



CREaTE

Canterbury Research and Theses Environment

Canterbury Christ Church University's repository of research outputs

<http://create.canterbury.ac.uk>

Please cite this publication as follows:

Pallant, C. (2010) Neo-Disney: recent developments in Disney feature animation. *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film*, 8 (2). pp. 103-117. ISSN 1474-2756.

Link to official URL (if available):

http://dx.doi.org/10.1386/ncin.8.2.103_1

This version is made available in accordance with publishers' policies. All material made available by CReaTE is protected by intellectual property law, including copyright law. Any use made of the contents should comply with the relevant law.

Contact: create.library@canterbury.ac.uk



Neo-Disney: Recent Developments in Disney Feature Animation

Dr. Chris Pallant

Introduction

The Princess and the Frog (Ron Clements and John Musker, 2009) marks a return by Disney to its hand-drawn roots. Understandably, many responses to the film have centred on its protagonist, Tiana, Disney's first black Princess. This focus, however, has drawn attention away from the fact that with this latest release the Studio has also returned to a more traditional style of filmmaking.¹ Significantly, Disney's previous 2D hand-drawn film, *Home on the Range* (Will Finn and John Sanford, 2004), concluded what had been a stylistically progressive sequence of theatrically released features which broke with the hyperrealist conventions most commonly associated with the Studio's feature animation. Comprising of *Fantasia 2000* (James Algar *et al.*, 1999), *The Emperor's New Groove* (Mark Dindal, 2000), *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* (Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise, 2001), *Lilo and Stitch* (Dean DeBlois and Chris Sanders, 2002), *Treasure Planet* (Ron Clements and John Musker, 2002), *Brother Bear* (Aaron Blaise and Robert Walker, 2003), and *Home on the Range*, this critically neglected period of feature animation provides the focus of this article; to help distinguish this discrete sequence of films from the larger Disney canon, they will be referred to as Neo-Disney features.

Having entered a period of renaissance during the 1990s, which provided both artistic renewal and considerable box office success, the trajectory of Disney animation appeared fixed. Yet, *Toy Story* (John Lasseter, 1995), released only a year after *The Lion King* (Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff, 1994) and which generated domestic box office receipts in excess of \$312 million (still a record for hand drawn animation), signalled what would soon become

the dominant form of feature animation. This usurpation of what had customarily been the domain of 2D hand drawn animation by primarily computer generated (CG) Pixar-esque productions, ultimately resulted in a phase of Disney feature animation that diverged, both artistically and narratologically, from the style traditionally associated with the Studio.

Neo-Disney: Aesthetics

In *America and Animation* (2002), Paul Wells identifies a shared post-modern quality that artistically unites what we can now term the Neo-Disney period:

Arguably, Disney films, with the clear exception of *Aladdin* [Ron Clements and John Musker, 1992], and increasingly in the post-*Hercules* [Ron Clements and John Musker 1997] period, acknowledge and embrace the ‘gaze’ in the way that cartoons have predominantly done since their inception, having only previously predicated their texts as classical narratives which preserve the ‘fourth wall’ which insists upon the coherent integrity of the fiction observed in its own right, while providing a framework by which the observer determines its own model of spectatorial participation and effect. (2002: 109-10)

Wells argues that the recent “loosening” of the Disney text is in a certain sense an acknowledgement of the increasing prominence of the cartoonal form and a greater trust in the public’s ability to embrace its intrinsic vocabulary’ (2002: 110). Given that Disney wanted his animated characters ‘to move like real figures and to be informed by a plausible motivation’ (Wells, 1998: 23), the cartoonal vocabulary to which Wells alludes opposes in many ways the aesthetic developed during the Disney-Formalist period, as I have termed and

explored in greater detail elsewhere (Pallant, in press). Concisely put, Disney-Formalism describes the acute style of hyperrealism, forged in the films *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (David Hand, 1937), *Pinocchio* (Ben Sharpsteen *et al.*, 1940), *Dumbo* (Ben Sharpsteen, 1941), and *Bambi* (David Hand, 1942), which prioritized artistic sophistication, ‘realism’ in characters and contexts, and, above all, believability within the hand-drawn medium. Although Wells identifies *Aladdin* and the post-*Hercules* features as reflective of this aesthetic change, *Fantasia 2000* is the first film of the Neo-Disney period to dispense with classical narrative convention and Disney-Formalist style for a sustained period of time.

Fantasia 2000’s ‘Rhapsody in Blue’ sequence opens with a single sweeping line which climbs in time with the clarinet *glissando*, fleshing out the New York skyline. The urban imagery which accompanies the music fits closely with George Gershwin’s original inspiration for the piece: ‘I hear it as a sort of musical kaleidoscope of America—of our vast melting pot, of our unduplicated national pep, of our metropolitan madness’ (quoted in Cowen, 1998). Additionally, those familiar with Woody Allen’s *Manhattan* (1979) may view this intertextually given the musical score and visual subject matter. Yet, irrespective of such foreknowledge, the sequence’s self-reflexivity is itself significant. By the time of the Wall Street crash in 1929, skyscrapers were already established as industrial symbols, merging ‘the tradition of the tower as civic monument [. . .] with the office building as corporate necessity’ (Ford, 1994: 30). For the caricatured characters that populate the sequence (and their real-life Depression-era counterparts), the growing New York skyline was a major a source of inspiration. Furthermore, Larry R. Ford writes:

While important cities had always had symbolic skylines [. . .] it was in the twentieth-century American city that the terms *city* and *skyline* became practically synonymous. No longer was the city a low-rise phenomenon

with a few symbolic towers, but rather the functioning city *was* the skyline. (1994: 10)

In addition to this opening visual style, which loosely resembles that of an architectural blueprint, the choice of music, George Gershwin's 'Rhapsody in Blue', is also important. In musical terminology a rhapsody, like a fantasia, is a miscellany, often conveying an 'impassioned, agitated character [. . .] as well as more elegiac or aspirational moods, [with] an improvisatory spirit often shaping the music' (Rink, 2001: 254). The combination, therefore, of this aural style and the sequence's anti-realist animation immediately marks 'Rhapsody in Blue' as a key moment of divergence in Disney's recent history.

The Studio's animators, by adopting the improvisatory techniques of Al Hirschfeld, who prioritized a distinctly caricatured, antiliteral style, served to consolidate the aesthetic dynamism of the 'Rhapsody in Blue' sequence. This is most discernible during the skating sequence, where, as Eric Goldberg observes, art director Sue Goldberg gave

the characters a flat, clear stage upon which to act out their dreams. The backgrounds become two colours—a pale blue-green for the ice, and a warm lavender for Rockefeller Centre. The absence of shadows serves to focus the audience on what's happening to the characters. (Culhane, 1999: 72)

Given Disney's consistent commitment to realism, this style of animation, when placed in the context of the Disney oeuvre, marks a change. However, rather than being viewed as merely imitative of a cartoonality more often associated with the likes of Warner Bros. or UPA, it can be seen to represent a focussed attempt by the Studio's animators to develop the

Disney aesthetic in a new direction. Through its harmonious combination of music, animation, and Herschfeld-style caricature, the ‘Rhapsody in Blue’ sequence provides an early glimpse of the self-reflexive post-modernisms that characterize Neo-Disney animation. *Fantasia 2000* concludes with a sequence entitled ‘Firebird’, which contains character animation that again differs from the Disney-Formalist norm. To animate the life-bringing sprite, sequence directors Gaëtan and Paul Brizzi utilized a style more commonly associated with Japanese anime and manga—*Bishojo*, where ‘characters are drawn in a very stylized and ethereal fashion, with huge eyes’ (McCarthy, 1993: 6). It is likely, however, that this appropriated aesthetic was born of necessity rather than as the result of a conscious decision to expand the Disney palette. The ‘Firebird’ sequence features no dialogue, so the Brizzi brothers needed to find an effective and concise way to convey the sprite’s feelings. Tony DeRosa, key animator for the character, offers the following explanation for this stylistic change: ‘The sprite presented a unique challenge to me [. . .]. As she is mute, all her emotions and reactions are expressed through movement. The eyes, of course, are the windows of the soul, and I had her eye[s] [. . .] to work with’ (Culhane, 1999: 160). A less artistic *raison d’être* could be that the ‘Firebird’ sequence was included as a way of covering as many stylistic bases as possible, in an attempt to broaden the global appeal of *Fantasia 2000*; in eastern markets, such as Japan, animation has a strong cultural identity, with artistic traditions that have developed beyond the influence of Disney animation.² Although *Fantasia 2000* represents a watershed moment for the Disney studio, diverging aesthetically from the conservative and conventionally realist animation of Disney’s earlier features, when viewed in the context of the Neo Disney period it constitutes little more than a divergent stepping-stone—especially when compared to *The Emperor’s New Groove*, Disney’s next animated feature.

The Emperor's New Groove owes much to the art of legendary animators such as Joseph Barbera, William Hanna, Tex Avery and Chuck Jones. However, the film's cartoonal nature may, in some part, be a reflection of its protracted development. It was originally conceived as a sweeping musical drama in the Disney Renaissance mould, provisionally titled 'Kingdom of the Sun' (reflecting the film's Incan setting), but directorial changes interrupted production. To keep the animators together whilst production was in limbo, the film's crew helped with *Fantasia 2000*'s 'Rhapsody in Blue' segment—a diversion which, given the distinctly un-Disneylike nature of the project, may have acted as a catalyst for *The Emperor's New Groove*'s cartoonality.

Comedy within the Disney animated feature is commonly located in the actions of sidekicks, whose pratfalls remain faithful to contextual and narratological verisimilitude. This is a well established device, and 'sidekicks like Lefou (French for 'the fool'), Smee, Scuttle, and Ed the hyena' who populate Disney's film are, as Don Hahn observes, 'just along for the laughs' (1996: 20). The cartoonality of *The Emperor's New Groove* opens up new possibilities for visual humour. One spectacularly 'un-Disneylike' moment of humour revolves around a sequence of comic cartoonal reversals, involving Kuzco, a squirrel, and a pack of sleeping panthers. Firstly, Kuzco, who is walking alone through the South American Rainforest, hears a growl that prompts him to retreat in fear, only for a harmless squirrel to appear; to conclude this initial reversal the squirrel generously offers an acorn to the trembling llama. After turning his nose up at the squirrel's kindness, Kuzco falls down a concealed embankment, landing in the midst of a pack of sleeping panthers. Luckily, his fall does not wake the pack. However, at this point the squirrel re-emerges, and, in classic cartoon style, delivers a further reversal, inflating a red tubular balloon and modelling it into a llama, before popping the quasi-voodoo doll with a nearby thorn. To both the squirrel's and Kuzco's surprise, the bursting balloon fails to wake the panthers. Kuzco's reprieve is only temporary,

however, as his defiant laughter—acting as a fitting cartoonal conclusion—wakes the sleeping pack.

Although anthropomorphosized animals can, and do, provide a narratological space in which to situate comedy, some animals actively problematize this paradigm. Wells argues against an oversimplification of Disney anthropomorphosis, claiming that it overlooks how the Studio's artists, like many others working in animation, 'engage with animals in a highly serious way in a spirit of representing animals on terms and conditions that both recognize the complexities and presence of animality and the ways it is best revealed through animation' (2009: 77). Wells draws on *Brother Bear*, one of the Neo-Disney features, as an example of this. The transformation of Kenai, the film's protagonist, into a small bear, rather than simply serving as the basis for some anthropomorphic comedy, actually presents a point of view—that of a bear—which challenges 'the assumptions about the bear's place both within the animal kingdom and in relation to humankind' (Wells, 2009: 45). Despite occasional lapses into more conventional anthropomorphic territory, *Brother Bear's* conclusion provides another instance of Neo-Disney filmmaking's divergence from the traditions of earlier Disney feature animation. Wells writes:

In this 'story of a boy who became a man by becoming a bear,' the mythic infrastructure has enabled a genuinely surprising ending in the sense that Kenai, in *not* returning to human form, renounces difference and opposition between humankind and animal and accepts the 'psychic identity' or 'mystical participation' with the animal, here made literal and authentic by the animated form, and achieves a model of assimilation that proves the essential sameness of living creatures in the primal order, now lost to the contemporary world. (Wells, 2009: 47)

Returning to *The Emperor's New Groove*, but with the focus on cartoonality, Kuzco and Pacha's attempt to cross a dilapidated rope bridge can be seen to further disrupt traditional Disney hyperrealism. Given the film's prevailing cartoonal aesthetic we anticipate that this bridge will collapse, which it does. What is still surprising, however, is the manner in which this happens. When the bridge finally fails we are provided with a clear example of cartoonal physics, as we see both Kuzco and Pacha defy gravity by hovering unsupported in mid-air a full two seconds after the bridge gives way. Whilst this is a commonplace occurrence in the cartoon world (see the *Looney Tunes* [Warner Bros. 1930-69]), it marks a definite departure from the studio's established conventions of realism.

The Emperor's New Groove also breaks new ground by being the first Disney animated feature to depict a woman in an advanced state of pregnancy. Chicha's expectant body breaks dramatically with the standard asexuality of Disney animation, symbolising a new maturity in tackling such issues as reproduction: Chicha's only notable predecessor is Mr Stork, who delivered Dumbo *par avion*.

Both *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* and *Lilo and Stitch* also contain deviations from standard Disney physiognomy. In *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* this is evident in the uncommon angularity, particularly in facial and muscular definition of the film's characters. This specific stylisation reflects the individual influence of Mike Mignola during production. Mignola, most famous for his comic book creation Hellboy (an angular red demon), influenced many of the film's animators, including John Pomeroy who was given the task of drawing Milo:

The Milo character has a kind of angularity about him that's very refreshing [. . .]. I knew how the mouth and eyes should look. Mignola's style was challenging and fun. I didn't have to worry if the anatomy was correct as long as I had a good graphic representation of the structure. (Anon, 2002)

Disney's incorporation of this aesthetic led to the coining of the term 'Disnola' by the film's creative team to reflect *Atlantis: The Lost Empire's* unique styling, a factor which Lisa Keene, the film's background supervisor, discusses:

Over the years, we have gotten very used to putting a lot of detail and rendering into our backgrounds. With this film, the style dictated that we use restraint. Mignola's graphic style meant we had to go back to the basics of our training and rediscover how important lighting patterns and shadows are to a scene and to describing form and environment. Even though an object is flat and graphic, it can still have a lot of depth if you give it the right values and atmospheric perspective. (Anon, 2002)

Similarly, for *Lilo and Stitch*, co-writer and director Chris Sanders had a very personal vision of how the film should look. To ensure maximum clarity when pitching the film to the Disney hierarchy, Sanders 'made [a] [. . .] book that presented everything the way [he] wanted them to see it' (DVD Special Feature: 'The Look of Lilo and Stitch', 2002—my transcription). Thomas Schumacher, then President of the Walt Disney Feature Animation division, found Sanders' vision so refreshing that he 'fell in love with it' and 'wanted to make a movie [. . .] that looked like a Chris Sanders drawing' (DVD Special Feature: 'The Look of Lilo and Stitch', 2002—my transcription). Consequently, the animation in *Lilo and Stitch* departs from Disney-Formalist hyperrealism, favouring instead a more weighted and rounded aesthetic. In many ways the characters in *Lilo and Stitch* adhere to Sanders' original visual concept, in which, as supervising animator Ruben A. Aquino notes, 'things almost seem to melt, so that everything drips to the bottom [. . .] legs are bottom-heavy, they are chunkier at

the bottom, toward the feet and the calves, same with the arms' (DVD Special Feature: 'The Look of Lilo and Stitch', 2002—my transcription).

This commitment to Sanders' aesthetic is clearly visible during the characters' short motorcycle journey. During this sequence the figures that occupy the foreground all possess rounded heads and bottom-heavy limbs (though not all are visible). Secondly, their motorcycle sports softly shaped headlights, dials, wheel guards, and a rounded fuselage. In contrast with the clarity of the foreground, the two layers of background, which are composed using hazy watercolour, soften the image as a whole, reducing the angularity of the distant mountains.

Ironically, the rounded nature of *Lilo and Stitch* could be seen, to a certain extent, as a return to a much earlier style of animation, one that was prevalent during Walt Disney's early stewardship of the studio. This parallel is recognized by co-writer and director Dean DeBlois, who observes: 'I think *Lilo* is [. . .] reminiscent of early designs from the thirties and forties where round and appealing were the requisites' (DVD Special Feature: 'The Look of Lilo and Stitch', 2002—my transcription). However, the individuality of the aesthetic vision that underpins both *Lilo and Stitch* and *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* sees them break with Disney-Formalist convention, such as the emphasis on believability, which characterizes much of the Studio's earlier animation. In the case of *Lilo and Stitch*, although acute water retention could be considered a believable 'cause' of the human character's bodily-swelling, it is unlikely that such a clinical explanation of their visual condition would have appealed to the Disney executive.

As is frequently the case when periodising a distinct body of film, within that grouping peaks and troughs will exist, and in this respect the Neo-Disney period is no different. Following the release of *Lilo and Stitch* the Studio released *Treasure Planet* and *Brother Bear*, both of which marked a return to a more hyperrealist mode of animation and

placed a stronger emphasis on traditional narrative continuity. However, with the release of *Home on the Range*, the Studio returned to a more divergent style of filmmaking.

As an animated Western, *Home on the Range* has only three generic antecedents within Disney's feature animation corpus: *The Three Caballeros* (Norman Ferguson, 1944), 'The Martins and the Coys' from *Make Mine Music* (Bob Cormack *et al.*, 1946), and the 'Pecos Bill' section from *Melody Time* (Clyde Geronimi *et al.*, 1948). Whilst *Home on the Range* relies on a linear narrative, concerned with the main characters' personal developments, the Western genre is self-reflexively developed in order to create film's stylized world.

Approximately fifteen minutes into *Home on the Range*, Buck, the sheriff's narcissistic horse, reveals his idealized self-image through a daydream sequence. Whilst the viewer has no way of knowing that this is a daydream from the outset, there are clues to indicate that this sequence may not be what it seems. In addition to Mrs Calloway's observation that Buck 'is a legend in his own *mind*', the aspect ratio changes from 1.85:1 to 2.35:1 as the camera tilts up towards the sun. The switching of aspect ratio in *Home on the Range* is not the first instance of this in a Disney feature animation. *Brother Bear* features a similar transition, changing from 1.66:1 to 2.35:1, to reinforce Kenai's altered circumstances and perspective. However, in the case of *Home on the Range*, the switch to CinemaScope signals a temporary transition to a wider, more 'cinematic' spectacle.

The significance of this scene is not that it is a daydream, but rather that its filmic vocabulary pays homage to the 'Spaghetti Western' sub-genre. Musically, Buck's reverie begins with a rasping rattle, which is quickly accompanied by the sound of a reverberating electric guitar. These sounds, coupled with the deeply accented, intermittent choral chanting, create an acoustic landscape evocative of Ennio Morricone's 'Per Qualche Dollaro in Più' (the theme song for a *For a Few Dollars More* [Sergio Leone, 1965]) and 'As a Judgement'

(from *Once Upon a Time in the West* [Sergio Leone, 1968]). The change in colour palette, from a wide range to an arid spectrum, full of yellows and oranges, also helps to establish the ‘Spaghetti Western’ aesthetic. Buck’s appearance in extreme close-up, with the camera’s focus directly on his eyes, creates further parallels with the genre, particularly the iconic framing of Sergio Leone’s ‘Man With No Name’ protagonist, played by Clint Eastwood. This allusion is heightened further still by the way Buck’s assailants circle around him during a stand-off, a topography which closely resembles that of the cemetery stand-off in *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly* (Sergio Leone, 1966). Interestingly, the subsequent slow motion high-kicking, which sees Buck disarm his adversaries, has more in common with the more contemporary *Shanghai Noon* (Tom Dey, 2000) than anything in the ‘Spaghetti Western’ canon. The level of thematic intertextuality and self-reflexivity during this sequence is unmatched in the rest of the film.

Although less cinematically self-reflexive, Alameda Slim’s unique cattle-rustling technique prompts a temporary shift to a more surreal aesthetic. Responding to Slim’s yodelling, the hypnotized cattle follow the music, much in the same way that Hamelin’s fairy-tale children followed the Pied Piper. Additionally, this tactic also results in the cattle entering into a psychedelic state, the animals becoming multicoloured as the background becomes black. Whilst this momentary discontinuity could simply be seen as another example of the film’s cartoonality, its composition is also remarkably similar to certain parts of the ‘Pink Elephants’ sequence from *Dumbo*, suggesting a degree of intertextuality.

The aesthetic difference of the aforementioned films represents a move, on the Studio’s part, to once more occupy a position of cultural relevance within the field of animation. Whilst these films are still clearly authored by Disney, and as such feed into synergistic practices such as serialisation, toy and McDonalds tie-ins, and computer game

spin-offs, it is in their departure from traditional Disney convention that they constitute a new chapter in the Studio's history.

Neo-Disney: Narratological and Generic Peculiarities

Whilst music has been a constant feature of Disney animation since *Snow White*, the Studio's Neo-Disney works also deviate from this tradition. *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* marks the most dramatic break with the Studio's musical history by ignoring the musical genre entirely. This is most likely due to the film representing an attempt by Disney to make an adventure film in the *Indiana Jones* mould, where the emphasis is placed on causal action sequences rather than narratologically escapist musical set-pieces. This prevalent action aesthetic subsequently resulted in *Atlantis: The Lost Empire*'s PG certification—the first animated Disney feature to receive such a 'cautionary' rating.

Many of the Neo-Disney features, whilst maintaining the structural tradition of narrative progression through song, use music in a diegetically progressive manner. Rather than having the songs completely rooted in a diegetic context, whereby protagonists sing their thoughts and feelings, certain Neo-Disney songs loosely resemble the musical montage sequences that feature in many contemporary live-action films. Examples of this non-diegetic style can be seen in *Tarzan*'s 'Son of a Man' (performed by Phil Collins) and *Lilo and Stitch*'s 'Stuck on You' (as sung by Elvis Presley). Occasionally, a character may 'prompt', or diegetically anticipate the non-diegetic music, by singing the opening line of the song *a cappella* (as is demonstrated in 'On My Way' from *Brother Bear*) or performing a riff from the opening of a song ('Burning Love' in *Lilo and Stitch*). These changes, in addition to marking a structural shift, also reflect the synergistic desire to increase profitability by facilitating celebrity participation.

In a discussion of the evolution of the Musical genre, J.P. Telotte notes how in many contemporary Musicals ‘people no longer suddenly burst into song or go into a dance’, and ‘whenever anyone does engage in overtly expressive activities, it is usually within a restricted arena, a limited space the boundaries of which weigh heavily on the moment of song and dance’ (2002: 48). In *The Emperor’s New Groove*, ‘Perfect World’, the introductory song, begins in typical Disney fashion. However, the viewer is quickly made aware of the song’s staged theatricality, with Kuzco referring to the performance of his own personal ‘theme song guy’. The self-reflexivity of this admission is further consolidated by the ‘theme song guy’ bearing a resemblance, albeit a caricatured one, to Tom Jones—the song’s real life singer. It is this self-reflexivity and foregrounding of the song’s construction, which, to paraphrase Telotte, limits the performance and establishes boundaries for the song and dance.

Due to the intermittent punctuation of narrative flow with cartoonal discontinuities, *The Emperor’s New Groove*, of all the Neo-Disney features, is perhaps the most structurally progressive. Wells defines cartoonal ‘discontinuity’ as ‘two ideas that do not seem to naturally relate, meet, and indeed, fundamentally conflict [. . .]. [From which] the joke comes out of a resistance to logical continuity’ (1998: 160). This device is commonplace in contemporary cartoons such as *Family Guy* (20th Century Fox Television, 1999-to date) and *Drawn Together* (Comedy Central, 2004-2007), where the device’s temporary alienation is counterbalanced by the audience’s familiarity with it. Such is the proliferation of this device that it is overtly lampooned in the *South Park* episodes ‘Cartoon Wars Part I’ (Trey Parker, 2006) and ‘Cartoon Wars Part II’ (Trey Parker, 2006), whereby

it is revealed that *Family Guy*’s writers are manatees living in a tank in the FOX studios; the writing process consists of the manatees randomly choosing ‘idea balls,’ each one representing a component of a *Family*

Guy joke. The ‘writers’ are shown choosing three balls, ‘Mexico,’ ‘Gary Coleman,’ and ‘date,’ which, when combined, construct a joke about Peter going on a date with Coleman in Mexico. (Crawford, 2009: 64)

Despite *Family Guy* and *Drawn Together* being produced with greater artistic freedom than *The Emperor’s New Groove*, director Mark Dindal pushes the film’s narrative cohesion as far as possible through a strategy of cartoonal discontinuity. This is immediately visible in *The Emperor’s New Groove*, as Kuzco’s opening monologue allows for the inclusion of an immediate temporal discontinuity. Kuzco, in voice over, states: ‘go back away—you know before I was a llama, and this will all make sense [. . .] [Cut to a baby] now see, that’s a little too far back.’ While this is a comic moment and largely superfluous to the narrative as a whole, it is not a strict discontinuity, as the diadem-wearing infant reveals an important character trait—Kuzco was born into sovereignty. A clearer example of temporal discontinuity comes directly after Kronk rethinks his attempted assassination of Kuzco. At this point the camera pulls rapidly back from the waterfall’s edge, coming to rest on a distant branch. The camera now remains static, delaying the narrative progression whilst a chimpanzee proceeds to eat a bug, which in turn prompts Kuzco to question the intrinsic value of this animation: ‘Um, what’s with the chimp and the bug? Can we get back to me?’ Furthermore, it could be argued that this cut-away also constitutes a spatial discontinuity, as its distance from the story’s centre—Kuzco—is highlighted through the dramatic transition to the bug-eating chimp.

The most cartoonlike discontinuity comes when Yzma and Kronk enter their laboratory for the first time. This short sequence quickly attains a degree of narratological autonomy through the character’s sudden costume change; the lab coats worn by Yzma and Kronk that signal this shift are also strongly reminiscent of those seen in the cartoon *Dexter’s*

Laboratory (Cartoon Network Studios, 1996-2003). It is here that Yzma formulates her plan to eliminate Kuzco, providing an additional layer of discontinuity as the scheme unwinds in her anarchic cartoon 'imagination'. This brief, yet hyperbolic, diversion in which Yzma concocts an elaborate strategy for 'postalcide' eventually culminates in a comic reversal as she rationalizes: 'to save on postage I'll just poison him.' The overtly cartoonal quality of *The Emperor's New Groove* places it in direct contrast to the majority of Disney's animated features.

The Neo-Disney period also sees the 'good' and 'bad' binary that proliferates much of Disney's earlier animation replaced with characters exhibiting both 'good' and 'bad' qualities. The heroes in the film *Lilo and Stitch*, for example, can be seen to have moments when their 'good' intentions are unclear. In the case of Lilo, this can be seen in her explosive arguments with older sister Nani, whilst Stitch's frequent delinquencies also destabilize any notion of him being an exclusively 'good' character. Likewise, in the film's opening exchange, the villainous Dr Jumba Jookiba is revealed to be merely an overly ambitious scientist who argues his 'experiments are only theoretical, completely within legal boundaries.' This moral bilateralism is also noticeable in *The Emperor's New Groove* (namely Kuzco and Kronk), *Treasure Planet* (particularly Long John Silver) and *Brother Bear* (Kenai), further consolidating it as a distinguishing facet of the Neo-Disney period.

Facing the growing demand for CG animation, the Neo-Disney features, despite their musical, narratological, and moral developments, proved ineffective at preserving the market share enjoyed by the Studio during the Renaissance period. Moreover, underlying many of Disney's boldest attempts to appeal to new demographics remained a filmic blueprint that had gone unchanged for almost seventy years. This is perhaps most obvious in the Studio's 2002 flirtation with the Science Fiction genre.

Given its overlap with the horror and fantasy genres, science fiction is one of the most problematic genres for which to establish stable, interpretive criteria. Moreover, from an iconographic perspective, the science fiction genre does not support a nexus of signification comparable to the western or gangster genres; this fundamental indeterminacy is perhaps the main reason why science fiction does not feature in the formative studies of genre. Vivian Sobchack writes:

[O]ne could create a list of [. . .] [science fiction] ‘objects’ as the spaceship which do indeed *evoke* the genre, but which are—specifically and physically—not *essential* to it: the New Planet, the Robot, the Laboratory, Radioactive Isotopes, and Atomic Devices. On the other hand, it is extremely difficult to think of a Western which does not take place in a visually represented ‘West’ with guns and horses, or recall a Gangster film which does not show a nightclub or which has no guns and no automobiles. (1998: 65-66)

Consequently, science fiction can be seen as one of the ‘most flexible popular genres’ (Telotte, 2001: 11).

Whilst the concept of Disney science fiction may seem alien, the Studio’s animation has, albeit infrequently, made use of the genre. Although *Lilo and Stitch* and *Treasure Planet* are Disney’s first feature-length science fiction animations, the Studio first engaged with the genre during the late 1950s. Stimulated by the developing space race, Disney produced a series of animations discussing space travel (*Man in Space* [Ward Kimball, 1955], *Man and the Moon* [Ward Kimball, 1955], *Mars and Beyond* [Ward Kimball, 1957], and *Eyes in Outer Space* [Ward Kimball, 1959]) as part of Walt Disney’s weekly television series. Furthermore,

the Disney-funded *Tron* (Steven Lisberger, 1982), although distributed under the banner of Lisberger/Kushner Productions, represents another example of the Studio's flirtation with science fiction—in this case prompted by the successes of *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) and *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* (Irvin Kershner, 1980).

With a growing number of animated features adopting a Disney-Formalist style during the 1990s, such as *Anastasia* (Don Bluth and Gary Goldman, 1997), *Quest for Camelot* (Frederik Du Chau, 1998), *The Magic Riddle* (Yoram Gross, 1991), and *The Swan Princess* (Richard Rich, 1994), the Studio understandably sought new genres to ensure product differentiation and marketability. Despite the fact that by 2000 science fiction had become 'one of the most popular and lucrative genres in cinema history' (King and Krzywinska, 2000: 8), it is surprising that Disney chose to embrace that particular genre so completely at that time, as during the early planning and production phases of *Lilo and Stitch* and *Treasure Planet* Disney's executives would almost certainly have been aware of the box office failure of both *The Iron Giant* (Brad Bird, 1999) and *Titan A.E.* (Don Bluth, 2000).³

Although *Lilo and Stitch* did well at the US box office, grossing \$145,794,338 (representing a \$65 million profit after the deduction of negative costs), *Treasure Planet*, like *The Iron Giant* and *Titan A.E.* before it, continued the recent unprofitability of traditionally animated science fiction features.⁴ In light of this, Disney's executives would have been reluctant to finance any further projects in this genre. Consequently, as a constituent element of the Neo-Disney period, science fiction represents little more than a fleeting influence. However, in the now dominant field of CG animation, the genre has proven to be both popular and highly profitable, with Disney and Pixar alone responsible for *Monsters Inc.* (Pete Docter; David Silverman; Lee Unkrich, 2001), *The Incredibles* (Brad Bird, 2004), *Meet the Robinsons* (Stephen J. Anderson, 2007), and *WALL-E* (Andrew Stanton, 2008).

Conclusions

Fittingly, the Studio's first CG production to be released after the cessation of hand-drawn animation reveals the influence of the Neo-Disney period.⁵ The first forty-five seconds of *Chicken Little* (Mark Dindal, 2005) serve as a form of self-reflexive mission statement, opening with the question: 'Where to begin?' How about, the narrator asks, 'Once Upon a Time?' At this point a ray of golden light fills the screen, prompting the 'camera' to tilt upward, following it to its source; however, just before the origin is reached, the light, along with the rising string music that had begun to swell, abruptly disappears, leaving only a black screen and the narrator's rhetorical statement: 'How many times have you heard that before? Let's do something else.' With renewed enthusiasm the narrator responds, 'I got it, I got it, here we go, here's how to open a movie.' This prompts lyrical chanting and a sunrise scene, both of which clearly reference the opening of *The Lion King*. Again, the narrator interjects, halting the introduction: 'No, I don't think so, it sounds familiar, doesn't it to you?' The final false start opens with an iris shot that reveals a leather storybook, which, accompanied by a pastoral piccolo acoustic, begins to open. The narrator interrupts for the last time: 'Oh no, not the book, how many have you seen opening the book before? Close the book, we're not doing that.' Finally, the narrator succeeds with his introduction and the film begins. We see a clock-tower lit by a single shaft of sunlight, around which the 'camera' begins to spin; as the 'camera' revolves, getting closer with each pass, *Chicken Little* becomes visible at the tower's summit.

In addition to providing a humorous, self-referential introduction, the iconographic evocation of traditional Disney introductions and subsequent admission of their staleness serves to position *Chicken Little* as a film which, through an awareness of past Disney convention, could potentially offer something new and different. Secondly, the specificity of *The Lion King* reference can be seen as a comment on CG animation's usurpation of

traditional 2-D animation. Upon its release *The Lion King* became the most successful animated feature of all time, grossing \$783 worldwide; however, in 2003 *Finding Nemo* comfortably surpassed that mark, setting a new benchmark for animation with a worldwide gross of \$864 million.

To conclude, it appears as if Disney's digital animators are working from an artistic remit not dissimilar to that of traditional hand animators. When discussing the motivations behind his preference for animal characters, Chuck Jones once remarked: 'I am an animator and an animation director; therefore, I look for characters that cannot be done in live-action. That is what animation is all about; it is an extension beyond the ability of live-action motion pictures' (1990: 227). Whereas traditional hand animators, such as Jones, created characters, images, and scenes, which could not be realized with live-action cinematography, Disney's digital animators introduce the eponymous Chicken Little with a 'camera' movement and lighting effect that would be difficult, if not impossible, to execute using traditional hand-drawn animation.

Ultimately, the Neo-Disney period was a time of crisis for Disney's executives. With Pixar's influence transforming the animated feature in western cinema, Disney was forced to reconsider its relevance for the next generation of cinemagoers. Ironically, this five-year period is perhaps the most consistently experimental in the Studio's history, containing a Package Feature, feature-length Science Fiction animation, and a Western parody. However, given the recent success of the largely traditional hand-drawn *The Princess and the Frog* (a film that was green lit by John Lasseter—now Chief Creative Officer at Walt Disney and Pixar Animation Studios—following Disney's acquisition of Pixar in 2006) a return to the progressive freedom of the Neo-Disney period may now prove difficult.

Works Cited

- Algar, James, *et al.* (1999), *Fantasia 2000*, USA: Walt Disney Feature Animation.
- Allen, Woody (1979), *Manhattan*, USA: United Artists.
- Allers, Roger, and Minkoff, Rob (1994), *The Lion King*, USA: Walt Disney Feature Animation.
- Anderson, Stephen J. (2007), *Meet the Robinsons*, USA: Walt Disney Feature Animation.
- Anon (2002) *Production Notes: Bringing the Character's to Life*, [Online], Available: 'http://www.mooviees.com/325/683-production_notes' [Accessed 30 January 2010].
- Bird, Brad (1999), *The Iron Giant*, USA: Warner Bros.
- (2004), *The Incredibles*, USA: Pixar Animation Studios.
- Blaise, Aaron, and Walker, Robert (2003), *Brother Bear*, USA: Walt Disney Feature Animation.
- Bluth, Don (2000), *Titan A.E.*, USA: Twentieth Century-Fox.
- Bluth, Don, and Goldman, Gary (1997), *Anastasia*, USA: Twentieth Century-Fox.
- Cartoon Network Studios (1996-2003), *Dexter's Laboratory*, USA.
- Clements, Ron, and Musker, John (1992), *Aladdin*, USA: Walt Disney Feature Animation.
- (1997), *Hercules*, USA: Walt Disney Feature Animation.
- (2002), *Treasure Planet*, USA: Walt Disney Feature Animation.
- (2009), *The Princess and the Frog*, USA: Walt Disney Feature Animation.
- Comedy Central (2004-07), *Drawn Together*: USA.
- Cormack, Bob, *et al.* (1946), *Make Mine Music*, USA: Walt Disney Productions.
- Cowen, R. (1998) 'George Gershwin: He Got Rhythm', *Washington Post*, 11 November.
- Crawford, A. (2009) '“Oh Yeah!”: Family Guy as Magical Realism?’, *Journal of Film and Video*, vol. 61, no. 2, pp. 52-69.
- Culhane, J. (1999) *Fantasia 2000: Visions of Hope*, New York: Disney.
- DeBlois, Dean, and Sanders, Chris (2002), *Lilo and Stitch*, USA: Walt Disney Feature Animation.
- Dey, Tom (2000), *Shanghai Noon*, USA/HK: Buena Vista Pictures.
- Dindal, Mark (2000), *The Emperor's New Groove*, USA: Walt Disney Feature Animation.
- (2005), *Chicken Little*, USA: Walt Disney Feature Animation.
- Docter, Pete, Silverman, David, and Unkrich, Lee (2001), *Monsters Inc.*, USA: Pixar Animation Studios.
- Du Chau, Frederik (1998), *Quest for Camelot*, USA: Warner Bros.
- Ferguson, Norman (1944), *The Three Caballeros*, USA: Walt Disney Productions.
- Finn, Will, and Sanford, John (2004), *Home on the Range*, USA: Walt Disney Feature Animation.
- Ford, L.R. (1994) *Cities and Buildings: Skyscrapers, Skid Rows, and Suburbs*, Baltimore: The John Hopkins UP.
- Geronimi, Clyde, *et al.* (1948), *Melody Time*, USA: Walt Disney Productions.
- Gross, Yoram (1991), *The Magic Riddle*, AUS: Yoram Gross Films.
- Hahn, D. (1996) *Animation Magic*, New York: Disney.
- Hand, David (1937), *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, USA: Walt Disney Productions.
- (1942), *Bambi*, USA: Walt Disney Productions.
- Jones, C. (1990) *Chuck Amuck*, London: Simon and Schuster.
- Kershner, Irvin (1980), *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*, USA: Twentieth Century-Fox.
- Kimball, Ward (1955), *Man and the Moon*, USA: Walt Disney Productions.
- (1955), *Man in Space*, USA: Walt Disney Productions.
- (1957), *Mars and Beyond*, USA: Walt Disney Productions.
- (1959), *Eyes in Outer Space*, USA: Walt Disney Productions.

- King, G. and Krzywinska, T. (2000) *Science Fiction Cinema: From Outerspace to Cyberspace*, London: Wallflower.
- Lasseter, John (1995), *Toy Story*, USA: Pixar Animation Studios.
- Leighton, Eric, and Zondag, Ralph (2000), *Dinosaur*, USA: Walt Disney Feature Animation.
- Leone, Sergio (1965), *For a Few Dollars More*, ITA/SPA/W.GER: United Artists.
- (1966), *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly*, ITA/SPA/W.GER: United Artists.
- (1968), *Once Upon a Time in the West*, ITA/USA: Paramount Pictures.
- Lisberger, Steven (1982), *Tron*, USA/TAI: Buena Vista Pictures.
- Lucas, George (1977), *Star Wars*, USA: Twentieth Century-Fox.
- McCarthy, H. (1993) *Anime! A Beginner's Guide to Japanese Animation*, London: Titan.
- Pallant, C. (in press) 'Disney-Formalism: Rethinking "Classic Disney"', *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal*.
- Parker, Trey (2006), 'Cartoon Wars Part I', USA: Comedy Central.
- (2006), 'Cartoon Wars Part II', USA: Comedy Central.
- Rich, Richard (1994), *The Swan Princess*, USA: New Line Cinema.
- Rink, J. (2001) 'Rhapsody', in Sadie, S. (ed.) *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, London: Grove.
- Sharpsteen, Ben (1941), *Dumbo*, USA: Walt Disney Productions.
- , et al. (1940), *Pinocchio*, USA: Walt Disney Productions.
- Sobchack, V. (1998) *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*, New Jersey: Rutgers UP.
- Stanton, Andrew (2008), *WALL-E*, USA: Pixar Animation Studios.
- Telotte, J.P. (2001) *Science Fiction Film*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- (2002) 'The New Hollywood Musical: From Saturday Night Fever to Footloose', in Neale, S. (ed.) *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, London: BFI.
- 'The Look of Lilo and Stitch'. (2002) *Lilo and Stitch* DVD Special Feature, Walt Disney Home Video.
- Trousdale, Gary, and Wise, Kirk (2001), *Atlantis: The Lost Empire*, USA: Walt Disney Feature Animation.
- Twentieth Century-Fox Television (1999-to date), *Family Guy*: USA.
- Warner Bros. (1930-69), *Looney Tunes*, USA.
- Wells, P. (1998) *Understanding Animation*, London: Routledge.
- (2002) *Animation and America*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.
- (2009) *The Animated Bestiary: Animals, Cartoons, and Culture*, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

Notes

¹ From this point forth, to reduce the inelegant repetition of Disney when used in a possessive context to denote the Disney studio, Studio—with a capitalised 'S'—will be used as a substitute when necessary.

² Helen McCarthy's *Anime! A Beginner's Guide to Japanese Animation* (1993), *Hayao Miyazaki: Master of Japanese Animation* (1999), *The Anime Encyclopedia: a Guide to Japanese Animation since 1917* (co-authored with Jonathan Clements, 2006), and *500 Essential Anime Movies: The Ultimate Guide* (2009) provide excellent coverage of this rich animation tradition.

³ Data from *boxofficemojo.com* [Accessed 12 October 2010].

⁴ Data from *boxofficemojo.com* [Accessed 12 October 2010].

⁵ Disney first entered the CG market with *Dinosaur* (Eric Leighton and Ralph Zondag, 2000); however, the film appears aesthetically conservative when compared to the Neo-Disney productions in development at that time. In fact, the principle concern that governed the creative team responsible for *Dinosaur* was believability, resulting in their seeking ‘the most up-to-date research about possible dinosaur skin colorization and the potential evolutionary relationship between dinosaurs and birds’ (Wells, 2009: 92) to achieve satisfactory levels of authenticity.