic_set=>),  
Retrieved 21 May 2010.

it realistically with a computer?<sup>77</sup> In other words, computers could certainly help to produce shots more easily, more cheaply, or more quickly than simply filming the same thing, but ultimately the application of the technology to filmmaking, at least as far as McKenna was concerned, went no further than the creation of special effects shots.

As perhaps the most notable example of all the work produced by the Lucasfilm Graphics Group (i.e. the one that received the greatest audience exposure), the computer-generated sequence used in Khan is an appropriate point to begin thinking about Pixar's early history and the origins of the company brand. Generally positive responses from critics were further reinforced by a respectable box office performance, with the film achieving what was then the highest opening weekend gross of all time,<sup>78</sup> and eventually finishing with the sixth-highest domestic gross of the year for 1982.<sup>79</sup>

The Genesis Effect sequence is an example of a shot that would have been extremely difficult to achieve using conventional filming techniques, particularly with regards to the complex sweeping and panning movement of the 'camera'. A key narrative device in the film, the Genesis Effect also plays an important role in its theatrical trailer, which devotes roughly one quarter of its running time to showcasing it – the last thirty seconds out of a possible two minutes. Keith Johnston has argued that the role that special effects were playing in film trailers had actually been in decline since the late-1970s, meaning that the use of this sequence in the film's trailer conflicts with marketing conventions of the early-1980s.<sup>80</sup> The

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<sup>77</sup> Peter Rowe, 'Computers give animation more bite', San Diego Union-Tribune, 30 August 1986, p.D1.

<sup>78</sup> Stephen Farber, 'The Director who made 1982's film bonanza', The New York Times, 27 June 1982, p.B1.

<sup>79</sup> Anon., 'Yearly Box Office – 1982 Domestic Grosses', Box Office Mojo, <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?yr=1982&p=.htm>>, Retrieved 1 February 2010.

<sup>80</sup> Keith M. Johnston, Coming Soon: Film Trailers and the Selling of Hollywood Technology



Genesis sequence thus is something of an anomaly, standing as ‘a curious technological and spectacular coda to a trailer narrative otherwise unconcerned with technology or visual spectacle.’<sup>81</sup> Despite the movie’s only sequence created by the Graphics Group being granted such a privileged position in the film’s marketing however, reviews saw the sequence get absorbed into far more general analyses of Khan’s special effects.

Khan was mentioned in at least two articles regarding the increasingly prevalent use of special effects in Hollywood films at that time – one in the New York Times<sup>82</sup> and the other in the Globe and Mail – with Salem Alaton arguing in the latter that ‘without special effects, the [American film] industry would be eating baloney sandwiches (and drinking sterno).’<sup>83</sup> Alaton was by no means the only observer to credit rising box office revenues in Hollywood to an increase in the use of visual effects, but most reviews of Khan actually played down their impact on the film as a whole.

Stephen Godfrey in the Globe and Mail for example pointed out that the film ‘doesn’t linger over its modest special effects’,<sup>84</sup> while Janet Maslin of the New York Times described the visual effects as ‘so good they don’t call undue attention to themselves.’<sup>85</sup> Roger Ebert issued similar praise, using the previous Star Trek film as a point of comparison:

Although I liked the special effects in the first movie [Star Trek: The Motion Picture (Robert Wise, 1979)], they were probably not the point; fans of the

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(London: McFarland & Company, 2009), pp.112-4.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, p.114.

<sup>82</sup> John Culhane, ‘Special effects are revolutionizing film’, The New York Times, 4 July 1982, p.B1.

<sup>83</sup> Salem Alaton, ‘Tron set to ride video wave’, The Globe and Mail, 9 July 1982.

<sup>84</sup> Stephen Godfrey, ‘Domestic dramas on the USS Enterprise a homey trek into space’, The Globe and Mail, 5 June 1982.

<sup>85</sup> Janet Maslin, ‘New “Star Trek” full of gadgets and fun’, The New York Times, 4 June 1982, p.C12.

TV series wanted to see their favorite characters again, and Trek II understood that desire and acted on it.<sup>86</sup>

For all of the advanced technology that went into making Khan then, ultimately the positive reviews it received owed far more to the quality of storytelling and character development than its more spectacular elements. Where these elements *were* acknowledged, the consensus was clearly that the more successfully they had been deployed, the less one should notice them whilst watching the movie. Perhaps surprisingly, this idea is also confirmed by the negative review written by Washington Post's Gary Arnold, given that he makes no reference whatsoever to Khan's visual effects, instead focusing all of his criticism on the story and characters.<sup>87</sup> We cannot know exactly what Arnold thought of the effects, but either way he deemed them undeserving of comment. Director Nicholas Meyer actually gave several interviews around the time of the film's release in which he argued along similar lines to Arnold, extolling the virtues of good storytelling, and even describing films and television shows that privileged visual style over narrative substance as 'a new form of pornography.'<sup>88</sup>

Retrospective references to the Genesis sequence produced by the Lucasfilm Graphics Group – many of which have been discussed in relation to the history of Pixar – have been conflictually enthusiastic. Loren Carpenter for instance recalled in 2009 that the 'reaction was – stunned ... It was like people had just seen

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<sup>86</sup> Roger Ebert, 'Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan', Chicago Sun-Times, 1 January 1982  
<<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19820101/REVIEWS/201010345>>,  
Retrieved 1 February 2010.

<sup>87</sup> Gary Arnold, 'Cashing in on the Spock market; "Star Trek II" shows little Enterprise', Washington Post, 4 June 1982, p.D1.

<sup>88</sup> Culhane, op. cit. Interestingly, Meyer used an almost identical phrase in a very different article discussing the potentially harmful effects of on-screen violence, which by extension implies that he not only sees special effects as pointless, but somehow morally suspect as well: 'Lots of movies are gratuitously violent. They pander to audiences, certainly, it's a form of pornography.' This article appeared just four days before Culhane's article, and in the same newspaper. Glenn Collins, 'Is the violence in "Blade Runner" a socially destructive element?', The New York Times, 30 June 1982, p.C19.

ten years into the future and had it dumped in their laps.’<sup>89</sup> He, along with the rest of the men who would go on to found Pixar, had undoubtedly produced a piece of work that had been seen by huge numbers of people. But contemporaneous reviews of Khan only ever acknowledged the film’s special effects as a whole, and not once in my research did I come across an article that singled out the Genesis sequence, whether for praise, criticism, or even passing indifference. On the rare occasions that credit for the visuals was given to anybody, it was to Industrial Light and Magic (ILM), of which the Graphics Group was but one small subdivision. The evidence suggests that while computer-generated special effects were certainly being used more and more frequently (and seamlessly) as filmmaking tools, reviews rarely differentiated between those effects produced using computers and those produced using more conventional methods such as scale models, mechanised scenery or pyrotechnics.

1985 saw the release of Young Sherlock Holmes (Barry Levinson, 1985), produced by Steven Spielberg, written by Chris Columbus, and featuring another noteworthy visual effects sequence produced by the Lucasfilm Graphics Group – a hallucination scene in which a stained-glass knight jumps down from a church window and chases a priest out of the building. Ironically, given that director Barry Levinson allegedly did not want the film to be an ‘effects movie’, Sherlock fared much better than Khan in terms of being recognised for its effects, although not always in a positive sense.

Variety saw the effects as having overpowered the relationship between the eponymous detective and his sidekick: ‘Spielberg’s team - this time led by director Barry Levinson – isn’t really as interested in [its characters] as it is in fooling around

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<sup>89</sup> Karen Paik, To Infinity and Beyond: The Story of Pixar Animation Studios (London: Virgin Books, 2007), p.24.

with the visual effects possibilities conjured by George Lucas' Industrial Light & Magic shop.<sup>90</sup> Salem Alaton in the Globe and Mail was similarly damning, criticising what he saw as the elevation of the effects to the position of 'intended high points of the film', and arguing that they 'bleed "Young Sherlock Holmes" of anything like charm.'<sup>91</sup> Both reviews effectively agree with Nicholas Meyer's abovementioned comments on special effects – that they should never be as important to a film as characters and storyline. Alaton would actually go on to accuse the special effects of being 'rehashed' from films like Eraserhead (David Lynch, 1977), Tron (Steven Lisberger, 1982) and Gremlins (Joe Dante, 1984),<sup>92</sup> thus suggesting that they were highly derivative in addition to intruding on the plot.

Paul Attanasio of the Washington Post was far more positive about the visual effects and the film as a whole, writing that:

[The] hallucinations in "Young Sherlock Holmes" are spectacularly staged, [and] the special effects (by George Lucas' Industrial Light and Magic, with a nod to Ray Harryhausen) are ingeniously frightening and appropriately low-tech – a roasted capon, for example, that sprouts a viciously pecking head, or a bloody crusader who springs to life from his stained-glass window.<sup>93</sup>

It is particularly interesting that he praises the special effects while at the same time describing them as 'low-tech'. Certainly, the rest of the film does feature a number of effects created using puppets and models – far more conventional methods of achieving such shots. As such it would be easy to imagine that Attanasio's 'low-tech' remark was referring to the film as a whole, had he not made

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<sup>90</sup> Anon., 'Young Sherlock Holmes', 1 January 1985  
<<http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117796563.html?categoryid=31&cs=1>>, Retrieved 1 February 2010.

<sup>91</sup> Salem Alaton, 'Young Sherlock receives familiar Spielberg treatment', Globe and Mail, 4 December 1985.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Paul Attanasio, 'The Elementary Sherlock; Portrait of the super sleuth as a young hound', Washington Post, 4 December 1985, p.C1.

a point of specifically mentioning the stained-glass knight sequence here. He may be praising what Alaton is speaking out against – the special effects as the high points of the film – but ultimately the lines along which they are making the comments are similar: for critics at least, whatever technology was used to create the movie's effects, the end result was generally not seen to represent the breaking of new ground in cinema.

This is further illustrated by an interview with director Barry Levinson in the Christian Science Monitor, in which David Steritt describes Young Sherlock Holmes as a 'natural' project for Spielberg and Columbus to undertake, following on from the 'youngsters, fast action, and high-tech visual effects' seen in The Goonies (Richard Donner, 1985) and Gremlins.<sup>94</sup> Although there may have been some disagreement among critics as to exactly how 'high-tech' or 'low-tech' the film's special effects really were, the biggest brand name evidenced by reviews is very clearly that of Steven Spielberg. Several critics appear to have been taken in by the tagline 'Steven Spielberg presents' (appearing above the film's title in all of its print marketing materials), giving a disproportionate amount of authorial credit to him in relation to the rest of the crew. Spielberg received only an executive producer credit, yet Roger Ebert sums up the way in which many critics wrote about Young Sherlock Holmes when he declares that there is 'a lot in this movie that can be traced directly to the work of Steven Spielberg.'<sup>95</sup> While reviews do not provide concrete evidence for gauging actual viewer responses to films, the fact that these comparisons were made so frequently suggests that audiences were strongly encouraged to read Sherlock's special effects as a small part of the overarching Spielberg brand.

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<sup>94</sup> David Steritt, 'Onward to the past', Christian Science Monitor, 10 October 1986, p.27.

<sup>95</sup> Roger Ebert, 'Young Sherlock Holmes', Chicago Sun-Times, 4 December 1985  
<<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19851204/REVIEWS/512040301>>,  
Retrieved 1 February 1986.

Unlike the Genesis Sequence in Khan however, the Graphics Group's contribution to Sherlock did not pass by unnoticed, with several prominent reviewers besides just Attanasio singling the stained glass knight sequence out for praise. The knight was for example the only evidence provided by Vincent Canby for what he saw as 'very special' visual effects.<sup>96</sup> Roger Ebert followed suit, both in print<sup>97</sup> and in his television review show with Gene Siskel, At the Movies (Tribune Entertainment, 1982-90).<sup>98</sup> In both reviews, Ebert praised the movie as a whole but especially the sequence created by Dennis Muren, Bill Reeves, John Lasseter, Dave Carson and others at Lucasfilm. Even Gene Siskel's considerably less positive review eventually involved him conceding that the knight represented the 'one good special effect' in the whole movie.<sup>99</sup> But just as reviewers had done with The Wrath of Khan's Genesis sequence, all the reviews that gave any credit for the stained glass knight attributed the effect not to Pixar, but to Industrial Light and Magic.

This brings us onto another issue raised by Austin Bunn's response to the Genesis sequence: he is retroactively crediting Pixar with work that, generally speaking, it was not known to have been responsible for until well after it had become a successful animation studio. This is not particularly problematic in terms of thinking about what Pixar's employees were doing before making feature films, but it certainly creates a misleading sense of how the brand was understood at the time. Having not even existed as a company before being purchased by Steve Jobs in April 1986, it was all but impossible for anybody (with the possible exception of well-informed individuals working within the computer graphics industry) to have

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<sup>96</sup> Vincent Canby, 'Film: "Young Sherlock", Spielberg Presentation', The New York Times, 4 December 1985, p.C21.

<sup>97</sup> Ebert, 'Young Sherlock Holmes'.

<sup>98</sup> A poor quality but nonetheless useful recording of this clip can be viewed online: 'Siskel & Ebert At the Movies 1985 – Young Sherlock Holmes', YouTube, 7 February 2009

<[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i\\_maBOyWG90](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i_maBOyWG90)>, Retrieved 1 February 2010.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

interpreted the special effects work the Graphics Group did as products of Pixar. Bunn's comments demonstrate how easy it is to look to the past and retroactively apply our knowledge about what we now know came afterwards, attributing coherence and even a sense of destiny to a company whose future was anything but certain, and whose brand reflected this uncertainty.

Pixar would later take steps to better control the discourses it was associated with, twisting the perception of work such as the special effects discussed in this section, even to the extent that John Lasseter is given sole credit for Young Sherlock Holmes' stained glass knight on the official Pixar web site.<sup>100</sup> It is an example of retroactive branding that effectively shifts praise for a particular piece of work towards a group of people who were not solely responsible for it. If recognition from American film critics was at this point unattainable, were there perhaps any less specific discourses that linked Pixar to artistic disciplines, or did the company brand lie elsewhere?

### **Sketchy Histories: Pixar, art and technology**

The word 'Pixar' itself had existed since 1981, the product of a dinnertime brainstorming session between Loren Carpenter, Alvy Ray Smith, Jim Blinn and Rodney Stock. In the midst of developing an imaging computer for George Lucas, they did not wish to continue referring to the prospective machine as the 'difip' or DFP (Digital Film Printer). 'Pixar' was the agreed-upon name – an invented word that the men thought sounded as though it could be a Spanish verb meaning 'to make pictures', as well as resonating with technological words like 'laser' and 'radar', or astronomical words like 'quasar' or 'pulsar'.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Anon., 'Meet the Execs', Pixar, No date

<[http://www.pixar.com/companyinfo/about\\_us/execs.htm](http://www.pixar.com/companyinfo/about_us/execs.htm)>, Retrieved 12 March 2010.

<sup>101</sup> Michael Rubin, Droidmaker: George Lucas and the Digital Revolution (Gainesville, FL: Triad

Despite not being documented in newspaper or magazine articles of the period, these specific connotations are important to the Pixar brand insofar as they illustrate how the Graphics Group saw itself – not as a group of artists, animators or potential filmmakers, but as a forward-thinking technology company intent on exploring the boundaries of what computers were capable of achieving. Making ‘pictures’ was the aim, but exactly what kind of pictures and who for were details that remained unspecified. The hardware and rendering software Pixar developed had the potential to be used in a huge variety of different ways, but despite the company brand having ultimately stemmed from the requests of Hollywood filmmaker George Lucas, it is significant that the word ‘Pixar’ was coined as a name for a piece of computer hardware – not a company, and certainly not a filmmaking company.

When the Graphics Group was later spun off from Lucasfilm to be sold as an independent company, Smith and Catmull named the group after the computer they had designed, calling it Pixar, Inc. There is little to indicate that the company saw itself as anything other than a computer graphics company at this time, aptly symbolised by both the choice of name and the original logo (See Appendix, Fig 1.1). Luxo Jr.’s eponymous bouncing lamp would become the protagonist of the Pixar logo and studio ident from Toy Story onwards, but until that time the company used a logo comprising a grey bevelled square with a circular indentation. In contrast to the character animation employed by the later version, the original logo was modeled on the design of the Pixar Image Computer itself (Fig 1.2), just like the name of the company before it.

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Publishing Company, 2005), p.227-8. Also see Price, The Pixar Touch, p.63.



John Lasseter however gave a slightly different account of the thinking behind the company name in a special episode of The South Bank Show (LWT/ITV, 1978-2010) in 2009. Neglecting to mention the idea of a fake Spanish verb or words such as ‘laser’ or ‘pulsar’, he instead claimed that ‘Pixar’ is simply a portmanteau of the words ‘pixel’ and ‘art’.<sup>102</sup> It seems relevant to point out that this explanation has only emerged quite recently (in the abovementioned television show and Karen Paik’s history of Pixar, To Infinity and Beyond, published in 2007),<sup>103</sup> and sits comfortably with another view of the brand that came to prominence in the twenty-first century – Lasseter’s oft-repeated philosophy: ‘Art challenges technology, and technology inspires the art’.<sup>104</sup> If this is indeed the way Pixar has always approached its work, then there is very little evidence to support the idea that the brand represented the meeting of art and technology prior to making a deal with Disney to produce Toy Story, even in the way that the company talked about itself.

Ed Catmull offers a possible explanation in The Pixar Story (2007), claiming that Luxo Jr. (John Lasseter, 1986) marked a change in Pixar’s direction. In his view, it was the making of that specific short film that led the company to see ‘the new goal for everybody’ – the fusion of their cutting-edge computer graphics technology with traditional concepts of character animation and storytelling.<sup>105</sup> This not only gives further weight to Lasseter’s art/technology view of the brand, but is also an admission that the creation of computer-animated movies was not always a goal that was shared by everybody at Pixar. To claim that it *did* become a shared goal after

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<sup>102</sup> ‘Disney•Pixar’, The South Bank Show, ITV1 (England), 11 October 2009, 22:15-23:15.

<sup>103</sup> Paik offers the same interpretation as Lasseter, albeit in addition to (rather than instead of) the aforementioned fake Spanish verb/laser version of the story. See Paik, To Infinity and Beyond, p.44

<sup>104</sup> John Lasseter, quoted in The Pixar Story.

<sup>105</sup> Ed Catmull, quoted in The Pixar Story.

Luxo, however, is again extremely misleading. The benefit of hindsight has enabled Pixarians like Ed Catmull and John Lasseter to make statements in which they confidently look back on the early years of the company they helped to found, and invite us to share in a series of alleged ‘eureka’ moments that brought them ever closer to the creation of the world’s first computer-animated feature film.

It is certainly the case that Lasseter himself came from an art background, having graduated from CalArts’ character animation programme, and his naivety and lack of expertise undoubtedly necessitated a cooperative working technique in the Lucasfilm (i.e. pre-Pixar days). Pixar historian David Price subscribes to this view, posting evidence for the company’s art and technology foundations on his blog, including annotated sketches by Lasseter that show him requesting a flexible teardrop shape for the animation of André from The Adventures of André and Wally B. (Alvy Ray Smith, 1984).<sup>106</sup>

If Catmull was correct, and Pixar did indeed shift its concentration towards using computer animation to tell stories, then we would expect to see a change either in the way the company was written about, or at least in the way in which it promoted and spoke about its own work. It seems however that notions of art were not successfully integrated with the brand until much later in the company’s history, and that Pixar’s early years were almost entirely categorised by associations with technology. An apt example from December 1988 saw Pixar appoint Chuck Kolstad as President and CEO. Kolstad was promoted from his previous role as vice president of manufacturing and engineering, justified by Steve Jobs, who said in a press release that ‘Kolstad’s experience as a member of the senior management team of a Fortune 500 company and as a team leader will serve Pixar well in

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<sup>106</sup> David Price, ‘Art challenging technology’, The Pixar Touch: The blog and website of “The Pixar Touch: A History of Pixar Animation Studios”, 11 November 2008  
<<http://thepixartouch.typepad.com/main/2008/11/the-adventures.html>>, Retrieved 30 April 2010.

implementing its product focus on imaging and rendering.’<sup>107</sup> On several occasions during the 1980s, company spokespeople (usually co-founders Alvy Ray Smith and/or Ed Catmull) even went as far as publically playing down links between the work Pixar was doing and Hollywood filmmaking. One newspaper article from February 1989 for instance quotes Smith as having stated, ‘a lot of people think that since we have produced, over the years, some of these fairly dramatic examples of computer animation for major motion pictures, that that is what our business is. It is not that at all.’<sup>108</sup>

Contrary to Smith’s assertion (and as already discussed in the previous section), the evidence provided by contemporaneous film reviews suggests that ‘a lot of people’ in fact did not see the special effects the Graphics Group produced for The Wrath of Khan and Young Sherlock Holmes as ‘dramatic’, and when praise was given out, it was certainly not lavished upon Pixar. What makes this quotation all the more interesting however is the fact that Smith exhibits a degree of brand awareness – he was evidently concerned with what people thought of Pixar, and actively sought to exert some control over the meanings and associations that were being discursively attached to the company name. Ed Catmull stated in February 1986 that what the Lucasfilm Graphics Group had actually wanted was for its ‘work [to be] used in a very broad sense,’<sup>109</sup> and throughout the 1980s it seems as though broadness and potential variety were indeed seen as defining characteristics of Pixar and its work.

One can find ample evidence for this in the media coverage afforded to Pixar in their early years, with company spokespeople habitually using any available platform to promote their technology’s versatility. Articles would often focus on

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<sup>107</sup> Pixar, ‘Pixar announces new president, chairman’, Press Release (Business Wire), 1 December 1988.

<sup>108</sup> Durham, op. cit.

<sup>109</sup> Michael Rogers and Lee Goldberg, ‘Of Pixels and Flicks’, Newsweek, 17 February 1986, p.76.

one particular use for the technology, but the vast majority would also go on to include a list of alternative applications. Several such examples appeared in response to the news of Steve Jobs' purchase of Pixar in early 1986, with Catmull stating at the time that, 'besides its use in filmmaking, Pixar computers ... can be used in medical imaging, mapping, oil exploration, printing and computer-aided design.'<sup>110</sup> Michael Rogers and Lee Goldberg wrote in similar terms less than two weeks later, noting that in addition to Hollywood special effects, 'the Pixar system has been used to generate images of underground strata for oil-company geologists and to process satellite images for government agencies. But its most dramatic use has been medical.'<sup>111</sup> That these comments should appear at this particular time may be partly explained by journalists' need to situate Jobs' purchase of Pixar in relation to his reputation as a well-known and successful entrepreneur, but these notions of versatility continued to appear well into the 1990s.

From the very beginning of the Pixar name establishing a presence in national media publications, this idea of versatility was clearly observable, despite the tendency at the time to talk about them from the perspective of George Lucas' plans to use computer technology in filmmaking. One such article from December 1983 (well before the Pixar Image Computer was released commercially) described Pixar (i.e. the computer) as a venture 'that could move [Lucasfilm] *outside* [of] Hollywood',<sup>112</sup> while in 1986 John Wilson described Pixar as a unit that 'had outgrown [Lucas's] film business.'<sup>113</sup> Despite being owned by a film director, constituting part of a world famous Hollywood special effects company, and being driven by two men (Catmull and Smith) who later would claim to have always

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<sup>110</sup> Anon., 'Steven Jobs buys Lucasfilm Unit', Associated Press, 8 February 1986.

<sup>111</sup> Rogers and Goldberg, op. cit.

<sup>112</sup> Anon., 'George Lucas moves his sci-fi genius to the production room', Business Week, 5 December 1983, p.184. Emphasis added.

<sup>113</sup> John W. Wilson, 'Look what Steve Jobs found at the movies', Business Week, 17 February 1986, p.37.

harboured an interest in the potential for using computer animation in film production, somehow the technology they developed was instantly reported as being ‘outside of Hollywood’.

The fact that connections between Pixar and Hollywood were often played down should not however be seen as an indication that the company or its observers really had a clear sense of what Pixar represented. In fact, the range of discourses associated with the company during the 1980s was so diverse that it was extremely uncommon for writers to actively *disassociate* Pixar from any particular industry, making the distance so many people put between Pixar and Hollywood all the more surprising. Whether the main focus of an article or an example mentioned in passing to illustrate a particular point, Pixar’s presence in the print media at this time was firmly grounded in a vocabulary of possibilities, and the impact that computer technologies could have on various people’s lives.

As is often the case with significant technological developments, some of these articles inevitably demonstrated an underlying fear of technology, particularly with regards to the levels of realism one was capable of achieving. One article for instance rhetorically asked whether or not photographs were to be believed anymore,<sup>114</sup> while another rather more sensational piece in Newsweek described ‘the potential for abuse’ of photorealistic graphics technology as ‘frightening’, and specifically mentioned Stalin, Joseph McCarthy, the Chinese government and members of the Nazi party as the sorts of people who could have been poised to take advantage.<sup>115</sup> More explicit denunciation of Pixar’s products came from former Disney animator Frank Thomas, one of the studio’s fabled Nine Old Men, who declared in one New York Times article that animators would ‘never adjust to a

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<sup>114</sup> John W. Verity and Corie Brown, ‘The Graphics Revolution’, Business Week, 28 November 1988, p.142.

<sup>115</sup> Jonathan Alter, ‘When Photographs Lie’, Newsweek, 30 July 1990, p.44.

technical monster', referring to the potential replacement of hand-drawn animation in favour of images produced by computers.<sup>116</sup> Lasseter has on several occasions cited Disney's fear of computer technology as the reason why he was asked to leave the studio in 1983,<sup>117</sup> yet while Thomas's rejection of it would seem to back up those claims, this tension between 'old' and 'new' forms of animation does not appear to have made its way into public forums. Traditional animators may well have felt genuinely threatened by the gradual introduction of computer technology into the production of animated films, but if that is the case then it was a debate that rarely, if ever, moved beyond the boundaries of the industry and into public media discourses.

While these notions of technophobia did receive some media acknowledgement, in the vast majority of cases the potential of computer graphics and the work Pixar was doing were discussed in positive terms. Even Frank Thomas's 'technical monster' comments appeared in an article in which the journalist also argued the other side of the story; that 'as it becomes clear that the artist is no less essential with a computer than with a pencil, more traditional animators are warming to the medium.'<sup>118</sup> This juxtaposition of conflicting responses within the same article instantly casts doubt on Lasseter's largely unsubstantiated claims of widespread resistance to CG animation, and hints at the process of re-remembering that brands are just as susceptible to as any other series of historical events.

Pixar's brand may not have been very focused at this time, but contemporaneous responses to the company's technology products were overwhelmingly eager to talk about their potential applications, with very few

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<sup>116</sup> Lawrence M. Fisher, 'Business Technology: Computer Technology Now Coming of Age', The New York Times, 12 April 1989, p.D1.

<sup>117</sup> See for example, his retelling of this anecdote in The Pixar Story.

<sup>118</sup> Fisher, op. cit. p.D1

column inches devoted to criticism or resistance. Press coverage of many new computer-related technologies have of course been broadly concerned with the ways in which they could make certain jobs much faster and/or easier, as well as how they could be used to perform simulations and tests that would have been impossible for any human to carry out themselves. As one article put it in November 1988, in ‘virtually every field, from medicine to publishing to moviemaking, digital processing of pictures is changing the way work is done – and how much it costs.’<sup>119</sup> Speed was frequently used as an illustration of the power of the Pixar Image Computer, and one of its key selling points, with Katherine Hafner writing in Business Week that it ‘is 200 times faster than a typical minicomputer and for some graphics jobs is six times faster than a low-end supercomputer.’<sup>120</sup>

As an interesting counterpoint however, consider the way in which Pixar would later talk about the technology and processing power required to render certain shots from its animated films, such as the fur on the character of Sully in Monsters, Inc. (Pete Docter, 2001).<sup>121</sup> To put this another way, Pixar would eventually distance itself from earlier associations with speeding up or otherwise enabling the concept of image rendering, and instead use the length of time taken up by the process as an indicator of the complexity (and by extension, detail and quality) of its animation. The earlier focus on speed and ease of use was of course entirely appropriate given that the computer graphics industry was still in its infancy, and justification was needed to convince others to adopt the technology. While entirely necessary then for the company’s survival, Pixar’s constant efforts to appeal

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<sup>119</sup> Verity and Brown, op. cit., p.142.

<sup>120</sup> Katherine M. Hafner, ‘Computer graphics are animating another market’, Business Week, 16 March 1987, p.88.

<sup>121</sup> See, for example, the section dedicated to that film on the official Pixar website. Anon., ‘Monsters, Inc. – Behind the Scenes’, No date <<http://www.pixar.com/featurefilms/inc/behind.html>>, Retrieved 30 July 2010.

to as many different markets as possible meant that most potential brand associations were diluted.

It is clear that when various observers did associate the Pixar name with one particular industry (e.g. animation, CAD/CAM, medical imaging, scientific visualisation etc.), they always did so in relation to the company's physical products, and so Pixar may not have been considered a brand as it is generally thought of in the twenty-first century. Naomi Klein for instance observes that in the mid-1980s, a shift occurred in the way businesses targeted success. For her, this was a shift towards the production of brands or images of their brands, not products – towards marketing instead of manufacturing.<sup>122</sup> She cites the example of the sudden success of the Saturn automobile, which after having been on sale for several years, was re-launched by General Motors as 'a car built not out of steel and rubber but out of New Age spirituality and seventies feminism.'<sup>123</sup>

As we will see in chapter four, in providing viewers with copious glimpses of its Emeryville studio (particularly through the use of DVD bonus features and granting studio exposés to selected journalists), Pixar would later go on to associate itself as a studio born out of 1960s liberalism and notions of community and the family. In its early years the company undoubtedly did try to market its technology products to a variety of industries, but because the item for sale was always a physical product and not an image or an abstract concept, it is difficult to describe it as a brand in Klein's sense of the word. I would argue however that this definition of branding, for all its focus on abstract concepts, is rather too abstract itself – not wrong but incomplete, assuming a great deal about the ways in which consumers

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<sup>122</sup> Klein, pp.3-8.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, p.17.



interpret and use brands, and largely ignoring the products and services that carry them.

Pixar during the 1980s may not have had one unerring set of ideas attached to its products, but it does seem as though some of its individual products were talked about in very particular ways within their respective industries. The company's RenderMan software and the application of Pixar technology to medical imaging were discussed relatively frequently in certain circles, and as such a set of meanings did come to be attached to the products in question. While the majority of these meanings revolved around tangible descriptions of characteristics such as speed, compatibility, or ease of use, several intangible characteristics such as quality and inventiveness began to be discussed. For some people at least, Pixar had succeeded in becoming synonymous with a specific product without being associated with abstract branding concepts, and had also come to simultaneously appeal to at least two very different technological markets. The following section discusses medical imaging and RenderMan in more detail, arguing that their centrality to the Pixar brand calls into question Klein's approach to branding.

### **Of Renderers and Radiologists: The importance of RenderMan and Medical Imaging technology**

With computer technology (and graphics technology in particular) still very much finding its feet in the 1980s, it is not surprising that so many potential technological applications for Pixar's products were discussed, leading to a diverse and somewhat inconsistent brand. For each consumer group that made use of the products made by Pixar during the 1980s, be they radiologists, seismologists, aeronautical engineers, or cinemagoers, it was entirely possible for the Pixar name to relate to one relatively consistent set of meanings. There were however two

possibilities that stood out, receiving far greater media attention than any of the others at the time: the company's RenderMan products, and Medical Imaging technology. Contemporaneous media coverage in fact suggests that either venture could have become the foundation of Pixar (and by extension its brand), and for a short time at least, it appears as though that is precisely what happened.

By far the best example of this is in the field of medical imaging, which at one point in the mid-1980s looked to be one of the more likely avenues of distribution for Pixar's technology – far more so than animation. The image processing capabilities of the Pixar computer worked in combination with imaging software to provide medical professionals with three-dimensional, fully rotatable images of structures such as the human pelvis. The technology allowed 'physicians for the first time to see underlying bone structures separated from surrounding tissue and fat, which [appeared] in conventional images.'<sup>124</sup> Pixar announced very early on in its time as an independent company that a 'multimillion dollar' agreement had been made to manufacture relevant hardware and software on behalf of Philips Medical Systems.<sup>125</sup>

Although the technicalities of the deal were not publicised at the time, the agreement's very existence somehow seems to have been lost from the already thin historical narrative of this period, with even David Price's well-researched history failing to mention it. The impact of the deal on the Pixar brand was admittedly negligible, quite simply because the news received so little coverage in the national print media that very few people would have even known about it. Even more importantly in terms of branding, this was an OEM (Original Equipment Manufacturer) agreement, meaning that anything Pixar *did* manufacture for use in

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<sup>124</sup> Anon., 'Philips medical systems' 3-D imaging research program', PR Newswire, 19 November 1987.

<sup>125</sup> See, for example, James Connolly, 'Jobs' Pixar Ships Image Computer', Computerworld, 26 May 1986, p.46.

Philips' medical imaging equipment would be marketed under the Philips brand, not Pixar's. The deal would therefore have helped Pixar financially, but done very little to spread word of the company and what it stood for. This does however illustrate that a company's brand (i.e. what people think about and associate with a particular product) is not directly related to its actual activities so much as its publicised activities, underlining the role played by discourse in a brand's formation. The OEM agreement nevertheless suggests that people like Steve Jobs saw medical imaging as one of the more promising and lucrative applications of Pixar technology, and he may well have been right.

Pixar's presence in this particular market was restricted to a relatively small number of practitioners (only 35 sites used the Pixar Image Computer for medical imaging as of December 1988),<sup>126</sup> but there is evidence to suggest that among those people, the Pixar name carried significant weight. Business Week journalist Katherine Hafner in March 1987 for instance went as far as using the word 'Pixar' as a verb, writing that radiologists 'now routinely "Pixar" CAT-scans of fractures to detect hidden problems before the bones are set.'<sup>127</sup> While this example relates to one particular profession, its relevance goes beyond the specificities of medical imaging. It demonstrates that the Pixar name had for certain consumers become synonymous with a specific activity or task, and thus it is entirely possible (indeed, likely) that to them, there were associations in place strong enough that one could legitimately describe as a brand. The conflicting discourses that were raised or hinted at in contemporaneous newspaper articles or press releases (i.e. those relating to other industries/applications) were of course only available to those who happened to read them in the first place. In the absence of these alternative or

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<sup>126</sup> Pixar, 'Pixar announces new president, chairman', Press Release (Business Wire), 1 December 1988.

<sup>127</sup> Hafner, op. cit., p.88.

oppositional discourses, those familiar with the application of Pixar's products within a specific field may therefore have had a very clear sense of who Pixar were and how their products should be used. It is only when the Pixar name began to be reproduced in other discourses, and on a more frequent and widespread basis, that those consumers would have become more likely to lose their sense of associations that could have become part of the Pixar brand.

By the time the 1980s came to an end, Pixar had made four short films (as well as The Adventures of André and Wally B. while still a part of Lucasfilm), winning an Academy Award for one of them (Tin Toy [John Lasseter, 1988]), and gradually receiving more media coverage for its animation work as a result. Yet a CBS News report on new technology from August 1991 demonstrates that even as late as this, Pixar were still very much considered in some circles to have found their biggest success in medical imaging technology. The broadcast showed clips of some of Pixar's shorts, but only in order to demonstrate their 'amazing clarity and detail', as a way of segueing into talking about the application of this technology to CAT and MRI scans.<sup>128</sup> The company's animation was in other words still performing the function it was originally made for – essentially an advanced trailer that promoted the hardware and software used to create it.

CBS anchor Merlin Olsen went on to use words such as 'revolutionary', 'spectacular' and 'fantastic' to describe the fully rotatable three-dimensional images from inside the human body, and in case there was any doubt as to where credit should be given, the broadcast continually referred back to this as being the work of Pixar.<sup>129</sup> A doctor from the University of Chicago adds that 'Once you saw one of the images generated by [Pixar's] system, all doubt went away ... With the Pixar, all

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<sup>128</sup> Merlin Olsen, CBS News: Fantastic Facts, CBS, 30 August 1991, 20.00 EDT. Full transcript retrieved via Lexis Nexis Academic, 5 March 2010.

<sup>129</sup> Olsen, *Ibid.*

you do is show the image and be quiet and try to peel them off the ceiling.’<sup>130</sup> These words are of course highly reminiscent of the hyperbole that has been retroactively applied to Pixar’s special effects work – the kind of reaction that had perhaps been hoped for, but as we have already seen, never really transpired at the time. It is likely that the OEM agreement with Philips meant that the recognition Pixar received for all its work in the field of medical imaging technology was not as high as it might otherwise have been. Nevertheless, it is abundantly clear that those who did use the technology on a regular basis – namely radiologists – would have been very familiar with what Pixar represented, and the CBS spotlight swiftly brought the brand to the attention of millions more.

While the Pixar Image Computer may not have been as successful as Steve Jobs or anybody else at the company had hoped, Pixar made a significant introduction to the field of computer graphics technology with the release of RenderMan in 1988. RenderMan has since become a widely used piece of software for the production of computer animation, having been used in more than 200 feature films since The Wrath of Khan.<sup>131</sup> True to what we have already seen with many aspects of the Pixar brand however, there is also a degree of ambiguity surrounding the use of the product’s name.

What is now commonly referred to simply as RenderMan was originally called Photorealistic RenderMan (or PRMan for short), and as the name implies, renders the final digital image based on modelling, texture, and other physics-based information input by the user. Media coverage of the product was largely restricted to specialist computer publications like InfoWorld and Computerworld, and technology sections of broadsheet newspapers such as The New York Times and

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<sup>130</sup> Dr. Elliot K. Fishman, MD, Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> ‘Pixar’s RenderMan – Movies & Awards’, Pixar,  
<[https://renderman.pixar.com/products/whats\\_renderman/movies.html](https://renderman.pixar.com/products/whats_renderman/movies.html)>, Retrieved 30 July 2010.

The Guardian, situating it firmly within discourses around computing and technology, with little mention of how the software could be used in filmmaking. That RenderMan should be mentioned at all is not particularly noteworthy (particularly given Steve Jobs' fame and involvement in Pixar), but crucially, the vast majority of discourses surrounding the product were actually far more interested in the RenderMan interface than the PRMan software.

Michael Alexander in Computerworld became one of the first observers to discuss the release of RenderMan in February 1987, and focused almost entirely on the usefulness of the interface. The article was relatively balanced, repeating Pixar's claims that the interface would act 'as a standard that would make it possible for designers to use one company's modelling program with another's renderer,' but also acknowledging the counter-argument, that 'publishers whose software offers both modelling and rendering features [see] little need for a standard.'<sup>132</sup> Alexander did add that Pixar 'also markets Photorealistic RenderMan, its own rendering software,' but made no other comments whatsoever on the product, underlining its perceived (lack of) importance in relation to the work the company was doing at the time.

Notions of compatibility and standardisation were frequently discussed across different types of articles about RenderMan, with Bob Ponting noting that the interface and shading language provided 'a standard way to link diverse 3-D modelling programmes with different shading systems and output devices.'<sup>133</sup> Steve Jobs referred to Pixar as 'the Adobe of 3-D graphics' at the 1989 Siggraph annual conference,<sup>134</sup> and several writers subsequently followed his lead and drew comparisons between the RenderMan interface and Adobe PostScript, an accepted

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<sup>132</sup> Michael Alexander, 'Rendering lifelike images in silicon', Computerworld, 16 February 1987, p.18.

<sup>133</sup> Bob Ponting, 'Renderman Toolkit Lets Developers Add 3-D Special Effects', InfoWorld, 7 August 1989, p.6.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

and standardised language for describing what a printed page should look like. Andrew Pollack was one such journalist, noting that as ‘rendering moves toward mainstream use, a battle over standards is beginning,’ and Pixar ‘is proposing its technology, known as RenderMan, as a standard.’<sup>135</sup>

Although Pollack went on to express some ‘competing technology’ that cast doubts on Pixar’s ability to succeed,<sup>136</sup> the RenderMan interface had already been endorsed by a host of prominent vendors. As reported in InfoWorld in May 1988,

Nineteen hardware and software vendors and major end-users participated in the Pixar announcement, including Apollo Computer, Sun Microsystems, Silicon Graphics, Stellar Computer, and MIPS Computer Systems. All have licensed the Renderman interface and will introduce products supporting the interface this year or in 1989.<sup>137</sup>

The Guardian’s coverage of the same story three days later mentioned that Disney would be following suit, but provided no commentary on why the Hollywood studio wanted to use the technology.<sup>138</sup> Lawrence Fisher however wrote a detailed article in the New York Times just under a year later, in which he outlined the beginnings of Pixar’s relationship with Disney, and wrote specifically about the use of computer animation for making animated films. He states that up to that point, ‘Disney [had] used computer animation primarily for backgrounds rather than for characters, as in the recent features “Oliver and Company” and “The Great Mouse Detective.”’<sup>139</sup> Clearly then, Pixar’s RenderMan interface was not only an increasingly discussed product by the end of the 1980s, but Pixar had also been explicitly linked to Disney and the making of popular animated feature films. Bob

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<sup>135</sup> Andrew Pollack, ‘Business Technology: Picture-Perfect Images, Without the Camera’, The New York Times, 22 November 1989, p.D5.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Mark Stephens, ‘RenderMan Interface to Link Modeling, Rendering Packages’, InfoWorld, 23 May 1988, p.6

<sup>138</sup> Jack Schofield, ‘Computer Guardian (Microfile): RenderMan’, The Guardian, 26 May 1988.

<sup>139</sup> Fisher, op. cit., p.D1.

Swain would agree, writing in December 1989 that ‘it shouldn’t be long before we [see] the first computer animation feature films,’ and dubbing John Lasseter as the person most likely to be the first to succeed.<sup>140</sup>

Fisher and Swain’s articles however were more anomalies than illustrative of a dominant trend, and the primary discourses attached to RenderMan only really mentioned animation in passing. Far more common was the tendency to position RenderMan as a key product in the computer graphics industry’s ongoing quest for photorealism – an issue that cropped up in almost every article that discussed the interface or PRMan. Tony Durham in The Guardian wrote as much in February 1989, describing Pixar in a headline as having made a ‘breakthrough in realistic computer graphics’, and quoting Alvy Ray Smith, who described the interface as ‘a piece of paper, a description of this language that Pixar has offered up to the world as a standard of how to do all of geometry-based imaging.’<sup>141</sup>

As discussed in the previous section, despite the critical and commercial benchmark it would later become, Pixar at this point in its history had made little (if any) attempt to brand itself as an animation company, or even as a part of the entertainment industry. Interestingly though, the evidence provided by print media publications also suggests that by the late-1980s Pixar had, in a very literal way, come to define a medium – in this case the rendered digital image. Not only that, Pixar benefited greatly from being one of the first companies to produce a high standard product while the medium of computer imagery was still in its infancy, resulting in industry-wide public endorsement of its RenderMan interface.

To say the company had a focused brand during the 1980s would be wide of the mark, but it certainly appears as though ideas and discourses did coalesce

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<sup>140</sup> Bob Swain, ‘Computer: Breathing new life into animation’, The Guardian, 14 November 1991.

<sup>141</sup> Durham, op. cit.



around Pixar's individual products or selected applications of its technology. RenderMan was written about in similar terms to Pixar more generally, in the sense that it was talked about largely in technology or computing circles, but was undeniably seen to be potentially useful in a variety of fields, including 'medical imaging, product design, CAD/CAM, and in special effects for the motion pictures and television.'<sup>142</sup> Discourses linking Pixar to the fields of image rendering and medical technology were common but not always consistent, and journalists did not always agree on how successful the company and its technology would prove to be.

Naomi Klein's concept of what a brand is relies primarily on abstract concepts and ideological implications, and while I agree that her definition works best with established lifestyle brands such as Nike, Gap or Coca-Cola, it needs a series of caveats in order for it to fit with a brand in its early stages of development. Is it really possible to say, for instance, when a mere product become a fully-fledged brand? Are we really discussing two discontinuous categories or are the two approaches to business (focusing on production, or focusing on marketing) actually far more fluid than Klein allows for? Pixar's early history suggests that the latter is true. The company's output during the 1980s and into the 1990s simultaneously straddled different markets (therefore making it simultaneously subject to several different sets of meanings), but importantly, this reputation seemed to be more firmly entrenched in some markets than it was in others. A set of meanings was available that related to Pixar's animation work for example, but these meanings were far less developed or consistent than those relating to its work in the field of image rendering or medical technology. One temptation could be to consider early Pixar as three (or more) separate brands, but these cannot really be separated since each field relates back to the same company name, and stories would often overlap

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<sup>142</sup> Stephens, op. cit., p.6.

with each other in national media discourses. Pixar now dedicates all of its resources to its work as an animation studio, but the sheer diversity of the company's output during the 1980s makes it far more difficult to discuss its brand during that time. Rather like the character of Jack-Jack in The Incredibles (Brad Bird, 2004), Pixar's early history showed definite potential to be 'super', but presently demonstrated a great deal of uncertainty, and had yet to really grow into a coherent identity.

## Conclusion

From the outset of its exposure to the American public, the Pixar name has been a site of contested meanings and associations. Through an analysis of Pixar's discursive surround during their formative years, I have argued in this chapter that the way in which the company was understood in this early period was characterised by a number of disparate and at times conflicting products and ideas. As Bob Swain wrote in November 1991, 'computers have been responsible for some remarkable moments in film and television over recent years - but without necessarily creating widespread interest in this new art form.'<sup>143</sup> Likewise, Pixar was responsible for a great deal of advancements in various fields of computer graphics technology during the 1980s, but the interest generated was perhaps weakened by the company's attempts to appeal to as many different markets as possible. The sheer variety of technological applications on display makes it extremely difficult to argue in favour of any one aspect of Pixar's business as being the cornerstone of its operations, but among the discourses that refer to one specific product at a time, one can observe some degree of consensus.

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<sup>143</sup> Bob Swain, 'Computer: Breathing new life into animation', The Guardian, 14 November 1991. Retrieved via LexisNexis Academic.

Using Naomi Klein's definition of the modern brand as the production of ideas rather than products, it would in fact be difficult to describe Pixar during the 1980s as a brand. I have argued however that her definition of branding is problematic, and leaves little scope for determining the point at which a product becomes a brand. While there may not have been many abstract ideas discussed in relation to Pixar at the time, there certainly were more tangible meanings and associations – particularly speed, compatibility, photorealism and the far more subjective notion of quality. The number of potential applications for Pixar's technology meant that these meanings varied greatly, but within each product category there were identifiable brands at play. It therefore makes more sense to adopt Paul Grainge's approach to the subject, and think of branding as a discourse or series of discourses that enable diverse meanings to coalesce.<sup>144</sup>

The primary business focus for those working at Pixar, as well as the small (but steadily growing) numbers of people who wrote about the company and/or consumed its products, was on computer hardware and software. Interestingly however, despite most of these technology products being closely tied to a vocabulary of possibilities, there was a curious but clearly observable distance between Pixar and Hollywood filmmaking. Even the fact that computers were increasingly being used to create visual effects shots for movies was played down, and as such, Hollywood and other art forms were only very rarely discussed in relation to Pixar. The process of historicisation that has taken place since the mid-1990s has played up the importance of animation and special effects, and while it is not a lie to suggest that such possibilities were mentioned, it appears that the

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<sup>144</sup> Paul Grainge, *Brand Hollywood: Selling entertainment in a global media age* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), p.24.

technology's capacity to render high quality images was seen to be far more central to the Pixar brand.

The totalised approach I have taken to this chapter has allowed me to observe John Lasseter's gradual journey to become the public face of Pixar, slowly replacing the computer scientists Ed Catmull and Alvy Ray Smith. His background in traditional animation will have inevitably limited the topics he could talk about in detail, moving away from technical questions and bringing the focus round to what he knew best: two-dimensional, hand-drawn animation in the Disney style. Although this will be a hypothesis I aim to test over the course of my thesis, it is my contention that the Pixar brand that eventually appeared in the early years of the twenty-first century was at least partly an extension of John Lasseter's star image. Once he emerged as the figurehead for the studio, the company was set on a course to become known as the talented but childlike, imaginative, cool, family-friendly studio that they are generally presented as today – a modern day Walt to a modern day Disney.

Prior to the elevation of the public role Lasseter had to play at Pixar however, the closest it came to becoming a brand (as defined by Klein, in terms of added value) was arguably by association with its considerably more famous owners, George Lucas and Steve Jobs. This branding by proxy was – like the majority of media coverage afforded to them in the 1980s – all but incapable of agreeing on the company's key function, but it nonetheless imbued the Pixar name with values of 'coolness' and (technologically) progressive thought that are difficult reputations to acquire in a business's early years. These associations would later become a more recognisable part of their brand identity, and manifested themselves most noticeably

in Pixar's media portrayal during the period of tension with Disney between 1999 and 2006.<sup>145</sup>

Ironically, a key part of the development of Pixar's brand identity was the branding by proxy of their involvement with Disney from the early 1990s onwards, after having decided to concentrate solely on becoming an animation studio. Moving away from its multifarious output during the 1980s, the deal to make a feature-length computer-animated movie with Disney gave Pixar the opportunity to concentrate on establishing itself as solely an animation studio. Financial stability was still a long way off however, and Pixar's need to reach this stability and open up doors to future work in the field of animated filmmaking required the development of a consistent brand identity. The transition towards this identity will form the subject of the next chapter.

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<sup>145</sup> This period of conflict between Disney and Pixar is covered in more detail in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **-You Got A Brand In Me?- Layered Reputations and the Consumption of Toy Story**

Early on in Toy Story (John Lasseter, 1995), there is a scene in which several characters discuss where they come from. Buzz Lightyear – at this point still unaware that he is an action figure and not a real ‘Space Ranger’ – proclaims that he is ‘stationed up in the Gamma Quadrant of Sector Four,’ but Mr. Potato Head offers the more succinct, ‘I’m from Playskool.’ Rex, a nervous dinosaur toy, follows suit, declaring to Buzz that, ‘I’m from Mattel. Well, I’m not really from Mattel, I’m actually from a smaller company that was purchased by Mattel in a leveraged buyout.’ This exchange serves both comic and narrative functions – playfully setting up and then subverting expectations, and highlighting an important aspect of Buzz’s character – but it also invites questions about the origins of the film itself: If Toy Story was a character that could speak, where would it say that it came from? Pixar? Disney? John Lasseter? An anonymous crew of geeks? A bank of powerful computers?<sup>146</sup>

This chapter seeks to interrogate the complexities of the film’s authorship through a focus on press reviews and feature articles that appeared immediately before and after its release. To what extent were Pixar credited as the film’s authors, and what inferences and assumptions, if any, did critics then make about the studio? I argue that, contrary to more recent understandings of the film, the overwhelming praise that Toy Story received was directed towards Disney, not Pixar. This in turn

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<sup>146</sup> Mr. Potato Head’s response is also interesting in relation to this question of origins, although presumably this is unintentional. The toy has been manufactured and distributed by Hasbro, not Playskool, since its first incarnation in 1952. Hasbro acquired Playskool in 1984, who then assumed control of the product. To say that Mr. Potato Head is ‘from Playskool’, then, would be akin to a rival animation company being purchased by Pixar, and then crediting itself for future re-releases of Toy Story on DVD. For detailed information and photographs on the history of the Mr. Potato Head toy, see Dennis Martin, The Mr. Potato Head Collector’s Page <<http://www.mrpotatohead.net/>>, Retrieved 1<sup>st</sup> May 2012.

raises questions about the shape of the studio's reputation at this time, and of the link between brands and their products more generally. This was the first time that Pixar had ever received widespread, sustained media coverage concentrated around one specific product, yet the reception of Toy Story also reveals the overlapping of multiple external authors and reputations.

In short, this chapter argues that Toy Story represents a crucial moment of transition for Pixar, as its reputation underwent several key changes that would comprise the studio brand in later years. The diverse meanings attached to the company name in the 1980s (as described in the previous chapter) were quickly simplified or ignored by the time that Toy Story was released. Rather than building on pre-existing discourses, then, journalists approached Pixar as a relatively unknown quantity, and as such granted the studio a discursive rebirth of sorts. The studio suddenly ceased to exist in quite so many different guises; its brand associations began to move away from science and technology, broadly defined, and coalesced (albeit crudely) around narrower conceptions of animation and filmmaking. It was also a moment of transition in terms of scale; Pixar had made films before, but they had been produced by and for a far smaller number of people, with far less financial and emotional investment at stake. The products the company was now making had changed too; from niche and the highly specialised to those aimed at a mass audience, and from a wide range of scientific and/or technological products to one form of entertainment and storytelling (i.e. filmmaking).

While the Pixar that emerges from these discourses is still a complex and inconsistent work in progress, Toy Story was nevertheless the epochal moment in the formation of the studio brand. Branded products rarely exist as singular entities, but this is particularly true of blockbuster cinema, which tends to exploit its own

multimedia potential, extending its narratives into other forms such as video games or theme park rides.<sup>147</sup> Whatever Pixar was at this time, its reputation was overwhelmingly attached to Toy Story, both as a multimedia/transmedia object and as a moment in time. This was the first time that the studio's identity was repeated consistently and relatively coherently across multiple media forms. But which *version* of the brand emerged from coverage of Toy Story, and to what extent was this identity complicated or impacted upon by competing claims of authorship, reputation and textuality?

### **'I'm not really from Mattel': Identifying Toy Story's author(s)**

The concept of authorship is notoriously problematic, despite its undeniable prevalence in popular and critical discourses of consumption.<sup>148</sup> As Will Brooker argues, 'the traditional model [of the individual auteur] clings on stubbornly – despite attempts to demonstrate that the process of artistic creation involves a complex mosaic of meanings.'<sup>149</sup> Indeed, undoubtedly buoyed by two commercially and critically successful sequels (Toy Story 2 [John Lasseter, 1999]; Toy Story 3 [Lee Unkrich, 2010]), Toy Story seems to fit very comfortably alongside many of the ideas that Pixar has since come to represent. The movie quickly found its way into popular animation canon, partly by virtue of being the first film to have been entirely computer animated, but its landmark status was also cemented by an overwhelmingly positive critical response. As Variety's Jerry Beck noted in 2006,

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<sup>147</sup> A great deal of excellent work exists in the field of blockbuster studies. For a collection that demonstrates the breadth of possible approaches to the subject, see Julian Stringer, ed., Movie Blockbusters (London: Routledge, 2003). For a focus on narrative blockbusters, see Geoff King, Spectacular Narratives: Hollywood in the Age of the Blockbuster (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000). A more cultural/anthropological approach can be found in David Sutton and Peter Wogan, Hollywood Blockbusters: The Anthropology of Popular Movies (Oxford: Berg, 2009).

<sup>148</sup> See, for example, John Caughie, 'Authors and auteurs: the uses of theory', James Donald and Michael Renov, eds., The SAGE Handbook of Film Studies (London: SAGE, 2008), pp.408-23.

<sup>149</sup> Will Brooker, Hunting the Dark Knight: Twenty-first Century Batman (London: IB Tauris, 2012), p.44.



‘critics at the time [1995] marvelled at the film’s technical achievement. Animators were overwhelmed by the sophisticated 3-D character animation. But moviegoers (and Pixar) knew better: It’s the story that makes [audiences] care about the characters.’<sup>150</sup>

Toy Story was also 1995’s highest grossing film domestically (\$192 million), and the second highest at box offices worldwide (\$362 million, just \$4 million behind Die Hard: With A Vengeance [John McTiernan, 1995]).<sup>151</sup> A small number of critics even included it in their shortlist for best film of the year.<sup>152</sup> Put simply, it would be difficult to imagine a more successful entrance into the notoriously unpredictable world of Hollywood filmmaking. From my current vantage point, writing this in 2013, it feels perfectly natural to refer to Toy Story as a Pixar film, in the same way one might talk about the qualities and conventions of a Steven Spielberg film, a Nick Hornby novel or a Lady Gaga single. Doing so enables us to make sense of these singular texts by drawing similarities to a larger body of work. Pixar is somewhat remarkable in that it is rare for a Hollywood studio to be conceptualised in the same way that individual directors are. Neither critics nor audiences would be ever be likely to declare their fondness for ‘the new Twentieth

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<sup>150</sup> Jerry Beck, ‘100 Years of Animation: Animation’s 10 Sharpest Turns’, *Variety*, 29<sup>th</sup> May - 4<sup>th</sup> June 2006, p.A6. Note that this is an apt summary of the way in which the film has been *remembered*, but a closer look at the film’s critical reception reveals a slightly different version of events. Here, Beck gives a disproportionate amount of credit to both audiences and Pixar, implying that they alone understood the importance of storytelling, whereas other animators and critics were only concerned with the film on a technical basis. As I discuss later in this chapter, while technology dominated Toy Story’s critical reception in the build up to its release, this tended to be downplayed and became far less important after critics actually saw the film.

<sup>151</sup> Anon. ‘1995 Worldwide Grosses’, *Box Office Mojo* <<http://boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?view2=worldwide&yr=1995&p=.htm>>, Retrieved 10<sup>th</sup> April 2012.

<sup>152</sup> See, for example, Judy Gerstel, ‘Tough to call the year’s 10 best when pickings have been slim’, *Toronto Star*, 24<sup>th</sup> November 1995, p.D7. Actually, considering how laudatory most of the reviews were, it is surprising that more critics *didn’t* include Toy Story in their Top 10. This is perhaps a testament to the cultural status of animation more generally, which is still stigmatised as ‘kids only’ fare. Chapter 4 picks up on this idea in more detail, and argues that the reputation for quality that Pixar eventually developed was predicated on the studio’s ability to appeal to both adults and children at the same time.

Century Fox' movie, or to refer to something as 'Warner Brothers-esque'.<sup>153</sup> Yet that is precisely the position that Pixar quickly found itself in, even to the extent that it became the first team to be awarded the Golden Lion lifetime achievement award at the Venice Film Festival.<sup>154</sup>

But even if, in purely hypothetical terms, there was universal agreement regarding what 'a Pixar film' would look like, why it was made, and/or who it would appeal to, this consensus would necessarily be predicated on an amalgamation of meanings that had developed and shifted over time.<sup>155</sup> When Toy Story was first released, then, with Pixar's back catalogue consisting solely of commercials and a handful of non-theatrical short films, how did critics make sense of it?<sup>156</sup> What we see here is a clear disparity between different definitions of 'success', with the movie's critical and commercial achievements contributing significantly to Pixar's financial stability and reputation within the industry, but without this translating proportionately to its reputation in the eyes of critics.

While Pixar was by no means absent from the critical discourse surrounding the film, the mainstream media very clearly associated Toy Story with Disney. Authorship in film and television should always be treated with a degree of scepticism, given that they are nearly always highly collaborative media forms. One could be forgiven for assuming that credit is generally given to the person(s)

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<sup>153</sup> On the surface, this admittedly may come across as a crude comparison, in the sense that both of these studios are now focused primarily on distribution, not production. The studio system of Classical Hollywood, for instance, did see individual studios producing their own films, and developing reputations for particular genres (e.g. Universal and horror; Warner Bros and the gangster film; MGM and musicals). See Thomas Schatz, Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio (New York: Random House, 1981). However, I use Warner Bros and Twentieth-Century Fox here purely to highlight the fact that studios' actual role in the production and/or distribution of cinema rarely translates to any attribution of authorship within film reviews.

<sup>154</sup> Anon., 'Venice honour for Pixar directors', BBC, 7<sup>th</sup> September 2009

<<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/8241282.stm>>, Accessed 10<sup>th</sup> April 2012.

<sup>155</sup> See Chapter 6 for a more detailed discussion of how the idea of 'consensus' has informed debates about Pixar and its films.

<sup>156</sup> It is important to note here that Pixar's short films had won several awards, including an Academy Award for Tin Toy (John Lasseter, 1988). Thus, while short films in general receive scant attention from the mainstream press, it would be misleading to suggest the company's work in the field was 'obscure'.

deemed to have had the largest creative influence on a text, yet this was not the case for Toy Story. Journalists and reviewers at the time of its release appeared to be fairly well informed about the production process and the division of labour, yet chose to base their assertions of authorship on reputation, not creative input.<sup>157</sup>

To be clear, I am not suggesting that journalists were morally obliged to recognise Pixar as the film's authors from the very beginning, but the apparent reluctance to acknowledge the studio's contribution is certainly surprising. With the benefit of hindsight, of course, we know that Pixar would eventually become so respected as to inspire entire books about its approach to creativity,<sup>158</sup> but in the eyes of the majority of journalists in 1995, Toy Story was both 'made by Walt Disney',<sup>159</sup> and even, 'Disney's neatest film ever'.<sup>160</sup> From cinema listings and brief plot summaries through to in-depth reviews and interviews with cast and crew, Pixar's contribution was consistently either downplayed or outright ignored. Press vocabulary was characterised largely by sentences such as, 'Disney's upcoming "Toy Story"',<sup>161</sup> 'Walt Disney Pictures' first computer-animated feature film',<sup>162</sup> 'Walt Disney Pictures' "Toy Story"',<sup>163</sup> or 'another instant animated classic from Walt Disney Pictures'.<sup>164</sup>

To give a rough indication of just how uneven this distribution was, a LexisNexis search revealed 375 English-language newspaper articles that mentioned

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<sup>157</sup> My research in Chapter 1 demonstrated that critics responded similarly to Young Sherlock Holmes, which was primarily understood as a Steven Spielberg film despite his negligible creative input. Authorship within these discourses thus appears to stem more from pre-existing reputation (for critics/journalists and their [imagined] audiences) than actual (or even reported) creative input.

<sup>158</sup> See, for example, Bill Capodagli and Lynn Jackson, Innovate the Pixar Way: Business lessons from the world's most creative corporate playground (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010).

<sup>159</sup> Sonia Reyes, 'It's a "Toy Story" told at the cash register', p.77.

<sup>160</sup> Lewis Beale, 'At Long Last Disney Is Shooting For The Hip', Daily News (New York), 20<sup>th</sup> November 1995, p.36.

<sup>161</sup> Anon., 'Sun Hopes To Rise With New Software', Variety, 13-19<sup>th</sup> November 1995, p.32.

<sup>162</sup> Arlene Vigoda, 'Play's the thing', USA Today, 15<sup>th</sup> November 1995, p.1D.

<sup>163</sup> Lara Wozniak, 'Tale of toys and burgers is a sequel', St. Petersburg Times (Florida), 21<sup>st</sup> November 1995, p.1E.

<sup>164</sup> Steve Persall, 'Films are perfect fare for holiday', St. Petersburg Times (Florida), 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1995, p.2B.

Toy Story within one week either side of its release date. Of those, more than three quarters (76.5%; n=287) mentioned Disney, compared to less than one quarter (23.2%; n=87) that mentioned Pixar. Only one-fifth (20.8%; n=78) included the names of both studios, whereas more than half (55.7%; n=209) mentioned *only* Disney, and the number that discussed Pixar without mentioning Disney was negligible, just 9 (2.4%) of the 375 news reports.<sup>165</sup> The search included transcripts of network news coverage, as well as some duplicate reports by news agencies such as Associated Press, and so the precise figures here should be treated with caution. Yet the broad trends they reveal are telling, clearly indicating the extent to which Disney's brand name engulfed Pixar's across Toy Story's critical reception.

In fact, Disney was actually talked about in terms that would have been more befitting of Pixar's reputation than its own. As Lewis Beale of New York's Daily News argued, 'hipness in cartoonery has never been considered a Disney trait. That was always the province of Warner Bros. ... How times have changed! In several recent works, Disney animators have been acting as if they understand the meaning of cool'.<sup>166</sup> Another article in the Washington Post described the film in similar terms, writing that, 'with its new computer animation feature Toy Story, the Walt Disney animation proves again it cannot be accused of lacking a multifaceted vision. If anything, the company seems to excel at whatever animated style it chooses'.<sup>167</sup> These arguments could easily have been framed as a story of a hip, young company coming in to breathe life into a stagnating corporation. Indeed, by the time of the industrial disputes between the studios in the early 2000s (discussed

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<sup>165</sup> Of these nine, only one was actually a source that would have been widely consumed – a brief discussion of new film releases by Michael Atkinson during a breakfast news report on CNN. See Anon., 'Critic says "Casino" is "Goodfellas go to Vegas"', CNN News, 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1995, 7:39am EST. Transcript retrieved via LexisNexis Academic, 1<sup>st</sup> April 2013.

<sup>166</sup> Lewis Beale, 'At Long Last Disney Is Shooting For The Hip', Daily News (New York), 20<sup>th</sup> November 1995, p.36.

<sup>167</sup> Anon., 'Movies', Washington Times, 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1995, p.M9.

in the next chapter), this is essentially what the narrative would become. In the context of Toy Story's release, though, the implication was that Disney made this progress on its own.

On the occasions that Pixar *was* credited, it was usually as 'a high-tech graphics outfit',<sup>168</sup> with the focus very much on the company's sophisticated technology, not its storytelling abilities:

[T]he lovable cartoon character you see on screen is *totally a product of the computer* ... [T]o create [Woody's] scenes for the new Disney release, "Toy Story", animators at San Francisco's Pixar Studios reached into the virtual space of their sophisticated computer system ... Both Pixar and Disney brought their own strengths to the project. Pixar had an amazing new technology. Disney had nearly 60 years of expertise in the field of feature animation and a reputation for ensuring good story structure. It also was powerful enough to attract outstanding voice and music talent.<sup>169</sup>

Hard-edged and hyperreal – half Pixar and half pixillated – this is workmanship that *could be achieved only by something with gigabytes*.<sup>170</sup>

[H]ow well the techie aspects (a sharp-edged, three-dimensional look) meld with Disney-style wit and whimsy.<sup>171</sup>

In some respects, these comments are a reflection of Toy Story's status as the first ever entirely computer-animated feature film, which understandably granted it attention from a wide number of media outlets. Yet each of these examples takes this debate a great deal further, with Portman's description of Sheriff Woody as 'totally a product of the computer' being particularly revealing in this context. Gary

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<sup>168</sup> Liam Lacey, 'Film Review: "Toy Story"', Globe and Mail, 24<sup>th</sup> November 1995. Retrieved via Nexis UK, 1<sup>st</sup> June 2012.

<sup>169</sup> Jamie Portman, 'From Computer Screen to Big Screen: "Toy Story" takes animated film-making into a new era', The Gazette (Montreal), 18<sup>th</sup> November 1995, p.C3. Emphasis added.

<sup>170</sup> Jay Stone, 'Make way for the future; Film animation will likely never be the same after "Toy Story"', Ottawa Citizen, 24<sup>th</sup> November 1995, p.E1. Emphasis added. Note that Stone's use of the word 'gigabytes' here is intended to evoke fantastically advanced computers. Bear in mind that the average home computer in 1995 had only 200-300 megabytes of disk space, compared to the 3-4 gigabytes that each Pixar workstation possessed, and the ~500 gigabytes of space that was required to hold the final frames. Also see Jason Hill, 'Animated Magic', Herald Sun, 21<sup>st</sup> November 1995. Retrieved via Nexis UK.

<sup>171</sup> Jane Horwitz, 'Ode to "Toy": An Animation Sensation', Washington Post, 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1995, p. D7.

Arnold's review in The Washington Times even went as far as stating that 'Pixar supplied 77 minutes of the 81-minute running time.'<sup>172</sup> While this claim appears to have resulted from confusion over the film's length – both figures were reported just as widely as each other – it (falsely) implies that another group of animators, presumably from Disney, also helped to produce Toy Story.<sup>173</sup> The cause of this confusion is, I would argue, less significant than the inference Arnold made from it; whether he attributed it to Pixar's inexperience, Disney's refusal to relinquish all control over the production process, or some other factor, the way in which he reported this discrepancy implies a surprisingly limited assessment of Pixar's productive and/or creative capacity.

Film authorship is traditionally associated with the figure of the director, and reviews of Toy Story were no different, with John Lasseter being the only individual who really stood out as a potential auteur amid all the reviews. Reviewers referred to 'Lasseter & Co.' or 'Mr Lasseter's Toy Story',<sup>174</sup> while then-Chief Technical Office Ed Catmull publically heaped praise on him, revealing that, 'It was very clear from the beginning that John was a master storyteller ... He had a skill set that we desperately needed. And so we basically listened to everything he had to say'<sup>175</sup> Disney producer Thomas Schumacher spoke in similar terms, claiming, 'We wanted to work with John Lasseter the filmmaker.'<sup>176</sup> The publicity from both Disney and Pixar, in other words, constantly strived towards legitimating phrases

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<sup>172</sup> Gary Arnold, "'Toy Story' plays delightfully with technology, imagination', The Washington Times, 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1995, p.C9.

<sup>173</sup> This confusion over running time appears to have resulted from both figures – 77 minutes and 81 minutes – having been reported by official and/or trusted sources. The author's personal copies of the film demonstrate the extent of the confusion, with the Region 2 DVD packaging stating a 77-minute running time, but the Blu Ray stating 81 minutes. One review of the laserdisc edition claims that it is the lower figure is accurate, and that 'the liner notes incorrectly list a running time of 81 minutes'. S. Damien Segal, 'Laserdisc Review: "Toy Story" (Deluxe edition)', SMR Home Theater Magazine, no date <<http://easyweb.easynet.co.uk/~robinson/Reviews/Toy-Story-2-Review.htm>>, Accessed 20<sup>th</sup> March 2013.

<sup>174</sup> Gary Arnold, "'Toy Story' plays delightfully with technology, imagination', p.C9.

<sup>175</sup> Jonah Lehrer, Imagine: How Creativity Works (London: Canongate, 2012), p.146.

<sup>176</sup> Bruce Kirkland, 'Toying with technology', Toronto Sun, 19<sup>th</sup> November 1995, p.S14.

that invested an inherently collaborative form of production (animation) with more traditional values of individual authorship.<sup>177</sup>

Interestingly, however, even this ostensibly specific discursive strand (i.e. Lasseter as author) involves a complex layering of different reputations, as Lasseter's reputation as a gifted animator was largely seen as the product of his background at Disney, and not him as an individual or the creative culture at Pixar.

Consider the following references:

Director John Lasseter is Walt's digital descendent, having nurtured this new animation technology from its earliest days<sup>178</sup>

Lasseter earned his traditional, hand-drawn animation stripes during his years at Disney<sup>179</sup>

As impressive as the computer images are, it's the imaginative script and attention to detail that power this movie, directed by former Disney animator John Lasseter.<sup>180</sup>

Disney was smart to snap up Toy Story five years ago when Pixar came pitching, fronted by former Disney animator John Lasseter, who conceived and directed the film.<sup>181</sup>

Several reviewers even mistakenly described Lasseter as the head of the company, with the St. Petersburg Times writing, 'Director John Lasseter's major studio debut (under the Disney banner, of course) is a logical extension of the technique *his* Pixar Animation Studios perfected.'<sup>182</sup> Even more incredibly, the Washington Times' Gary Arnold referred to 'Mr. Lasseter, a former Disney animator who started his own company, Pixar,'<sup>183</sup> despite the fact that the company

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<sup>177</sup> As Jerome Christensen

<sup>178</sup> Dave Kehr, 'Let's hear it for the "Toy"', Daily News (New York), 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1995, p.37.

<sup>179</sup> Jamie Portman, 'From Computer Screen to Big Screen: "Toy Story" takes animated film-making into a new era', The Gazette (Montreal), 18<sup>th</sup> November 1995, p.C3.

<sup>180</sup> Paul Delean, 'Toys are stars in Disney's latest', The Gazette (Montreal), 24<sup>th</sup> November 1995, p. C1.

<sup>181</sup> Judy Gerstel, 'The Toy Story: Canadian plays key role in creating ground breaking Disney movie with computer animation', Toronto Star, 17<sup>th</sup> November 1995, p.B1.

<sup>182</sup> Steve Persall, 'A True Treasure From The Toy Box', St. Petersburg Times (Florida), 24<sup>th</sup> November 1995, p.3. Emphasis added.

<sup>183</sup> Gary Arnold, '"Toy Story" plays delightfully with technology, imagination', The Washington

had existed for several years before Catmull and Alvy Ray Smith recruited him. This brings to mind the ‘limiting’ role of authorship described by Roland Barthes, who argues,

To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to finish it with a final signified, to close the writing. Such a conception suits criticism very well, the latter then allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author ... beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is “explained”.<sup>184</sup>

As I have demonstrated throughout this section, this explanatory function is clearly evident throughout *Toy Story*’s critical reception, with most reviews either referring to Disney or to John Lasseter as the source of the film’s humour, creativity, and appeal more generally. However, what my analysis reveals is that the conflation of corporate and individual authorship within these discourses belies an altogether more complex interplay between different *authorships*. With very few exceptions, the making of a film or television text will require the input of companies or collectives as well as individuals.<sup>185</sup> Media discourses may seek to simplify these relationships or elevate the importance of one authorial claim over all others, but the evidence presented above suggests that doing so is invariably an artificial exercise that masks the origin and flow of various meanings. What this points towards is the need to develop theories of what might be termed ‘reputational melange’, borrowing from Jan Nederveen Pieterse’s conception of ‘global melange’.<sup>186</sup> Nederveen Pieterse describes the latter in terms of cultural

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*Times*, 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1995, p.C9.

<sup>184</sup> Roland Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’, John Caughie, ed., *Theories of Authorship: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 1981), p.212.

<sup>185</sup> This is of course a simplification, and one that applies primarily to commercial filmmaking. Even the rise of amateur filmmaking, however, owes considerable debt to the cine-clubs that often facilitated production through the pooling of expertise and equipment. See, for example, Ryan Shand and Ian Craven, eds., *Small Gauge Storytelling: Discovering the Amateur Fiction Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).

<sup>186</sup> Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *Globalisation and Culture: Global Melange* (Plymouth, UK: Rowman &



hybridity and globalisation, with ideas, tastes, art forms and behaviour moving beyond their geographical or cultural origins and combining against or reacting against different cultural practices. In highlighting the need to theorise hybridity, he writes,

We are so used to theories that are concerned with establishing boundaries and demarcations among phenomena—units or processes that are as neatly as possible set apart from other units or processes—that a theory that instead would focus on fuzziness and *mélange*, cut’n’mix, crisscross and crossover, might well be a relief in itself. Yet, ironically, of course, it would have to prove itself by giving as neat as possible a version of messiness, or an unhybrid categorisation of hybridities.<sup>187</sup>

He goes on to propose a ‘continuum of hybridities’, with assimilationist hybridity and the mimicry of hegemony at one end, and a destabilising, canon-blurring hybridity at the other.<sup>188</sup> For reputational *mélange*, we might think about normalisation and distinction rather than assimilation and destabilisation, focusing on the processes and outcomes of reputation construction, and acknowledging the multiple reputations that converge around a given text or set of texts. Pixar, for instance, is in many respects a distinct entity, with clear proprietary boundaries, yet its reputation simply cannot be understood without also considering the contributions of individuals such as John Lasseter, Steve Jobs, Michael Eisner and George Lucas, or companies such as Apple, Disney, LucasFilm or DreamWorks. Since the complexity of this *mélange* increases with public exposure, 1995 marks a time when Pixar’s reputation underwent a significant shift.

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Littlefield, 2009).

<sup>187</sup> Ibid, p.78.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid, p.79.

## **Making the Big Time: Pixar, growth, and transition towards the 'mainstream'**

Toy Story is perhaps best thought of as a period of transition for Pixar, and in particular a period of growth and concentration. The bulk of my analysis in this chapter is based on reviews and journalism from a fairly narrow period of time (i.e. one week either side of Toy Story's release date), but briefly adopting a broader perspective reveals a definite shift in the discursive spaces that the company was occupying. If we compare the results of a simple newspaper database search from the nine-year period between the founding of Pixar and Toy Story's release (February 1986 – November 1995) to just one year that followed it (November 1995 – November 1996), the results are striking. Owing to the decidedly unscientific nature of this method, these results should of course be treated with some caution, and as such, I have deliberately not quoted any precise figures here. Nevertheless, as with the LexisNexis search noted above, the trends that emerge from this comparison are telling, and certainly indicate that Pixar's role in media discourses underwent significant changes in a comparatively short space of time. The Nexis UK search was designed purely to show the number of print articles that mentioned the word 'Pixar', and the publications they appeared in.

Prior to November 1995, Pixar was discussed primarily in specialist technology magazines, particularly InfoWorld and Computerworld, as well as trade or industry publications such as AdWeek, Variety and The Hollywood Reporter. The variety of sources on display here mirrors the multi-faceted nature of the company during its early years, with publicity tending to relate very broadly to the advancement of computer graphics technology and its potential application to special effects, television commercials and scientific visualisation. In the year following Toy Story, newspaper coverage of the company more than doubled in

comparison to the *nine* years that preceded it, as Pixar became a common fixture in the mainstream media. Its presence within the pages of InfoWorld, Computerworld and other specialist magazines declined sharply, while coverage in Hollywood trade papers Variety and The Hollywood Reporter saw a dramatic increase. The company also became a far more regular fixture in national newspapers, suggesting a shift from niche to mainstream recognition. While the aggregation of large numbers of articles in this way may not *explain* this transitional period, it does provide some indication of the changes that were taking place at Pixar, pointing towards Pixar's increasing public (i.e. media) presence in the wake of Toy Story.<sup>189</sup>

Of course, this growth occurred on many levels, and manifested itself in different ways, but my focus here is on the growth of *reputation*. The initial three-picture deal the studio signed with Disney meant that, regardless of any structural or financial changes that might take place (e.g. hiring more staff, shifting business objectives), Pixar was now a component of the same critical discourses as one of the biggest brand names in entertainment.<sup>190</sup> This association with Disney ensured that Pixar was given access to production and marketing budgets that far outstripped its previous resources, but it also guaranteed Toy Story considerable media coverage. Accordingly, in the days leading up to its release, journalists variously described the film as a 'real commercial dynamo',<sup>191</sup> the 'most anticipated kid-flick of the season',<sup>192</sup> and potentially 'the holiday season's hottest ticket'.<sup>193</sup> In its formative

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<sup>189</sup> See Chapter 6 for a more detailed discussion of review aggregation and what it can (and cannot) tell us.

<sup>190</sup> The three-picture deal would later become a more lucrative (for Pixar) five-picture deal, which Steve Jobs negotiated with Michael Eisner after Toy Story's successful stock offering. Chapter 3 discusses these industrial and contractual developments in more detail.

<sup>191</sup> Leonard Klady, '007's B.O. luck not contagious', Daily Variety, 21<sup>st</sup> November 1995, p.19.

<sup>192</sup> Steve Persall, 'Look out, it's time for those holiday movies', St. Petersburg Times (Florida), 20<sup>th</sup> November 1995, p.1D.

<sup>193</sup> Beth Pinkser, "'Toy Story': A realistic breakthrough", The Dallas Morning News, 19<sup>th</sup> November 1995, p.1C. Note that all of the reviews and articles quoted in this chapter come from one week either side of Toy Story's release date, unless otherwise stated. The two LexisNexis searches listed above are exceptions, and were used purely to illustrate broader trends over time.

years, Pixar had developed a reputation for quality within the computer graphics industry, but the abovementioned descriptions point towards expectations that far exceeded anything they had previously experienced.

One of the most obvious indicators of the company's sudden leap in recognition was the number of publications that wrote about Toy Story *before* the film had been released. While this is common practice within film journalism, it was new to Pixar, who had hitherto experienced very little advance press (the only exceptions being a handful of short articles featuring forthcoming animation festivals, technology conferences or short film exhibitions). Its formative years had been marked by media debates that looked towards the future, but often these were debates that emphasised technological possibilities, rather than anything the company might become, or even produce. If Pixar can truly be said to have had an identity at that time, it was one that centred around unpredictability, simply because the technologies being talked about had so many potential applications. Nobody, including Pixar, knew what the company would become. By association with a media conglomerate with as strong a reputation as Disney, however, many of these alternative possibilities were discursively killed off.<sup>194</sup> The studio was of course still capable of succeeding or failing, but there was little doubt about what it would be failing *at*.

Pixar's rise to prominence was not simply a case of being associated with a media giant, and was in fact intensified through Disney's own expansion during the late-1980s and early-1990s. As Adam Arvidsson notes,

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<sup>194</sup> I say '*discursively* killed off', because Pixar, its employees and its technologies could easily have been taken in other (i.e. non-filmmaking) directions, even after this point. The company still continues to sell its RenderMan software and programming interface, which has become an industry standard, yet this has received only minimal recognition within the media since Toy Story.

Their growth and diversification was truly astonishing. In 1988 Disney was a \$2.8 billion per year amusement park and cartoon company; in 1998 Disney had \$25 billion in sales divided between television and radio (ABC, Buena Vista Productions), internet (InfoSeek), film studios (Miramax, Touchstone), a cruise line, a residential community (Celebration), sports teams and 660 Disney retail stores around the world.<sup>195</sup>

Toy Story's production and release fell entirely within this ten-year window, meaning that, as the Disney name expanded into increasingly diverse media and consumer territories, so too did animated characters like Woody, Buzz, and Rex. Of course, this is not to say that these different brand identities were henceforth free to flow into each other. Maintaining some separation between brands allows each to develop its own identity, and provides the parent company (in this case, Disney) with a degree of protection from an unknown or unproven quantity (Pixar).<sup>196</sup> Through Miramax, for instance, Disney was able to benefit financially from investment in controversial films made by young directors – famous examples include the violent, expletive-ridden Pulp Fiction (Quentin Tarantino, 1994), and Trainspotting (Danny Boyle, 1996), a Scottish comedy drama about heroin addiction – without undermining the homogeneity of its own family friendly image. A conglomerate does not serve as a melting pot into which all subsidiary brands are poured, but this emerging strategy meant that Toy Story was not simply a standalone film, becoming what David Marshall terms an 'intertextual commodity'.<sup>197</sup> Arvidsson argues that,

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<sup>195</sup> Adam Arvidsson, Brands: Meaning and Value in Media Culture (London: Routledge, 2006), p.74.

<sup>196</sup> Compare this to Pacific Data Images, who were responsible for the production of DreamWorks' computer-animated features. DreamWorks purchased all PDI shares after the success of its first feature, Antz (Eric Darnell and Tim Johnson, 1998), before the company was able to develop its own identity. While DreamWorks Animation still releases films under the name PDI/DreamWorks, the media has not seen PDI as a creative/authorial entity for any of the studio's releases since Antz.

<sup>197</sup> David Marshall, 'The New Intertextual Commodity', Dan Harries, ed. The New Media Book (London: BFI, 2002), p.69.

When a particular media product (or “content”) can be promoted across different media channels and sold in different formats, what is marketed is not so much films or books, as “content brands” that can travel between and provide a context for the consumption of a number of goods or media products.<sup>198</sup>

Toy Story undoubtedly represents a moment when Pixar’s reputation increases significantly, but this growth in stature should be seen as having taken place across multiple media industries, not just within Hollywood. Although I discuss the specifics of the film’s marketing and tie-in promotions in more detail below, it is clear that its cultural presence stretched significantly further than anything Pixar had done before. As Toy Story spread itself across different media, widening the studio’s reach in the process, critics were also quick to note the potentially catalytic impact the film could have on the rest of Hollywood. Roger Ebert wrote that, ‘watching [it], I felt I was in at the dawn of a new era of movie animation,’<sup>199</sup> while the Ottawa Citizen described it as ‘a ground-breaking achievement that will likely change the entire character of film animation.’<sup>200</sup> Within days of its release, then, its cultural impact was deemed significant enough to change how animation was made in the future, providing a model for storytelling that would ensure quality as well as success.

What is particularly interesting about these bold predictions is that they appeared to stem at least partly from an element of surprise; quality to some extent was defined by the extent to which it exceeded expectations. Judy Gerstel, for instance, noted ‘one Hollywood movie from this weekend makes it to the Top 10 [i.e. “best” films of the year] with a bullet. And not one you might expect. Toy Story

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<sup>198</sup> Arvidsson, p.75.

<sup>199</sup> Roger Ebert, “Toy Story”, Chicago Sun-Times, 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1995  
<<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19951122/REVIEWS/50208001/1023>>, Accessed 1<sup>st</sup> June 2012.

<sup>200</sup> Jay Stone, ‘Make way for the future; Film animation will likely never be the same after “Toy Story”’, Ottawa Citizen, 24<sup>th</sup> November 1995, p.E1.

... will totally knock your socks off.<sup>201</sup> Bruce Kirkland of the Toronto Sun was similarly impressed, 'set to play with your expectations and wreak havoc with all prejudices.'<sup>202</sup> These expressions of surprise are important, as they not only indicate a gulf between expectation and reality (especially in relation to the cultural status of animation), but they also meant that Pixar's transition from niche technology company to popular animation studio could later be characterised in a more dramatic fashion, rather like the 'genesis effect' sequence discussed in the previous chapter.

Such positivity was only really present *after* reviews started to appear, however, with the vast majority of pre-release discourse seemingly torn between excitement and uncertainty. As Stuart Elliot wrote in the Dallas Morning News, 'though the film is a full-length animated feature, a genre in which Disney excels, and advance reviews have been almost giddily enthusiastic, there is considerable risk.'<sup>203</sup> Elliot goes on to quote one box office analyst, who felt that Disney had 'done really well on the marketing ... It's going to have an initial impact, but I don't know how big.'<sup>204</sup> Toy Story was seen to harbour the potential for selling a huge variety of products, which would explain the considerable marketing investment it received. Programmers at southern California's first commercial IMAX theatre chose the film for their opening week,<sup>205</sup> and Hasbro were reported to be expecting 'a run' on Mr. Potato Head toys at Christmas,<sup>206</sup> yet the faith shown in the product appeared to have worried many executives.

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<sup>201</sup> Judy Gerstel, 'Tough to call the year's 10 best when pickings have been slim', Toronto Star, 24<sup>th</sup> November 1995, p.D9.

<sup>202</sup> Kirkland, p.S14.

<sup>203</sup> Stuart Elliot, 'Sharing nicely', Dallas Morning News, 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1995, p.2D.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Katharine Stalter, 'Pushed to the IMAX', Daily Variety, 15<sup>th</sup> November 1995, p.9.

<sup>206</sup> In addition to the classic Mr. Potato Head toy, Hasbro also released a Toy Story special edition doll, which retailed for under \$10. See Anon., 'Hasbro warms up to his caustic Mr. Potato Head', USA Today, 21<sup>st</sup> November 1995, p.8D.

As Toronto's Financial Post reported, Toy Story was one of five movies predicted to gross over \$100 million, but several high profile failures meant that 'the climate [was] decidedly nervous.'<sup>207</sup> Tom Hanks and Tim Allen, the voices of Woody and Buzz, respectively, appeared similarly uncertain, with one article reporting that the actors 'refused to talk to print journalists about the movie. They chose to do brief TV interviews only, instead of fully backing what may become one of the biggest movies of the year.'<sup>208</sup> It would not have been surprising if Pixar had been the reason for this doubt, being as it was, a comparatively young company with only very limited filmmaking and storytelling experience. Yet as demonstrated above, Toy Story was understood as a Disney film above all else, and so there should have been little suggestion that the film would fail because of incompetent production. Instead, observers' uncertainties appeared to be tied to the computer technology and whether it would attract or deter audiences. Gary Arnold's review in the Washington Times admits as much when he writes that the film 'demonstrates the viability of the technology at feature length.'<sup>209</sup>

Strangely, though, these parameters shifted slightly once reviews started to appear. Up until that point, articles had questioned the volatility of the marketplace. This varied depending on which sources one chose to listen to, with 1995 seeing a 'dearth of family-oriented movies'<sup>210</sup> in the eyes of one observer, and 'a year of great children's films' according to another.<sup>211</sup> Either way, the implied concern for Toy Story was over its commercial appeal, not quality, and this doubt disappeared immediately when critics saw the film for themselves. Critics actually struggled to

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<sup>207</sup> Steve James, 'Hollywood awaits holidays, fearing another flop will drop', Financial Post (Toronto), 21<sup>st</sup> November 1995, p.54.

<sup>208</sup> Kirkland, p.S14.

<sup>209</sup> Gary Arnold, "'Toy Story'" plays delightfully with technology, imagination', The Washington Times, 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1995, p.C9.

<sup>210</sup> Melanie Wells, 'Marketers pan holiday box-office offerings', USA Today, 21<sup>st</sup> November 1995, p.1B.

<sup>211</sup> Dave Kehr, 'Let's hear it for the "Toy"', Daily News (New York), 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1995, p.37.



find anything negative to say about it, with the exception of a handful who were slightly perturbed by the ‘uncanny’ appearance of its human characters.<sup>212</sup> In terms of reputation, one of the most interesting criticisms levelled at the film came from Hollywood’s longest running industry publication, Variety. They argued that Disney would surely be ‘kicking themselves’ for missing so many opportunities for synergistic marketing opportunities, citing The Lion King (Roger Allers, Rob Minkoff, 1994) as an example of the studio’s previous approach.<sup>213</sup>

You don’t just see “The Lion King” movie, after all, you buy the album, beach towels and toys; watch the spinoff syndicated TV show, the Disney Channel special, the Disneyland parade and live stage show; read the book; play the videogames; and drink out of the McDonald’s collector’s cups.<sup>214</sup>

Variety was particularly surprised that Toy Story made use of characters that Disney did not own the rights to, partly because of its long-standing reputation for exploiting synergy in order to maximise profits, but especially in light of the conglomerate’s recent expansion:

That’s one reason the Disney/ABC merger – beyond its sheer size and scope – fired up the imagination so much more than CBS/Westinghouse. One can see the obvious advantage of the network with the strongest primetime presence among kids aligning itself with the company that possesses the business’s most powerful brand name. The possibilities – from movies to TV to publishing to merchandising – are truly awesome.<sup>215</sup>

To read this one article, however, might give the impression that Disney did not strive to sell Toy Story across other media or push the ‘content’ into other

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<sup>212</sup> See, for example, Arnold, ““Toy Story” plays delightfully with technology, imagination’, p.C9; Anon., ‘Movies’, Washington Times, 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1995, p.M9; Liam Lacey, “Film Review: “Toy Story””, The Globe and Mail, 24<sup>th</sup> November. Retrieved via Nexis UK. The idea of the ‘uncanny valley’ was coined in 1970 by Japanese scientist Masahiro Mori, who described it in relation to anthropomorphic robots. Masahiro Mori, ‘The Uncanny Valley’, Energy, 7.4 (1970), pp.33-5.

<sup>213</sup> Anon., ‘Changing channels’, Daily Variety, 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1995. Retrieved via Nexis UK.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

markets. This is far from the case, and while this section has explored some of the implications of Pixar's transition into a new industry, I now turn to some of the specific ways in which this growth was accompanied by a change in textuality. As Pixar grew, it also diversified by virtue of being so strongly tied to a film that was being sold across a diverse range of media. By looking at its marketing and the range of ways that Toy Story could be consumed, I demonstrate that Pixar itself was by this point becoming a brand that was increasingly associated with inhabitable storyworlds and textual play.

### **'Outside The Theatre Door': Re-thinking 'paratexts' and the consumption of Toy Story**

In February 1996, I cheered and applauded as an eight-foot tall dinosaur walked alongside a pair of anthropomorphic binoculars. I was eleven years old, and my parents had taken me on holiday to Disney World, Florida, where the Toy Story parade was a daily occurrence. We filmed and took photographs as plastic army soldiers, three-eyed aliens and a giant Slinky dog strolled past, waving in all directions. I was aware that these peculiar characters were from a film, but it was one that I hadn't seen, and knew very little about, since its release back home in the UK was still more than a month away. In the Magic Kingdom, though, Toy Story was difficult to escape, even though I was at that point experiencing it entirely through so-called paratexts.

Gérard Genette first identified paratexts in 1987 in relation to literature. He saw them as 'thresholds' or 'vestibules' that exist between the inside and outside of source texts.<sup>216</sup> In Show Sold Separately, Jonathan Gray applies Genette's work to

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<sup>216</sup> Gérard Genette, Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp.1-2.

film and television, but deviates slightly in that he refuses to see paratexts as ‘subordinate’ to a larger text.<sup>217</sup> He argues that ‘a film or program is but one part of the text, the text always being a contingent entity ... the entire storyworld as we know it.’<sup>218</sup> Indeed, when my parents and I eventually saw Toy Story at an Orlando multiplex in the days following the parade, I was so enraptured that I instantly sought ways to continue the experience, rushing to spend my pocket money on merchandise, toys, books and stationery. My consumption of Toy Story thus neither began *nor* ended with the film itself, and the remainder of this chapter will accordingly focus on questions of textuality. Even before its sequels in 1999 and 2010, Toy Story was always a great deal more than a standalone movie, and it is worth reflecting on the roles that such epiphenomena have played in the construction of Pixar’s reputation.<sup>219</sup>

While I agree with Gray and Genette’s broader aims, in that they endorse the study of an often-overlooked set of materials that frequently accompany media texts, I would argue that their conception of the paratext (or, more accurately, the term itself) is problematically limiting. Gray is careful not to conflate words such as ‘film’ or ‘program’ with ‘text’, explaining that the ‘text’ is something far larger than any one constituent element,<sup>220</sup> but the etymology of ‘paratext’ nevertheless implies some form of referential hierarchy.<sup>221</sup> If the ‘para-’ prefix can mean either ‘beside,

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid, p.12.

<sup>218</sup> Jonathan Gray, Show Sold Separately: Shows, Spoilers, And Other Media Paratexts (London: New York University Press, 2010), p.7.

<sup>219</sup> I do not mean to suggest that Toy Story is unique in being sold across different media. Such industrial practice has of course become increasingly common throughout the creative industries, and blockbuster cinema in particular, since at least the 1970s. See, for example, Douglas Gomery, ‘The Hollywood Blockbuster: Industrial Analysis and Practice’, Julian Stringer, ed., Movie Blockbusters (London: Routledge, 2003), pp.72-83. My point here is simply that this transmedia aspect of Toy Story represents a change for Pixar, which had hitherto been heavily restricted in terms of the discursive spaces it occupied, and the forms in which its branded products appeared.

<sup>220</sup> Gray, p.7.

<sup>221</sup> Indeed, I would suggest that, in Gray’s use of the term, movies and television shows should themselves count as ‘paratexts’.

adjacent to', or 'beyond or distinct from but analogous to',<sup>222</sup> then the 'paratext' points towards something that it must always be seen in relation to. Yet it would be entirely possible to consume many Toy Story products or branded experiences without *ever* seeing the film itself, or even knowing that it was a film at all. Gray admits as much in his acknowledgement of instances 'when the paratext either stands in for the entire text or becomes a key and "primary" platform for that text'.<sup>223</sup> Paratexts, in other words, may not require their prefix at all, since audiences are free to consume them in isolation. To think of them as 'vestibules' implies that the reader/viewer must always make a choice: move on to the 'text' or turn back, when in fact many 'paratexts' – parades and toys being perfect examples – may not necessarily function in this way at all. Just as Andy in Toy Story can enjoy playing with Sheriff Woody regardless of whether or not he has ever seen Woody's Roundup (the 1950s television serial that we discover Woody originates from in Toy Story 2 [John Lasseter, 1999]), so too can most 'paratexts' function as texts in their own right, capable of standing alone or being subsumed into different narratives and intertextual networks.

So what are the implications of this for the Pixar brand, or for Disney's reputation? If Toy Story was more than just a film, what other forms did it take? What are the implications of a marketing campaign that spanned different brands as well as a range of media? Rather than seeking to provide a definitive answer about what Pixar might have represented at this moment in time, this section aims to highlight the brand's heightened potential for fluidity and intertextuality.

Toy Story's marketing campaign actually received a great deal of press attention in its own right, with several publications featuring articles on specific tie-

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid, p.6.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid, p.176.

in products and other licensed promotion. The film had a production budget of \$30 million,<sup>224</sup> yet Disney spent a further \$20 million on advertising, including ‘everything from teaser advertisements in newspapers to a site on the World Wide Web’.<sup>225</sup> Marketing deals were also struck with four key partners – Burger King, Minute Maid, Frito-Lay and Payless ShoeSource – who were widely reported to have backed the film with a combined \$125 million investment in ‘advertising and promotional support’.<sup>226</sup> While it is far from unheard of for the press to take an interest in movie marketing campaigns, the attention in this case was a testament to Toy Story’s status as a cultural event as well as a film, which again was new for Pixar. The deal with Burger King was particularly noteworthy, described by the USA Today as a ‘mega-promotion’.<sup>227</sup> This involved the distribution of 35 million Toy Story toys (action figures and hand puppets), which dwarfed the 14 million handed out in the wake of Pocahontas (Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg, 1995), as well as the 15 million from the tie-in promotion of The Lion King.<sup>228</sup> Other tie-in products included Hasbro’s release of a special edition Mr. Potato Head toy,<sup>229</sup> Payless brand shoes, Fritos and Doritos potato chips packaging featuring Toy Story characters,<sup>230</sup> a soundtrack by Randy Newman, and an animated storybook on CD-ROM.

Another promotional text appeared the night before Toy Story’s theatrical release, when the Disney Channel aired a half-hour documentary entitled, To Infinity and Beyond: The Making of “Toy Story”. In a brief review, Matt Roush of

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<sup>224</sup> Anon., “‘Toy Story’: The Inside Buzz’, Entertainment Weekly, 304, 8<sup>th</sup> December 1995 <[http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,299897\\_7,00.html](http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,299897_7,00.html)>, Accessed 1<sup>st</sup> June 2012.

<sup>225</sup> Anon., ‘Business Digest’, New York Times, 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1995, p.D1.

<sup>226</sup> Wells, p.1B.

<sup>227</sup> Arlene Vigoda, ‘Play’s the thing’, USA Today, 15<sup>th</sup> November 1995, p.1D.

<sup>228</sup> Lara Wozniak, ‘Tale of toys and burgers is a sequel’, St. Petersburg Times (Florida), 21<sup>st</sup> November 1995, p.1E.

<sup>229</sup> Anon., ‘Hasbro warms up to his caustic Mr. Potato Head’, USA Today, 21<sup>st</sup> November 1995, p.8D.

<sup>230</sup> Packs told consumers little about the film other than that it was ‘Disney’s Toy Story’, and in very small lettering beneath the logo, some text indicating that the film was ‘At a theatre near you!’

USA Today noted that the programme was ‘intermittently interesting’ and showed several clips that were ‘a gas’, but criticised its ‘baldly promotional’ stance and the ‘fawning narration’.<sup>231</sup> This is the only review for this particular Toy Story promotion, but Roush’s comments touch on a wider concern, with many observers criticising the campaign as a whole for its excessiveness. Liam Lacey of the Globe and Mail even described the film itself as ‘a great infomercial for a host of manufacturers and toys’,<sup>232</sup> while Steven Rea’s otherwise highly positive review in the Philadelphia Inquirer is worth quoting at length:

Inevitably, given that a lot of its cast comes affixed with trademark logos (Etch-a-Sketch, Magic 8-Ball and Barrel of Monkeys are all put to good use), Toy Story is saddled with a certain commercialism. But the writers play off of this to winning effect [e.g. the ‘leveraged buyout’ gag], leaving Disney’s mega-promotional blitz outside the theater door. But not far outside. With Woody and Buzz Lightyear figures already stocked on toy market aisles, and Burger King promising Toy Story figures through the holidays, this ingenious movie experience is in risk of being tainted by tie-ins, product pitches and cross-merchandising schemes.<sup>233</sup>

This was a sentiment that was echoed by several other reviewers, who struggled to consolidate the movie’s fetishisation of toys with the ubiquity of its marketing campaign. Interestingly, however, the pattern that emerged most often from such statements was one of forgiveness in the face of perceived quality. Janet Maslin of the New York Times for instance speculates that, ‘maybe no one will even mind what is bound to be a mind-boggling marketing blitz. After all, the toy tie-ins are to old friends.’<sup>234</sup> David Sterritt agrees, arguing in the Christian Science Monitor that, ‘with its many eye-catching shots of consumer products, the picture starts off

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<sup>231</sup> Matt Roush, ‘Critic’s Corner’, USA Today, 21<sup>st</sup> November 1995, p.10D

<sup>232</sup> Liam Lacey, ‘Film Review: “Toy Story”’, The Globe and Mail, 24<sup>th</sup> November. Retrieved via Nexis UK.

<sup>233</sup> Steven Rea, ‘An adventure in animation that’s dazzling’, Philadelphia Inquirer, 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1995, p.C1.

<sup>234</sup> Janet Maslin, ‘There’s a new toy in the house. Uh-oh’, New York Times, 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1995, p.C9.

more like a promotional ploy than a kid-friendly entertainment. Happily, the plot and dialogue turn out to be hilarious, making this the most enjoyable picture of its kind in a very long while.<sup>235</sup> Steve Persall speaks in extremely similar terms, describing Toy Story as ‘one of those rare films to be appreciated by adults and children, [which] justifies all those burger-joint promotions and Christmas-gift products now hitting the shelves.’<sup>236</sup> All three of these examples are essentially making the same argument: saturated multimedia promotion can be forgiven, providing the film in question is sufficiently entertaining and/or nostalgic.<sup>237</sup> Appropriately enough, there are arguably no better examples of promotional texts that so regularly satisfy these final criteria as the objects at the centre of Toy Story’s narrative: toys.

Official Toy Story merchandise unquestionably existed for primarily commercial reasons, having been created, commissioned or licensed by Disney in order to provide consumers with multiple ways of buying into the movie. As Henry Jenkins argues, however, our consumption of transmedia extensions cannot simply be reduced to the buying and selling of cultural commodities. Writing in relation to children playing with He-Man action figures, he writes:

Whether they fully recognised it or not, when media producers sold these toys to our children, they also told them things about the nature of the story – the story you saw on the screen was not complete and self contained; these characters had a life beyond the stories we’ve been sold and told, and what happens next is literally and figuratively in the hands of the consumer.<sup>238</sup>

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<sup>235</sup> David Steritt, ‘Freeze frames’, Christian Science Monitor, 24<sup>th</sup> November 1995, p.13.

<sup>236</sup> Steve Persall, ‘Films are perfect fare for holiday’, St. Petersburg Times (Florida), 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1995, p.2B.

<sup>237</sup> See Chapter 6 for a discussion of how this compares to the Cars films, which were also accused of being overly commercial, but are generally described as the weak links in Pixar’s string of hits. It is an accusation, it seems, that erodes in the face of perceived quality.

<sup>238</sup> Henry Jenkins, ‘He-Man and the Masters of Transmedia’, Confessions of an Aca-Fan: The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins, 21<sup>st</sup> May 2010 <[http://henryjenkins.org/2010/05/he-man\\_and\\_the\\_masters\\_of\\_tran.html](http://henryjenkins.org/2010/05/he-man_and_the_masters_of_tran.html)>, Accessed 7<sup>th</sup> July 2012.

Jenkins thus sees licensed merchandise as an invitation for consumers to extend the narrative of a particular product or service beyond its established parameters.<sup>239</sup> Toy Story itself begins with Andy playing out a bank robbery/heroic rescue scenario with his toys. His disregard for certain ‘established’ narrative, generic and character tropes is presented fondly, as he happily switches between accents to voice different characters, combining iconography from the western genre (saloons; banks; the lone hero battling an outlaw) with both futuristic and fantastical elements (forcefields; dinosaurs; talking animals) to create his own playful narrative experience. His disavowal of brands and willingness to combine different categories of toy (hand-me-down cowboy doll; porcelain Bo Peep ornament; remote control cars) is particularly illuminating. It is a scene that would be familiar to many children, as well as functioning nostalgically for anyone in the audience whose childhood was less recent. My own response to the scene is still vivid in my mind, as Andy’s play instantly chimed with my experience of combining toys from Star Wars (George Lucas, 1977), He-Man and the Masters of the Universe (Syndicated, 1983-5) and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (Syndicated, 1987-89; CBS, 1990-96) with Lego, Matchbox cars, and WWF wrestling action figures.<sup>240</sup> As Jenkins goes on to describe the significance of such play,

Sometimes an action figure would stand in for another character not yet acquired much as an actor plays a fictional role, and in other cases the pleasure was in experimenting with the boundaries between texts and genres, with the mixing of characters forcing them to rethink the scripts. The cross-over points to the generative dimensions of this action figure play

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<sup>239</sup> Of course, these parameters – ‘the stories we’ve been sold and told’ – are not as fixed as they may seem, since audiences often disagree on what story is in fact being told, or which elements of it are the most important. See, for example, John Fiske, Reading the Popular (1989. London: Routledge, 2000); John Fiske, Understanding Popular Culture (1989. London: Routledge, 2000). For an interesting reconsideration of polysemy, see Cornel Sandvoss, Fans: The Mirror of Consumption (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), especially chapter six, ‘Fan texts: From polysemy to neutrosem’, pp.123-52

<sup>240</sup> The WWF (World Wrestling Federation) gradually changed its name to WWFE (World Wrestling Federation Entertainment) and then WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) following a lawsuit against it from the World Wide Fund for Nature, who also used the WWF acronym.



– the ways that kids would move from re-performing favourite stories or ritualising conventional elements from the series to breaking with conventions and creating their own narratives.<sup>241</sup>

It is this potential for playfulness and creativity that I am particularly interested in in relation to Pixar. Toy Story ushered in a period of change in terms of the way that the studio was talked about by critics, but it also marks a moment in time when the nature of consumers' relationship with the brand was changing in other, more fundamental ways. The fact that the movie was accompanied by such an extensive marketing campaign meant that American popular culture was littered with products bearing its name and/or featuring its characters. Pixar's consumers in the 1980s were not only far smaller in number, but were limited in the range of possible interactions with the brand. Toy Story, however, could be watched (the film itself), worn (shoes; clothing), played with (toys), eaten (potato chips; candy), listened to (soundtrack), explored (CD-ROM), and in one example, which I will return to shortly, it could even be visited. Building on the work of Gary Fleming, Jonathan Gray points out that licensed toys should not be seen as mere *extensions* of narratives from other media, but as spaces 'in which meanings can be worked through and refined'.<sup>242</sup>

The idea of narrative and intertextual play sits particularly comfortably in a discussion of licensed action figures or dolls; their physicality emphasises a distinction from the stories they originated from, and few guidelines (if any) are provided for how they should be played with. It is far less common to see such arguments being applied to other products or epiphenomena, as trailers, posters, and soundtracks for instance do not typically exhibit obvious scope for the re-purposing of meaning. Yet even these examples are products that cannot be

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<sup>241</sup> Henry Jenkins, 'He-Man and the Masters of Transmedia'.

<sup>242</sup> Gray, Show Sold Separately, p.178.

consumed in isolation; trailers and posters for different films will often cluster together, branded clothing will likely be worn in very particular contexts and/or alongside other brands, and other licensed products such as soundtracks or food packaging might be consumed alongside other, very different acts of consumption. Rather than the products themselves inherently lending themselves to intertextual play, then, we need to reconsider paratexts in relation to the *context* in which they are consumed. For Pixar, my point here is that Toy Story represents a moment in time when the studio brand became consumable in new and increasingly intertextual contexts, one that was becoming progressively associated with storytelling and storyworlds.

One of the most intriguing examples of this, and indeed of Toy Story's promotion as a whole, was the construction of an 'instant amusement park' in Los Angeles – 'a three-story, 30,000-square-foot Toy Story Funhouse' situated in the Masonic Convention Hall, next to Hollywood's El Capitan theatre.<sup>243</sup> Unlike the Toy Story attractions and promotion that took place in Disney World, this venture was designed specifically for cinema patrons, who would pay \$15 (children), \$20 (adults) or \$30 (VIPs, meaning 'reserved seats and complimentary popcorn and soda pop brought to you') for a combined cinema and amusement park ticket. Timothy Gray's detailed description of the park is worth quoting at length:

For five or six shows each day, the 81-minute movie will end, 1,000 audience members will exit onto Hollywood Boulevard and, ignoring the derelicts rummaging through trash cans, will march a few steps to the Masonic for two hours o' fun. They can play in seven areas:

- Green Army Men's Room: No, not a men's room, but an obstacle course, featuring sound effects in the floor (big "Ta-da!" fanfares if you successfully

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<sup>243</sup> Timothy M. Gray, 'Disney stretches "Toy Story" beyond theater walls', Daily Variety, 17<sup>th</sup> November 1995. Retrieved via Nexis UK.

swing on a rope over a “river,” bleats if you fall from the hand-to-hand monkey bars.)

- Woody’s Roundup: A band, deejay and three casts of four to six Western line dancers.

- Mr. Potato Head’s Playroom: Guests can play with crayons and Etch-a-Sketches (giving journalists who were bleated in the Green Men’s Room a chance to save face by staying within the lines as they color).

- Buzz Lightyear’s Galaxy: Interactive Flight Simulator, Whack-a-Alien, Intergalactic Lazer-Tron, and a 16-minute stage show featuring Buzz & the Buzz Lites dancing to such tunes as “Fly Me to the Moon.”

- Pizza Planet: A basement restaurant with chartreuse and purple walls, where visitors eat pizza, hot dogs and Alien Slime.

- Totally Interactive Room: Patrons sit inside a giant toy box and play the Toy Story videogame.

- Hamm’s Theater: 300-seat venue for the 20-minute “Hamm’s All Doll Revue,” with three [performances] every two-hour shift.

After two hours, loudspeakers play the Funhouse theme song and the “entertainment and operational personnel” will begin singing and gently usher out the visitors.

Disney marketing and distribution executive Richard Cook said at the time that the creation of such a place ‘wasn’t about merchandising; it was about the movie’, with Variety conceding that ‘there is, in fact, very little merchandising here’.<sup>244</sup> This is an incredible claim from Cook, given how elaborate this was as a piece of promotion, but the fact that Gray agreed with him reveals something about how we think of merchandising in relation to film and television. When he writes that there is ‘very little’ of it on display inside the attraction, actually what he means is that there is little attempt to sell toys or other branded products to those who visit. Merchandising, then, is more a question of physical products or tangible consumption (e.g. DVD sales), as opposed to the promotion of ideas and experiences. By selling the opportunity to temporarily inhabit the world of Toy

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid.

Story, the Funhouse allows audiences to extend the film's textual boundaries, and blurs the boundaries between the on-screen diegesis and the real world. Patrons are encouraged to physically interact with and even become the characters (e.g. the flight simulator, or sitting inside the giant toy box), and with most of the activities designed around acts of play, usual distinctions between adult and child behaviour are dissolved.

This comes very close to Adam Arvidsson's description of Nintendo's strategy for extending its content brands: 'links between these objects created an ambience within which kids were free to produce the particular "finishing touch" that adapted the product to their life-world – by using the objects provided or enacting some of the narrative content of the ambience, in play for example.'<sup>245</sup> Certainly, this appears to be what the Funhouse is striving towards, selling Toy Story as not just a film, but a space within which one can celebrate the limitless creative potential of childhood, regardless of one's age.<sup>246</sup>

What this section has aimed to highlight is the way in which Toy Story functioned as a series of texts beyond the film itself, and how this meant that the Pixar brand was at that time transitioning towards a more fluid, intertextual identity associated with storytelling and storyworlds. As Steven Rea wrote, its promotional campaign remained 'outside the theatre door. But not far outside'.<sup>247</sup> The idea of remaining 'not far outside' the film, however, is noteworthy in the sense that it alludes to proprietors attempts to structure or influence consumers' participation, interaction and creativity. The animated storybook CD-ROM, for example, allowed users to navigate the Andy's bedroom or engage in a prolonged, light-hearted altercation between Woody and Buzz in the Dinoco gas station forecourt, yet there

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<sup>245</sup> Arvidsson, pp.75-6.

<sup>246</sup> As I demonstrate in later chapters, this blurring of age hierarchies is something that becomes absolutely central to the Pixar brand and definitions of 'quality' animation more generally.

<sup>247</sup> Rea, 'An adventure in animation that's dazzling', p.C1.

was no scope to do anything that the software producers hadn't designed as an 'interactive' feature.<sup>248</sup>

Perhaps, then, studies of transmedia texts should place more emphasis on intertextuality and consumption contexts, considering the potential discord between the design or structure of a particular narrative, and the ways in which this can potentially be disregarded or combined with other narratives. Jenkins' oft-cited definition of a 'story [that] unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole',<sup>249</sup> as well as his references to an 'ideal form' of transmedia storytelling, implies that transmedia is always a consciously thought-out strategy, albeit one that does not always succeed in enriching the narrative. However, by focusing attention on the relationship between brands and intertextuality, via reception studies or audience research, for instance, we may well uncover revealing links about the way that brands operate in relation to other texts.

## Conclusion

In a Salt Lake Tribune article in June 2010, Toy Story 3 director Lee Unkrich was asked by journalist Sean Means about the responsibility involved in directing the third installment in a much-celebrated franchise. He responded that, 'it wasn't like I was some outsider who was asked to do this. It was more like I was already the cast of the play, and then one night I was told, "Oh, we need you to play the lead tonight."' "Toy Story" and the characters of "Toy Story" are very much in

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<sup>248</sup> This might usefully be thought of in relation to the notion of the 'preferred reading'. See, for example, David Morley, The "Nationwide" Audience: Structure and Decoding (London: BFI, 1980), pp.12-5.

<sup>249</sup> Henry Jenkins, Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide (London: New York University Press, 2006), pp.95-6.

my DNA.<sup>250</sup> Toy Story is also a part of Pixar's DNA, both as a film and as a moment in time, in many ways epitomising the values that the brand has since come to represent. In this chapter, however, I have demonstrated that this sense of identity was very clearly in a state of transition in 1995. As Mark Jancovich has argued, 'the original understandings of a text are no more or less "real" than those of later periods. But there is a problem when the critics of a later period present their own interpretations as being inevitably present within earlier contexts of reception.'<sup>251</sup> Similarly, as tempting as it is to look back at Toy Story as a genesis moment in Pixar's history, it is important to recognise the confusion and fluidity that still surrounded the studio in 1995.

Authorship was especially difficult to discern, with Pixar receiving a disproportionately small amount of critical praise for the film. Methodologically, this presents the brand historian with a problem, in that the product that the studio was most associated with (Toy Story) was discussed as though someone else (i.e. Disney) had made it. Nevertheless, one can observe traces of a coherent consumable identity forming at this time,<sup>252</sup> even if they are in many cases clouded by confusion or downplayed.<sup>253</sup> While contemporary criticism for the most part neglected to recognise Pixar's contributions, it is important that the film itself was so well regarded, as its authorship was later reapportioned to the studio. In a reputational sense, then, it was Toy Story that made Pixar, and not the other way around.

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<sup>250</sup> Sean P. Means, "'Toy Story 3' Director: Characters 'in my DNA'", Salt Lake Tribune, 17<sup>th</sup> June 2010. Retrieved via LexisNexis Academic, 20<sup>th</sup> March 2013.

<sup>251</sup> Mark Jancovich, 'Shadows And Bogeymen: Horror, Stylisation And The Critical Reception Of Orson Welles During The 1940s', Participations, 6.1 (May 2009), pp.25-6.

<sup>252</sup> Barbara Klinger, 'Digressions at the Cinema: Reception and Mass Culture', Cinema Journal, 28.4 (Summer 1989), pp.3-19.

<sup>253</sup> We might describe such discourses as 'emergent' and/or 'residual' cultural processes, to use Raymond Williams' terminology. See Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp.121-7.

This brings us back to Arvidsson's conception of brands as 'informational capital', and in particular his argument that "content brands" that can travel between and provide a context for the consumption of a number of goods or media products.<sup>254</sup> This would certainly account for the lack of coherence that surrounded Pixar before committing to filmmaking, and even after the release of Toy Story. If brands provide context for consumption of a wide range of products and services, then perhaps we should see them as informational organising structures. My own experience of watching the Toy Story parade at Disney World effectively mirrored that of the critics who reviewed it, filtering its meanings and characters through Disney stories and institutions, and therefore inferring an authorship that did not actually exist.<sup>255</sup> To me, Buzz Lightyear and Sheriff Woody appeared to be just as much a part of Disney's roster of characters and narratives as Mickey Mouse and Goofy, thus altering my initial perceptions and expectations.

1995 represents a moment when what did exist of the Pixar brand did so in relation to an enormous range of other brands. This is of course true of virtually every marketplace, but the palimpsesting of reputations involved in Toy Story's marketing campaign was an important moment for Pixar, which had hitherto maintained a reasonable degree of control over its own reputation.<sup>256</sup> The company had already established something of a reputation for quality, but it was not until it released a major Hollywood movie that any external observers seemed able to talk about its goals and operations with much certainty. Pixar may have been somewhat dwarfed by the Disney brand when Toy Story came out, but the fact that it was seen

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<sup>254</sup> Arvidsson, p.75.

<sup>255</sup> I do not mean to suggest that Disney was in no way responsible for Toy Story's success, but that the studio had little input into the story or animation process.

<sup>256</sup> Douglas Holt notes that, 'identity value usually matters less for brands in low-involvement, business-to-business ... and highly technical categories' of product. In other words, branding is far more important in certain industries, which would explain why Pixar was less concerned with talking to the media before their transition into Hollywood. Douglas B. Holt, How Brands Become Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2004), p.4.

as a distinct entity eventually turned out to be somewhat fortuitous. Over the coming years, this sense of difference really began to be emphasised, as the two studios were discursively set against each other.



## CHAPTER THREE

### **-A Mouse Divided- Disney, Pixar, and the reception of industrial conflict**

In January 2006, the Walt Disney Company announced that a \$7.4 billion deal had been agreed for the purchase of Pixar Animation Studios.<sup>257</sup> Months of speculation leading up to that point meant that the deal itself did not come as a surprise, but the ways in which the media reacted to it tells us a great deal about how far the Pixar brand had evolved over the preceding decade. Observers generally responded positively to the news, quoting the views of analysts who deemed it ‘a smart strategic move’ for Disney,<sup>258</sup> one that would surely create a ‘potential powerhouse’,<sup>259</sup> and ‘an arsenal of quality for audiences.’<sup>260</sup> It is curious however that amidst the numerous articles to have come out of the announcement, this positivity was not grounded in a discussion of mutual benefits for the two studios, or for audiences. Instead, what one observes when looking at the media reaction to the Disney-Pixar deal is an overwhelming sense that Disney animation had suffered in preceding years; it *needed* a saviour.

The years leading up to the deal had seen the two studios embroiled in a series of disputes over their collaborative dealings, including the renegotiation of their production/distribution pact after Toy Story’s success in 1995, contested views on the status of sequels like Toy Story 2 (John Lasseter, 1999), and the breakdown of further contractual negotiations in 2004. The situation gradually worsened to the point that Pixar announced that the relationship between the

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<sup>257</sup> Laura M. Holson, ‘Disney agrees to acquire Pixar in a \$7.4 billion deal’, New York Times, 25<sup>th</sup> January 2006, p.C6.

<sup>258</sup> Dominic Rushe, ‘The real Mr. Incredible’, The Sunday Times, 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2006, Business, p.9.

<sup>259</sup> Anon., ‘In Disney’s interest in buying Pixar, a sign of chief’s technological focus’, New York Times, 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2006, p.C2.

<sup>260</sup> Gayle MacDonald, ‘Why Disney wooed a crazy Canuck’, The Globe and Mail, 28<sup>th</sup> January 2006, p.R1.

studios was beyond repair, and it would soon be looking for a new business partner. As discussed in Chapter Two, the build up and reaction to the release of Toy Story largely talked about it in terms of being the latest Disney film. For Pixar's status to develop within popular media discourses from Disney's bit player to its saviour incarnate in the space of ten years is quite incredible, and indeed one of the aims of this thesis as a whole is to map some of the ways in which this has played out.

In this chapter, I trace the evolution of the abovementioned industrial conflict by focusing in detail on several key moments of tension between the studios, and in particular on the ways in which these moments can highlight both parties' shifting reputations. I argue that the Pixar brand was strengthened and even shaped by the ways in which these tensions with Disney played out in the media. This leads to a discussion of oppositional brand loyalty – the notion that a brand can come to be defined through being (discursively) positioned against its competitor(s). The figure of Michael Eisner is particularly central to many of these debates, since it was he who was Chief Executive of Disney throughout much of this time, and eventually became the scapegoat for everything that was going wrong at the conglomerate. His 'micro-management' and acerbic personality were frequently set against the calmer and more creative figure of Steve Jobs,<sup>261</sup> and the more forward-thinking Robert Iger, who succeeded Eisner as Disney CEO.

Although this chapter is primarily focused on representations of industrial conflict, I will begin with an overview of some of the earlier moments in the relationship between Disney and Pixar, those that took place before any (public) conflict arose. While such instances do not hint at underlying tension, through these

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<sup>261</sup> As one publication described the conflict as a whole; 'the corporate drama that pitted Jobs against Eisner.' Richard Morgan, 'Return to Mouse House', The Deal, 30<sup>th</sup> January 2006.

discourses one can observe the development of associations and descriptive language that would become more pronounced once tensions did arise.

### **Stock Characters: Steve Jobs and Pixar's IPO**

The initial partnership between Disney and Pixar to produce a computer-animated feature film (i.e. Toy Story) was announced on 12<sup>th</sup> July 1991, and despite failing to register with the majority of the media, the news did receive some coverage in a handful of high-circulation publications. Rhonda Rundle of the Wall Street Journal wrote just one sentence, describing Pixar as a 'small computer animation venture funded by computer guru Steven P Jobs', and noting that the film would be the 'first full-length animated feature to bear Disney's banner without being created at [the] studio.'<sup>262</sup> The New York Times provided slightly more detail, and lauded Pixar for being 'among the leaders in computer animation.'<sup>263</sup> Clearly these descriptions of Pixar as both a 'small' venture and being 'among the leaders' in its field are slightly at odds with each other, and the Hollywood Reporter's descriptions remained somewhere in the middle. To them, Pixar was merely 'the company founded by Apple wunderkind Steven Jobs', and a 'Northern California-based company' – the publication's choice of words notable mainly for their lack of expressiveness.<sup>264</sup> To some extent, this ambivalence was characteristic of Pixar's media reputation prior to the company gravitated towards filmmaking (see Chapter 1), but some consistency can still be observed.

The Hollywood Reporter and New York Times both combined their descriptions with a quotation from Steve Jobs, who stated, 'Working with Disney to

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<sup>262</sup> Rhonda L. Rundle, 'Walt Disney agrees to distribute film by Jobs's Pixar', Wall Street Journal, 12<sup>th</sup> July 1991, p.B4C.

<sup>263</sup> Anon., 'Pixar film deal with Disney', New York Times, 12<sup>th</sup> July 1991, p.D4.

<sup>264</sup> Greg Ptacek, 'Disney, Pixar pact on 3-D animation', Hollywood Reporter, 12<sup>th</sup> July 1991. Retrieved via LexisNexis Academic, 19<sup>th</sup> March 2011.

make the first full-length computer-animated film has been a dream of ours since we founded the company in 1986.’<sup>265</sup> While only described as ‘small’ in one publication then, the neutral and positive descriptions of Pixar were tempered by their juxtaposition with talk of a long-standing ‘dream’ to work with Disney. Jobs adds that ‘our dream is now realised and we couldn’t be more excited’,<sup>266</sup> implicitly positioning Pixar as aspiring to the achievements of Disney – a minnow looking up to (and finally getting to work alongside) its hero. The disparity in size and stature between the two companies may seem a superfluous point in and of itself, since most companies would of course appear ‘small’ in comparison to Disney. What is important here however is the fact that Pixar were consistently talked about in relation to Disney from as early as 1991, but often using language and qualifiers that ensured they were viewed as a distinct entity – perpetually tied to but always different from their corporate cousins.

Released in North American cinemas on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1995, Toy Story opened to impressive box office takings and a hugely positive critical reception. Journalists across the continent were quick to point out that the film succeeded not only because of its use of computer animation, but because they saw it as a funny, heartfelt and otherwise entertaining piece of filmmaking that would please audiences of all ages. I do not wish to repeat my arguments from the previous chapter, but for the purposes of my argument here, I will now turn to the reception of one specific incident that occurred in the wake of Toy Story’s release: Pixar offering its stock to be sold to the public in November 1995.

While there are a number of reasons why a company may choose to float its shares on the stock exchange, initial public offerings (IPOs) chiefly function to raise

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<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

capital, often with a view to expansion. Crucially for Pixar, though, the move also provided the company with an increase in media recognition. As David Price notes, Steve Jobs was reportedly unhappy that many consumers believed Toy Story to have been a Disney film, and thus saw the IPO as an opportunity to raise the studio's profile as well as funds.<sup>267</sup> The media responses to the flotation certainly suggest that Jobs succeeded in both respects, as the soaring share price made him a billionaire overnight, and the majority of articles reacted extremely enthusiastically to the news.

The Dallas Morning News was particularly positive, describing Pixar as 'a pioneer in an untested industry', 'the next Apple', and declaring that 'the hottest company in the movie business [has become] one of the year's hottest new public companies.'<sup>268</sup> This metaphor of heat was surprisingly widespread, with at least four additional publications adopting some variation in their own reporting of the story. USA Today called Pixar's stock 'the latest hot new issue',<sup>269</sup> while the The Wall Street Journal said it was 'looking hot'.<sup>270</sup> Interestingly, this was not a success story that involved only Pixar, with the Washington Post linking the company's soaring share price to a series of other recently successful IPOs by technology companies, representing 'the latest in a string of hot stock offerings'.<sup>271</sup> One analyst in the Financial Post agreed, hyperbolically stating that 'some of these IPOs are hot as the hinges from hell.' Whether or not observers chose to see Pixar as an exception or as an important part in an emerging trend, it is clear that the reaction to its stock

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<sup>267</sup> David A. Price, The Pixar Touch: The making of a company (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), pp.163-4.

<sup>268</sup> Jennifer Files, 'Playing the market; Animated movie sends Pixar's shares into orbit', Dallas Morning News, 30<sup>th</sup> November 1995, p.1D.

<sup>269</sup> Julie Schmit, 'Pixar stock debut gets rave reviews', USA Today, 30<sup>th</sup> November 1995, p.1B.

<sup>270</sup> Molly Baker and Thomas R. King, 'Pixar share offering, hyped by "Toy Story", is looking hot', Wall Street Journal, 29<sup>th</sup> November 1995, p.C1.

<sup>271</sup> David Ward Bloomberg, 'Pixar stock soars on first day', The Financial Post, 30<sup>th</sup> November 1995, p.12.

offering immediately marked Toy Story's producers as new, exciting, and worth attaching oneself to.

Even those who described the studio's stock as potentially 'risky' appeared simultaneously eager to note the potential money that was to be made on the back of its success. Central to this idea was the figure of Steve Jobs, whose swift financial gains became arguably the biggest sub-story of Pixar's successful flotation, with the USA Today for instance labelling him as 'the biggest winner' of the deal.<sup>272</sup> Certainly there were few reports that neglected to mention Jobs' personal windfall, with Variety putting it into perspective by pointing out that he had earned 'more than \$1.3 billion in paper profits ... for what is only a part-time job for him.'<sup>273</sup> In a somewhat sycophantic piece in the New York Times, John Markoff wrote that Jobs had 'struck gold,' 're-emerged as a captain of industry,' and that his 'financial success ... was well deserved, since he held onto his Pixar investment through a difficult decade.'<sup>274</sup> The notion of Jobs as a model of tenacity is one that has continually been taken up by various writers, often encapsulated by a phrase such as 'comeback'. Kevin Maney for example calls his story 'one of the most remarkable comebacks in business,'<sup>275</sup> and the subtitle to Jeffrey Young and William Simon's biography of Jobs labels him 'the greatest second act in the history of business.'<sup>276</sup> While undoubtedly incredibly wealthy and powerful then, Jobs' reputation is nonetheless bound up in notions of having *earned* his success through determination and hard work, overcoming significant obstacles along the way.<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> Schmit, p.1B.

<sup>273</sup> Martin Peers, 'Wall St. Pumps Pixar', Daily Variety, 30<sup>th</sup> November 1995, p.6.

<sup>274</sup> John Markoff, 'Apple computer co-founder strikes gold with new stock', New York Times, 30<sup>th</sup> November 1995, p.A1.

<sup>275</sup> Kevin Maney, 'Back on top: Former Silicon Valley brat hits his stride', USA Today, 1<sup>st</sup> December 1995, p.1B.

<sup>276</sup> Jeffrey S. Young and William L. Simon, iCon: Steve Jobs, the greatest second act in the history of business (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2005).

<sup>277</sup> Clearly these 'rags-to-riches'/American dream narratives are deeply ingrained in US popular culture. For a discussion of the American dream in relation to Disney, see Steven Watts, The Magic

Significantly, and perhaps surprisingly, this financial success was in contrast to the fortunes of Pixar. Despite its share offering and the box office figures and reviews that indicated Toy Story had been a huge hit, several articles reporting on the IPO qualified their enthusiasm by pointing out that Pixar would not actually procure any significant revenue from the film. Crucially in relation to my argument in this chapter, this was not only written about as being implicitly unjust, but Disney was frequently cited as the explanation for it. Variety noted that even if its future films were ‘extraordinary box office successes, Pixar’s compensation would be very small compared with that of Disney,’ and there was every possibility that the current arrangement would bring them no significant revenue at all.<sup>278</sup> A separate article the following day reiterated that ‘Pixar’s compensation would be very small compared with that of Disney,’<sup>279</sup> with the Washington Post adding that, as well as Disney ‘picking up the lion’s share of the profits,’ the conglomerate was also moving ‘aggressively’ to introduce computer animation to its own studios.<sup>280</sup> Other examples wrote that Pixar had ‘struggled to pay its bills in the late-1980s,’<sup>281</sup> had ‘lost money in each of the last five years,’<sup>282</sup> and that ‘Disney will end up making money, and Pixar will just be a provider for them.’<sup>283</sup> Amidst the enthusiastic discussion of Pixar and its IPO, then, across several major publications, there is a clearly observable opposition being set up between the two studios. Disney is effectively presented as a threat to Pixar’s present and future capacity to make

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Kingdom: Walt Disney and the American Way of Life (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2001). For broader research on the concept of the American dream, see, for example, Jim Cullen, The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped the Nation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Lawrence R. Samuel, The American Dream: A Cultural History (Syracuse, NY: New York University Press, 2012).

<sup>278</sup> Martin Peers, ‘Pixar goes public: A billion \$ toy story’, Daily Variety, 29<sup>th</sup> November 1995, p.6.

<sup>279</sup> Peers, ‘Wall St. Pumps Pixar’, p.6.

<sup>280</sup> Steven Pearlstein, ‘Pixar stock offering a hit for Steve Jobs’, Washington Post, 30<sup>th</sup> November 1995, p.B11.

<sup>281</sup> Maney, p.1B.

<sup>282</sup> Markoff, p.A1.

<sup>283</sup> Bloomberg, p.12.

money, and by extension to survive as a business. While at first glance there may also appear to be a disparity between Steve Jobs' newly-inflated wealth and Pixar's financial uncertainties, both parties were linked through being depicted as underdogs who everybody wanted to succeed.

In chapter one I argued that Pixar's early reputation relied partly upon association with Steve Jobs (and George Lucas before him), but this branding by proxy began to work in both directions once Pixar became successful in its own right. Earlier on in their relationship, Pixar was a relatively unknown brand name and Jobs was riding on the coattails of his previous success with Apple – a man whose reputation was more valuable than any company he had recently controlled. Having struggled to make any significant impact with NeXT, the computer company he started after being fired from Apple 1985, it wasn't until the release of Toy Story ten years later and Pixar's subsequent IPO that either party really looked to have achieved its goals. The reputations that emerged from that moment ended up exceeding the sum of its parts, with Pixar's underdog status cemented by association with Steve 'comeback billionaire' Jobs, whose own reputation was enhanced by association with the 'hottest' new prospect in Hollywood, Silicon Valley, and on the New York Stock Exchange. Variety reported that 'investors fell over themselves in their rush to buy stock,' implicitly pointing towards a degree of exclusivity about the deal.<sup>284</sup> Pixar were thus being discursively positioned as an exciting trend that needed to be followed. Jobs himself said at the time that he 'bought into their dream, both spiritually and financially,'<sup>285</sup> and as time went on it became increasingly apparent that the media were doing the same thing.

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<sup>284</sup> Peers, 'Wall St. Pumps Pixar', p.6.

<sup>285</sup> Maney, p.1B.



## Snake Eisner: Disney and Pixar's shifting reputations

The success of Toy Story and the studio's subsequent IPO gave Pixar enough leverage to renegotiate the terms of their production pact with Disney, becoming co-financiers of each film and dividing the profits equally between them. In an official statement following the confirmation of the new arrangement, Steve Jobs wrote clearly about how it related to Pixar's ambitions.

We believe there are only two significant brands in the film industry – 'Disney' and 'Steven Spielberg.' We would like to establish 'Pixar' as the third. Successful brands are a reflection of consumer trust, which is earned over time by consumers' positive experiences with the brand's products. For example, parents trust Disney-branded animated films to provide satisfying and appropriate family entertainment, based on Disney's undisputed track record of making wonderful animated films. This trust benefits both parents and Disney: it makes the selection of family entertainment that much easier for parents, and it allows Disney to more easily and assuredly draw audiences to see their new films. Over time we want Pixar to grow into a brand that embodies the same level of trust as the Disney brand. But in order for Pixar to earn this trust, consumers must first know that Pixar is creating the films.<sup>286</sup>

What Jobs appears to be most concerned with here is recognition of authorship, and the significance of this recognition to the building of a successful brand. In a sense this is rather peculiar, given that he also explicitly draws comparisons between Pixar, Disney, and Steven Spielberg, thereby calling for both recognition (distinction) *and* association (similarities) with other companies. Having only released one feature film up to this point however, Jobs moved swiftly to introduce the idea of Pixar being a potential equal of Disney's. Toy Story had of course received considerable praise for its 'dual appeal' – the ability to entertain both children and adults at the same time.<sup>287</sup> Even in these early stages of brand development then, the idea that Pixar could be the 'next Disney' would have

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<sup>286</sup> Co-Production Agreement [between] Walt Disney Pictures and Television and Pixar, 24<sup>th</sup> February 1997, quoted in Price, p.164.

<sup>287</sup> See Chapter 2 on Toy Story, or Chapter 4 for a more detailed discussion of this 'dual appeal'.

seemed vaguely plausible at that time, and would become increasingly likely as the studio continued to produce hit after hit, confirming their ability to live up to their own high standards.

The enormous success of Finding Nemo (Andrew Stanton, 2003) at the worldwide box office and on DVD meant that by early 2004, Pixar's reputation for producing quality family entertainment had risen to the point where they were arguably *more* trusted than Disney, at least in the eyes of the media. When Steve Jobs announced on 29<sup>th</sup> January 2004 that he would be looking to rival studios to distribute their films from then on, observers seemed more troubled about the future of Disney than Pixar. Variety wrote of 'investor jitters',<sup>288</sup> stressed the importance of the corporation finding 'another smart animation partner',<sup>289</sup> and quoted the thoughts of former executive Roy Disney, who predicted that an end to the relationship with Pixar 'would prove harmful to Disney.'<sup>290</sup> The New York Times was similarly anxious about the studio's post-Pixar future, with Laura Holson writing that Disney 'now must prove that it can remain a powerhouse in animation on its own,' and that it would be facing two 'formidable foes' in Pixar and Dreamworks SKG.<sup>291</sup> The prevailing opinion among the American media was that while neither party stood to come out of the disagreement in a better position than they previously were in, it was Disney that would really struggle to cope.

Jobs' decision to look for alternative partners appears to have stemmed from a prolonged period of disagreement between the studios. Conversations over the handling of sequels and character rights proved to be on-going flashpoints, but in the media, one of the primary ways in which this industrial feud had played out

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<sup>288</sup> Carl DiOrio, 'A Disney broadside', Daily Variety, 4<sup>th</sup> February 2004, p.8.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

<sup>290</sup> Carl DiOrio, 'Eisner's Animated Angst', Variety, 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2004, p.9.

<sup>291</sup> Laura Holson, 'Pixar to find its own way as Disney partnership ends', New York Times, 31<sup>st</sup> January 2004, p.C1.

was as a clash between Jobs and Michael Eisner. In his biography of Jobs, Walter Isaacson describes both men as ‘strong-willed’ and reluctant to compromise, personalities that exaggerated other tensions that emerged between them.<sup>292</sup> In February 2002, for example, Eisner publicly accused Apple’s iTunes campaign, ‘Rip. Burn. Mix’, of promoting theft, misunderstanding the meaning of ‘rip’ in this context, and severely angering Jobs in the process.<sup>293</sup> Their feuding had played out in increasingly public (i.e. media) spaces from the summer of 2002 onwards, with Eisner invariably being presented as the least reasonable, the more antagonistic, and the most ‘corporate’ in a pejorative sense. In hindsight, it likely that these disagreements resulted from their incompatibly similar attitude towards other people, although there does seem to have been a curious relationship between their reputation and that of the company they represented within these discourses. Certainly, this dispute between Disney and Pixar made more sense to the press as a dispute between individuals, not companies, but both Eisner and Jobs came to be seen as embodiments of their respective companies.<sup>294</sup> It seems important, however, that unlike Eisner and Disney, Jobs’ pre-existing reputation had created a degree of separation between brand and CEO. Thus, despite functioning as the embodiment or representative figurehead of Pixar at this time, the layering of reputations here allowed for association but with limited contamination; negative qualities, such as Jobs’ anger and refusal to learn from Disney, came across as an individual personality trait, while his commitment to quality and attention to detail were able to be positively linked to Pixar. This of course ties in strongly with the layering of reputations discussed in the previous chapter. However, the rather more selective

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<sup>292</sup> Walter Isaacson, *Steve Jobs* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2012), p.244.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

<sup>294</sup> Chapter 5 will discuss in more detail some of the ways in which places, objects or people can potentially function as canvases for brand reification, allowing abstract ideas and associations to effectively become three-dimensional.

relationship between corporate and individual reputation here is indicative of the sense of certainty and consistency that the Pixar brand had acquired in the intervening years.

Eisner's status had not been helped by the very public exit of studio chairman Roy Disney just a few months earlier, along with fellow board member Stanley Gold. Steve Jobs was hardly known for his willingness to compromise, but the media's attitude towards Eisner was consistently worse, writing about him in terms that tended to tread a line between contempt and pity. Gold alleged that Eisner treated Pixar as 'second-class citizens,' while others compared his relationship with Jobs as 'paternalistic' rather than a partnership.<sup>295</sup> The Gazette went on to note that as well as initially resisting the theatrical release of Toy Story 2 (John Lasseter, 1999), Eisner had predicted that Finding Nemo would serve as something of a 'reality check' for Pixar, a prediction that was spectacularly proven wrong when the film was eventually released.<sup>296</sup> Of course, those sentiments were never intended to be made public, having originated from a private email from Eisner to the rest of the Disney board, which was in turn leaked to the press. Over time, as incidents such as this combined with the respective studios' output, the image of Eisner that built up in the media was as a bitter, deluded man in control of a company that had lost touch with the values it once held dear.<sup>297</sup> Not only had he overseen a severe slump in the quality of Disney's output across multiple forms of media, Eisner was also guilty of not giving Pixar his full support. The fact that he doubted them twice only to be proven wrong twice only enhances the respective reputations of the two parties. Add to this the assertion that Eisner publically

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<sup>295</sup> Richard Verrier and Claudia Eller, 'Disney, Pixar split was personal', The Gazette (Montreal, Quebec), 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2004, p.B4.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

<sup>297</sup> Finding Nemo became Pixar's biggest hit so far, both at the box office and on DVD, placing Piar

bragged about the leverage he had over Pixar, and the image of the man that one is left with is far from positive.

When Roy Disney left Disney in late-November 2003, he arranged to have his letter of resignation hand-delivered to Michael Eisner as it was simultaneously being faxed to the national media.<sup>298</sup> In it, he cited several reasons for his resignation, essentially comprising a list of the numerous failures Eisner had either overseen or been directly responsible for since the mid-1990s. Among these alleged failures were: an inability to revive the ABC Family Channel; micromanagement leading to a decline in employee morale; timid investments; allowing a continued exodus of creative talent; and the failure to maintain relationships with partners such as Pixar and Miramax.<sup>299</sup> In relation to the Disney brand however, there is one point on the list that stands out, which I quote here in full: “The perception by all of our stakeholders – consumers, investors, employees, distributors and suppliers – that the company is rapacious, soul-less, and always looking for the “quick buck” rather than the long-term value which is leading to a loss of public trust.”<sup>300</sup> As defined by marketing and business analysts and scholars, it is the level of this ‘trust’ that is central to the strength of a brand, and a lack of trust equals a weak brand.

Ratatouille (Brad Bird, 2007) appears to serve as an interesting example of the gulf in Pixar and Disney’s respective brand strengths, since the kitchen at Gusteau’s restaurant was read by a number of viewers as a metaphor for the relationship between Disney and Pixar. In this interpretation, Chef Skinner stands in for the figure of Michael Eisner, spoiling the legacy of his predecessor (Gusteau/Walt Disney) by abandoning his philosophies and releasing a range of

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<sup>298</sup> Price, p.233.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid, pp.233-4.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid.

poor quality products (frozen ready meals/straight-to-video sequels.<sup>301</sup> As well as Roy Disney and Stanley Gold, former Disney employee Henry Caroselli publically declared his opposition to the studio's business practices, arguing in his 2004 book Cult of the Mouse that the studio was emblematic of contemporary corporate greed.<sup>302</sup> The departure of Roy Disney served only to underline how far the studio had strayed from the industrial and creative practices associated with Walt Disney himself. They had, to put it another way, apparently forgotten how to be Disney.

## Conclusion

What are the implications of this negative press for the Pixar brand and the critical consensus that has developed around the studio? And why should the representation of Disney have any significant impact on any other company or studio? I would argue that the answer rests with oppositional brand loyalty – the notion that ones attachment to a particular brand can be expressed as the rejection of or opposition to a competitor. As Albert Muniz and Lawrence Hamer have argued, such interactions serve to reinforce existing understandings of the brands in question, through the publically visible competition between rival brands.<sup>303</sup> While academic work on marketing and brands has historically prioritised consumption in

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<sup>301</sup> This was not a mainstream debate, but certainly there are a large number of blog posts and online forum threads that entertain this idea. See, for example, Lucas R., 'Ratatouille as a metaphorical history of Disney and Pixar', Journal of Cartoon Overanalyzations, 11<sup>th</sup> May 2008 <<http://cartoonoveranalyzations.com/2008/05/11/ratatouille-as-a-metaphorical-history-of-disney-and-pixar/>>, Retrieved 20<sup>th</sup> March 2011; Mark-E, response to 'Gustaue's [sic]: A Disney Metaphor?', Pixar Planet, 24<sup>th</sup> January 2009, 7.49am <<http://www.pixarplanet.com/forums/viewtopic.php?f=22&t=3239&start=30>>, Retrieved 20<sup>th</sup> March 2011; Synian, 'A Short History of Pixar Through Ratatouille (2007)', Reverie, 9<sup>th</sup> April 2013 <<http://synian.wordpress.com/2013/04/09/a-short-history-of-pixar-through-ratatouille/>>, Retrieved 15<sup>th</sup> April 2013; Carol Platt Liebau, 'Ratatouille: Art Imitates Life Imitates Business?', CarollLiebau, 29<sup>th</sup> July 2007 <<http://carolliebau.blogspot.co.uk/2007/07/ratatouille-art-imitates-life-imitates.html>>, Retrieved 15<sup>th</sup> April 2013.

<sup>302</sup> Henry M. Caroselli, Cult of the Mouse: Can we stop corporate greed from killing innovation in America? (Berkeley, California: Ten Speed Press, 2004). For a detailed historical account of the power struggle at Disney, see James B. Stewart, Disney War: The Battle for the Magic Kingdom (London: Pocket Books, 2006).

<sup>303</sup> Albert M. Muniz, Jr. and Lawrence O. Hamer, 'Us versus Them: Oppositional brand loyalty and the Cola wars', Advances in Consumer Research, 28 (2001), pp.355-61.

terms of ‘conversion rates’, this chapter has highlighted the extent to which the meaning of brands function in symbolic ways, and therefore *outside* of the context of consumption.<sup>304</sup> Observable across the American national press then, Disney’s increasingly negative publicity cemented the idea that Michael Eisner, and by extension the studio he was in control of, had become greedy and lost its creative edge. Pixar, on the other hand, had for several years worked closely enough to Disney to be associated with them, but was distinct enough for the two brands to remain separate.

The coverage of the conflict and incongruities between the studios ultimately encouraged the emergence of a series of discourses that had been building for some time, and reinforced the Pixar brand in the eyes of the journalists. Although these differences were eventually resolved, the merging of the two companies initially did little to damage Pixar’s reputation, which for some years at least, managed to remain a distinct corporate auteur whose ownership was presented as being almost tangential.<sup>305</sup>

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<sup>304</sup> Margaret Hogg has conducted some excellent work on this subject. See, for example, Margaret K. Hogg, Emma N. Banister and Christopher A. Stephenson, ‘Mapping symbolic (anti-) consumption’, Journal of Business Research, 62 (2009), pp.148-59; Margaret K. Hogg, ‘Anti-Constellations: Exploring the Impact of Negation on Consumption’, Journal of Marketing Management, 14 (1998), pp.133-58; Margaret K. Hogg, Emma N. Banister and Christopher A. Stephenson, ‘Mapping symbolic (anti-) consumption’, Journal of Business Research, 62 (2009), pp.148-59.

<sup>305</sup> The conclusion of this thesis reflects on how this dynamic has shifted during the time that I have been researching and writing Pixar. As I write this in 2013, it does appear that the Disney brand has started to bleed into Pixar to some extent, something which did not seem likely after the success of Toy Story 3 in 2010.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **-Almost Pixarian- Genre, rivalry, and emerging discourses of quality**

Press reviews for any new film or television show will invariably seek to supplement their evaluative comments by providing some context to their subject. Often this will involve discussing its adherence to (or deviation from) genre conventions, or drawing comparisons to other texts with similar narratives, representations, or visual styles. In the autumn of 1998, however, two films were released in American cinemas that bore a particularly striking resemblance to each other. Released just seven weeks apart, DreamWorks SKG/Pacific Data Images' Antz (Eric Darnell and Tim Johnson, 1998) and Disney/Pixar's A Bug's Life (John Lasseter, 1998) were both animated movies, both computer-generated, and both told stories of anthropomorphised ants who had become dissatisfied with their relationship to the rest of the colony.<sup>306</sup> It was of little surprise, then, when critics drew comparisons between the two, using each in turn to pass judgement on the strengths and weaknesses of the other.

In the New York Times for instance, Janet Maslin called them 'uncannily similar',<sup>307</sup> while Todd McCarthy of Variety described A Bug's Life as 'the second good computer animated ant adventure in as many months'.<sup>308</sup> McCarthy had praised Antz, but wrote that it 'doesn't possess the potential to live up to' Toy Story, which at that point was still the only major computer-generated animation feature to have been released.<sup>309</sup> A Bug's Life was still several weeks away, but critics

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<sup>306</sup> DreamWorks SKG is hereafter abbreviated to DreamWorks, and Pacific Data Images to PDI.

<sup>307</sup> Janet Maslin, 'Out-of-step Ant Sails Out To Save The Hill', New York Times, 25<sup>th</sup> November 1998, p.E1.

<sup>308</sup> Todd McCarthy, "'Bug's" Strives for 'Top of Ant Hill', Variety, 16-22<sup>nd</sup> November 1998, p.33.

<sup>309</sup> Todd McCarthy, 'D'works Throws a CGI Picnic with "Antz"', Variety, 21-27<sup>th</sup> September 1998, p.104. One other CG animated film had been released in the intervening period, but *outside* of the



nevertheless sought to use it as a basis for comparison, writing that ‘Disney’s bugs look funnier, funkier and more traditionally cartoonish than the more authentically drawn arthropods of “Antz”’<sup>310</sup> From the very beginning of DreamWorks’ involvement in animation, then, the studio’s reputation worked in tandem with the reputation(s) of Disney and Pixar. To what extent, then, is the reverse true? Is it possible to trace the shifting meaning(s) of the Pixar brand name by looking at its closest competitors? It is this relationship between competing studios that will form the basis of this chapter, as I seek to interrogate the generic discourses involved in the early years of CG animation.

I begin by looking more closely at the critical responses to Antz and A Bug’s Life, examining the extent to which critics pitted the two films against each other, and what that rivalry was said to entail. Both films were the products of relatively unknown companies vying for a foothold in Hollywood. Despite the critical and commercial success of Toy Story three years earlier, Pixar’s reputation as an animation studio was still very much overshadowed by its more illustrious production partner, Disney. DreamWorks on the other hand had only existed since 1994,<sup>311</sup> and until the release of Antz, the studio had only ever been responsible for live action productions.<sup>312</sup> PDI, who carried out the animation work, were even less well known.<sup>313</sup> At what point did Pixar, to some extent buried under the weight of

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United States: the Brazilian feature, Cassiopéia (Clóvis Vieira, 1996).

<sup>310</sup> Rita Kempley, ‘Thoracic Park: Spielberg’s Animated “Antz” is No Picnic’, Washington Post, 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1998, p.D1.

<sup>311</sup> For more on the history of DreamWorks, see Nicole LaPorte, The Men Who Would Be King: An almost epic tale of moguls, movies, and a company called DreamWorks (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010).

<sup>312</sup> I am by no means suggesting that DreamWorks had not had any success up to that point. Among the studio’s releases prior to Antz were Deep Impact (Mimi Leder, 1998) and Saving Private Ryan (Steven Spielberg, 1998), the latter of which was the highest grossing domestic release of the year. See Anon., ‘1998 Domestic Grosses’, Box Office Mojo <<http://boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?yr=1998&p=.htm>>, Accessed 10<sup>th</sup> January 2011.

<sup>313</sup> For a historical account of the various companies experimenting with computer graphics technology in the 1970s and 1980s, see Michael Rubin, Droidmaker: George Lucas and the digital revolution (Gainesville, FL: Triad Publishing Company, 2006).

critical debates surrounding Disney, emerge as a creative force in its own right? And how did we arrive at a time when Pixar is used as shorthand for the best that animation has to offer? The chapter aims to answer these questions by analysing reviews of rival studios' films. I use the Shrek and Ice Age franchises as case studies, tracing the way in which the reputation of Hollywood animation has shifted. Ultimately I argue that the critical reception of these generic rivals informs, and is informed by, Pixar's reputation. Critics consistently hold the latter studio up as a benchmark against which all other animation should be measured, and in doing so, draw distinctions between 'mainstream' and 'quality' animation.

### **DreamWorks versus Disney?: Antz and A Bug's Life**

Antz had originally been scheduled for a March 1999 release, but an announcement in June 1998 indicated that this was to be pushed forward by five months to 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1998. It would now beat A Bug's Life to the box office. This came at a time when a number of national and regional newspapers were commenting on the proliferation of apparent film 'pairings'. 1997 for example had seen the close release of two volcano/disaster movies – Dante's Peak (Roger Donaldson, 1997) and Volcano (Mick Jackson, 1997) – and two films set in Tibet – Seven Years in Tibet (Jean-Jacques Annaud, 1997) and Kundun (Martin Scorsese, 1997). These were followed by two asteroid-themed global disaster pictures in 1998 – Deep Impact (Mimi Leder, 1998) and Armageddon (Michael Bay, 1998).<sup>314</sup> As Konrad Yakabuski of the Globe and Mail noted, this was not an especially new phenomenon: 'Hollywood studios, of course, have a long history of clambering onto the same bandwagon, which often results in copycat films. The track record

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<sup>314</sup> The similarities in narrative between The Truman Show (Peter Weir, 1998) and EDtv (Ron Howard, 1999) led to the continuation of this debate into 1999. Both featured protagonists that were, to varying degrees, the reluctant stars of their own reality TV shows, battling for a life away from the cameras.

generally shows that the first of two similarly themed films to get released has the better chance of scoring big at the box office.<sup>315</sup> Marketing strategist Jack Trout agreed with this latter assertion, arguing that ‘It’s always the first one that captures the hearts, the souls and the eyeballs of the marketplace ... unless there’s something dramatic or unique in the second one, which is rarely the case.’<sup>316</sup> By bringing forward the release date of Antz, DreamWorks were therefore optimising their chances of a healthy box office performance, at least according to prevailing marketing wisdom. Some observers saw the move as being significant for a different reason, though.

Elizabeth Snead and Susan Wloszczyna wrote in the USA Today that, ‘films with dueling themes often jockey for position because the first one out usually wins at the box office, but this film may have a rivalry behind it.’<sup>317</sup> It is this idea of rivalry that will be explored in this chapter, as I seek to unpack some of the ways in which Pixar’s reputation and identity is demonstrably tied to the discourses surrounding *other* studios. Actually, the conflict being referred to in Snead and Wloszczyna’s example is the relationship between DreamWorks’ co-founder Jeffrey Katzenberg, and Disney, where he had previously been in charge of the animation unit. Katzenberg had overseen the resurgence in Disney animation that occurred between the late-1980s and mid-1990s, but was forced to resign in 1994 following a dispute with CEO Michael Eisner.<sup>318</sup> As a result, the press were quick to describe DreamWorks’ animation output as a challenge to his former employers.

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<sup>315</sup> Konrad Yakabuski, ‘Truman Show has Quebec cousin SEEING DOUBLE’, Globe and Mail, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1998, Arts, p.C1.

<sup>316</sup> Quoted in Andy Seiler, ‘The sky’s falling! The sky’s falling! Dual Global Disasters Reflect Trend Of Doubling Up On Film Ideas’, USA Today, 7<sup>th</sup> May 1998, Life, p.4D.

<sup>317</sup> Elizabeth Snead and Susan Wloszczyna, ‘DreamWorks getting antsy with “Antz” date’, USA Today, 25<sup>th</sup> June 1998, p.1D.

<sup>318</sup> For a comprehensive account of Katzenberg’s relationship with Eisner, see James B. Stewart, Disney War: The Battle for the Magic Kingdom (London: Pocket Books, 2006).

Sources say [Katzenberg] has shown near obsessive zeal in his bid to create the first true competition for Disney in animation. It's no coincidence that DreamWorks' third pic out of the gate will be "Mouse Hunt," which could be taken as a not-so-veiled reference to his former bosses. For its part, Disney is expected to bring out its own heavy artillery with the opening of its second Disney/Pixar 3-D computer-animated project, "A Bug's Life," against "Prince of Egypt." Both are slated for release sometime around Thanksgiving next year. "It would be like Disney to open it on the same day as Katzenberg's film," said one marketing chief at another studio. "There's no love lost between the two."<sup>319</sup>

It is important to notice here that it is Prince of Egypt (Brenda Chapman, Steve Hickner and Simon Wells, 1998), not Antz, that was initially seen as the focal point for this alleged rivalry. It was a view corroborated by the New York Times, who wrote that Prince of Egypt 'was viewed as a challenge to Disney's hegemony in animation.'<sup>320</sup> What this implies is that the distinctions that were drawn between Antz, A Bug's Life and the studios behind them had as much to do with industrial conflict as with the individual merits of the films themselves. The similarities in subject matter made them an apt pairing, but the above evidence suggests that they would have been seen as rivals even if their narratives had differed wildly. They were matches in terms of genre, and therefore competing for the same audiences.

In light of Antz's schedule alteration, a spokesman for DreamWorks stated that "The movies are so different. [The timing of the release of] "Bug's Life" was never really a consideration."<sup>321</sup> Yet this did not prevent the press from presenting the move as a brave statement of intent in this ongoing corporate dispute. An article in the Daily News of Los Angeles quoted one analyst who said, 'I'm very impressed that DreamWorks has that much confidence and it shows that we're entering a new

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<sup>319</sup> Dan Cox, 'Dream Schemes: Pricey New Studio Ready to Roll Out Pix', Daily Variety, 18<sup>th</sup> September 1997, p.1. Note that Prince of Egypt would have been DreamWorks' first animated feature film had the studio stuck to its original release schedule. After Antz was brought forward, Prince of Egypt was pushed back, and was eventually released domestically in December 1998.

<sup>320</sup> Bernard Weinraub, "Antz" Jumps The Gun On Disney's "Bug's Life", New York Times, 25<sup>th</sup> June 1998, p.E8.

<sup>321</sup> Andrew Hindes, 'D'works Ups "Antz" launch', 25<sup>th</sup> June 1998, Daily Variety, p.5.

golden age of animation with Disney and DreamWorks going toe-to-toe.<sup>322</sup>

Hindsight, however, tells us that this rivalry did not transpire as predicted, and eventually it was Pixar that became the animation yardstick that Disney had once been.

### **A note on method**

Before surveying the attitudes of critics towards Pixar's rivals, it is worth drawing attention to the methodological barriers that this focus presents us with. Firstly, defining who or what counts as a 'rival' or 'competitor' is not as straightforward as it might appear. Commercially speaking, Pixar is in direct competition for audiences with *every* major Hollywood studio. This includes parent company Disney, to whom they are ultimately accountable, despite retaining creative control over the production of their films. Should a chapter such as this therefore be looking at reviews of every major studio release since *A Bug's Life* in 1998? Doing so would involve collating and analysing reviews for so many disparate films that picking up on relevant patterns of discourse would prove difficult, and would leave little room for detailed qualitative analysis of contextual debates. What is needed is an approach that focuses on a manageable sample of films that are part of similar discourses to Pixar, allowing analysis in both a synchronic *and* a diachronic manner, so that the studios' shifting reputations can be traced *across* time, as well as at specific moments in time.

In talking about Pixar's competition in this chapter, my working definition of 'rival' refers only to rival *animation* studios. This taxonomical decision is not without its problems. The cultural status of animation as both a genre and medium

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<sup>322</sup> Dave McNary, 'Allen Deal May Make Investor DreamWorks' Top Shareholder', *Daily News of Los Angeles*, 9<sup>th</sup> July 1998. Retrieved via LexisNexis Academic, 10<sup>th</sup> January 2012.

means that labelling Pixar an animation studio, as opposed to a film (production) studio for example, implicitly situates its output within a very specific range of values and expectations. Jason Mittell has argued in relation to television, for instance, that animation has been stigmatised as children's entertainment since the 1960s.<sup>323</sup> Moreover, this decision could at first glance be seen to undermine my argument in other chapters of this thesis, that Pixar has come to be recognised as 'more than' an animation studio. Up (Pete Docter, 2009) and Toy Story 3 (Lee Unkrich, 2011) were after all included in the Academy Awards' Best Picture category for their respective years, nominated alongside far more 'traditional' Oscar fare such as The Hurt Locker (Kathryn Bigelow, 2009) and The King's Speech (Tom Hooper, 2010). To some extent, then, Pixar has managed to transcend its status as a 'mere' animation studio. Yet in order to trace the discourses involved in this cultural ascent, we must necessarily restrict our analysis to the reputations of other animation studios, providing us with a sense of what Pixar has been seen to move away *from*.

Is it sensible to compare studios from different countries, or working in different forms of animation? After all, the definition of 'animation' could easily be adapted to encompass companies as diverse as the cel animation of Japan's Studio Ghibli, the stop motion work produced by Aardman Animation in the UK, or the performance-capture work carried out at New Zealand-based Weta Digital. Such comparisons would undoubtedly be worthwhile. Critical discourses surrounding anime in the United States and United Kingdom have for example drawn frequent

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<sup>323</sup> Jason Mittell, 'The Great Saturday Morning Exile: Scheduling cartoons on television's periphery in the 1960s' in Carol A. Stabile and Mark Harrison, eds. Prime Time Animation: Television animation and American culture (London: Routledge, 2004), pp.33-54. Also see Jason Mittell, 'Cartoon Realism: Genre Mixing and the Cultural Life of The Simpsons', The Velvet Light Trap, 47 (Spring 2001), pp.15-28.

associations with discourses of art cinema and cult fandom as much as animation.<sup>324</sup>

A cross-cultural comparison, however, would make it extremely difficult to distinguish whether differences in studio reputation were attributable to their output, discourses relating to their respective countries or national cinemas, or to the varying forms of animation in which they work.

Pixar's strong performances at the American box office do provide us with another potentially useful reference point. All but one of the studio's thirteen feature films to date has been among the ten highest grossing movies of the year, with the only exception being Ratatouille (Brad Bird, 2007), which placed eleventh and still grossed more than \$200 million domestically. Accordingly, it seems appropriate to choose rival films that are competing for a similar share of film audiences. Yet a focus on American animated movies that were also box office hits still leaves us with a potentially very large sample of movies. Even taking into consideration Disney animation's resurgent success in the early 1990s, the decade preceding Toy Story saw only six animated features make it into the domestic box office Top 20. Toy Story's success marks a turning point for animation, with twenty films being released in the decade that followed, and a further twenty-six in the five years between 2006 and 2010 inclusive.<sup>325</sup> By all accounts, the market for animation (particularly computer-generated) has expanded significantly since the release of Pixar's first feature.<sup>326</sup> While all thirteen of Pixar's features to date have placed

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<sup>324</sup> See, for example, Susan J. Napier, From Impressionism to Anime: Japan as Fantasy and Fan Cult in the Mind of the West (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

<sup>325</sup> This figure includes fully animated features only, and thus could be even higher if one were to include films that used a combination of live action and animation/motion capture, such as Alice in Wonderland (Tim Burton, 2010) or Avatar (James Cameron, 2009) for example. The only non-Disney (fully) animated film to make the domestic Top 20 in the decade preceding Toy Story was Universal's An American Tail (Don Bluth, 1988). Anon., 'Movie Box Office results by year', Box Office Mojo <<http://boxofficemojo.com/yearly/>>, Retrieved 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2011.

<sup>326</sup> I stress that I am not drawing a direct causal link between the release of Toy Story and the subsequent improved fortunes of animation at the American box office. One could easily take Aladdin (Ron Clements and John Musker, 1992) or The Lion King (Roger Allers and Bob Minkoff, 1994) as the focal point of these figures, and the trend would still be just as noticeable. Toy Story can

comfortably in the annual US Top 20, this means that, between 1995 and 2010, well over thirty films have been released by rival studios such as Dreamworks Animation, Blue Sky Studios and Sony Pictures Animation among others.<sup>327</sup>

In summary, then, this chapter's definition of what constitutes a rival film for Pixar is based on finding a comparable sample, and hinges on three clear criteria:<sup>328</sup>

1. The films must all be animated. Pixar's films may have been talked about as being 'more than' animation, but the discourses of quality that have developed around them are nevertheless intrinsically linked to the medium in which they are produced.
2. They must be the products of Hollywood studios. Comparing Pixar to Studio Ghibli or Aardman Animation films would mean that cultural differences and attitudes to non-American cinemas would need to be accounted for.
3. They must be comparable in terms of production budgets and box office performance. It would not be fair to compare reviews of a two million dollar movie with reviews of a two hundred million dollar movie, as the expectations of the critic would inevitably be very different.

With these criteria in mind, the remainder of this chapter will focus on the critical reception of the Shrek and Ice Age franchises, produced by

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be said to have proven the viability of computer animation as a medium that could potentially be successful at the box office, although it would still be a number of years (which also saw films such as *Antz*, *A Bug's Life*, and *Shrek* add to its reputation) before CG animation completely replaced cel animation at the major studios.

<sup>327</sup> This trend shows no sign of slowing down, with 6 of the US box office Top 20 in 2011 being fully computer animated, followed by 5 in 2012. Ibid.

<sup>328</sup> These criteria could certainly be applied to the study of rivalry in cinema or brands more generally. Analyses borrowing this model could define rivals and/or narrow down research samples by searching for similarities across three criteria: (1) generic categorisation, or product category in the case of non-media brands; (2) industrial and/or production context; (3) economic context, in terms of investment and revenues.



DreamWorks/PDI and Blue Sky Studios/20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox respectively. The two series constitute eight films in total – four in each series – and all were released in the years between 2001 and 2012. All but the fourth Ice Age film – Ice Age: Continental Drift (Steve Martino and Mike Thurmeier, 2012), which placed 16<sup>th</sup> – were among the ten highest grossing films of the year at the US box office, and were made by animation studios that, during that time period, also produced a number of other animated features that grossed hundreds of millions of dollars. Finally, their status as franchises assures a degree of continuity to the critical discourses within the reviews, making it easier to trace the ways in which specific ideas have developed, changed or disappeared over time.<sup>329</sup>

### **Expectation and Legitimation: Shrek and Ice Age**

Shrek (Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jenson, 2001) met with a cavalcade of praise when it was released in the summer of 2001. Entertainment Weekly described it as ‘a coming of age for DreamWorks, the upstart studio’,<sup>330</sup> the Washington Post stated that it ‘outdoes PDI/DreamWorks’ own “Antz”’,<sup>331</sup> and Variety felt that the ‘scriptwriters [had] let their imaginations go’.<sup>332</sup> Critics were in other words quick to draw attention to the impact it would have on DreamWorks’ reputation, implicitly pointing towards pre-existing question marks surrounding the studio’s ability to produce hits. Shrek’s status as a benchmark in animation (not just in the history of DreamWorks itself) can be seen ten months later, when reviews of Ice Age began to appear. For instance, Elvis Mitchell of the New York Times wrote, ‘Because it lacks

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<sup>329</sup> All reviews are taken from the same sample of publications – the five daily newspapers with the highest circulations that *also* publish regular film reviews, plus Variety and Entertainment Weekly as high selling industry specific publications. Circulation figures correct as of 30<sup>th</sup> September 2011, and collected by the Audit Bureau of Circulation

<<http://abcas3.accessabc.com/ecirc/newstitlesearchus.asp>>, Retrieved 4<sup>th</sup> January 2012.

<sup>330</sup> Lisa Schwarzbaum, ‘Shrek (2001)’, Entertainment Weekly, 18<sup>th</sup> May 2001

<<http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,110072,00.html>>, Retrieved 4<sup>th</sup> January 2012.

<sup>331</sup> Desson Howe, “‘Shrek’: A Funny, Fractured Fairy Tale”, Washington Post, 18<sup>th</sup> May 2001, p.T45

<sup>332</sup> Todd McCarthy, ‘Shrek’, Daily Variety, 7<sup>th</sup> May 2001, p.4.

the comic sophistication of pictures like “Monsters, Inc.” and “Shrek,” the blandly likable computer-animation extravaganza “Ice Age” actually seems like a fossil, a relic from a bygone era.<sup>333</sup> It is worth pointing out that Mitchell’s comments were far more negative than most critics (who for the most part enjoyed the film), but the hierarchy of quality that he refers to was a common theme throughout reviews of Ice Age. Comments appearing in Entertainment Weekly (‘never matches ... the heartfelt heft of “Shrek,” but it’s an antic and sweet-spirited pleasure’)<sup>334</sup> and Variety (‘doesn’t attempt to be knowing or self-satirical (a la “Shrek”) ... but there are many clever touches and tongue-in-cheek allusions’)<sup>335</sup> for example showed slight variations in their overall evaluations of the film, but, like Mitchell, both used Shrek as a basis for comparison. What this points towards is a commonly held assumption regarding Shrek’s reputation, which at that time was often employed as shorthand for quality family entertainment.<sup>336</sup>

Mitchell’s closing statement, that Ice Age felt to him like ‘a relic from a bygone era,’ is also worthy of further attention. The fact that critics could not agree on this issue is less important than the fact it was being debated at all. Shrek had become known not simply for its perceived quality, but because it represented something new and ‘hip’.<sup>337</sup> Animation, it seems, had changed over the preceding

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<sup>333</sup> Elvis Mitchell, ‘Woolly Mammoths and Tigers and Sloths, Oh My!’, New York Times, 15<sup>th</sup> March 2002, p.E22.

<sup>334</sup> Owen Gleiberman, ‘Ice Age (2002)’, Entertainment Weekly, 13<sup>th</sup> March 2002 <<http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,217132,00.html>>, Retrieved 4<sup>th</sup> January 2012.

<sup>335</sup> Joe Leydon, ‘Ice Age’, Daily Variety, 18<sup>th</sup> March 2002, p.10.

<sup>336</sup> Note that Shrek was not the only point of comparison here; Pixar’s own Monsters Inc. (Pete Docter, 2001) also featured several times in these debates, but usually in a list of other films. Shrek was employed as shorthand in this way with greater frequency and often on its own, suggesting that it was the computer-animated film that served critics’ purposes most effectively. Of course, ‘quality’ is surely not the only factor at play here, and the fact that the film’s artistic merit was matched by its cultural ubiquity is also likely to be significant.

<sup>337</sup> Note the similarity between this and some of the reviews of Toy Story mentioned in Chapter 2. In particular, see Lewis Beale, ‘At Long Last Disney Is Shooting For The Hip’, Daily News (New York), 20<sup>th</sup> November 1995, p.36. Also consider Beale’s decision to cite two *television* examples to make his point about the shifting appeal of animated *film*. Not only is this a reflection of media looking towards other media for inspiration in its storytelling, distribution and marketing, but his choice of texts is interesting in another way. While some excellent academic work has been done on

years. As Glenn Lovell put it, ‘Obviously aware that the Nickelodeon set’s taste in animation has evolved a bunch since *Sponge Bob* [sic] and the *Rugrats*, the people behind “*Ice Age*” have left “*The Land Before Time*” far behind for something a bit more nervy and “now.”’<sup>338</sup> Joe Leydon even suggested that the ‘attempt to be knowing or self-satirical’ would constitute ‘ticking off the list of animated-feature plot conventions.’<sup>339</sup> Describing these qualities as ‘plot conventions’ may be attributable to a clumsy choice of wording in writing the article, but it also points towards the importance of a very particular comic tone in animation at that time. Leydon went on to praise *Ice Age* because there is ‘no time wasted on generic production numbers set to blandly kid-friendly tunes,’ for which ‘parents ... will be eternally grateful.’<sup>340</sup> The discourses involved in legitimating computer animation, then, reveal a desire for the genre to broaden its target market, and move beyond its association with childishness.

These debates are highly reminiscent of the discourses highlighted in Chapter 2 of this thesis, with *Toy Story* also having received considerable praise for having broken away from animation conventions. The difference between that moment in time and the release of *Shrek* and *Ice Age*, however, is that the latter films were not just seen to be breaking away from animation conventions, but specifically from *Disney* conventions. In *Shrek*’s case, this was a far smaller leap on the part of critics, who were delighted by what they saw as the clear mockery of Disney and its history. *Variety*’s Robert Koehler for instance wrote in his review of the DVD that,

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prime time animation aimed at adults audiences – see, for example, Carol A. Stabile and Mark Harrison, eds. *Prime Time Animation - SpongeBob SquarePants* and *The Rugrats* are both Nickelodeon shows. Their primary target market is still children, but the shows do not cater exclusively towards them, and have proven just as popular with adult audiences too, much like Pixar.

<sup>338</sup> Glenn Lovell, ““*Ice Age*” Blends Beauty, Action, Fun”, *San Jose Mercury News*, 15<sup>th</sup> March 2002, p.EY8.

<sup>339</sup> Leydon, p.10.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid.

[Director Andrew] Adamson sounds awfully disingenuous when he says that Lord Farquaat's castle/theme park was inspired by a combination of Mussolini's Rome, Albert Speer, the Hearst Castle, the Universal City theme park and Vegas, when everybody knows that this was Katzenberg's pointed lampoon of Disney and Disneyland.<sup>341</sup>

Roger Ebert agreed, writing that, 'No doubt [the recognisable Disney characters], and a little dig at DisneyWorld, were inspired by feelings DreamWorks partner Jeffrey Katzenberg has nourished since his painful departure from Disney'<sup>342</sup> Whether or not Katzenberg really was responsible for Shrek's numerous alleged Disney references is open to debate. Indeed, the apportioning of credit or blame for specific ideas represents a perennial problem of authorship studies. PDI employee Penney Finkelman Cox does however confirm that, 'Jeffrey was very, very involved with "Shrek"; there wasn't a frame of that movie that he wasn't in the cutting room to see. But the advantage you had at PDI is that you had five days [each week] without him in your face.'<sup>343</sup> Any sense of ambiguity was all but ignored by the press, and ultimately Katzenberg's personal history and acrimonious relationship with Disney informed much of what was said about Shrek. In fact, every publication within my research sample mentioned what they saw as thinly veiled taunts at Disney, who in turn received no sympathy for being the butt of the jokes.

Elvis Mitchell was particularly scathing, arguing that 'Disney created the fairytales that were 90 percent merchandising and 10 percent boredom.'<sup>344</sup> He went on to state that, 'the cycle of kiddie musicals typified by "Aladdin" seems to be drawing to a close, possibly because video stores have walls of these animated sing-

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<sup>341</sup> Robert Koehler, 'Shrek', Variety, 12-18<sup>th</sup> November 2001, p.30.

<sup>342</sup> Roger Ebert, 'Shrek', Chicago Sun-Times, 18<sup>th</sup> May 2001  
<<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20010518/REVIEWS/105180305>>, Retrieved 4<sup>th</sup> January 2012.

<sup>343</sup> Quoted in LaPorte, p.277.

<sup>344</sup> Elvis Mitchell, 'FILM REVIEW: So Happily Ever After, Beauty and the Beasts', New York Times, 16<sup>th</sup> May 2001, p.E1.

along films already.<sup>345</sup> This implies that part of his problem with Disney animation was their perceived ubiquity, which in turn has connotations of mass production and commercialism, which are seen as enemies of creativity. Roger Ebert was the only critic who expressed any sense of scepticism over Shrek's Disney allusions, but only did so in order to dismiss the rumour that the film's antagonist, Lord Farquaad, was modelled on Michael Eisner.<sup>346</sup> Nobody challenged the far-from-flattering nature of these representations, with the only debate being whether or not it could be described as 'playful'.

The notion that good animation equals good *family* entertainment is strongly evident across reviews of Shrek and Ice Age, both of which were praised for their ability to appeal to a very wide audience. Desson Howe of the Washington Post said of Shrek that, 'While kids can chortle at Farquaad torturing the Gingerbread Man in a protracted, cookie-crumbling scene ... grownups can smirk at jokes about Disneyland's character-named parking lots.'<sup>347</sup> Todd McCarthy agreed, describing it as 'a lively romp for kids and an enormously clever comedy for adults.'<sup>348</sup> Ice Age received similar praise, with Glenn Lovell of the San Jose Mercury News arguing that it 'should appeal to parents who are into clever wordplay as well as preschoolers who live for flying-poop jokes.'<sup>349</sup> Such comments are clearly intended as compliments, appear frequently within reviews of popular Hollywood animation, and are often coupled with predictions of healthy box office revenues and/or DVD sales. But this process of legitimization is not without implications for animation more generally.

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<sup>345</sup> Ibid.

<sup>346</sup> Ebert, 'Shrek'.

<sup>347</sup> Howe, p.T45.

<sup>348</sup> Todd McCarthy, 'Shrek', p.4.

<sup>349</sup> Lovell, p.EY8.

Repeated references to a dual or layered appeal, whereby children can enjoy certain aspects of the film, and adults another, reinforces the distinction between the two audiences. It implies that they cannot take pleasure from the same things; an adult would not laugh at slapstick moments or ‘flying-poop jokes’. It is also a distinction that leaves little room for adolescent audiences, who would be unlikely to see themselves as children or adults. In fact, many of these reviews are more specific than simply addressing adults or ‘grownups’, with explicit references to parenthood throughout. Ann Hornaday’s Washington Post review is a vivid example, beginning, ‘The question isn’t whether you’re going to go to “Ice Age.” If you’re the parent of anyone under 10, you are going to “Ice Age.” The question, as it always is with kids’ movies, is whether you should take a good novel and an Itty-Bitty Book Light.’<sup>350</sup> Parenthood therefore functions as the means through which animation is justified for adult consumption, reinforcing the idea that animation is fundamentally ‘childish’. As the subtitle to Lovell’s article put it, Ice Age’s ‘humor means that *even* adults will find it very cool.’<sup>351</sup> How, then, did critics’ notions of ‘quality’ in relation to computer animation change over the subsequent years?

### **The Genrification of Computer Animation**

In his review of the DreamWorks animated feature, How To Train Your Dragon (Dean DeBlois and Chris Sanders, 2010), Richard Corliss of Time magazine wrote that, ‘in its loftier moments, [the film] might almost be called Pixarian’.<sup>352</sup> Apparently seeing little need to explain what exactly this might mean, Corliss does at least point out that he considered the movie to be ‘a little more serious and more

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<sup>350</sup> Ann Hornaday, “‘Ice Age’: Way Cool”, Washington Post, 15<sup>th</sup> March 2002, p.C1.

<sup>351</sup> Lovell, p.EY8. Emphasis added.

<sup>352</sup> Richard Corliss, ‘Dreaming Up “How To Train Your Dragon”’, Time, 5<sup>th</sup> April 2010 <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1975321-2,00.html>>, Retrieved 4<sup>th</sup> July 2011.

ambitious than the signature DreamWorks films'.<sup>353</sup> His words are clearly intended to be complimentary, and yet implicitly position the 'signature' DreamWorks film as one of comparatively poor quality. Pixar films are, by extension, inherently *more* 'serious' and 'ambitious'.

As I have shown in previous chapters, Pixar is no stranger to being praised by critics and journalists, with compliments coming from a variety of industries and publications. The company's early years saw the studio develop a reputation as an industry leader in computer graphics technology, but with little agreement about how such technologies should or would be applied in the future. Even after the release of its first feature film and the subsequent sale of its hardware division, Pixar continued to be praised for its technological advances as much as its filmmaking success. What Corliss' words demonstrate, however, is that the studio's reputation for quality actually stems in part from discourses that had for several years circulated around the output of other studios. As Rick Altman has argued in his work on film genre, 'what we usually think of as single entities (the studio, the spectator) actually comprise multiple discursive sites.'<sup>354</sup> This clearly applies to Pixar, whose brand clearly exists outside of the output of the studio itself, and regularly dominates discussions of animation that has been produced entirely by other companies.

I chose to focus my analysis in this chapter on the Shrek and Ice Age franchises for the sake of consistency, but it does seem as though reviews of most animated films at this time were telling a similar story: Disney's hold on Hollywood animation was wavering. As Rick Lyman wrote in the New York Times, 'if there is one major difference today from the early 1990s, when Disney was having its

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<sup>353</sup> Ibid.

<sup>354</sup> Rick Altman, Film/Genre (London: BFI, 1999), p.121.

biggest hits, it is that so many other studios have moved into the market.<sup>355</sup> He went on to clarify, however, that these shifts were not simply down to increased competition, but a shift in the stylistic and tonal qualities of the films in question:

The animated films that have clicked with teenage males – the most coveted audience because of their tendency to see favourite films again and again – have been *smart, ironic computer-generated comedies* like “Shrek” and the “Toy Story” films that were somehow able to overcome the perception in teenagers’ minds that they were made for younger children.<sup>356</sup>

Although there was debate among critics as to the value and worth of contemporary animation, most were in agreement that the genre had undergone important changes in recent years, the significance of which went beyond the normalisation of CGI. In one 2006 article in the New York Times, for example, Charles Solomon lamented what he referred to as the rise of ‘cellphone films’. Movies such as Robots (Chris Wedge, 2005), Madagascar (Eric Darnell and Tom McGrath, 2005) and Chicken Little (Mark Dindal, 2005) were, to him, guilty of an overreliance on dialogue for its own sake. He complained that ‘filmmakers and studio executives are afraid to let [characters] be quiet’, citing numerous counter-examples of animation that used dialogue sparingly, if at all.<sup>357</sup> His scope was broad, reaching back to characters like Mickey Mouse, Bugs Bunny and Tom and Jerry, but also referring to more up-to-date examples such as Wallace and Gromit, Les Triplettes de Belleville (Sylvain Chomet, 2003), and the films of Hayao Miyazaki. Solomon’s words point towards a tension between animation as a medium and animation as a genre, almost as though a hitherto undisputed idea had begun to

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<sup>355</sup> Rick Lyman, ‘Box-Office Letdown for Disney Raises Worry About Animation’, New York Times, 5<sup>th</sup> December 2002, p.C1.

<sup>356</sup> Ibid. Emphasis added.

<sup>357</sup> Charles Solomon, ‘Pipe Down, We’re Trying to Watch a Cartoon’, New York Times, 19<sup>th</sup> March 2006 <[http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/19/movies/19solo.html?\\_r=1&pagewanted=print&=>](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/19/movies/19solo.html?_r=1&pagewanted=print&=>), Retrieved 1<sup>st</sup> April 2013.



separate. Clearly animation is itself a category that can be (and has been) defined in a huge variety of ways, but the implication here is of a pre-existing critical consensus regarding what animation meant and what its merits were, at least in Hollywood terms.

The fact that Solomon also mentions Brother Bear (Aaron Blaise and Robert Walker, 2003) and Home on the Range (Will Finn and John Sanford, 2004) confirms that this is not something he sees as being tied exclusively to computer animation, and is a question of broader generic shifts. As Rick Altman argues, genres should not be seen simply as qualities of texts, but as ‘by-products of discursive activity’, and certainly we can see such a discursive struggle pervading the critical reception of animation throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century.<sup>358</sup> No example typifies this shift more than the emergence of the term ‘Shrekification’, used by NPR’s Andrew Lapin in 2011 in relation to Disney’s Winnie the Pooh (Stephen J. Anderson and Don Hall, 2011). He described the film as ‘an antidote to the shrill, snarky Shrek-ification of modern family franchises,’<sup>359</sup> indicating that Shrek’s position as CG animation benchmark had shifted considerably from where it was at the beginning of the decade. The series became diluted by a string of sequels, and pilloried for the biting humour and popular culture references that it was originally lauded for. Importantly, this slide down the cultural hierarchy from ‘quality’ to ‘mainstream’ should not be seen so much as a

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<sup>358</sup> Rick Altman, Film/Genre (1999. London: BFI, 2010), p.120. Altman also notes an interesting distinction between adjective and noun genres, with the former preceding the latter as genres are born and/or reconstructed. Descriptive words from critics and studios (through promotional material, for instance) regarding a small cycle or corpus of films are picked up, recycled, and in time come to define the category itself. See Altman, pp.62-8.

<sup>359</sup> Andrew Lapin, ‘Will Christopher Robin ever grow up?’, NPR, 13<sup>th</sup> July 2011 <<http://www.npr.org/blogs/monkeysee/2011/07/13/137816699/will-christopher-robin-ever-grow-up>>, Retrieved 1<sup>st</sup> April 2013. The use of this term was admittedly fairly limited, and can be found more commonly in blogs than reviews or mainstream press articles. Nevertheless, the way in which it was employed is indicative of the broader sentiments that critics expressed towards the Shrek franchise and DreamWorks Animation, as well as to broader conceptions of ‘mainstream’ animation.

reflection of Shrek, but of computer animation as a whole. The issue was that these discourses were no longer circulating around a limited cycle of films, but a much broader series of industrial and stylistic developments that had come to define the genre itself, even to the extent that Disney ceased producing traditional 2-D cel animation.<sup>360</sup>

This brings us back to Richard Corliss's review of How To Train Your Dragon, and his reference to the 'signature' DreamWorks film. For what is ostensibly a review, Corliss dedicates very little space in his article to a discussion of the movie itself, choosing instead to use it as a mere jumping off point for a vague comparison between DreamWorks and Pixar. His initial observations are complimentary towards both studios, but keen to draw distinctions between them. As he puts it, 'Pixar's features are closer to the old, elevated Disney style, while DreamWorks' films are flat-out cartoons, proud to carry on the fast, cavorting Warner tradition.'<sup>361</sup> This discursive 'othering' of Pixar's rivals is clearly visible throughout the article, as he goes on to state,

DreamWorks movies, made mostly in the Hollywood suburb of Glendale, are team efforts. A Pixar film may have one writer besides the director; it's total auteur handicraft. Most DreamWorks movies credit two directors and several writers, and play like the spiffiest vaudeville. The DreamWorkers aren't in the masterpiece business; they just want to provide an expert good time.<sup>362</sup>

Corliss is explicit about his investment in auteurist discourses here, and there is evidence of other critics responding similarly in relation to the Shrek and Ice Age series. Stephen Hunter's largely negative review of Shrek the Third (Chris

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<sup>360</sup> See, for example, Ben Child, 'Disney Turns Away From Hand-Drawn Animation', The Guardian, 7<sup>th</sup> March 2013 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2013/mar/07/disney-hand-drawn-animation>>, Retrieved 15<sup>th</sup> April 2013.

<sup>361</sup> Corliss, 'Dreaming Up "How to Train Your Dragon"'.  
<sup>362</sup> Ibid.

Miller and Raman Hui, 2007) includes a passage in which he lauds the film's visuals, but does with a sarcastic reference to 'the DreamWorks animators, all 600 of them or whatever'.<sup>363</sup> The fact that directors and writers are discussed far more frequently in reviews of Pixar films than those made by other studios also seems relevant. Granted, this may well be a genuine reflection of the studios' differing approaches to filmmaking, but the centrality of authorship to the Pixar brand is difficult to ignore. As noted above in relation to Shrek and Ice Age, part of CG animation's legitimization has relied upon the extent to which it caters for the adults in the audience. A.O. Scott's review of Shrek 2 (Andrew Adamson, Kelly Asbury and Conrad Vernon, 2004) puts this question at the centre of the debate between DreamWorks and Pixar:

In terms of its attitude toward the audience, DreamWorks 3-D animation is in some ways the opposite of Pixar, choosing to divide its viewers by age rather than uniting them. The music, [...] the in-jokes and the occasional touches of bawdiness are intended to placate insecure adults while the bright colors and jaunty storytelling enchant their children and teach them to be themselves, like all the other kids with Shrek dolls and ears. This kind of strategy is hardly uncommon in pop culture these days.<sup>364</sup>

Shrek, Ice Age and many other films from the first decade of computer-generated animation had been praised for leaving behind the 'childish' conventions of Disney animation, and providing entertainment for children and adults alike. Scott's thoughts on the perceived difference between Pixar and DreamWorks' 'attitude towards the audience' are interesting, pointing towards a distinction between films that appeal to children and adults, and films that appeal to everyone. This also implies that the most distinguished texts will be those who are seen to demonstrate the greatest respect for its audiences. The stigma of 'childishness' that

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<sup>363</sup> Stephen Hunter, 'Royally Funny, Yet "Shrek"'s Third Time Not So Charming', Washington Post, 18<sup>th</sup> May 2007, p.C1.

<sup>364</sup> A.O. Scott, 'The New Son-in-Law's an Ogre, And Hollywood is the Target', New York Times, 18<sup>th</sup> May 2004, p.E1.

has been attached to animation for decades is particularly significant here, because discourses of parenthood have played a prominent role in establishing what CG animation should (or should not) be aiming for. We can see this quite clearly in the genre's formative years, as critics initially expressed great surprise and delight at being able to take pleasure in 'children's' films. As Desson Howe said of *Ice Age*, 'Your kids will love it. *Better yet*, so will you.'<sup>365</sup> Once this early surprise became normalized, however, a noticeable cynicism emerges towards films that are overtly playing to two separate age groups. Managing to appeal to all age groups simultaneously is, conversely, seen as an indicator of cleverness, and often referred to as a lost art in Hollywood cinema.

Tellingly, in a 2009 article in the *New York Times*, A.O. Scott included *Shrek* in an article entitled, 'Movies of Influence'.

Pixar may have raised computer-generated animation to the level of art, but it was this loud, rambunctious DreamWorks adaptation of a William Steig picture book that set the template for 21st-century family entertainment. License a lot of pop songs, lock in merchandising opportunities, recruit A-list celebrities to read a script full of winking allusions and semi-rude jokes for the grown-ups and hokey morals for the kids, and watch the money pour in.<sup>366</sup>

Critical responses to the *Shrek* and *Ice Age* sequels varied hugely, but in general deemed them markedly inferior to the installments that spawned the franchises in the first place. Glenn Lovell's subheading for his *Shrek 2* review sums up this response, stating plainly that the movie 'suffers from sequelitis even as it retains original's charms'.<sup>367</sup> Sequels frequently struggle for critical praise, both due

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<sup>365</sup> Desson Howe, "'Ice Age': Stone Cold Funny', *Washington Post*, 15<sup>th</sup> March 2002, p.T41. Emphasis added.

<sup>366</sup> A.O. Scott, 'Movies of Influence: The 10 most culturally, commercially or technologically important, consequential or groundbreaking films of 2000-9, in no particular order', *New York Times*, 15<sup>th</sup> November 2009, p.MM12.

<sup>367</sup> Glenn Lovell, 'Ogre and Ogre Again', *San Jose Mercury News*, 19<sup>th</sup> May 2004, p.7F.

to inevitably being judged against previous installments, and to the connotations of unoriginality. It is likely that Pixar benefited considerably from having largely avoided making sequels to its films, and only really investing in such a business strategy after being taken over by Disney. Scott's words above attest to the relationship in critical discourses between 'mainstream' animation and, if not sequels, then commercialization. As he puts it, 'the template for 21st-century entertainment' is less about narrative structure or production practices, and more to do with the film as a commodity: music licensing, recruiting stars, merchandising, and money.

If Pixar is so frequently positioned as being distinct from the standardized output of DreamWorks, Blue Sky/20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, and most other animation studios, can we consider the studio a cult object? Mark Jancovich and Nathan Hunt have stressed that,

Cult texts are defined through a process in which [they] are positioned in opposition to the mainstream, a classification that is no more coherent as an object than the cult and is also a product of the same process of distinction that creates the opposed couplet mainstream/cult.<sup>368</sup>

Despite the difficulty in defining what constitutes 'cult' and 'mainstream' texts, then, it is clear that Pixar occupies a curious position between the seemingly opposite ends of this binary spectrum. Building on Jancovich and Hunt's work, Matt Hills has suggested that it is possible for the two labels to co-exist or even 'merge in specific ways', becoming what he terms 'mainstream cult'.<sup>369</sup> He goes on to argue, 'mechanisms of cultural othering are, precisely, relational; all that matters is

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<sup>368</sup> Mark Jancovich and Nathan Hunt, 'The Mainstream, Distinction, and Cult TV', in Sara Gwenllian-Jones and Roberta E. Pearson, eds., *Cult Television* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), p.27.

<sup>369</sup> Matt Hills, 'Mainstream Cult', in Stacey Abbott, ed., *The Cult TV Book* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), p.68.

that “cult” can be defined against something that it is not.<sup>370</sup> Where other chapters in this thesis (particularly Chapter 2) go into more detail about Pixar’s ability to appeal to a broad and diverse audience, the evidence presented here complicates the extent to which this appeal can be described as ‘mainstream’.

The studio’s budgets, box office revenues, and wide cultural reach make it difficult to define Pixar’s appeal as ‘cult’ in the usual sense of the word. Indeed, as Douglas Atkin has argued, nothing draws more attention to the boundaries of a cult as limited access.<sup>371</sup> Yet it is clear the discourses of quality on display in the studio’s reception work to define Pixar as distinct from (and implicitly superior to) the mainstream. As Michael Newman and Elana Levine have argued in relation to television, legitimization ‘depends upon a delegitimated “other” television – that of the past but also that of the contemporary genres, production modes, technologies, and practices that do not receive the stamp of legitimacy.’<sup>372</sup> While the Shrek and Ice Age franchises have received considerable plaudits from critics over the years, and collectively amassed close to five billion US dollars in box office receipts alone, the studios that made them have found themselves in an unfortunate position.<sup>373</sup> Justifiably or not, they have come to represent the mainstream, while Pixar has been firmly established as existing on a level above that. These respective positions are by no means permanent, but nevertheless are sufficiently entrenched that individual exceptions (the critical lambasting of Cars 2 [John Lasseter, 2011], or the extensive praise for How To Train Your Dragon, for example) appear to have little impact on the overall reputations of the studios.

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<sup>370</sup> Ibid.

<sup>371</sup> Douglas Atkin, The Culting of Brands: When Customers Become True Believers (New York: Portfolio, 2004), p.27.

<sup>372</sup> Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status (London: Routledge, 2012), p.13.

<sup>373</sup> All box office grosses obtained from Box Office Mojo <www.boxofficemojo.com>, Retrieved 6<sup>th</sup> January 2012.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### -Whistle While You Work- Pixar's 'Behind the Scenes' Narratives

The sheer quantity of media articles that have been written about Pixar demonstrates a commonly recurring desire on the part of journalists and film critics to explain the studio's unbroken string of critical and commercial success. Writers have variously justified their coverage of Pixar in terms of going in search of their 'secret',<sup>374</sup> 'how they do it',<sup>375</sup> or 'what makes [them] so special'.<sup>376</sup> What is particularly interesting about these articles, however, is how frequently writers look beyond the studio's films, and even the people that make them, and instead focus on Pixar's headquarters in Emeryville, northern California.<sup>377</sup> As William Taylor and Polly LaBarre of the New York Times succinctly put it in 2006, 'The secret to the success of Pixar Animation Studios is its utterly distinctive approach to the workplace.'<sup>378</sup> Bill Capodagli and Lynn Jackson also hint at this idea in the introduction to their 2010 book, Innovate the Pixar Way, describing Pixar as 'a childlike storytelling "playground" ... a place that enables storytellers to create tales of friends and foes who share great adventures in enchanting lands.'<sup>379</sup> Note the choice of language here: Pixar is not an organisation, studio, company, or group of people, but a *place*.

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<sup>374</sup> Jonah Lehrer, 'Animating a blockbuster: How Pixar built Toy Story 3', Wired, 24<sup>th</sup> May 2010 <[http://www.wired.com/magazine/2010/05/process\\_pixar/all/1](http://www.wired.com/magazine/2010/05/process_pixar/all/1)>, Accessed 5<sup>th</sup> January 2011.

<sup>375</sup> Sam Leith, 'WALL-E: How Pixar found its shiny metal soul', The Sunday Telegraph, 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2008, p.10.

<sup>376</sup> Paul McInnes, 'Inside Pixar: "I haven't thought about anything but Toy Story 3 for four years', The Guardian, 7<sup>th</sup> July 2010 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/video/2010/jul/07/pixar-toy-story-3-making>>, Accessed 5<sup>th</sup> January 2011.

<sup>377</sup> While Emeryville is a small town in Alameda County, California, all further mentions of Emeryville will refer specifically to the Pixar studio space and grounds, unless otherwise stated.

<sup>378</sup> William C. Taylor and Polly LaBarre, 'How Pixar adds a new school of thought to Disney', New York Times, 29<sup>th</sup> January 2006, Sec. 3, p.3. It is also worth noting that this article appeared in the 'Business' section of the newspaper, not under 'Arts', underscoring the pedagogical discourses surrounding the studio.

<sup>379</sup> Bill Capodagli and Lynn Jackson, Innovate the Pixar Way: Business lessons from the world's most creative corporate playground (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), ix.

But how do ideas about what Pixar represents tie into this place? I argue that Emeryville plays an integral role in the discursive construction of the Pixar brand, and that writing about the studio space itself demonstrates the need to explain and locate the brand's core so that it may be replicated. Indeed, the subtitle to Capodagli and Jackson's book is Business lessons from the world's most creative corporate playground, aptly demonstrating the (hyperbolic) pedagogical terms in which Pixar is often discussed. The studio exists to be learnt from as well as celebrated.

It is Emeryville, and in particular the media attention afforded to it, that will form the basis of this chapter. If media publications are so keen to consistently publish articles about this place, I ask what exactly it is about the building, its people, and its corporate culture, that commands so much attention. These discourses demonstrate the need for certain (successful) brands to be reified or embodied in order to be understood, requiring a tangible space or object onto which abstract qualities and stories of success can be projected. Emeryville currently performs this role, but there is evidence to suggest that many of the ideas associated with Pixar's 'identity' can in theory be attached to any physical space or indeed a person. Since the aim of this chapter is to explore the idea of studio space and the extent to which Emeryville factors into the critical consensus around Pixar, it is worth beginning by interrogating the importance of going 'behind the scenes'.

### **A stranger from the outside!: Going 'behind the scenes' at Pixar**

Upon arriving at Emeryville, all visitors to the studio are issued with a badge that reads, 'A stranger from the outside!' The text echoes the words of the Pizza Planet aliens from Toy Story, who waver between amazement and curiosity after Sheriff Woody and Buzz Lightyear enter their (previously) hermetically sealed world



(of a claw crane machine). More than this however, the use of that quotation draws attention to the peculiar insider/outsider dichotomy at Pixar. Before looking at the specific features of Emeryville, it would be useful to unpack this dichotomy, since it provides a context for the ways in which Pixar is talked about more generally.

By labelling studio visitors as strangers to be stared at in amazement, studio employees are by extension positioned as the aliens, ordinarily cut off from the rest of the world but now suddenly in touching distance. Of course, the visitor badges are almost certainly intended to be humorous, and the unusual wording could be interpreted in this way even if one had never seen Toy Story. For the joke to be fully realised though, one must both have seen the film *and* recognise the use of the quotation outside of its original context. This may be just one small observation, but its ramifications go beyond simply spotting or not spotting a reference.

As Nathan Hunt has forcefully argued, insider knowledge in the form of trivia plays a crucial role within fan cultures. Far from being meaningless, he sees trivia as ‘important exactly because its value can be recognised only by insiders’,<sup>380</sup> and as such is used to ‘define and police the borders of fandom’ while simultaneously ‘producing, maintaining and negotiating hierarchies within fandom.’<sup>381</sup> The Pixar badges therefore serve to visually distinguish insiders from outsiders at Emeryville, but also complicate this notion through the use of in-jokes, references and trivia, which contribute to the creation of hierarchies among the outsiders. The visitor who ‘gets’ the joke may still wear a badge that labels them a ‘stranger’, but through an in-depth knowledge of Pixar and the movies it has made,

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<sup>380</sup> Nathan Hunt, ‘The importance of trivia: Ownership, exclusion and authority in science fiction fandom’, Mark Jancovich et al., eds., Defining cult movies: The cultural politics of oppositional taste (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p.198.

<sup>381</sup> Ibid, p.186.

the outsider can ostensibly narrow the gap between themselves and the people who actually work at the studio.<sup>382</sup>

Making-of documentaries and behind-the-scenes features that provide fans with this kind of ‘insider’ information have been a popular fixture of DVD releases ever since the medium took off in the late-1990s. In her work on home cinema cultures, Barbara Klinger argues that such texts place the viewer in a position of privilege. Privy to a seemingly secret world of information, the collector is schooled in detail about the film production process, creating a ‘cognoscenti’ among them – the intra-fan hierarchies of which Hunt speaks.<sup>383</sup> So-called Easter Eggs are a particularly good example of the types of trivia involved in this interplay – partly hidden materials that form part of a DVD’s special features. In Pixar’s case, Easter Eggs tend to consist of references to its earlier (and even forthcoming) work. Every Pixar short and feature film since 1987 has contained references like this, with characters, props, and consumer products from one film cropping up in the background of another.<sup>384</sup> Several online threads on Pixar fan forums have attempted to document as many of these references as possible, of which there are hundreds across the Pixar oeuvre.<sup>385</sup> The discussions on these forums suggest a desire among fans to inform others about newly-discovered references, whilst simultaneously competing with each other to see who can spot the most obscure examples. Fans frequently provide screengrabs from the DVDs as evidence, often

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<sup>382</sup> Companies are increasingly adopting more ‘democratic’ approaches towards brand management, allowing consumers to participate with their products and services, and therefore contribute to brand meaning. The author is grateful to Nick Johnson of Useful Social Media for his helpful conversations and the generous sharing of research into how marketers view this relationship. For a discussion of branding as a process of negotiation between fan consumers and proprietors, see Richard McCulloch, ed., ‘Of Proprietors and Poachers: Fandom as Negotiated Brand Ownership’, *Participations*, 10.1 (Forthcoming, May 2013).

<sup>383</sup> Barbara Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, new technologies, and the home* (London: University of California Press, 2006), p.68.

<sup>384</sup> Correct up to and including *Toy Story 3* (Lee Unkrich, 2010).

<sup>385</sup> See for example, rachelcakes1985, ‘The Definitive Pixar In-Jokes List’, *Pixar Planet Forums*, 15<sup>th</sup> March 2008, 3:49am PST. <<http://www.pixarplanet.com/forums/viewtopic.php?t=2822>>, Accessed 1<sup>st</sup> March 2013.

shown in extreme close-up to demonstrate their skill in uncovering the reference. What is significant here is that Pixar has consistently facilitated and catered towards this kind of consumption by continually referring to and talking about itself. Partly this has manifested itself in the studio's courting of journalists, authors and business executives, and employees' willingness to talk about their craft. But the easter eggs noted above exemplify a more specific aspect of the studio brand, in the sense that its films, like the company itself, has become a space to be playfully explored.<sup>386</sup>

A number of scholars have already argued that behind the scenes features are not an entirely new media phenomenon, with Craig Hight likening their function to electronic press kits (EPKs),<sup>387</sup> and John Thornton Caldwell noting precursory trends in 1940s television programming and the emergence of the star system.<sup>388</sup> These features have become increasingly important in recent years as film and television producers have taken advantage of the possibilities of DVD and Blu-ray technology, re-packaging (and thus re-framing) the theatrical text with an often extensive collection of audiovisual materials that invite the viewer in. Industry reports suggest that consumer proclivity for bonus features has played a key role in the appeal of DVD as a medium,<sup>389</sup> a trend that Blu-ray, with its increased storage capacity, is well poised to capitalise on.

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<sup>386</sup> It also seems significant that this drive towards inclusivity has marked Pixar out as market leaders in computer animation, while, as noted in the previous chapter, DreamWorks has become associated with its outwardly-focused pop culture references. Perhaps, then, the Pixar brand has succeeded in part because it has convinced critics and fans that the company itself is a space that not only *can* be (virtually) occupied, but *rewards* that kind of relationship. In television, *Arrested Development* also springs to mind as a comparable example, since the show's fandom revolves around the relentless documenting of its in-jokes and self-referentiality. See, for example, Eric Detweiler, "I Was Just Doing A Little Joke There": Irony and the Paradoxes of the Sitcom in *The Office*, *Journal of Popular Culture*, 45.4 (2012), pp.727-48.

<sup>387</sup> Craig Hight, 'Making-Of documentaries on DVD: "The Lord of the Rings" trilogy and special editions, *The Velvet Light Trap*, 56 (Fall 2005), p.7

<sup>388</sup> John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Cultures: Industrial reflexivity and critical practice in film and television* (London: Duke University Press, 2008), p.283.

<sup>389</sup> Peter M. Nichols, 'Home Video: From directors, a word, or two', *New York Times*, 6<sup>th</sup> September 2002, p.E26.

In their analysis of the Monsters Inc (Pete Docter, 2001) 2-Disc DVD, Robert Alan Brookey and Robert Westerfelhaus observe the commercial benefits presented by extratextual material. They argue that Pixar used such featurettes to position itself as not only distinct from Disney at a time of industrial conflict (as discussed in Chapter 3), but as an autonomous creative collective with an emphasis on ‘fun’ and ‘quality’.<sup>390</sup> The DVD extratext in other words is capable of performing a key role in the establishment of an auteur reputation, with the author in Pixar’s case shown to be a group as opposed to a single person. Hight takes issue with Brookey and Westerfelhaus’s view of the DVD as a single text, however. He argues that, while useful for exploring possible ways in which the audience’s understanding of a text may be constructed, such an approach ‘ignores fundamental differences in the manner and variety of ways of the ways in which audiences engage with DVDs.’<sup>391</sup> Some viewers for instance may ignore some or even all of the bonus features included on a given disc, choosing instead to watch only the main feature. Building on previous work by Lev Manovich, Hight instead proposes that when we watch a DVD, we should think of ourselves not so much as viewers but as users, ‘navigating our way through menus and following the pathways that they provide.’<sup>392</sup>

Both the American and British media have demonstrated an increasing fascination with Pixar’s Emeryville studio since the company moved there in 2001, with detailed behind-the-scenes exposés having appeared in publications that include Variety, Empire, The San Francisco Chronicle, The Telegraph, The Independent, and The New York Times. The articles are curiously similar in their argument, a phenomenon self-consciously commented on in one such piece by Sam Leith in The Telegraph:

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<sup>390</sup> Robert Alan Brookey and Robert Westerfelhaus, ‘The Digital Auteur: Branding identity on the “Monsters, Inc.” DVD’, Western Journal of Communication, 69.2 (April 2005), pp.109-128.

<sup>391</sup> Hight, p.9

<sup>392</sup> Ibid.

As a journalist ... you want to dislike Pixar; or at least find its dark side. Where's the story in "happy people make brilliant films, get well paid for it, love their work"? But all the evidence points to that being the case. [As] much as you tire of hearing about the silver scooters, the primacy of storytelling, the staggering attention to detail (you hear stories – one animator spent days watching videotapes of his own eyeballs) and the fanatical determination to get it right, you cannot get away from the fact that not only is most of this stuff demonstrably true, it has given the company an unbroken record of hit movies. Good hit movies.<sup>393</sup>

Here, Leith not only acknowledges that the same stories are constantly being repeated, but also that 'this stuff' is precisely the reason why Pixar has become so successful. The implication is that the studio employees' use of silver scooters to transport themselves from office to office is equally as important as hard work and 'attention to detail'. This is a very unusual causal link on many levels, but however accurate an assertion it is, the fact remains that the critical consensus that has built up around Pixar is heavily reliant upon a detailed knowledge of the studio's 'wacky' production culture. Emerging from the vast majority of articles, broadcasts and DVD features that seek to go behind the scenes at Emeryville, is a sense of a place that collapses notions of age in order to create films that connect with as many people as possible. 'Normal' adult behaviour is replaced with 'childish' behaviour, yet always in a way that is controlled and safe, as demonstrated by Jessi Hempel's article on the studio:

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<sup>393</sup> Leith, p.10. This idea of Pixar having developed an unusually positive reputation among critics and audiences (and one that involves the constant repetition of particular phrases and types of story) was satirised by the spoof newspaper *The Onion*. In the article, entitled, 'I've got you dumb motherfuckers eating right out of my hand', an exaggeratedly arrogant John Lasseter exclaimed, 'We're fucking Pixar! We've built enough credibility that we don't have to worry about talking dogs ruining a movie, because we own the audience, we own the critics, and when we say "Jump," the jack-offs who give out Academy Awards say, "How high? Best Picture high enough?"' While the article, as with all stories in *The Onion*, is clearly driven by a comic imperative, the humour in it is entirely reliant upon ones familiarity with Pixar's reputation, suggesting that even if people don't agree with the critical consensus, they should at least be aware of its existence. See John Lasseter, 'I've got you dumb motherfuckers eating right out of my hand', *The Onion*, 1<sup>st</sup> February 2011 <<http://www.theonion.com/articles/ive-got-you-dumb-motherfuckers-eating-right-out-of,19014/>>, Accessed 1<sup>st</sup> February 2011.

In most companies, it's extremely bad form to deck your boss. Not so at Pixar, where Technical Director Bill Polson clocked the president over the head – many times – shortly after he was hired. His weapon: long, thin red balloons. His audience: 12 classmates, ranging from janitors to animators to executives. His motivation: the teachers told him to.<sup>394</sup>

Such idiosyncratic behaviour is something that never seems to escape the attention of outside observers who come to visit Pixar, but it is also worth noting that the company goes out of its way to make sure people know about it. By presenting what they do as 'fun' and not laborious, Pixar encourages its visitors and those who read about the studio culture to see it in a positive light, encouraging and rewarding further investigation.

Pixar is of course not alone in taking advantage of the marketing potential of this technology, but the studio's reputation is arguably more pronounced due to its consistency in repeating themes, characters, motifs, and values across DVD releases and media interviews. As demonstrated by the Emeryville visitor's badges discussed above, these motifs and characters do not only appear in other media forms (e.g. video games, trailers, posters, studio stationery), but also in a variety of physical spaces. These includes merchandise, particularly toys, as well as characters appearing in theme parks, and Pixar's enormous Buzz Lightyear balloon that took part in four of the five Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parades between 2008 and 2012 inclusive.<sup>395</sup>

Christopher Anderson makes a similar point about brand coherence in relation to the Disneyland television show and the ways in which it presented Disney to 1950s American audiences. By dissecting the animated production process and continually illustrating how it works by drawing on the studio's own

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<sup>394</sup> Jessi Hempel, 'Pixar University: Thinking Outside the Mouse', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 4 June 2003 <<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/gate/archive/2003/06/04/pixar.DTL>>, Accessed 25<sup>th</sup> January 2011.

<sup>395</sup> John Lasseter also took part in the parade as a balloon carrier in 2008 and 2010.

back catalogue, Disneyland effectively positioned itself as an outlet for commentary on the studio's films. It encouraged audiences to see continuities across Disney's films, to develop an appreciation for the production process, and to recognise the studio's body of work as a 'unified product of Walt's authorial vision.'<sup>396</sup>

The comparison with Disney is of course rather appropriate, given that it was the world-famous animation studio that first provided Pixar with the financial backing to make Toy Story in the early 1990s, and ever since a \$7.4 billion takeover in 2006, is now also Pixar's owner.<sup>397</sup> Walt Disney assured the press that his television series Disneyland would stand as entertainment, despite the fact that a large proportion of its content consisted of thinly veiled advertisements.<sup>398</sup> Anderson notes that the show generated 'fanatical interest' in the studio's amusement parks, quoting one unnamed ABC executive who is alleged to have said, 'Never before have so many people made so little objection to so much selling.'<sup>399</sup> However, in one crucial way, the relationship between Disney and the Disneyland series differed from Pixar's and its own attempts at producing studio exposés. As discussed above, Pixar is for the vast majority of people an exclusive place that they will never get to go to, whereas Disneyland existed largely to encourage audiences to physically travel to the amusement parks.

Importantly, then, despite Pixar's willingness to allow various groups of people access to Emeryville to photograph, film, and/or write about the building and its people, the majority of people's 'access' is virtual. There is no shortage of sources that can shed light on Pixar's studio space and corporate culture, with

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<sup>396</sup> Christopher Anderson, Hollywood TV: The studio system in the fifties (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), p.144.

<sup>397</sup> Laura M. Holson, 'Disney agrees to acquire Pixar in \$7.4 billion deal', New York Times, 25<sup>th</sup> January 2006 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/25/business/25disney.html>>, Accessed 25<sup>th</sup> January 2011.

<sup>398</sup> Anderson, p.141.

<sup>399</sup> Ibid, p.148.

‘behind the scenes’ articles having appeared in the English-language press throughout the world, while scores of similar examples have been published online. Seeing inside Emeryville is easy, but it is almost always mediated, virtual, and entirely on Pixar’s terms. Actually going there is a practice generally reserved for selected commentators, relevant film industry insiders, or the occasional school group. The studio space has become subject to what John Urry calls the tourist gaze – an attitude towards the experience of places, spaces and objects that situates them in opposition to everyday life, and regulated, organised work in particular.<sup>400</sup> He notes that, although tourist relationships exist in the journey towards a destination and a period of stay there,<sup>401</sup> tourist consumption is visual above all else.<sup>402</sup> The public is denied access to Emeryville, which at the same time is presented as a space governed by principles of fun and inclusivity. As we saw in relation to its imagined audiences in the previous chapter, Pixar’s reputation for quality is closely related to its ability to unite seemingly disparate aspects of its own identity. The brand manages to exude inclusivity *and* exclusivity, sophistication *and* frivolity, and its films manage to be both forward-thinking *and* nostalgic. With that in mind, it is worth turning our attention towards the specificities of Emeryville, and the ways in which that has played into the brand’s apparent universality.

### **Architecture with a plot?: Studio space as a canvas for brand reification**

Pixar’s Emeryville studio has been described in a variety of laudatory terms, existing in the eyes of the media as a ‘digital dream factory’,<sup>403</sup> ‘an incubator for

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<sup>400</sup> John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze* (London: Sage, 2002). In particular, see pp.2-3.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid, p.2.

<sup>402</sup> Ibid, p.111.

<sup>403</sup> Rick Lyman, ‘A digital dream factory in Silicon Valley; Pixar’s new digs coddle animators, writers and tech heads’, *New York Times*, 11<sup>th</sup> June 2002, p.E1.



creative minds’,<sup>404</sup> ‘a sprawling playground’,<sup>405</sup> ‘an eclectic campus of free-spirited artists’,<sup>406</sup> and in the words of John Lasseter, ‘a home that reflects how cool [they] are.’<sup>407</sup> Words such as ‘campus’ are used again and again to refer to the site, invoking images of universities and colleges – places at the cutting edge of scientific, technological, philosophical and cultural thought. The term ‘dream factory’ has also appeared in at least three separate newspaper articles, in publications from both coasts of the United States as well as one from the British tabloid newspaper *The Mirror*.<sup>408</sup> This label in particular attests to the peculiar line Pixar is seen to tread between being a serious (and extremely successful) producer of culturally important films, and to use Chloe Veltman’s words, ‘behaving like children’.<sup>409</sup> Notice, however, that the above list of descriptions also span different stages of a person’s life, from incubator, through to playground, campus, a factory and a home, reflecting the seamlessness with which the Pixar brand manages to slip between different age brackets; by extension, it is a brand you can never outgrow. But how do specific features of the studio play into this idea?

Karen Paik writes in her 2007 book *To Infinity and Beyond* that the Emeryville studio space was designed with two goals in mind: to ‘renew the sense of community that had begun to dissipate in the company’s piecemeal expansion’, and ‘to make sure that the new space wouldn’t inadvertently kill the intangible “rough and tumble magic” that had flourished at [its previous headquarters in] Point

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<sup>404</sup> Sean P. Means, ‘Playing at Pixar’, *Salt Lake Tribune*, 30<sup>th</sup> May 2003, p.D1.

<sup>405</sup> Susan Wloszczyna, ‘Pixar whiz reanimates Disney’, *USA Today*, 9<sup>th</sup> March 2006, p.1D.

<sup>406</sup> Robert La Franco, ‘Creative Drive – Pixar at 20’, *Hollywood Reporter*, 9<sup>th</sup> June 2006.

<sup>407</sup> Glenn Whipp, *The Daily News of Los Angeles*, 30<sup>th</sup> May 2003, p.U6.

<sup>408</sup> As well as Rick Lyman’s article (above), see Alun Palmer, ‘Inside Pixar’s dream factory’, *The Mirror*, 13<sup>th</sup> July 2010, pp.28-29. Chuck Barney, ‘Monster Mash: Pixar expands’, *Contra Costa Times*, 1<sup>st</sup> November 2001. Also see Chuck Barney, “‘Slumdog Millionaire’ top dog at the Oscars”, *San Jose Mercury News*, 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2009.

<sup>409</sup> Chloe Veltman, ‘Fun Factory’, *The Telegraph*, 31<sup>st</sup> December 2001  
 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/4727218/Fun-factory.html>>, Accessed 5<sup>th</sup> January 2011.

Richmond.<sup>410</sup> The implication is that the creative culture that Pixar has come to be known for was at some point in the late-1990s in danger of disappearing, and that a new site was needed in order to restore or even enhance its effectiveness. In the studio's attempt to foster community and creativity, it was Steve Jobs who was reportedly the most heavily involved in the design process, so much so that the building and its grounds are occasionally referred to as 'Steve's movie.'<sup>411</sup> Architecture firm Bohlin Cywinski Jackson was commissioned to design the building, which upon completion comprised a 200,000 square foot, two-storey construction of steel and brick, set amid 15 acres of landscaped grounds. Designed for 600 employees, master planning was also carried out for expansion to house over 1,000 employees in the future.<sup>412</sup> The hub of the building is a vast atrium, with the wall that houses the main entrance comprised entirely of glass and steel. Natural light consequently fills the atrium, and the space acts as a point that has to be traversed regularly in order to get to different parts of the building, encouraging employees from different departments to necessarily run into each other on a daily basis.<sup>413</sup>

Far from simply being the core of Pixar's physical studio space, this atrium also serves as a central component of the discourses that surround the space, and the studio more generally. Almost every single article, interview or DVD feature

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<sup>410</sup> Karen Paik, *To Infinity and Beyond: The Story of Pixar Animation Studios* (London: Virgin Books, 2007), pp.167-8.

<sup>411</sup> Ibid, p.168. Also see Walter Isaacson, *Steve Jobs* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), pp. 243-4. The extent to which Jobs was actually involved in the process is difficult to assess, given that architect Peter Bohlin (and his firm Bohlin Cywinski Jackson) was commissioned to design the building after having previously been responsible for several Apple Stores around the world. It is slightly suspicious, for instance, that Young and Simon's biography of Jobs mentions Emeryville, yet absolutely nothing of his involvement or influence on the design process. Evidence of his involvement is corroborated by several other sources, however, and it is safe to assume that Pixar would have at the very least provided Bohlin with a detailed brief of their requirements and requests. Really this is a question of authorship, which itself is dictated by the prevailing discourses within a particular industry or consumption context. Architectural publications, for instance, would unequivocally credit Bohlin, not Jobs, with Emeryville's design.

<sup>412</sup> Anonymous, 'Pixar studios and headquarters', *BCJ.com* <<http://www.bcj.com/public/projects/project/39.html>>, Accessed 29<sup>th</sup> January 2011.

<sup>413</sup> Paik, p.168.

that takes audiences or readers behind the scenes at Pixar will either mention the atrium explicitly or use it as a filming location. Accordingly, this communal space is positioned as the starting point not only for studio visitors ('corporeal tourists', as Urry would refer to them),<sup>414</sup> but for anybody interested in finding out about what Pixar does, how it does it, and why it does it. Employees are routinely shown walking or riding scooters across this floor space as they go about their business, and frequent gatherings and company announcements are often shown to take place in the lobby. The consumer of one of these behind the scenes features is thus positioned as a participant in the Pixar community, sharing in the studio's paper plane throwing competitions or celebrating as the opening weekend box office figures for the latest film release are announced. To run with Zahid Sardar's analogy of the atrium as Pixar's 'town square',<sup>415</sup> reading about or watching footage from inside Emeryville is akin to accepting an invitation to become a citizen.

The insider/outsider dichotomy discussed above becomes particularly interesting when we consider which areas of Emeryville act as recurring motifs when journalists or camera crews visit the studio. Aside from the atrium and its adjoining areas (which include a café and a free cereal bar), film footage is often shot inside a number of employees' offices, with John Lasseter and his toy-filled shelves providing by far the most common interview backdrop. Lasseter's 'childlike' behaviour has often been contrasted with his status as the creative head of Pixar (and now Disney),<sup>416</sup> serving as the symbolic embodiment of what Pixar represents – the injection of a child's sense of creativity and fun into the serious business of filmmaking.

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<sup>414</sup> John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze* (London: Sage, 2002).

<sup>415</sup> Zahid Sardar, 'Pixar Unbound', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2002, Magazine, p.26.

<sup>416</sup> See for example, Veltman.

Animator Andrew Gordon's office also figures heavily in discussions around Emeryville. Crucially though, Gordon himself is generally not named, or mentioned only in passing – it is his office, or rather one specific part of his office that takes centre stage. This space is in fact that only part of Emeryville except the atrium to be mentioned in Jeffrey Young and William Simon's biography of Steve Jobs. As they put it, 'Off in one corner [of the building] is a waist-high passageway into the Love Lounge, a stainless-steel lounge for on-the-job relaxing that embodies the unique spirit of the place.'<sup>417</sup>

There are several interesting points here. Firstly, the space is actually an air-conditioning shaft that Gordon discovered in his office and subsequently decorated with furniture, fabrics, photographs and a variety of 'kitsch' items, before it eventually became popular among employees (and the media) for its unusualness. Young and Simon's implication that the Love Lounge was intentionally part of the building's design is thus highly misleading. Secondly, the phrase 'on-the-job relaxing' brings us back to the abovementioned manner in which discourses surrounding Emeryville (and Pixar more generally) frequently combine leisure terminology with contrastingly vocational words. Thirdly, and most importantly, it is my contention that the Love Lounge features so heavily in reports of Emeryville precisely because it is seen to embody 'the unique spirit' of Pixar. Just as a DVD Easter Egg positions the viewer as an insider, rewarding them for their curiosity and skill in navigating the disc's features, the Love Lounge performs a marketing function, existing as a 'hidden' area of Pixar which itself is normally inaccessible to the public, waiting to be discovered by skilled explorers. Clearly there is a contradiction here, in the sense that images from this 'secret' area are among the

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<sup>417</sup> Jeffrey S. Young and William L. Simon, *iCon: Steve Jobs – The greatest second act in the history of business* (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2005), p.308.

most widely publicised features of the entire studio. When New York Times journalist Rick Lyman was given a tour of the studio prior to writing an article about Pixar, he was asked by at least three separate people whether he had ‘visited the Love Lounge yet’.<sup>418</sup> This strongly suggests that Pixar are keen for certain areas of the studio to be seen (and therefore written about and discussed) far more than others, insisting that all visitors are shown and educated about very specific features of Emeryville – those that fit in in-keeping with symbolic and thematic notions about what the studio is seen to represent. It is in a sense, to use Beth Dunlop’s phrase, ‘architecture with a plot’.<sup>419</sup>

Pixar has only been located at Emeryville since between 1998 and 2000 however, with their previous offices being at Point Richmond, slightly further north in the San Francisco Bay area, and San Rafael immediately after leaving Lucasfilm.<sup>420</sup> At Point Richmond Pixar had its own screening room but not the funds to install cinema seating, and so Lasseter asked everyone in the company to donate any unwanted furniture. As he describes the end product:

Our screening room was filled with the most ugly collection of ‘70s couches you’ve ever seen. But it was great because it was like this eclectic kind of quilt, you know. Right in the middle was this big La-Z-Boy recliner – my director’s chair. That room became kind of the soul of Pixar, in a way.<sup>421</sup>

Here we see notions of workspace and corporate identity combining in a very similar manner to the way(s) in which Emeryville’s Love Lounge is discussed.

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<sup>418</sup> Lyman, p.E1.

<sup>419</sup> Beth Dunlop, Building a Dream: The art of Disney architecture (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), p.13. For another good example of Pixar using its workspace to sell ideas about what the brand represents, see its recent series of DVD/Blu-ray features, ‘Studio stories’, which consist of short animated anecdotes about the people who work there and their behaviour (which necessarily takes place in particular areas of the studio). Each installment concludes with the line, ‘99% true, as far as we remember it!’, signalling the studio’s self-consciously ‘knowing’ mythologisation of its own history.

<sup>420</sup> Paik, pp.164-169.

<sup>421</sup> Paik, p.166.

The implication is that a collection of physical objects (in this case ugly, mismatched couches) are being seen to stand in for bigger, less tangible ideas about what Pixar represents. One gushingly laudatory online article in which Jason Adams describes his own experience of visiting Emeryville gets close to touching on this idea:

In my review of Cars, I mentioned not knowing how Pixar “does it” and I wasn’t exaggerating. One could argue that it’s the focus on story and characters or a genuine love for the medium, but there’s still something intangible that’s oft summed up by the vague term “heart.” Even if the secret turned out to be black magic, the thing I wanted most on this trip [to Emeryville] was to get some insight in to their mysterious and awesome sauce.<sup>422</sup>

It is the intersection of the workspace with what Adams refers to as ‘something intangible [often called] heart’ that I see as being central to a strong brand.<sup>423</sup> As I argued in the introduction to this thesis, while brands (particularly well-developed ‘lifestyle’ brands) are often seen to transcend the products to which they were originally attached, a brand cannot exist without products and services to carry it. While clearly subjective, what the above quote from Adams demonstrates is that the features of the Pixar brand that he loves so much are seen to be somehow embedded in the films that the studio makes, and yet still cannot be grasped unless one can engage with something more tangible, which in this case is Emeryville.

This idea is further supported by an article by Peter Hartlaub, who argued in September 2003 (long after Pixar had moved to Emeryville) that the proverbial ‘secret’ to the studio’s ‘magic’ actually lies in CalArts, the Disney-funded university

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<sup>422</sup> Jason Adams, ‘JoBlo.com visits Pixar Animation Studios to talk “Cars”’, JoBlo.com, 7<sup>th</sup> November 2006 <<http://www.joblo.com/index.php?id=13475>>, Accessed 19<sup>th</sup> January 2011.

<sup>423</sup> For an interesting discussion of marketing brands through so-called ‘brand lands’, see Christian Mikunda, Brand Lands, Hot Spots & Cool Spaces: Welcome to the Third Place and the Total Marketing Experience (London: Kogan Page, 2004). Also see Markus Wohlfel and Susan Whelan, ‘Like being a drop in a freshly-poured Guinness pint: consumer motivations to participate in the “Guinness Storehouse”’, The Marketing Review, 7.3 (2007), pp.283-300.

where many of Pixar's chief creative staff learned the art of animation.<sup>424</sup> While Emeryville is clearly shown to play an important role in the critical consensus that surrounds Pixar and its work then, it seems that this is not so much dependent upon that building's specific features as it is the fact that it is a physical space for the reification of the brand's intangible qualities. Like the individual cubicles that Pixar animators were encouraged to wreck, decorate, paint on, or reconstruct to their own design and specifications,<sup>425</sup> Emeryville is a canvas upon which abstract notions of what the studio represents can become three-dimensional.

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<sup>424</sup> Peter Hartlaub, 'The secret of Pixar's magic can be found at CalArts, where legendary old-school animators from Disney's golden era passed on their knowledge – and passion – to younger generations', San Francisco Chronicle, 17<sup>th</sup> September 2003, p.D1.

<sup>425</sup> Paik, pp.170-171.

## CHAPTER SIX

### **-Imagined Consensus- Review Aggregation and Post-Takeover Pixar**

Tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance ('sick-making') of the tastes of others.

-Pierre Bourdieu<sup>426</sup>

Most of the time film is subjective. This time it's not.

-Josh Tyler, CinemaBlend<sup>427</sup>

My academic interest in Pixar began towards the end of 2008. Rising critical acclaim for the studio showed no signs of halting its progress, with WALL-E (Andrew Stanton, 2008) being touted by a number of respected journalists as not only the best animated movie of the year, but a deserving candidate for the 2009 Academy Award for Best Picture.<sup>428</sup> Over the subsequent two years, the extent to which observers were lauding Pixar's work intensified, with the studio eventually garnering Best Picture nominations for both Up (Pete Docter, 2009) and Toy Story 3 (Lee Unkrich, 2010).<sup>429</sup> What struck me as surprising about Pixar's reputation was just how widely held it seemed to be. Despite being a self-confessed fan of its output and professed approach to filmmaking, one of my primary motivations for writing this thesis was that it seemed so difficult to find anyone who would write anything negative about Pixar. As Martin Barker points out, films are open to 'an

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<sup>426</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste, trans. Richard Nice (1984. London: Routledge, 2010), p.49.

<sup>427</sup> Josh Tyler, 'Meet the only two people who hate "Toy Story 3"', CinemaBlend, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2010 <<http://www.cinemablend.com/new/Meet-The-Only-Two-People-Who-Hate-Toy-Story-3-19118.html>>, Retrieved 1<sup>st</sup> April 2011.

<sup>428</sup> See for example, Joe Morgenstern, 'Hey, WALL-E: Shoot for the top', Wall Street Journal, 12<sup>th</sup> July 2008 <<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB121582504891547833.html>>, Retrieved 27<sup>th</sup> April 2011.

<sup>429</sup> This achievement is all the more impressive when one considers that only one previous animated film had ever received an Academy Award nomination for Best Picture – Beauty and the Beast (Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise, 1991). It should be noted however that both of Pixar's nominations occurred after the ceremony increased the number of nominees in the Best Picture category from five to ten.



unlimited number of questions ... each of which will lead you to investigate and analyse ... with different priorities.’<sup>430</sup> But surely if the possibilities for responding to Pixar’s films were ‘unlimited,’ somebody must have something critical to say about them? I specifically remembered reading a number of negative reviews of Cars (John Lasseter, 2006), but the post-WALL-E consensus appeared to suggest that the studio was incapable of putting a foot wrong.

I was certainly interested in exploring the studio’s reputation in terms of what critics had come to value about its work, but I soon recognised that doing so would also require some consideration of what it means to *dislike* Pixar. As Pierre Bourdieu put it, ‘it is no accident that, when they have to be justified, [tastes] are asserted purely negatively, by the refusal of other tastes.’<sup>431</sup> Where chapters 3 and 4 of this thesis look at how brands develop reputations in relation to rival or closely related brands, this chapter takes a different approach to the function of distastes and how they relate to critical consensus. My interest here is in the period following Disney’s takeover of Pixar, and specifically the moments when critics *have* written negative reviews of one of its films. What are the implications of criticising a brand that everyone else appears to adore? What reactions have such reviews provoked among online communities? And most importantly, to what extent has this criticism impacted upon Pixar’s reputation?

I begin with a case study of the critical reception of Cars, which prior to its sequel was widely regarded as being the studio’s weakest film. I argue that the agreed-upon reaction to the film actually changed over time, as journalists struggled to consolidate their initial negativity with the increasingly widespread opinion that the studio was all but infallible. From there I move on to a discussion of Rotten

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<sup>430</sup> Martin Barker with Thomas Austin, From “Antz” to “Titanic”: Reinventing Film Analysis (London: Pluto Press, 2000), p.2.

<sup>431</sup> Bourdieu, p.49.

Tomatoes and notions of consensus, with a particular focus on a recent trend within film criticism that places greater emphasis on aggregation and quantification. I see this trend as having contributed to an intense streamlining of opinion, polarising responses and in many cases functioning as a form of evidence for ‘proving’ that a particular film is ‘better’ than another, or that an individual possesses objectively ‘good taste’. This leads into a case study of the critical reception of Toy Story 3 (Lee Unkrich, 2010), specifically interrogating the bizarre controversy that arose when two critics (and later, a third) wrote negative reviews of the film. The mere existence of this furore raises a number of interesting questions, and I argue that the controversy demonstrates the power of the social component of taste, and the ways in which taste can shift. This is, to put it another way, a chapter about how even negative criticism can, under the right conditions, shift to such an extent that it actually *strengthens* the praise around a cultural object instead of harming it.

### **When is a failure not a failure?: The critical reception of Cars**

The critical reaction to John Lasseter’s Cars is perhaps best described as ‘mixed,’ although as we will see later on in the discussion of websites such as Rotten Tomatoes, very rarely (if ever) do critics unanimously agree about the merits and artistic qualities of any film.<sup>432</sup> This is not to say that Cars was devoid of admirers, however. Kenneth Turan of the Los Angeles Times, for instance, commended its ‘purring heart,’<sup>433</sup> while Time’s Richard Corliss labelled it ‘an instant classic,’<sup>434</sup> and Hollywood Reporter’s Michael Rechtshaffer felt certain that it was ‘destined to

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<sup>432</sup> I return to the ‘mixed’ nature of Cars’ critical reception below, in the section on Rotten Tomatoes.

<sup>433</sup> Kenneth Turan, ‘It runs like a charm’, Los Angeles Times, 9<sup>th</sup> June 2006.  
 <<http://articles.latimes.com/2006/jun/09/entertainment/et-cars9>>, Retrieved 25<sup>th</sup> April 2011.

<sup>434</sup> Richard Corliss, ‘Get your motor running’, Time, 14<sup>th</sup> May 2006.  
 <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1194022,00.html>>, Retrieved 25<sup>th</sup> April 2011.

emerge as one of the season's biggest performers.<sup>435</sup> In-keeping with Bourdieu's assertion that tastes are often expressed as distastes, many of these positive reviews demonstrate a continued desire to discursively situate Cars in opposition to animated films produced by Pixar's rivals. Turan's review for example argues that

Disney, Fox, DreamWorks and others have led us to equate computer animation with bulletproof repartee and snappy patter, turning every creature on the planet into a Borscht Belt comedian. It's not that those films haven't been a treat, or that Cars doesn't have its share of gags that make you laugh out loud. But Lasseter's latest is not powered by glibness and speed but by warmth, emotion and good-hearted charm.<sup>436</sup>

Rechtshaffen agrees, writing that 'while the other guys [i.e. other animation studios] are still hawking talking animals, the folks at Pixar continue to up the anthropomorphic ante with terrific characters and crowd-pleasing storytelling.'<sup>437</sup> While this opposition was discussed in more detail in chapter 4 of this thesis, it is important to re-emphasise that Pixar has come to represent something far more profound and accomplished than any of its contemporaries. Notice that even Disney, Pixar's parent company by this point in time, are referred to as being distinct and inferior. Indeed, this thesis begins from the central premise that, in Jonah Lehrer's words, 'Nobody in Hollywood seems to know anything. Pixar seems to know *everything*.'<sup>438</sup>

Even reviews that otherwise responded negatively to the movie were keen to offer some praise, and at the very least, Cars was widely hailed as an impressive technical and visual achievement. Paul Arendt's review for BBC website is typical of such sentiments, describing the film as 'a surprisingly lame affair,' and yet

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<sup>435</sup> Michael Rechtshaffen, 'Movie Review: Cars', Hollywood Reporter, 6<sup>th</sup> June 2006.

<sup>436</sup> Turan, 'It runs like a charm'.

<sup>437</sup> Rechtshaffen, 'Movie Review: Cars'.

<sup>438</sup> Jonah Lehrer, 'Animating a Blockbuster: How Pixar built "Toy Story 3,"' Wired, 24<sup>th</sup> May 2010 <[http://www.wired.com/magazine/2010/05/process\\_pixar/all/1](http://www.wired.com/magazine/2010/05/process_pixar/all/1)>, Retrieved 25<sup>th</sup> April 2011. Original emphasis.

simultaneously ‘a marvel of technology.’<sup>439</sup> That he sees the film as ‘surprisingly lame’ as opposed to simply ‘lame’ is a testament to the weight of expectation that critics placed on the studio at this time – Pixar was expected (or even required) to offer something more than its rivals. Importantly, Arendt is being openly critical of Cars, and opens his review with the almost eulogistic declaration, ‘It had to happen sometime. After a run of standard-setting CGI movies, Pixar has finally delivered a dud.’<sup>440</sup> Brian Lowry in Variety was of the same opinion, writing that, ‘With Cars, Pixar’s enviable streak of creative triumphs comes to a skidding stop.’<sup>441</sup> Both reviewers are clearly being critical of the film, but even amidst this criticism there remains a very strong sense that the studio’s ‘story’ is one of constant success and universal praise.

Talk of Pixar being on something of a ‘run’ informs much of what is written about them, and should be seen as a central tenet of the consensus and discourses of quality that have surrounded them for years. One article that appeared in The Business in 2003 for instance stated that Pixar are ‘as close to a sure thing as exists in the unpredictable movie business,’<sup>442</sup> and in January 2006 the Globe and Mail wrote that Disney were ‘acquiring Pixar in the midst of a long-profitable winning streak.’<sup>443</sup> What is particularly interesting about this streak is that it was proclaimed by many journalists to be going strong, even after many Cars reviews argued it had already ended. In November 2006, just five months after the film had been criticised by people like Arendt and Lowry, the Toronto Sun reported that ‘Lasseter

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<sup>439</sup> Paul Arendt, ‘Cars (2006)’, BBC, 28<sup>th</sup> July 2006  
 <[http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2006/07/12/cars\\_2006\\_review.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2006/07/12/cars_2006_review.shtml)>, Retrieved 25<sup>th</sup> April 2011.

<sup>440</sup> Ibid.

<sup>441</sup> Brian Lowry, ‘Cars’, Daily Variety, 4<sup>th</sup> June 2006, p.6. The same review was re-printed in the weekly edition of the publication. See Brian Lowry, “‘Cars’ Spins its Wheels”, Variety, 12-18<sup>th</sup> June 2006, p.27.

<sup>442</sup> Anon., ‘Coy Story: Will Steve Jobs Jilt Disney?’, The Business, 12<sup>th</sup> October 2003.

<sup>443</sup> Merissa Marr and Nick Wingfield, ‘Disney tries to capture Pixar’s star formula’, Globe and Mail, 25<sup>th</sup> January 2006, p.B15.

is optimistic that Ratatouille will continue the [studio's] golden streak.'<sup>444</sup> Gregg Kilday of the Hollywood Reporter suggests that this is precisely what happened, noting after the release of WALL-E (Andrew Stanton, 2008) that Pixar had 'turned out nine winners in a row,'<sup>445</sup> and the success of that film in 2008 had in fact prompted the USA Today to declare, 'It's official: Pixar can sell anything.'<sup>446</sup>

When Manohla Dargis of the New York Times wrote in her review of Cars that 'one clunker won't shut down or even threaten the factory line',<sup>447</sup> she could have had little idea of just how right she was. Far more than simply being strong enough to withstand a relative 'dud', the Pixar consensus was apparently strong enough by 2006 (after just seven feature films) that the dud would effectively be erased from the studio's historical narrative.

This becomes all the more pronounced when we consider the critical response to its sequel, which met with a curiously similar series of criticisms in 2011. Peter Bradshaw's Guardian review labelled Cars 2 (John Lasseter, 2011) as 'uninspired',<sup>448</sup> while The Telegraph's Sukhdev Sandhu considered it to be 'just as so-so' as the original.<sup>449</sup> Others bemoaned its overly complicated plot, and throughout reviews from both sides of the Atlantic ran an overwhelming sense that the film was too 'commercial'. As A.O. Scott of the New York Times put it, 'Cars 2 is certainly built to move merchandise, ... an effective advertisement for licensed

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<sup>444</sup> Bruce Kirkland, 'Disney's Wonderful World of Pixar', Toronto Sun, 5<sup>th</sup> November 2006, p.S14.

<sup>445</sup> Gregg Kilday, 'Stable, smart and savvy Pixar builds winning streak with sheer confidence', Hollywood Reporter, 1<sup>st</sup> July 2008.

<sup>446</sup> Scott Bowles, 'WALL-E continues Pixar's winning streak', USA Today, 30<sup>th</sup> June 2008  
<[http://www.usatoday.com/life/movies/news/2008-06-29-online-box-office\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/life/movies/news/2008-06-29-online-box-office_N.htm)>, Retrieved 21<sup>st</sup> April 2010.

<sup>447</sup> Manohla Dargis, 'A Drive Down a Lonely Highway', New York Times, 9<sup>th</sup> June 2006, p.E1.

<sup>448</sup> Peter Bradshaw, 'Cars 2 – review', Guardian, 1<sup>st</sup> July 2011  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2011/jul/21/cars-2-review>>, Retrieved 12<sup>th</sup> March 2013.

<sup>449</sup> Sukhdev Sandhu, 'Cars 2, review', Telegraph, 21<sup>st</sup> July 2011  
<<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/filmreviews/8653167/Cars-2-review.html>>, Retrieved 12<sup>th</sup> March 2013.

playthings.’<sup>450</sup> Of course, such comments can commonly be found in critical discourses surrounding certain blockbusters – particularly franchises and sequels – but it says a great deal about Pixar’s reputation that commercialism should be a cause of complaint where it had not been a problem before.<sup>451</sup> There has, after all, been little criticism of the considerable merchandise sales associated with the Toy Story franchise, implying that is that it is perfectly acceptable for a film to be ‘commercial’ if it simultaneously demonstrates sufficient artistic achievement.

Again, however, Cars 2 was not seen in a wholly negative light. In particular, the vast majority of critics were quick to praise the look of the film, variously describing it as ‘winningly vibrant’,<sup>452</sup> ‘visually stunning’,<sup>453</sup> ‘gorgeous’,<sup>454</sup> and ‘brilliantly animated’.<sup>455</sup> Both Cars films received criticism for having relatively dull plots, both were seen to have spectacular visual effects, and most importantly, both were seen as Pixar’s *first* ‘flop’ in a long line of critical and commercial successes. The mere fact that two separate films could be awarded this unenviable label indicates the constant revisions that Pixar’s narrative has been subjected to. Many critics deemed Cars a ‘failure’ when it was released, but then struggled to consolidate this assessment with Pixar’s subsequent overpowering narrative of success. Individual critics even went as far as retrospectively altering their stance on the film, with Peter Bradshaw explaining that it grew on him after repeat viewings

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<sup>450</sup> A.O. Scott, ‘Sidekick Tries to Tow a Sequel’, New York Times, 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2011  
<[http://movies.nytimes.com/2011/06/24/movies/pixars-cars-2-with-larry-the-cable-guy-and-owen-wilson-review.html?\\_r=0](http://movies.nytimes.com/2011/06/24/movies/pixars-cars-2-with-larry-the-cable-guy-and-owen-wilson-review.html?_r=0)>, Retrieved 12<sup>th</sup> March 2013.

<sup>451</sup> Derek Johnson, Media Franchising: Creative License and Collaboration in the Culture Industries (New York: New York University Press, 2013), pp.1-4.

<sup>452</sup> Claudia Puig, ‘“Cars 2” Stalls as Sequel Idles in Neutral’, USA Today, 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2011  
<[http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/movies/reviews/2011-06-23-cars-2\\_n.htm](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/movies/reviews/2011-06-23-cars-2_n.htm)>, Retrieved 12<sup>th</sup> April 2013.

<sup>453</sup> Michael O’Sullivan, ‘Cars 2: An IMAX 3D Experience’, Washington Post, 24<sup>th</sup> June 2011  
<<http://www.washingtonpost.com/gog/movies/cars-2-an-imax-3d-experience,1166839/critic-review.html>>, Retrieved 12<sup>th</sup> April 2013.

<sup>454</sup> Scott, ‘Sidekick Tries to Tow a Sequel’.

<sup>455</sup> Chris Tookey, ‘Cars 2: It’s Miles Better!’, Daily Mail, 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2011  
<<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2017414/Cars-2-Its-miles-better.html>>, Retrieved 12<sup>th</sup> April 2013.

with his young child.<sup>456</sup> What all of this suggests is that the reviews were heavily influenced by the idea of prevailing consensus – a pre-conceived (and/or *collectively* agreed-upon) idea of the value of the film itself and of Pixar. Aside from specific plot details, Cars and Cars 2 received such similar comments that the two sets of reviews were almost interchangeable, yet review aggregation websites indicated a huge gulf in quality between them. In the following section, I argue that Cars' Rotten Tomatoes score of 74% 'fresh', when compared to Cars 2's score of only 38%, reveals less about the quality of either film, and more about review aggregation's limited capacity to reveal patterns of taste.

### **Looking out for Number One: Rotten Tomatoes and what it can(not) tell us**

The process of review aggregation essentially involves converting the qualitative contents of a film review into quantitative data, either by producing an average score based on the star rating awarded by each critic, as is the case with Metacritic, or simply by counting the number of 'positive' versus 'negative' reviews, like Rotten Tomatoes. Media articles about Pixar frequently refer the website, particularly since Ratatouille (Brad Bird, 2007) onwards, and almost always without any qualification as to the implications of the 'Tomatometer' scores. One Variety article from 2008 used the scores as evidence for the apparent convergence of the tastes of critics and audiences, noting that successful box office hits were also scoring highly on aggregation sites. Specifically using WALL-E as an example, stating plainly that the film was the 'best reviewed film of the summer (97%), if not the year.'<sup>457</sup> Using Rotten Tomatoes scores in this way is common practice, with journalists effectively using them as proof of a film's competency. Pixar even used

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<sup>456</sup> Bradshaw, 'Cars 2 – review'. Note the similarities between this and the ideas discussed in Chapter 4; Bradshaw – like the critics writing about Ice Age and Shrek – legitimated the film through discourses of parenthood.

<sup>457</sup> Anon., 'Critics get in summer spirit', Variety, 28<sup>th</sup> July 2008, p.41.

the phrase 'Best reviewed film of the year' to promote their films for Academy consideration during its Oscar campaigns in 2008, 2010 and 2011.

The trophy cabinet in the atrium of Pixar's Emeryville studio is generally only reserved for the most prestigious of all the awards their work has received, but their Golden Tomato for WALL-E takes its place alongside all the Academy Awards.<sup>458</sup> Given how the studio has benefited from the website and the critical consensus that it has come along with it, it is unsurprising that they appear so willing to embrace the Tomatometer as a measure of success and quality.

Of course, Pixar would only continue to do this for as long as its results reflected positively on the studio. John Lasseter, for instance, wrote in 2007 that, 'In the early days of Ratatouille's release we were checking it, every day, on Rotten Tomatoes. We were 100% for a while! I think when people start seeing 100% up there for a while they start coming in and saying, "I'm going to write a bad review to see how much it drops!"'<sup>459</sup> When asked about the negative reviews for Cars 2 in 2011, however, he claimed 'I typically don't read reviews'.<sup>460</sup> The most obvious point to make about these two statements is that they are clearly contradictory; it is difficult to believe that Lasseter would be so heavily invested in the Rotten Tomatoes score for one Pixar film that he required constant updates as reviews rolled in, but then not read reviews at all for a later release. Even so, both examples indicate Pixar's attempts to strengthen and/or negotiate the ways in which journalists were talking about the studio, demonstrating a clear awareness of the discourses surrounding it. It is worth noting, however, that it *is* theoretically possible for someone to be an avid follower of Rotten Tomatoes scores without ever

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<sup>458</sup> Author's Interview with Joe Utichi, 5<sup>th</sup> February 2011.

<sup>459</sup> Joe Utichi, 'Exclusive: John Lasseter on Pixar Past, Present and Future', Rotten Tomatoes, 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2007 <<http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/ratatouille/news/1682430/exclusive-john-lasseter-on-pixar-past-present-and-future/>>, Retrieved 21<sup>st</sup> April 2010.

<sup>460</sup> Brooks Barnes, 'It Wasn't A Wreck, Not Really', New York Times, 18<sup>th</sup> October 2011, p.C1.



actually reading a single review, so Lasseter's comments aren't necessarily mutually exclusive.

Anybody with an internet connection today has potential access to hundreds of reviews for almost any film they wish to read an opinion on, and this increase in visibility has in turn encouraged more people to turn to publishing their own reviews online. Rotten Tomatoes founder Senh Duong began the site in 1998, aiming to provide 'movie lovers of all backgrounds quick and easy information on the latest movies hitting the theatres,' in order to 'help users make a decision on what to watch.'<sup>461</sup> The theory is that instead of having to read scores of reviews from different publications, users can see at a glance how the critical community responded, and decide based on each film's score whether they wish to see it or not. It is not difficult to see why this might be appealing, particularly to time-constrained journalists with less time to gather research, conduct interviews, or verify facts.<sup>462</sup> But while aggregation undeniably provides a gauge of sorts, it clearly does not tell the whole story about a film's reception.

One of its limitations for instance is that aggregation comes with a confused sense of who exactly is included in its 'critical community'. Much has been written about the supposed 'death' of film criticism over the years, attributed in part to the rise of non-professional critics (or 'fan-critics'), empowered by blogging and the Internet more generally.<sup>463</sup> This has in turn created a heightened ambiguity between professional and non-professional criticism. James Berardinelli of Reelviews.net and

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<sup>461</sup> Anon., 'Interview with Senh V. Duong of "Rotten Tomatoes"', The Trades, 29<sup>th</sup> September 2000 <<http://www.the-trades.com/article.php?id=367>>, Retrieved 15<sup>th</sup> April 2011.

<sup>462</sup> This has been a growing trend throughout journalism in western countries for decades. For more on the subject, see Nick Davies, Flat Earth News: An award-winning reporter exposes falsehood, distortion and propaganda in the global media (London: Vintage, 2009).

<sup>463</sup> For a detailed discussion of the history and development of film criticism, particularly in relation to blogging and the internet, see Jonathan D. Lupo, 'Accounting for TasteFilm Criticism, Canons and Cultural Authority', PhD thesis, University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2007. Chapter 4, 'The Internet, Fan-Critics, and the Democratisation of Film Criticism' is particularly relevant to my discussion here.

Harry Knowles of Ain't It Cool News are perhaps two of the most prominent examples, having built up enormous readerships and subsequent power within the American film industry, despite having no formal training and having risen to prominence purely through publishing reviews on his own website. Clearly if aggregation websites were to include every single blog review of a particular film, the number of reviews that counted towards each Metacritic rating or score on the Tomatometer would instantly jump. But is this a good reason to exclude certain reviews?

As Barbara Klinger has argued, 'exhaustiveness [in historical research, is] impossible to achieve, [but] necessary as an ideal goal.'<sup>464</sup> We may ask for instance should a blog post be deemed inherently less valuable to a review aggregation website, purely because it is written by a non-professional or read by fewer people? Similarly, even had access to web statistics that proved more people visited a particular blog or website, does that make it inherently *more* valuable? The extent to which Rotten Tomatoes scores can be seen to provide an accurate reflection of a critical community is clearly problematic at best.

This community is also an overwhelmingly western one, since the only reviews that count towards the Tomatometer are American and British publications and websites.<sup>465</sup> In his book on Céline Dion and taste, Carl Wilson gives an astonishing example of one of the ways in which tastes can vary between countries and cultures, quoting the Jamaican-American music critic Garnette Cadogan:

And the places [Dion] turns up in Jamaica are all the more curious. I remember being at sound-system dances and hearing everyone from Bob Marley to Kenny Rogers (yes, Kenny Rogers) to Sade to Yellowman to Beenie Man being blasted at top volume while the crowd danced and drank

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<sup>464</sup> Barbara Klinger, 'Film History, terminable and interminable: Recovering the past in reception studies', Screen (Summer 1997), 38.2, p.108.

<sup>465</sup> Correct as of January 2013.

up a storm. But once the [DJ] began to play a Céline Dion song, the crowd went buck wild and some people started firing shots in the air ... I also remember always hearing [Dion] blasting at high volume whenever I passed through volatile and dangerous neighbourhoods, so much that it became a cue to me to walk, run or drive faster if I was ever in a neighbourhood I didn't know and heard Céline Dion mawking over the airwaves.<sup>466</sup>

Dion's incredible popularity outside of the United States significantly complicates her seemingly universal unpopularity in the eyes of western music critics, and demonstrates that all tastes, however pervasive they may seem, should be open to scepticism and criticism.

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of review aggregation lies in its quantification of qualitative data. Paul Arendt's review of *Cars* provides a vivid example of the nature of the film's 'mixed' reception. Rather than manifesting itself as a disagreement between critics (that is, arguing with each other as to whether it was 'good' or 'bad'), few of the reviews were unanimous one way or the other, generally expressing a variety of positives and negatives that tipped slightly in one direction. This may seem like a fairly obvious point to make, but it is one that appears to be ignored all too often by a culture that is increasingly displaying a propensity towards review aggregation websites and notions of consensus more generally. A hypothetical film could receive one review that responds to it with an unmitigated stream of hyperbolic praise, and another review that is largely ambivalent but nevertheless ultimately deems it worthy of paying to see, and both reviews would count as 'fresh' in terms of the Tomatometer. A perfect score therefore would not necessarily suggest a 'perfect' film. In fact, the reduction of a critic's qualitative response to a number or score effectively encourages the erasure of minor grievances that were included in an otherwise positive review, or praise

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<sup>466</sup> Carl Wilson, *Let's Talk About Love: A journey to the end of taste* (London: Continuum, 2007), p.48.

contained within an otherwise damning assessment. Even in the highly unlikely event that every critic were to be in absolute agreement about a film's respective merits, neither a 100% nor a 0% score on Rotten Tomatoes would tell us anything at all about *why* critics felt that way.

This is not about any one person or institution intentionally skewing facts, but it demonstrates the level of adherence that contemporary film critics must have towards the cultural zeitgeist. The example of Toy Story 3 demonstrates this very well indeed, with the film having scored an extraordinarily high 99% on the Tomatometer, based on the aggregation of 249 reviews. Certainly, receiving such a high percentage of 'positive' reviews is an impressive achievement, even taking into consideration the abovementioned drawbacks of review aggregation. The remainder of this chapter however will look at the 1% of critics – a mere three out of 249 – who deemed the film 'rotten'. Although I will give some consideration to the criticisms of the individual reviewers, what is most interesting about this case study is the vociferous reaction that it provoked. The situation became a 'controversy' that was rarely about the specificities of the reviews, and more to do with the expression of astonishment and disgust that anybody could even consider disliking Toy Story 3. Through interrogating this controversy, some fascinating issues are raised as to the nature and function of film criticism, review aggregation, and some of the ways in which they intersect with taste cultures.

### **Trolling in the Aisles: The critics who disliked Toy Story 3**

On Friday 18<sup>th</sup> June 2010, the stage was set. Toy Story 3's Tomatometer score still sat at 100% after more than 130 reviews had been counted. With its predecessors – Toy Story (John Lasseter, 1995) and Toy Story 2 (John Lasseter, 1999) – having also scored 100% when they were released, a number of people were

entertaining the distinct possibility that the trilogy could end up with a ‘perfect’ Rotten Tomatoes score. As the number of Rotten Tomatoes-approved reviews began to climb and the third instalment remained on 100%, various observers had begun to speculate about whether or not this would continue. Twitter users<sup>467</sup> and various forum threads exclaimed their excitement that Toy Story 3 ‘STILL [had] 100% on Rotten Tomatoes,’<sup>468</sup> before this speculation turned its attention to one man in particular. As Roger Ebert put it in a tweet, “Toy Story 3 has 100% on the Meter after 77 reviews. World awaiting Armond White.”<sup>469</sup>

New York Press film critic Armond White has in recent years developed a reputation for disagreeing with other critics in relation to a number of high profile Hollywood releases. His reviews frequently elicit a range of responses from bemusement to outright anger, as journalists and online film fans struggle to come to terms with his opinions. White wrote that Toy Story 3 is ‘so besotted with brand names and product-placement that it stops being about the innocent pleasures of imagination,’ and concluded by labelling it ‘drivel’ and ‘a sap’s story.’<sup>470</sup> It is not particularly surprising that those who did enjoy the film should get upset about such an evaluation, especially since he also suggested that the trilogy as a whole ‘isn’t for children and adults, it’s for non-thinking children and adults.’<sup>471</sup> His words thus

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<sup>467</sup> Some example tweets were previously viewable using Google’s Realtime search. However, Google has since discontinued the Realtime service. Plans are in place to resurrect it with additional new features, but at the time of writing, no date has been set for its relaunch. See Emma Barnett, ‘Google Realtime search suspended after Twitter deal ends’, Telegraph, 5<sup>th</sup> July 2011

<<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/google/8617985/Google-Realtime-search-suspended-after-Twitter-deal-ends.html>>, Retrieved 1<sup>st</sup> March 2013. Armond White’s negative review appears to have been published on the New York Press website some time around 22:20 on 18<sup>th</sup> July 2010.

<sup>468</sup> Baddoctor, ““Toy Story 3” STILL has 100% on “Rotten Tomatoes””, IGN, 16<sup>th</sup> June 2010, 6:24pm <[http://boards.ign.com/teh\\_vestibule/b5296/192976307/p1](http://boards.ign.com/teh_vestibule/b5296/192976307/p1)>, Retrieved 26<sup>th</sup> April 2011.

<sup>469</sup> Roger Ebert @ebertchicago, Twitter, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2010, 01:36 <<http://twitter.com/#!/ebertchicago/status/16428154294>> Retrieved 27<sup>th</sup> April 2011. Also see Christopher Rosen, ‘Will Armond White write the first bad “Toy Story 3” review?’, Movieline, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2010 <<http://www.movieline.com/2010/06/who-will-write-the-first-bad-toy-story-3-review.php>>, Retrieved 26<sup>th</sup> April 2011.

<sup>470</sup> Armond White, ‘Bored Game’, New York Press, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2010 <<http://www.nypress.com/article-21357-bored-game.html>> Retrieved 10<sup>th</sup> April 2011.

<sup>471</sup> Ibid.

came across as a personal attack as much as an honest evaluation of artistic merit, again highlighting the peculiar balance between objectivity and subjectivity that review aggregation debates often tread. Accordingly, the bulk of the Toy Story 3 controversy centred on White, with Peter Sciretta of Slashfilm describing the news of the film dropping from 100% to 99% on the Tomatometer with the simple words, ‘What happened? You guessed it. Armond White’.<sup>472</sup>

Actually though, the controversy that arose involved two additional critics: Cole Smithey, who had published his review within minutes of (or possibly even before) White’s on June 18<sup>th</sup>, and Jeremy Heilman two days later.<sup>473</sup> Smithey contextualised the film in relation to the Toy Story trilogy as a whole, expressed disappointment at its use of 3-D, which he felt came across as ‘an afterthought,’ and added that ‘the inappropriately cruel and drawn out climax sequence is too intense for younger children.’<sup>474</sup> Heilman agreed with Smithey’s thoughts on the 3-D, and more scathingly wrote that the film

frequently indulges in the cheap brand of crass humour that has defined [the Shrek] series, with fart jokes, ethnic jokes, and gay jokes throughout its run time. All of this seems well beneath the level of sophistication that people insist Pixar films possess, and suggests something of a shark jump for the studio.<sup>475</sup>

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<sup>472</sup> Peter Sciretta, “‘Toy Story 3’ finally gets negative review, becomes the second best reviewed movie of all time,” Slashfilm, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2010 <<http://www.slashfilm.com/armond-white-prevents-toy-story-3-from-becoming-the-best-reviewed-movie-of-all-time/>>, Retrieved 15<sup>th</sup> April 2011.

<sup>473</sup> Smithey claims to have published his review fifteen minutes before Armond White, which would make *him* the man who first ‘ruined’ Toy Story 3’s Tomatometer score. While neither critic’s review includes a time stamp, making it difficult to verify his claim, it is likely that Smithey’s was at least the first of the two to be counted towards the Tomatometer. Rotten Tomatoes users began commenting on his review at 02:26pm on 18<sup>th</sup> June 2010, compared with 02:41pm for White’s review. Cole Smithey, ‘How “Toy Story 3” blew up in my face’, ColeSmithey.com, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2010 <<http://www.colesmithey.com/capsules/2010/06/toy-story-3.html>>, Retrieved April 23<sup>rd</sup> 2011.

<sup>474</sup> Cole Smithey, ‘Buzzkill: Why “Toy Story 3” isn’t as good as 1 or 2’, ColeSmithey.com, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2010 <<http://www.colesmithey.com/capsules/2010/06/toy-story-3.html>>, Retrieved 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2011.

<sup>475</sup> Jeremy Heilman, “‘Toy Story 3’ (Lee Unkrich, 2010)”, MovieMartyr.com, 20<sup>th</sup> June 2010 <<http://www.moviemartyr.com/2010/toystory3.htm>>, Retrieved 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2011.

Whether or not one agrees with White, Smithey, or Heilman, their arguments are certainly worthy of debate, and are by no means out of step with the standards and conventions of American film criticism more generally. Toy Story 3 *does* feature extensive use of brand name products, several of which existed before the first instalment of the trilogy, but most of which can now be found in a variety of guises in retailers throughout the world. The use of 3-D *is* a controversial topic of debate among many critics, not just those who disliked this film, with Roger Ebert and Mark Kermode arguably standing as two of the most outspoken critics either side of the Atlantic. Both men were very complimentary of Toy Story 3.<sup>476</sup> Heilman's aversion to the film's 'fart jokes, ethnic jokes, and gay jokes' is also a point worth discussing, since the stereotypically Spanish version of Buzz Lightyear and the camp, emasculated Ken doll function as sources of repeated humour throughout. However legitimate these reviews were however, the responses from Rotten Tomatoes users were, frankly, astonishing. Every film that receives a Tomatometer score has its own page, with a list of every critic whose review counted towards it, stating whether they rated it overall 'fresh' or overall 'rotten'. Each of these includes a one-line quotation, an external link so that users can read the review in its entirety, and there is also an option for them to leave a comment of their own next to each critic's summary. Most critics will on average receive somewhere between zero and ten comments in response to their reviews, with some of the more widely known critics sometimes receiving slightly more. In the case of Toy Story 3, Peter Debruge of Variety and Roger Ebert received 50 and 47 comments respectively, but Cole Smithey's review received 395, Jeremy Heilman's

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<sup>476</sup> See for example, Roger Ebert, "'Toy Story 3' (G)", Chicago Sun-Times, 16<sup>th</sup> June 2010  
 <<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20100616/REVIEWS/100619990>>,  
 Retrieved 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2011.

413, and Armond White's a huge 850.<sup>477</sup> Needless to say, the comments they received were overwhelmingly aggressive, and often extremely offensive or threatening.

Taking a step back from the specificities of the reviews themselves, it is worth considering for a moment the implications of a small number of negative film reviews becoming newsworthy. What does it say about notions of subjectivity and taste if such a thing can even begin to be talked about as a controversy? Time for instance described Armond White as a 'lifelong devil's advocate [who] chose to trounce on' the film,<sup>478</sup> while the Wall Street Journal reported that 'many Pixar-lovers and fanboys ... have had it with his contrarian positions, which he sometimes seems to stake out just to annoy people.'<sup>479</sup> These are views that echo the online comments left by visitors to White's review on the New York Press website, as well as the Rotten Tomatoes page for Toy Story 3. Even more common than 'devil's advocate' or 'contrarian' however is the label 'troll'.

Etymologically, the word 'trolling' (distinct from 'trawling') comes from the fishing practice of drawing a baited line through the water, either with a rod or boat, in order to entice bites from fish that come near the surface.<sup>480</sup> In web parlance, trolling originated on early Usenet groups in the late-1980s, with the word troll being used to 'denote someone who deliberately disrupts online communities [by] asking stupid questions and seeing who [rises] to the bait.'<sup>481</sup> Labelling Armond White a troll may well seem perfectly reasonable to anybody who truly loved Toy

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<sup>477</sup> Figures correct as of 1<sup>st</sup> March 2013.

<sup>478</sup> Steven James Snyder, 'Can 147 critics be wrong? Meet the two pundits who trashed "Toy Story 3"', Time, 19<sup>th</sup> June 2010 <<http://newsfeed.time.com/2010/06/19/can-147-critics-be-wrong-meet-the-two-pundits-who-trashed-toy-story-3/>>, Retrieved 15<sup>th</sup> April 2011.

<sup>479</sup> Anon., 'Armond White's "Toy Story 3" review enrages fanboys and groupthinkers', Wall Street Journal, 19<sup>th</sup> June 2010 <<http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2010/06/19/armond-whites-toy-story-3-review-enrages-fanboys-and-groupthinkers/>>, Retrieved 15<sup>th</sup> April 2011.

<sup>480</sup> Mattathias Schwartz, 'Malwebolence: The Trolls Among Us', New York Times, 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2008, Magazine, p.24.

<sup>481</sup> Ibid.



Story 3, but accusing him of deliberately criticising the film to irritate others has very problematic implications. By questioning his sincerity at all, even in a relatively balanced manner, there are only two possibilities that are being entertained within these discourses:

1. He is a troll. If this is true, he knows the film is good, and has deliberately given it a bad review to provoke its fans.
2. He is not a troll. If this is true, he genuinely disliked the film, even though everybody else enjoyed it. This choice is so out of step with consensus that there must be something wrong with him.

Whichever of those conclusions one comes to, the implication is that there is very clearly wrong with Armond White, and absolutely nothing wrong with Toy Story 3, which was entirely beyond reproach. As Josh Tyler put it, ‘most of the time film is subjective. This time it’s not.’<sup>482</sup>

It is worth reiterating at this point that Armond White’s review of Toy Story 3 is not the first time he has been labelled a troll, and he had come in for similarly heavy criticism one year earlier in response to his negative review of District 9 (Neill Blomkamp, 2009). The resultant furore was significant enough for Roger Ebert to weigh in on the debate for himself, coming to White’s defence by doing what very few of his readers appear willing to do with his reviews: take his points seriously. Ebert made clear in his blog post that he disagreed with White’s evaluation of the District 9, but that nevertheless his arguments were legitimate, and that he as a critic

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<sup>482</sup> Josh Tyler, ‘Meet the only two people who hate “Toy Story 3”’, CinemaBlend, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2010 <<http://www.cinemablend.com/new/Meet-The-Only-Two-People-Who-Hate-Toy-Story-3-19118.html>>, Retrieved 1<sup>st</sup> April 2011.

was ‘pretty much on the money.’<sup>483</sup> The following day however, Ebert updated his piece with a retraction of sorts, after a reader sent him some more information. It was an image that simply depicted a table, with some of the films that Armond White had reviewed positively, versus some that he had reviewed negatively. Here are the first ten from each column, as they appear on the image.

<b>Bad movies according to Armond</b>	<b>Good movies according to Armond</b>
<u>Julie and Julia</u> (Nora Ephron, 2009)	<u>Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen</u> (Michael Bay, 2009)
<u>Transformers</u> (Michael Bay, 2007)	<u>Land of the Lost</u> (Brad Silberling, 2009)
<u>Hunger</u> (Steve McQueen, 2008)	<u>Dance Flick</u> (Damien Dante Wayans, 2009)
<u>Gomorra</u> (Matteo Garrone, 2008)	<u>Terminator Salvation</u> (McG, 2009)
<u>Revolutionary Road</u> (Sam Mendes, 2008)	<u>Next Day Air</u> (Benny Boom, 2009)
<u>The Curious Case of Benjamin Button</u> (David Fincher, 2008)	<u>Fanboys</u> (Kyle Newman, 2008)
<u>Che</u> (Steven Soderbergh, 2008)	<u>Confessions of a Shopaholic</u> (P.J. Hogan, 2009)
<u>The Wrestler</u> (Darren Aronofsky, 2008)	<u>Bedtime Stories</u> (Adam Shankman, 2008)
<u>Doubt</u> (John Patrick Shanley, 2008)	<u>Transporter 3</u> (Olivier Megaton, 2008)
<u>I'm Not There</u> (Todd Haynes, 2007)	<u>Noah's Arc: Jumping the Broom</u> (Patrik-Ian Polk, 2008)

Figure 1. Table breaking down some of Armond White's reviews into 'good' and 'bad' movies.<sup>484</sup>

<sup>483</sup> Roger Ebert, 'Not in defense of Armond White', Chicago Sun-Times, 14<sup>th</sup> August 2009 <[http://blogs.suntimes.com/ebert/2009/08/in\\_defense\\_of\\_armond\\_white.html](http://blogs.suntimes.com/ebert/2009/08/in_defense_of_armond_white.html)>, Retrieved 1<sup>st</sup> April 2011. Note that the original title for the piece was 'In Defense of Armond White', and was posted online one day earlier, 13<sup>th</sup> August 2009. The current 'Not in Defense' version of the piece is the only one still available, since Ebert chose to add a foreword to his initial post rather than writing a new, separate retraction.

<sup>484</sup> A lengthier version of this table is linked in Ebert's abovementioned blog post. Note the apparently sarcastic URL <<http://img8.imageshack.us/img8/1897/armondwhiteisntinsane.jpg>>, Retrieved 1<sup>st</sup> April 2011.

While he noted that he was standing by his specific comments about White's District 9 review, Ebert wrote that in light of this new evidence,

I [have] to withdraw my overall defense of White. I was not familiar enough with his work. It is baffling to me that a critic could praise "Transformers 2" but not "Synecdoche, NY." Or "Death Race" but not "There Will Be Blood." I am forced to conclude that White is, as charged, a troll. A smart and knowing one, but a troll.<sup>485</sup>

Here, Ebert retreats from his initial decision to analyse the qualitative content of White's reviews, and instead rejects his opinions based on a series of 'likes' and 'dislikes'. The table reproduced above says nothing of why Armond White gave positive or negative reviews to each film, and ignores any conflicting content they may have included, such as a small amount of praise for a film that he was otherwise critical of. And yet this was apparently evidence enough for a critic of Roger Ebert's standing, knowledge, and experience, to conclude that White is a troll. Such evidence was also enough for the thousands of people who decided to make their feelings known to White after the publication of his Toy Story 3 review. Several comments expressed their feelings towards the three critics on the Rotten Tomatoes page for the film, for example:

[White] says transformers 2 was better!? WTF!?WTF!? like woowow. and he gave Jonah Hex a good review. he said it was the best movie opening this weekend....WTF!?!?<sup>486</sup>

Yes, giving [Toy Story 3] a rotten and Jonah Hex a fresh cements [White] in the hall of shame.<sup>487</sup>

How can [Cole Smithey] think Toy Story 3 is rotten but give both

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<sup>485</sup> Ebert, 'Not in defense of Armond White'.

<sup>486</sup> "'Toy Story 3' Article ratings and comments: Armond White', Rotten Tomatoes, Alexson Philips, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2010, 03:30pm

<[http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/toy\\_story\\_3/comments.php?reviewid=1889779&page=1](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/toy_story_3/comments.php?reviewid=1889779&page=1)>, Retrieved 25<sup>th</sup> April 2010.

<sup>487</sup> Ibid, ftf353, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2010, 03:37pm.

Marmaduke and Shrek 4 a fresh rating?? Really???? And then complain about the price [for 3-D tickets]??????<sup>488</sup>

Hold on hold on hold on...[Jeremy Heilman] gave The Human Centipede a fresh review, but Toy Story 3 a rotten one? [He's] joking, right?<sup>489</sup>

The fact that Ebert defended White and then subsequently retracted (or rather, qualified) that defence on the basis of evidence like this, presents an interesting point. It suggests that disagreements over individual responses to a particular film may well be acceptable, but only on condition that ones tastes are otherwise befitting of a recognised pattern. Viewed individually, films are apparently open to debate and opinion, but direct comparison of two films somehow creates a situation whereby it is acceptable to like some far more than it can be with others. Carl Wilson again makes this point succinctly in relation to Pierre Bourdieu's findings, writing that

[Bourdieu's] point is not that people are only pretending to like or dislike the culture they like and dislike, trying to con people into thinking highly of them. The pleasure of listening to music or playing a sport is obviously real. The argument is that the *kinds* of music and sports we choose, and how we talk about them, are socially shaped.<sup>490</sup>

The controversy surrounding Toy Story 3's reception thus has less to do with Toy Story 3 being objectively 'good' or 'bad', and more to do with the fact that Pixar films have come to be recognised as fitting in with the *kinds* of film that

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<sup>488</sup> "“Toy Story 3” Article ratings and comments: Cole Smithey’, Rotten Tomatoes, Beng9210, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2010, 03:19pm  
<[http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/toy\\_story\\_3/comments.php?reviewid=1889775](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/toy_story_3/comments.php?reviewid=1889775) >, Retrieved 25<sup>th</sup> April 2010.

<sup>489</sup> "“Toy Story 3” Article ratings and comments: Jeremy Heilman’, Rotten Tomatoes, ImMikeUrNot9, 20<sup>th</sup> June 2010, 12:45pm.

<sup>490</sup> Wilson, p.91.

people are expected to like.<sup>491</sup> As Matt Singer put it in an article for the Independent Film Channel, if you are ‘not a fan of “Toy Story 3”, [then] the internet suggests you keep that to yourself.’<sup>492</sup> Indeed, the second half of this sentence here is a particularly important one, since it is worth reminding oneself that this controversy should not be seen as an accurate reflection of the movie-going population in general, but of (visible) internet users.<sup>493</sup>

Aside from the disparity in sheer number of comments (with White alone receiving more than the combined totals of Smithey and Heilman), the responses to the three ‘negative’ reviews were strikingly similar to each other in tone and content. Pejorative labels such as ‘idiot’, ‘douche(bag)’ and ‘asshole’ were used liberally, as were suggestions as to what the three men should do instead of being film critics. Some were far angrier than others, with one respondent telling Heilman, ‘Just kill yourself so America can sleep again. You’re a total turd. Die mother\*\*\*\*er, please die,’<sup>494</sup> or one commenter who suggested to Cole Smithey, ‘how about you practice eye surgery on yourself with a sharp stick?’<sup>495</sup> Armond White was not exempt either, with one post appealing to him, ‘[you] just had to break Toy Story 3’s perfect score. Well, I sure hope this makes you happy, Mr. White. I bet it made your weekend. I have one thing left to say: Why you don’t you just \*\*\*\* off and die!’<sup>496</sup> Such vitriolic

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<sup>491</sup> This is akin to the concept of ‘quality’ television, although I would argue that what I am describing here is far broader in scope, applying to a wider range of texts. Quality TV has come to be associated with a fairly narrow group of shows (i.e. almost exclusively dramas with extremely high production values) and the networks that have produced them (e.g. AMC, HBO, Showtime, Netflix), whereas ‘unimpeachable’ films like Toy Story 3 do not appear to share any obvious formal or industrial qualities.

<sup>492</sup> Matt Singer, ‘Not a fan of “Toy Story 3”? The internet suggests you keep that to yourself’, IFC, 20<sup>th</sup> June 2010 <<http://www.ifc.com/blogs/indie-eye/2010/06/not-a-fan-of-toy-story-3.php>>, Retrieved 27<sup>th</sup> April 2011.

<sup>493</sup> The idea of ‘visibility’ would certainly be worthy of further exploration, as phrases such as ‘the Internet’ and ‘Twitter’ appear to be deployed as evidence of public opinion with alarming regularity. Rarely is there any acknowledgement about potential sample bias, or why it might be problematic to extrapolate the words of a small number of people in order to make broader generalisations.

<sup>494</sup> “‘Toy Story 3’ Article ratings and comments: Jeremy Heilman’, rono3849, 21<sup>st</sup> June 2010, 11:13pm.

<sup>495</sup> “‘Toy Story 3’ Article ratings and comments: Cole Smithey’, Decisi8ns, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2010, 05:33pm.

<sup>496</sup> “‘Toy Story 3’ Article ratings and comments: Armond White’, Star Child, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2010,

posts may seem somewhat over the top, but they are representative of the tone of the majority of other comments, a testament to the polarising potential of taste.

The pseudo-threatening nature of these particular examples is undoubtedly exacerbated by the anonymity that online communication presents. As Michael Marshall wrote, the New Scientist website was subject to a sharp increase in the amount of abusive language as soon as a new feature was introduced that allowed readers to comment on its articles. Having had to moderate the comments in order to conform with their stated house rules, Marshall wrote that ‘while most of them are perfectly polite, there’s a stubborn minority that are rude, intentionally provocative, or just plain abusive. It seems people will say things online that they would never say face-to-face.’<sup>497</sup> To anyone familiar with online spaces (particularly social media, or spaces that report news stories and opinion pieces and allow readers to comment below), this would be unlikely to come as a surprise. It is nevertheless worth considering that the polarised expressions of taste involved at the heart of the Toy Story 3 controversy were strongly facilitated by the Internet.

Numerous social psychology experiments have for example demonstrated that electronic communication, with its distinct absence of non-verbal or paralinguistic cues, makes it much harder to reliably convey and/or interpret the intended meaning of a message.<sup>498</sup> Nicholas Epley and Justin Kruger argue that expectations and stereotypes are ‘essential’ to everyday communication, with the ‘ability to go beyond the information given [being] a key feature of any intelligent

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04:31pm.

<sup>497</sup> Michael Marshall, ‘Don’t flame me, bro’, New Scientist, 19<sup>th</sup> November 2007 <<http://www.newscientist.com/blog/technology/2007/11/dont-flame-me-bro.html>>, Retrieved 10<sup>th</sup> April 2010.

<sup>498</sup> See for example, Nicholas Epley and Justin Kruger, ‘When what you type isn’t what they read: The perseverance of stereotypes and expectancies over e-mail’, Journal of Experimental Social Psychology (2005), 41, pp.414-22. Also see Justin Kruger et al., ‘Egocentrism over E-Mail: Can we communicate as well as we think?’, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology (2005), 89.6, pp.925-36.

system.’<sup>499</sup> They go on to add, however, that ‘inaccurate expectancies, whether derived from stereotypes, erroneous first impressions, or negative preconceptions, can cause information to be interpreted in a manner consistent with those expectancies, thereby perpetuating the expectancy.’<sup>500</sup> Their findings suggest that if huge numbers of online film fans expect Armond White to ‘hate’ a particular film, the qualitative content within his reviews is far more likely to be interpreted as negative and hostile than if it had been written by somebody with a more respected reputation. Many of the examples of Pixar reviews I have used in this chapter suggest that the same may also be true of positive preconceptions.

Journalist and author Jonah Lehrer would agree, arguing that ‘although we think we make political decisions based upon the facts, the reality is much more sordid. We are affiliation machines, editing the world to confirm our partisan ideologies.’<sup>501</sup> He goes on to add that even when faced with evidence that contradicts what we expect (and crucially, *want*) to hear, see, or read, ‘we silence the cognitive dissonance through self-imposed ignorance.’<sup>502</sup> Political affiliation and taste are of course closely related, both being socially shaped, the product of an interaction between what Bourdieu would term cultural capital, habitus and field.<sup>503</sup>

Lehrer’s work also helps shed light on the nature of the Toy Story 3 controversy. Armond White’s reputation as an alleged contrarian certainly goes some way to explaining the far higher number of comments his review received in comparison to Smithey’s and Heilman’s. Several readers expressed their unfamiliarity with the latter two critics, and insinuated that they must either be

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<sup>499</sup> Epley and Kruger, p.419.

<sup>500</sup> Ibid.

<sup>501</sup> Jonah Lehrer, ‘The Ignorance of Voters’, Wired, 27<sup>th</sup> April 2011  
 <<http://www.wired.com/wiredscience/2011/04/the-ignorance-of-voters/>>, Retrieved 27<sup>th</sup> April 2011.

<sup>502</sup> Ibid.

<sup>503</sup> Bourdieu, Distinction.

associates of White's ('Tweedle Dee and 'Tweedle Dum'),<sup>504</sup> or doing his bidding ('Another reviewer paid off by Armond White').<sup>505</sup> The consistency in tone and content across responses to all three critics however, combined with the lack of engagement with the specificities of the reviews, suggests that this situation had very little to do with what they had actually written. Rather, in the same way that we 'impose ignorance' on ourselves upon receiving information that runs contradictory to what we want to hear, Lehrer's research implies that people may have been keen to surround themselves with opinions that parallel their own. Carl Wilson argues that this is extremely common, since doing so effectively confirms and legitimates our tastes. We seek out others who will tell us what we want to hear.

Sociologist Duncan Watts makes an important link between the tastes of individuals and those of groups. In a 2007 article in the New York Times, he outlined the concept of cumulative advantage, tested in an experiment into the music consumption habits of more than 14,000 individuals online. The experiment aimed to test the effects of social influence on these habits, and revealed that people were more willing to purchase a particular song or give it a higher rating if they also saw that other people had been doing the same.

Even if you think most people are tasteless or ignorant, it's natural to believe that successful songs, movies, books and artists are somehow "better," at least in the democratic sense of a competitive market, than their unsuccessful counterparts, that Norah Jones and Madonna deserve to be as successful as they are if only because "that's what the market wanted." What our results suggest, however, is that because what people like depends on what they think other people like, what the market "wants" at any point in time can depend very sensitively on its own history: there is no sense in which it simply "reveals" what people wanted all along. In such a world, in fact, the question "Why did X succeed?" may not have any better answer than the one given by the publisher of Lynne Truss's surprise best seller,

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<sup>504</sup> "'Toy Story 3' Article ratings and comments: Cole Smithey", ftf353, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2010, 03:28pm.

<sup>505</sup> "'Toy Story 3' Article ratings and comments: Jeremy Heilman", iheartjacksparrow, 20<sup>th</sup> June 2010, 05:10pm.



Eats, Shoots & Leaves, who, when asked to explain its success, replied that “it sold well because lots of people bought it.”<sup>506</sup>

Here we see a vivid example of consensus in action, with the popularity of a cultural object being largely determined by social influence above all else. Those participants of the experiment that were able to view the consumption habits of others were in a similar position to Rotten Tomatoes users, who when faced with a large number of choices of films to potentially watch, use the website’s scores to help make their decision.<sup>507</sup> The Tomatometer provides a starting point for influencing a user’s film consumption habits, but also serves as ‘evidence’ for justifying his or her existing tastes. Watts’s research would suggest that the Tomatometer polarises people, providing users with a sense that, if they aren’t watching and liking (or disliking) the same films that others are, then they missing out. As he puts it, ‘what we often want is not so much to experience the “best” of everything as it is to experience the same things as other people and thereby also experience the benefits of sharing.’<sup>508</sup>

## Conclusion

When Toy Story 3’s Rotten Tomatoes score dropped from 100% to 99%, the reaction that the first ‘negative’ reviews received was swift and fierce. Armond White, Cole Smithey, and later, Jeremy Heilman, expressing their distaste for Pixar’s

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<sup>506</sup> Duncan J. Watts, ‘Is Justin Timberlake a product of cumulative advantage?’, New York Times, 15<sup>th</sup> April 2007, Magazine, p.22. For a more detailed discussion of this topic, see Duncan Watts, Everything Is Obvious\* \*Once You Know The Answer: How Common Sense Fails (London: Atlantic Books, 2011). In particular, see Chapter 3, ‘The Wisdom (and Madness) of Crowds. Also see Cass R. Sunstein, Infotopia: How many minds produce knowledge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>507</sup> It is important to stress that a precise link between review aggregation and actual cinemagoing has yet to be proven. The ideas and polarisation it encourages do seem to be spreading, but more work needs to be done to uncover whether or not this actually translates to box office success. For more on the link between film criticism and cinemagoing, see, for example, Robert O., Wyatt and David P. Badger, ‘Effects of Information and Evaluation in Film Criticism’, Journalism Quarterly, 67.2 (Summer 1990), pp.359-68.

<sup>508</sup> Watts, ‘Cumulative advantage’, p.22.

latest release, all came in for intense abuse on the website itself, being insulted, accused of being trolls, and having their credentials as film critics called into question. Rotten Tomatoes users were in other words expressing their own taste by coming together en masse to reject the critics' distastes. To some extent, there are reasons why Toy Story 3 should be the subject of a controversy of this kind, namely in the sense that the trilogy had been released over a fifteen-year period. As such, audiences who enjoyed the films had already invested in two previous stories with the same characters, and several reviewers noted that changes in their own lives over that period had had a significant bearing on their reactions to the third installment.

Toy Story and Toy Story 2 also carried with them the weight of 'perfect' Rotten Tomatoes scores, although it is important to note that the website was only founded in 1999, with many reviews (obviously including Toy Story, but also some of the sequel's reviews) being posted to the site retrospectively. Just as we saw in the case of Cars, and with Duncan Watts' experiment, while consensus does leave room for criticism, the social component of taste tends to polarise rather than fragment opinion.

Importantly, the consensus surrounding Pixar and the films it produces is strongly informed by the notion of the 'winning streak'. While this idea manifests itself primarily through observers who link each of the studio's films together in an unbroken chain of success, it was given an added dimension upon the release of Toy Story 3. The nature of how the film's Tomatometer score unfolded – 130 'fresh' reviews before a single 'rotten' one – undoubtedly exacerbated the reaction that White, Smithey and Heilman received, creating a winning streak (Toy Story 3 on the Tomatometer), within a winning streak (the Toy Story franchise), within a winning streak (Pixar's oeuvre). Before Rotten Tomatoes existed, it would have

been easier for fans of a film to restrict their reading of reviews to a select few publications, more easily enabling the dismissal of any opinions that contradicted their own. But the rise of Rotten Tomatoes has made ignoring conflicting reviews far more difficult, since anybody who uses the website at all is inextricably linked to every review that counted towards a film's score.

The importance of the vitriolic responses to Armond White, Cole Smithey and Jeremy Heilman's reviews of Toy Story 3 however go far beyond this one film, and beyond Pixar. Roger Ebert's defence of Armond White and then his subsequent retraction suggest a paradox, whereby everyone is indeed entitled to their own opinion about a cultural object, but there nevertheless exists a definite (if intangible) sense of 'good' versus 'bad' art. Individual 'discrepancies' (i.e. opinions that conflict with consensus) are perfectly legitimate, but only on condition that they are not repeated across multiple cultural objects. Aggregation of course makes this effect far more pronounced than it has ever been, since it not only simplifies and collates multiple reviews for multiple films, but the Tomatometer scores provide an instant way of comparing one film to another. We can see at a glance that Toy Story 3 is high on 'perfect', and Jonah Hex (Jimmy Hayward, 2010) is 'rotten' – the figures are there for all to see.

Pixar is by no means the only studio to have benefited from the polarising effect of the Tomatometer, and it will not be the last, but the highest and lowest scores on the website stand as a clearly observable indicator of what cinematic taste does and does not consist of at any given time. Film critics and internet-savvy film fans should by no means be seen to represent 'the audience' for any given release, but cumulative advantage theory suggests that these relatively small audiences will play an increasingly central role in the formation of tastes. The more it is reported that 'everybody' loves Toy Story 3 or Pixar, the more people will be encouraged to

seek out the studio's work, already wanting to see it in a positive light. Of course, this can work in the opposite way too, whereby people may approach a cultural object with the intention (whether conscious or not) of *disliking* it. Doing so is itself an expression of cultural distinction. Others may approach the text with a considerable degree of scepticism, doubting whether it actually lives up to the hype from critics and/or audiences. In both cases, however, branding and reputation can make the difference, and even the most vehemently derisive review of a Pixar film must be seen in relation to all that has come before it – an all but indisputable narrative of success.

## CONCLUSION

### Beyond Infinity, Beyond Animation?: The Future of the Pixar Brand

In many ways, the work of a critic is easy. We risk very little, yet enjoy a position over those who offer up their work and their selves to our judgment. We thrive on negative criticism, which is fun to write and to read. But the bitter truth we critics must face is that in the grand scheme of things, the average piece of junk is probably more meaningful than our criticism designating it so. But there are times when a critic truly risks something, and that is in the discovery and defence of the *new*. The world is often unkind to new talent, new creations. The new needs friends. Last night, I experienced something new: an extraordinary meal from a singularly unexpected source. To say that both the meal and its maker have challenged my preconceptions about fine cooking is a gross understatement. They have rocked me to my core. In the past, I have made no secret of my disdain for Chef Gusteau's famous motto, "Anyone can cook." But I realise, only now do I truly understand what he meant. Not everyone can become a great artist; but a great artist *can* come from *anywhere*. It is difficult to imagine more humble origins than those of the genius now cooking at Gusteau's, who is, in this critic's opinion, nothing less than the finest chef in France. I will be returning to Gusteau's soon, hungry for more.

- Anton Ego (Peter O'Toole), Ratatouille (Brad Bird, 2007)

The monologue above is taken from the end of Ratatouille, when the notoriously surly food critic Anton Ego (Peter O'Toole) triumphantly admits that he has been won over by Remy the rat's fine cuisine. Ego offers a self-effacing re-assessment of the value and worth of his profession in comparison to the art and artists he writes about, conceding that 'the average piece of junk is probably more meaningful than our criticism designating it so'. He champions the 'new' and the 'unexpected', and expresses his profound delight at having had his preconceptions challenged by a 'genius'. It is but one moment from one of Pixar's many feature films, yet it also appeared to stand for a great deal more than that, reading very much like a paean from the studio to itself.<sup>509</sup> The reference to Remy's 'humble

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<sup>509</sup> A 2011 feature by Entertainment Weekly also noted this association, selecting Ego's monologue as one of 'Pixar's Top 12 moments', and suggesting that it 'could have just as easily been written

origins' chimes comfortably with the romanticised narratives of early Pixar, depicted as a talented but struggling company who eventually succeeded through perseverance. It was a speech that, in hindsight, appeared to set the tone for critics who would write about the studio, pre-empting the hyperbole that would follow in subsequent years.

Indeed, when I first began work on this doctoral thesis in October 2009, Pixar occupied a seemingly unassailable position in American popular culture. The release of Up (Pete Docter, 2009) that summer had truly cemented the studio's already solid reputation for quality family entertainment, building on the achievements of Ratatouille and WALL-E (Andrew Stanton, 2008). Pixar had often been the subject of effusive critical praise in the past, but these three movies were seen to exemplify everything that the brand stood for in the eyes of critics: cinema that was original, creative, daring, and ruled by the pursuit of artistry rather than marketing reports. One of John Lasseter's repeated mantras was that 'quality is the best business plan', a phrase that could have sounded hollow had Pixar's output fallen below par. It was a brand that was regularly making promises to its audiences, but rarely failed to deliver. Even so, prior to Up's release, a number of stakeholders expressed concern that the studio was straying too far from established filmmaking conventions. To some reviewers, recent characters and storylines – a rat who becomes a gourmet chef, or an elderly widower using balloons to fly his house to South America – almost came across as deliberate attempts to dissuade audiences from seeing them, with one financial analyst anxiously explaining that 'each film [Pixar] delivers seems to be less commercial than the last.'<sup>510</sup>

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about Ratatouille itself.' John Young, 'Pixar: Top 12 Movie Moments', Entertainment Weekly, 4<sup>th</sup> November 2011 <[http://www.ew.com/ew/gallery/0,,20483133\\_20541423,00.html#21072204](http://www.ew.com/ew/gallery/0,,20483133_20541423,00.html#21072204)>, Retrieved 7<sup>th</sup> April 2013.

<sup>510</sup> Brooks Barnes, 'Pixar's Art Leaves Profit Watchers Edgy', New York Times, 5<sup>th</sup> April 2009 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/06/business/media/06pixar.html?8dpc=&pagewanted=all>>.

These fears were routinely assuaged, as positive reviews and strong word of mouth were matched by impressive box office takings around the world. Ego's words again ring true here, with Pixar consistently 'challenging critics' preconceptions' by giving them something 'new'.<sup>511</sup> Even a Maclean's article in 2008 ominously entitled 'The Problem With Pixar' was actually full of praise. Jaime Weinman wrote that, 'lately, its movies have felt more like art films', and his concern was simply that audiences would not reward them with the box office revenues they deserved.<sup>512</sup>

The Pixar that exists as I write this conclusion in early 2013, however, seems far less stable. While the reputation for quality that the studio has been cultivating since the mid-1980s will take some time to erode completely, figurative cracks have certainly begun to emerge; critics simply do not have as much faith in Pixar as they once did. For many observers, films like Cars 2 (John Lasseter and Brad Lewis, 2011) and Brave (Mark Andrews and Brenda Chapman, 2012) have cast doubt on what had previously been one of the most dependable brand names in global entertainment. An article in Variety from November 2012 again described 'the Pixar problem', but this was not the same issue that Weinman had raised four years earlier. This time, the eponymous problem was the impact of the Disney takeover, with the parent company's demands for more sequels and increased productivity having forced Pixar to alter its previously successful working methods.<sup>513</sup>

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Retrieved 16<sup>th</sup> July 2012.

<sup>511</sup> The precise meaning of 'new' in this context is somewhat ambiguous. It could mean 'original' or 'creative', but these are still incredibly subjective qualities, and difficult to pin down through formal analysis without also including extensive references to other films. Several critics have compared Pixar's originality to rival studios' reliance on existing source material, implying that 'newness' here is at least partly a question of taking risks.

<sup>512</sup> Jaime J. Weinman, 'The Problem With Pixar', Maclean's, 7-14<sup>th</sup> July 2008, Film, p.76.

<sup>513</sup> David S. Cohen, 'Lucasfilm could face the Pixar problem', Daily Variety, 8<sup>th</sup> November 2012, p.2.

## The 'Sequelisation' of Pixar

Interestingly, in the wake of the takeover, Disney CEO Bob Iger was quick to declare, 'I'm sensitive to what can happen when a company is bought,' and he stressed the importance of 'the Pixar culture [being] protected and allowed to continue.'<sup>514</sup> This creative culture had become a key component of the studio's reputation, particularly in relation to the question of *how* it had become so adept at consistently producing critically lauded box office successes. Disney certainly appears to have kept its word in this regard, maintaining the atmosphere of playfulness and encouraging collaboration, experimentation and interaction between all its employees. However, it does seem as though there may have been orders from Disney to shift long term production strategies towards sequels, spin-offs and franchises, so as to provide animation that can extend existing narratives and create new opportunities for storytelling across a range of media. Whether this is exactly what has happened is open to debate, and ultimately impossible to prove without being granted access to internal correspondence or conversations between the studios.

Derek Johnson notes that the curious cultural position that media franchising finds itself in today, as an industrial strategy that simultaneously dominates the North American box office, yet is routinely dismissed, criticised and satirised by cultural commentators. As he puts it, 'as an awkward punchline, franchising explains the creative bankruptcy and foregone economic determination of contemporary media industries ... as monstrously homogenised, self-determining, and childish'.<sup>515</sup> Crucially, Pixar's reputation has been discursively set in opposition to such industrial/creative logic, yet has now reached a point when the distinction is

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<sup>514</sup> Laura M. Holson, 'Disney Agrees to Purchase Pixar in \$7.4 Billion Deal', New York Times, 25<sup>th</sup> January 2006, p.C6.

<sup>515</sup> Derek Johnson, Media Franchising: Creative License and Collaboration in the Culture Industries (New York: New York University Press, 2013), p.1.



becoming far less clear. Its brand has effectively made creativity into a commodity, with the studio name having come to represent not just consistent entertainment, but newness and uniqueness. Sequels, franchises and merchandising are, quite simply, antithetical to Pixar's reputation and historical narrative, meaning that such industrial activity must somehow be consolidated in relation to incongruous ideas.

During the period of industrial conflict between Disney and Pixar between 2001 and 2006 was marked by considerable public sniping from either side, both John Lasseter and Steve Jobs made derisive comments about Disney's willingness to compromise quality in exchange for easy cash.<sup>516</sup> As David Price describes the situation in 2003:

The idea of Disney cranking out Toy Story 3, Finding Nemo 2, and the like drove Lasseter to distraction. He regarded the films almost as his children, and there was little reason to expect that [then-Disney CEO Michael] Eisner would tend them with any sort of care. Disney-made sequels under Eisner, it seemed, would be objects of commerce above all else. "These were the people who put out Cinderella II," Lasseter later said mordantly.<sup>517</sup>

Steve Jobs employed the same example as Lasseter, reflecting that, 'When you see what that company did putting out Cinderella II, you shudder at what would have happened'.<sup>518</sup> Walter Isaacson's biography of Jobs, however, goes even further than Price in describing Lasseter's torment, quoting him as saying, 'I was worried about my children, what they would do with the characters we'd created. It was like a dagger to my heart. It's like you have these dear children and you have to give them up to be adopted by convicted child molesters'<sup>519</sup> These words are

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<sup>516</sup> The fact that Lasseter spoke out against is particularly noteworthy, even shocking, given that his interviews and public comments are characterised by an almost hyperactively positive attitude towards his work.

<sup>517</sup> David Price, The Pixar Touch: The Making of a Company (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), p.232.

<sup>518</sup> Walter Isaacson, Steve Jobs (London: Simon & Schuster, 2011), p.245.

<sup>519</sup> Ibid.

significantly stronger than any of the words that emerged publically at that time, and thus their effect on post-takeover discourse is a polarising one, not only maintaining but increasing the perceived distance between the two studios. Available evidence suggests Pixar has decided that taking responsibility for its own films is preferable to ceding control of its characters to another company. With Toy Story 3 having been released in 2010, however, and Finding Dory (i.e. the sequel to Finding Nemo) having been set for release in 2015,<sup>520</sup> it is clear that a disparity (or at the very least, a tension) has emerged between Pixar's reputation and its performance.

However, the truth of this situation is less important than its plausibility, and the reason why it became such an attractive narrative was because of the respective reputations involved. Disney's reputation within these discourses hinged on its prior association with globalisation and cultural ubiquity, as well as its corporate focus on synergy and franchising throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Pixar, on the other hand, had mostly resisted producing sequels throughout its string of successes. Although the Toy Story trilogy represents a notable exception, critics justified this in two key ways: firstly, Toy Story 2 (John Lasseter, 1999) was a rare example of a sequel that was deemed to measure up to its predecessor, thus vindicating the decision to make it in the first place; secondly, it was later widely reported that the production of both sequels had actually been forced on Pixar by Disney, who controlled character rights and threatened to make the film themselves with or without Pixar's assistance.<sup>521</sup> Reputations and brands thus need to be considered from the perspective of narratives, with trajectories and key 'plot elements' which are constantly in a state of flux.

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<sup>520</sup> Madeline Boardman, "Finding Dory" Announced as "Finding Nemo" Sequel With Ellen DeGeneres To Star', Huffington Post, 2<sup>nd</sup> April, 2013.  
 <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/02/finding-dory-finding-nemo-sequel\\_n\\_2999649.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/02/finding-dory-finding-nemo-sequel_n_2999649.html)>, Retrieved 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2013.

<sup>521</sup> See, for example, David Price, The Pixar Touch: The Making of a Company (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008); Walter Isaacson, Steve Jobs (London: Simon & Schuster, 2011), p.131.

Sociologist William Sewell has, for example, argued that historical ‘events’ are not as easily defined as they often seem to be, and come to be recognised only when they result in the ‘transformation of structures’.<sup>522</sup> Duncan Watts concurs, and stresses the problematic process of historicisation more generally. He compares the use of artificial ‘endpoints’ to the ending of movies, which impose an ending on what in reality would be an ongoing story.<sup>523</sup> This argument has important implications for this thesis, not only because it is, in part, a historical account of how the Pixar brand has developed, but because it is an attempt to document an *ongoing* process. History, as Watts points out, can only be written *after* something has happened, and thus many of the ‘events’ I have chosen to focus my attention on could theoretically be deemed insignificant to the ‘meaning’ of the Pixar brand at some point in the future. Yet this should not diminish the strength of the arguments I have made, since reputation is *constantly* being mediated in different ways by different forces. Thus, journalism and film reviews are, I would argue, the most effective way of at least being able to gauge the prevailing zeitgeist – which narratives prevail – at any given time. This even applies in instances when writers may have interpreted events ‘wrongly’, as exemplified in the case of Toy Story, which was seen as a Disney film by most critics despite the demonstrable evidence, both then and now, of Pixar’s overwhelming creative control. Such moments may even prove to be more revealing than reports that can be verified or corroborated through other sources, since the impact and legacy of inaccuracies will inevitably stand out as unusual in the face of conflicting information. In other words, it is

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<sup>522</sup> William H. Sewell, Jr., ‘Historical Events as Transformations of Structures: Inventing Revolution at the Bastille’, Theory and Society, 25.6 (December 1996), p.843.

<sup>523</sup> Duncan Watts, Everything Is Obvious\* \*Once You Know The Answer: How Common Sense Fails (London: Atlantic Books, 2011), pp.131-2. For a discussion of endings in Hollywood cinema more generally, see James MacDowell, Happy Endings in Hollywood Cinema: Cliché, Convention and the Final Couple (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

important to acknowledge that the arguments put forth throughout this thesis are necessarily shaped by the point in time that they were written.

One of my overriding research questions when I began the project was to explore the studio's continued rise, since there was no suggestion that its success would end in the near future. Had I written this conclusion during the summer of 2012, however, following critics' varied criticisms of Cars 2 (John Lasseter, 2011) and Brave (Mark Andrews, Brenda Chapman and Steve Purcell, 2012), I would likely have been reflecting on the 'rise and fall' of Pixar. As it stands now, in 2013, with Disney having purchased Lucasfilm, the narrative almost feels as though it has come full circle; Pixar was purchased by Disney to restore quality to its animation department, but there are now signs that their respective reputations are beginning to converge. What this means is that Pixar now finds itself in the curious position of being (seemingly) responsible for the fate of the company it originated from in the late-1970s.<sup>524</sup>

### **Beyond Animation?: What John Carter might tell us about Pixar**

One of the key developments at Pixar since I began this research has been an implied shift away from animation. This shift has to some extent been symbolic or referential, as critics have sought to legitimate the studio's films by elevating them above the output of its rivals. In another sense, however, this move away from animation has been a literal one, as several Pixar directors have moved into live action cinema. For example, prior to joining Pixar and making The Incredibles (2004) and Ratatouille (2007), Brad Bird had been responsible for the critically lauded animation The Iron Giant (1999). He then became the first of the studio's

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<sup>524</sup> To be clear, I am not suggesting that Pixar will have any creative input into the forthcoming Star Wars series, but that the convergence of Disney and Pixar's reputations means that such a *narrative* is becoming more and more of a possibility.

filmmakers to make something elsewhere when he was appointed to direct Mission Impossible 4: Ghost Protocol (2011). The impact of his departure was arguably lessened as a result of Bird's own reputation within Pixar, as the critical reception of The Incredibles had previously established him as something of a 'wacky' outsider. After directing two Pixar films, however, his association with the studio was still strong, and when it was announced that Andrew Stanton would be directing Disney's live-action blockbuster John Carter, a clear story was emerging of Pixar's key creative workers abandoning the medium they made their names in.

The ways in which these developments played out in the reception of John Carter were intriguing, and as with the legitimating discourses described in Chapters 4 and 6, reveal a great deal about Pixar's cultural status. One article in the Guardian, for example, wrote in January 2010 (two years before the film's release), that if John Carter became a success, it would prove that Stanton and his colleagues deserve to be seen as 'the greatest film-makers the world has ever known'.<sup>525</sup> The article asked whether the studio's 'Midas touch' would 'transfer to live action',<sup>526</sup> while Bloomberg Businessweek similarly speculated 'whether Disney can spread the magic of animation powerhouse Pixar ... to live-action films'.<sup>527</sup> What comments like this imply is that critics had in mind a clear narrative trajectory for Pixar that could easily have become historicised. Ultimately, this wasn't to be the case, because the overwhelming story of the film became one of catastrophic failure after its \$250 million production budget dwarfed the domestic box office takings of only \$73

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<sup>525</sup> Ben Child, 'Can Pixar's Midas touch transfer to live action film?', Guardian, 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2010 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/filmblog/2010/jan/22/pixar-disney-animation-john-carter-of-mars>>, Retrieved 15<sup>th</sup> April 2013.

<sup>526</sup> Ibid.

<sup>527</sup> Michael White and Christopher Palmeri, 'Can a Pixar Whiz Conquer Live Action?', Bloomberg Businessweek, 1<sup>st</sup> March 2012 <<http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2012-03-01/can-a-pixar-whiz-conquer-live-action>>, Retrieved 15<sup>th</sup> April 2013.

million.<sup>528</sup> Significantly, though, the way in which Disney and Pixar were both conceptualised within these discourses of failure is telling; A.O Scott's New York Times review only mentioned Pixar once, but only to declare, 'the Pixar touch is evident in the precision of the visual detail and in the wit and energy of Michael Giacchino's score'.<sup>529</sup> Michael Cavanaugh's blog for the Washington Post asked, 'Who's to blame for Disney's "\$200-million" bomb?', effectively answering his own question, and neglecting to mention Pixar anywhere in the article.<sup>530</sup> I have provided countless examples of this process of negotiated reputation throughout this thesis, but it will be interesting to see how this gradual conflation between Disney and Pixar, and between animation and live-action filmmaking continues. Richard Corliss might have seen Pixar as 'standing in' for all other animation, but this becomes a more complex issue as animation itself becomes increasingly difficult to define. As CGI, motion capture, video gaming, and other visual effects technologies become more capable of mimicking the 'real', will this have any impact on Pixar's reputation for quality animation?

### **Beyond Pixar?: Suggestions for Future Research**

As I have repeatedly stressed throughout this thesis, many of the arguments and theoretical frameworks that I have presented here may certainly be applied to the study of other brands, loosely defined. Certainly, Klinger's approach to historical reception studies represents an insightful way of exploring the development of reputation over time, as well as in specific moments. While it may

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<sup>528</sup> Anon., 'John Carter', Box Office Mojo, no date

<<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=johncarterofmars.htm>>, Retrieved 15<sup>th</sup> April 2013.

<sup>529</sup> A.O. Scott, 'The Wild, Wild West of a Certain Red Planet', New York Times, 8<sup>th</sup> March 2012

<[http://movies.nytimes.com/2012/03/09/movies/john-carter-with-taylor-kitsch-and-lynn-collins.html?\\_r=1&](http://movies.nytimes.com/2012/03/09/movies/john-carter-with-taylor-kitsch-and-lynn-collins.html?_r=1&)>, Retrieved 15<sup>th</sup> April 2013.

<sup>530</sup> Michael Cavanaugh, 'The Rant: John Carter's Massive Fallout', Washington Post, 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2012  
<[http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/comic-riffs/post/the-rant-john-carters-massive-fallout-whos-to-blame-for-disneys-200-million-bomb/2012/03/19/gIQAOKf6VS\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/comic-riffs/post/the-rant-john-carters-massive-fallout-whos-to-blame-for-disneys-200-million-bomb/2012/03/19/gIQAOKf6VS_blog.html)>, Retrieved 15<sup>th</sup> April 2013.

not be enough on its own to explain *why* certain discourses prevail and others do not, it does at least allow for a comprehensive overview of what those discourses are, and how they develop. Reputations will inevitably be forged by an enormous range of factors, but reception studies as a discipline is well placed to explore the spaces where these processes of negotiation take place.

Following the lead of Arvidsson, seeing brands as units of ‘informational capital’ that ‘provide context’ for the consumption of a diverse range of products,<sup>531</sup> my contention is that studies in this area should seek to move away from strictly proprietorial definitions of branding. Consumption simply does not take place inside a vacuum, and it is imperative that the academy develops ways of studying the fluidity with which journalists, audiences, and other consumer groups routinely engage with brands. After all, if branding is about ‘providing a context’, then I would argue that it is equally important to understand *how* these contextual providers are themselves created, and where they came from.

One potential approach to the Pixar brand that I was heavily tempted to incorporate into my research was an audience study. The primary reason why I opted against the idea was because I was keen to trace Pixar’s development *over time*, free from the biases of knowing what would become of the studio. Nevertheless, such an approach would undoubtedly help to answer some closely related questions. To what extent do critical discourses surrounding the studio match up with audience expectations and responses to its films? And are audiences just as invested in the distinctions between rival animation studios? Anecdotally, my own experience of talking to friends and family about my research has almost always resulted in someone asking me, ‘So, was [x] a Pixar film then?’ (where [x] represents the name of virtually any high profile computer-animated film made since Shrek). My

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<sup>531</sup> Arvidsson, Adam, Brands: Meaning and Value in Media Culture (London: Routledge, 2006), p.75.

suspicion is that these distinctions between brands that are so prominent between critics, would actually be far less common among audiences more generally, and it would be fascinating to test that hypothesis. More work would also be needed to prove whether there was a demonstrable link between branded reputation and audience consumption practices, a study that would likely be of considerable interest to film studios and brand strategists in general.

What this all comes back to is the question of how to locate Pixar. Where exactly do brands reside, and how can we analyse them in meaningful ways?

Interbrand's annual list of the 'Best Global Brands', for instance, often features Disney near the top, yet calculates brand value from the sum total of all the other brands it owns. This is clearly problematic if, as I have shown, Disney is routinely derided in relation to companies such as Pixar. Value, in this context, is seen purely in terms of monetary flow, and appears to have little correlation with cultural value or reputation. Seen in this way, I would argue that in order to discuss what Pixar 'means', studies of Disney's corporate structure and other industrial information needs to be supplemented with research into, say, passing references to Pixar in popular sitcom The Office (NBC, 2005-13). What does it mean, for example, that protagonist Michael Scott attempts to impress a woman in a bar by saying, 'Toy Story, Finding Nemo, Up, I bawled the entire time! I cannot watch Pixar!'<sup>532</sup> It is cultural analysis of this kind that I believe existing studies of brands are lacking, treating brands as stories, or texts that can be formally analysed in a multitude of potential ways.

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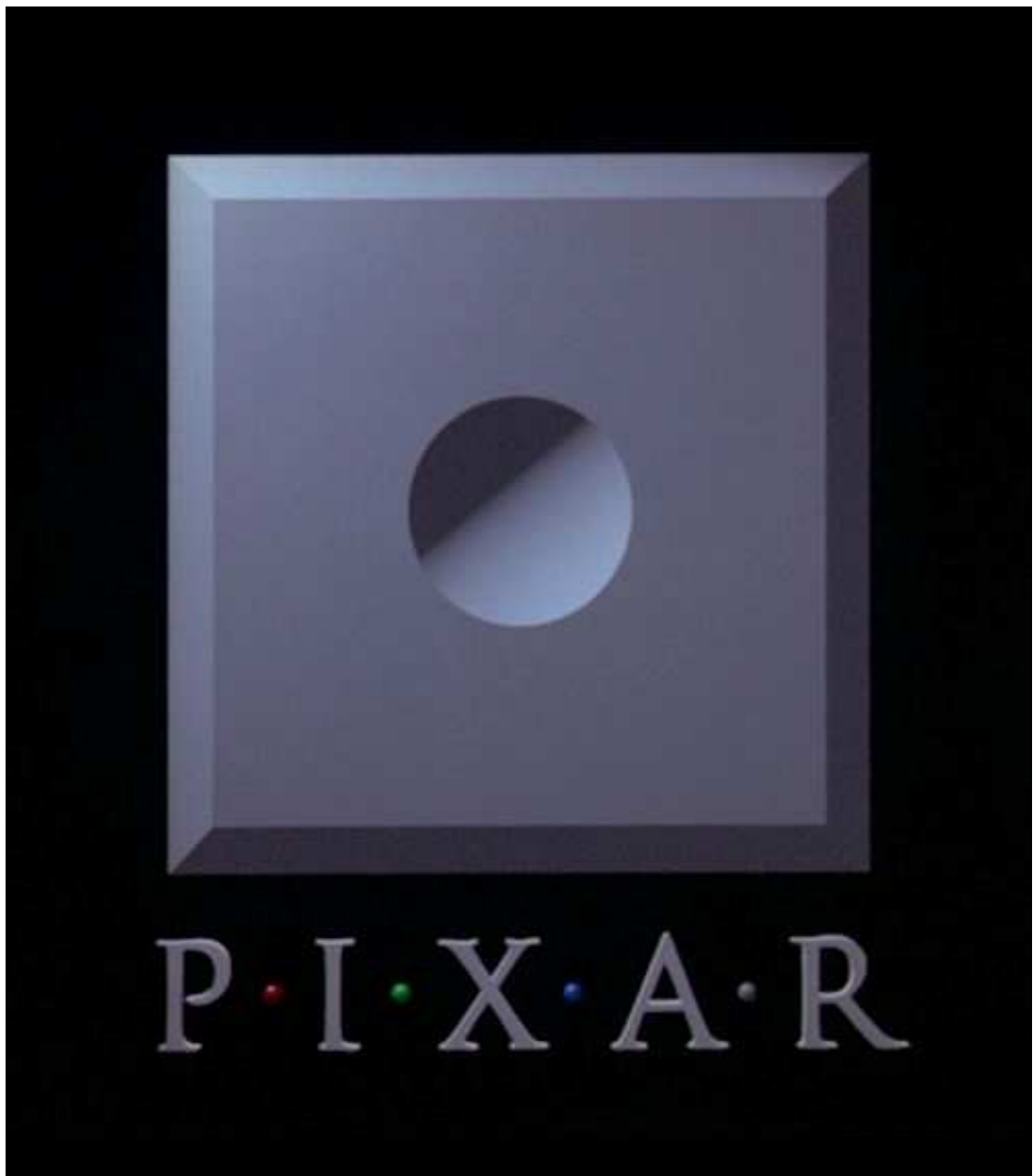
<sup>532</sup> The Office, 6.4, 'Niagara'. Other references to Pixar films can be found in episodes: 6.8, 'Koi Pond'; 7.11, 'Classy Christmas'; 7.13, 'The Seminar'; 7.16, 'Threat Level Midnight'. I would argue, for instance, that Pixar is gendered female within most of these jokes or references, being most strongly associated with the characters of Erin Hannon (Ellie Kemper), Kelly Kapoor (Mindy Kaling) and Holly Flax (Amy Ryan). Pixar is also mentioned by Ellie Kemper's character in Bridesmaids, Dir. Paul Feig, USA, Universal Pictures, 2011.



Pixar's position within Disney's corporate structure will likely remain unchanged in the coming years, yet there are clear signs emerging that its reputation is at a crucial moment in time. As the studio passes control of its films from its original 'Brain Trust' of John Lasseter, Andrew Stanton, Pete Docter and Lee Unkrich, will this in turn contribute to a sense that Pixar has moved away from individual authorial visions, and towards something more corporate and figuratively 'faceless'? At what point will 'bad' sequels or underperforming blockbusters cease to be blamed on Disney, and merge into a sense of Pixar having lost its way? Is there a grace period here that can only continue for a finite number of perceived 'flops'? It is difficult to believe that a gradual change could never come, but for the moment, Pixar still seems to be in a position where its failures will constantly be discursively displaced onto other brands or authors. My suspicion is that even a constant stream of critical backlash could be spun positively, further strengthening the reputation of the studio's earlier work in the manner of 'Classic' Disney films. It almost feels as though this story has already been written.

## Appendix

Fig. 1.1 – Pixar logo, 1986-1990. Author's screengrab.



**Fig 1.2 – Pixar Image Computer.**<sup>533</sup>



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<sup>533</sup> Samad Rizvi, 'Happy 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary to Pixar', Pixar Times, 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2011  
<<http://pixartimes.com/2011/02/03/happy-25th-anniversary-to-pixar/>>. Retrieved 7<sup>th</sup> March 2013.

# Pixar Filmography

## FEATURES

A Bug's Life. Dir. John Lasseter. Co-Dir. Andrew Stanton. Perf. Dave Foley, Kevin Spacey, Julia Louis-Dreyfus. USA. Disney/Pixar, 1998.

Brave. Dir. Mark Andrews, Brenda Chapman. Co-Dir. Steve Purcell. Perf. Kelly Macdonald, Billy Connolly, Emma Thompson. USA. Disney/Pixar, 2012.

Cars. Dir. John Lasseter. Co-Dir. Joe Ranft. Perf. Owen Wilson, Paul Newman, Bonnie Hunt, Larry the Cable Guy. USA. Disney/Pixar, 2006.

Cars 2. Dir. John Lasseter. Co-Dir. Brad Lewis. Perf. Owen Wilson, Larry the Cable Guy, Michael Caine, Emily Mortimer. USA. Disney/Pixar, 2011.

Finding Nemo. Dir. Andrew Stanton. Co-Dir. Lee Unkrich. Perf. Albert Brooks, Ellen DeGeneres, Alexander Gould. USA. Disney/Pixar, 2003.

The Incredibles. Dir. Brad Bird. Perf. Craig T. Nelson, Holly Hunter, Samuel L. Jackson, Jason Lee. 2004. USA. Disney/Pixar, 2005.

Monsters, Inc. Dir. Pete Docter. Co-Dir. David Silverman, Lee Unkrich. Perf. John Goodman, Billy Crystal, Mary Gibbs, Steve Buscemi, James Coburn. USA. Disney/Pixar, 2001.

Ratatouille. Dir. Brad Bird, Jan Pinkava. Perf. Patton Oswalt, Ian Holm, Lou Romano, Peter O'Toole. USA. Disney/Pixar, 2007.

Toy Story. Dir. John Lasseter. Perf. Tom Hanks, Tim Allen, Don Rickles, Jim Varney, Wallace Shawn. USA. Disney/Pixar, 1995.

Toy Story 2. Dir. John Lasseter. Co-Dir. Ash Brannon, Lee Unkrich. Perf. Tom Hanks, Tim Allen, Joan Cusack, Kelsey Grammer, Wayne Knight. USA. Disney/Pixar, 1999.

Toy Story 3. Dir. Lee Unkrich. Perf. Tom Hanks, Tim Allen, Joan Cusack, Ned Beatty. USA. Disney/Pixar, 2010.

Up. Dir. Pete Docter. Co-Dir. Bob Peterson. Perf. Edward Asner, Christopher Plummer, Jordan Nagai, Bob Peterson. USA. Disney/Pixar, 2009.

WALL-E. Dir. Andrew Stanton. Perf. Ben Burtt, Elissa Knight, Jeff Garlin, Fred Willard. USA. Disney/Pixar, 2008.

## SHORTS

The Adventures of André and Wally B. Dir. Alvy Ray Smith. Pixar/Lucasfilm Ltd., 1984.

Boundin’. Dir. Bud Luckey. Co-Dir. Roger Gould. Pixar, 2003.

BURN-E. Dir. Angus MacLane. Disney/Pixar, 2008.

Day & Night. Dir. Teddy Newton. Disney/Pixar, 2010.

Dug’s Special Mission. Dir. Ronnie Del Carmen. Disney/Pixar, 2009.

For the Birds. Dir. Ralph Eggleston. Disney/Pixar, 2000.

George & AJ. Dir. Josh Cooley. Disney/Pixar, 2009.

Geri’s Game. Dir. Jan Pinkava. Pixar, 1997.

Hawaiian Vacation. Dir. Gary Rydstrom. Disney/Pixar, 2011.

Jack-Jack Attack. Dir. Brad Bird. Disney/Pixar, 2005.

Knick Knack. Dir. John Lasseter. Pixar, 1989.

La Luna. Dir. Enrico Casarosa. Disney/Pixar, 2012.

The Legend of Mor’du. Dir. Brian Larsen. Disney/Pixar, 2012.

Lifted. Dir. Gary Rydstrom. Disney/Pixar, 2006.

Luxo Jr. Dir. John Lasseter. Pixar, 1986.

Mater and the Ghostlight. Dir. John Lasseter. Co-Dir. Dan Scanlon. Disney/Pixar, 2006.

Mike’s New Car. Dir. Pete Docter, Roger Gould. Disney/Pixar, 2002.

One Man Band. Dir. Mark Andrews, Andrew Jimenez. Pixar, 2005.

Partly Cloudy. Dir. Peter Sohn. Disney/Pixar, 2009.

Partysaurus Rex. Dir. Mark Walsh. Disney/Pixar, 2012.

Presto. Dir. Doug Sweetland. Disney/Pixar, 2008.

Red’s Dream. Dir. John Lasseter. Pixar, 1987.

Small Fry. Dir. Angus MacLane. Disney/Pixar, 2011.

The Blue Umbrella. Dir. Saschka Unseld. Disney/Pixar, 2013.

Tin Toy. Dir. John Lasseter. Pixar, 1988.

Your Friend the Rat. Dir. Jim Capobianco. Disney/Pixar, 2007.

## Filmography

Aladdin. Dir. Ron Clements and John Musker. USA. Walt Disney Pictures, 1992.

An American Tale. Dir. Don Bluth. USA. Universal Pictures, 1986.

Armageddon. Dir. Michael Bay. USA. Touchstone Pictures, 1998.

Beauty and the Beast. Dir. Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise. USA. Walt Disney Pictures, 1991.

Bedtime Stories. Dir. Adam Shankman. USA. Walt Disney Pictures, 2008.

Bridesmaids. Dir. Paul Feig. USA. Universal Pictures, 2011.

Brother Bear. Dir. Aaron Blaise and Robert Walker. USA. Walt Disney Pictures, 2003.

Cassiopéia. Dir. Clóvis Veira. Brazil. NDR Filmes, 1996.

Che. Dir. Steven Soderbergh. Spain/France/USA. Morena Films/Warner Bros./IFC Films, 2008.

Chicken Little. Dir. Mark Dindal. USA. Walt Disney Pictures, 2005.

Confessions of a Shopaholic. Dir. P.J. Hogan. USA. Touchstone Pictures, 2009.

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button. Dir. David Fincher. USA. Paramount Pictures, 2008.

Dance Flick. Dir. Damien Dante Wayans. USA. Paramount Pictures, 2009.

Dante's Peak. Dir. Roger Donaldson. USA. Universal Pictures, 1997.

Deep Impact. Dir. Mimi Leder. USA. DreamWorks Pictures, 1998.

District 9. Dir. Neill Blomkamp. USA/New Zealand/Canada/South Africa. TriStar Pictures, 2009.

Doubt. Dir. John Patrick Shanley. USA. Miramax Films, 2008.

EDtv. Dir. Ron Howard. USA. Universal Pictures, 1999.

Fanboys. Dir. Kyle Newman. USA. The Weinstein Company/Vivendi Entertainment, 2008.

Gomorra. Dir. Matteo Garrone. Italy. IFC Films, 2008.

Gremlins. Dir. Joe Dante. USA. Warner Bros., 1984.

Home on the Range. Dir. Will Finn and John Sanford. USA. Walt Disney Pictures, 2004.

How to Train Your Dragon. Dir. Chris Sanders, Dean DeBlois. USA. DreamWorks Animation, 2010.

The Human Centipede (First Sequence). Dir. Tom Six. Netherlands. Bounty Films, 2010.

Hunger. Dir. Steve McQueen. UK/Ireland. Icon Film Distribution, 2008.

The Hurt Locker. Dir. Kathryn Bigelow. USA. Summit Entertainment/Universal Pictures, 2008.

Ice Age. Dir. Chris Wedge. Co-Dir. Carlos Saldanha. USA. Blue Sky Studios/20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2002.

Ice Age 2: The Meltdown. Dir. Carlos Saldanha. USA. Blue Sky Studios/20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2006.

Ice Age 3: Dawn of the Dinosaurs. Dir. Carlos Saldanha. Co-Dir. Michael Thurmeier. USA. Blue Sky Studios/20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2009.

The Iron Giant. Dir. Brad Bird. USA. Warner Bros. Feature Animation, 1999.

I'm Not There. Dir. Todd Haynes. Germany/USA. The Weinstein Company, 2007.

John Carter. Dir. Andrew Stanton. USA. Walt Disney Pictures, 2012.

Jonah Hex. Dir. Jimmy Hayward. USA. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2010.

Julie and Julia. Dir. Nora Ephron. USA. Columbia Pictures, 2009.

Jurassic Park. Dir. Steven Spielberg. USA. Universal Pictures, 1993.

The King's Speech. Dir. Tom Hooper. UK. Momentum Pictures, 2010.

Kundun. Dir. Martin Scorsese. USA. Touchstone Pictures, 1997.

Land of the Lost. Dir. Brad Silberling. USA. Universal Pictures, 2009.

The Lion King. Dir. Rogers Allers and Rob Minkoff. USA. Walt Disney Pictures, 1994.

Madagascar. Dir. Eric Darnell and Tom McGrath. USA. DreamWorks Animation/Pacific Data Images, 2005.

Marmaduke. Dir. Tom Dey. USA/UK. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2010.



Mission: Impossible: Ghost Protocol. Dir. Brad Bird. USA. Paramount Pictures, 2011.

Mouse Hunt. Dir. Gore Verbinski. USA. DreamWorks Pictures, 1997.

Next Day Air. Dir. Benny Boom. USA. Summit Entertainment, 2009.

Noah's Arc: Jumping the Broom. Dir. Patrik-Ian Polk. USA/Canada. LOGO Films, 2008.

Pocahontas. Dir. Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg. USA. Walt Disney Productions, 1995.

Prince of Egypt. Dir. Simon Wells, Brenda Chapman and Steve Hickner. USA. DreamWorks Animation, 1998.

Revolutionary Road. Dir. Sam Mendes. USA/UK. Paramount Vantage, 2008.

Robots. Dir. Chris Wedge. USA. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2005.

Seven Years in Tibet. Dir. Jean-Jacques Annaud. France/USA/UK/Argentina. TriStar Pictures, 1997.

Shrek. Dir. Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jenson. USA. Pacific Data Images/DreamWorks Animation, 2001.

Shrek 2. Dir. Andrew Adamson, Kelly Asbury and Conrad Vernon. USA. Pacific Data Images/DreamWorks Animation, 2004.

Shrek the Third. Dir. Chris Miller, Raman Hui. USA. Pacific Data Images/DreamWorks Animation, 2007.

Shrek the Final Chapter. Dir. Mike Mitchell. USA. DreamWorks Animation, 2010.

Star Wars. Dir. George Lucas. USA. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1977.

The Sweatbox. Dir. John-Paul Davidson and Trudie Styler. Canada. Xingu Films, 2002.

Terminator Salvation. Dir. McG. USA. Warner Bros., 2009.

Transformers. Dir. Michael Bay. USA. DreamWorks Pictures, 2007.

Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen Dir. Michael Bay. USA. DreamWorks Pictures, 2009.

Transporter 3. Dir. Olivier Megaton. France. Lionsgate, 2008.

Les Triplettes de Belleville. Dir. Sylvain Chomet. France/Belgium/Canada/UK. Les Armateurs/Sony Pictures Classics, 2003.

Tron. Dir. Steven Lisberger. USA. Walt Disney Pictures, 1982.

The Truman Show. Dir. Peter Weir. USA. Paramount Pictures, 1998.

Volcano. Dir. Mick Jackson. USA. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1997.

Who Framed Roger Rabbit? Dir. Robert Zemeckis. USA. Buena Vista Pictures, 1988.

Winnie the Pooh. Dir. Stephen J. Anderson and Don Hall. USA. Walt Disney Pictures, 2011.

The Wrestler. Dir. Darren Aronofsky. USA. Fox Searchlight, 2008.

Young Sherlock Holmes. Dir. Barry Levinson. USA. Amblin Entertainment/Paramount Picture, 1985.

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The Office. USA. NBC, 2005-13.

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