Post-Princess Models of Gender: The New Man in Disney/Pixar

Abstract: Unlike most Disney animated films, which have been criticized for decades for their stereotypical female leads and traditional representations of gender, all the major features released by Disney’s Pixar studios since 1990 have featured masculine protagonists. These male plots are remarkably alike, and together, we argue, they indicate a rather progressive postfeminist model of gender. Beginning with alpha-male traits in common, from emotional inaccessibility to keen competitiveness, the stars of these stories follow similar bildungsroman plots. In this article, we chart the pattern of masculine development in three of these films—Cars, Toy Story, and The Incredibles—noting that Pixar consistently promotes a new model of masculinity, one that matures into acceptance of its more traditionally “feminine” aspects.

Keywords: animated film, bildungsroman, Disney, gender studies, homosociality, masculinity, Pixar, Eve Sedgwick

Lisping over the Steve McQueen allusion in Pixar’s Cars (2006), our two-year-old son, Oscar, inadvertently directed us to the definition(s) of masculinity that might be embedded in a children’s animated film about NASCAR. The film overtly praises the “good woman” proverbially behind every successful man: the champion car, voiced by Richard Petty, tells his wife, “I wouldn’t be nothin’ without you, honey.” But gender in this twenty-first-century bildungsroman is rather more complex, and Oscar’s mispronunciation held the first clue. To him, a member of the film’s target audience, the character closing in on the title long held by “The King” is not “Lightning McQueen” but “Lightning the queen”; his chief rival, the always-a-bridesmaid runner-up “Chick” Hicks.

Does this nominal feminizing of male also-rans (and the simultaneous gendering of success) constitute a meaningful pattern? Piqued, we began examining the construction of masculinity in major feature films released by Disney’s Pixar studios over the past thirteen years. Indeed, as we argue here, Pixar consistently promotes a new model of masculinity, one that matures into acceptance of its more traditionally “feminine” aspects.

Cultural critics have long been interested in Disney’s cinematic products, but the gender critics examining the texts most enthusiastically gobbled up by the under-six set have so far generally focused on their retrograde representations of women. As Elizabeth Bell argues, the animated Disney features through Beauty and the Beast feature a “teenaged heroine at the idealized height of puberty’s graceful promenade [. . ., f]emale wickedness [. . .] rendered as middle-aged beauty at its peak of sexuality and authority [. . ., and] [f]eminine sacrifice and nurturing [. . .] drawn in pear-shaped, old women past menopause” (108). Some have noted the models of masculinity in the classic animated films, primarily the contrast between the ubermacho Gaston and the sensitive, misunderstood Beast in Beauty and the Beast, but the male protagonist of the animated classics, at least through The Little Mermaid, remains largely uninterrogated. For most of the early films, this critical omission
seems generally appropriate, the various versions of Prince Charming being often too two-dimensional to do more than inadvertently shape the definition of the protagonists’ femininity. But if the feminist thought that has shaped our cultural texts for three decades now has been somewhat disappointing in its ability to actually rewrite the princess trope (the spunkiest of the “princesses,” Ariel, Belle, Jasmine, and, arguably, even Mulan, remain thin, beautiful, kind, obedient or punished for disobedience, and headed for the altar), it has been surprisingly effective in rewriting the type of masculine power promoted by Disney’s products.  

Disney’s new face, Pixar studios, has released nine films—Toy Story (1995) and Toy Story 2 (1999); A Bug’s Life (1998); Finding Nemo (2003); Monsters, Inc. (2001); The Incredibles (2004); Cars (2006); Ratatouille (2007); and now WALL•E (2008)—all of which feature interesting male figures in leading positions. Unlike many of the princesses, who remain relatively static even through their own adventures, these male leads are actual protagonists; their characters develop and change over the course of the film, rendering the plot. Ultimately these various developing characters particularly Buzz and Woody from Toy Story, Mr. Incredible from The Incredibles, and Lightning McQueen from Cars—experience a common narrative trajectory, culminating in a common “New Man” model: they all strive for an alpha-male identity; they faceemasculating failures; they find themselves, in large part, through what Eve Sedgwick refers to as “homosocial desire” and a triangulation of this desire with a feminized object (and/or a set of “feminine” values); and, finally, they achieve (and teach) a kinder, gentler understanding of what it means to be a man.

Emasculation of the Alpha Male

A working definition of alpha male may be unnecessary; although more traditionally associated with the animal kingdom than the Magic Kingdom, it familiarly evokes ideas of dominance, leadership, and power in human social organizations as well. The phrase “alpha male” may stand for all things stereotypically patriarchal: unquestioned authority, physical power and social dominance, competitiveness for positions of status and leadership, lack of visible or shared emotion, social isolation. An alpha male, like Vann in Cars, does not ask for directions; like Doc Hudson in the same film, he does not talk about his feelings. The alpha male’s stresses, like Buzz Lightyear’s, come from his need to save the galaxy; his strength comes from faith in his ability to do so. These models have worked in Disney for decades. The worst storm at sea is no match for The Little Mermaid’s uncomplicated Prince Eric—indeed, any charming prince need only ride in on his steed to save his respective princess. But the postfeminist world is a different place for men, and the post-princess Pixar is a different place for male protagonists.

Newsweek recently described the alpha male’s new cinematic and television rival, the “beta male”: “The testosterone-pumped, muscle-bound Hollywood hero is rapidly deflating . . . Taking his place is a new kind of leading man, the kind who’s just as happy following as leading, or never getting off the sofa” (Yabroff 64). Indeed, as Susan Jeffords points out, at least since Beauty and the Beast, Disney has resisted (even ridiculed) the machismo once de rigueur for leading men (170). Disney cinema, one of the most effective teaching tools America offers its children, is not yet converting its model male protagonist all the way into a slacker, but the New Man model is quite clearly emerging.

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model is thus not only present and challenged in the films but also is, in fact, the very structure on which the plots unfold. Each of these films is about being a man, and they begin with an outdated, two-dimensional alpha prototype to expose its failings and to ridicule its logical extensions: the devastation and humiliation of being defeated in competition, the wrath generated by power unchecked, the paralyzing alienation and fear inherent in being alone at the top. As these characters begin the film in (or seeking) the tenuous alpha position among fellow characters, each of them is also stripped of this identity—dramatically emasculated—so that he may learn, reform, and emerge again with a different, and arguably more feminine, self-concept.

“Emasculated” is not too strong a term for what happens to these male protagonists; the decline of the alpha-male model is gender coded in all the films. For his community service punishment, Lightning is chained to the giant, snorting, tar-spitting “Bessie” and ordered to repair the damage he has wrought. His own “horsepower” (as Sally cheerfully points out) is used against him when literally put in the service of a nomi- nally feminized figure valued for the more “feminine” orientation of service to the community. If being under the thumb of this humongous “woman” is not emasculating enough, Mater, who sees such subordination to Bessie as a potentially pleasurable thing, names the price, saying, “I’d give my left two lug nuts for something like that!”

Mr. Incredible’s downfall is most clearly marked as gendered by his responses to it. As his wife’s domestic power and enthusiasm grow increasingly unbearable, and his children’s behavior more and more out of his control, he surreptitiously turns to the mysterious, gorgeous “Mirage,” who gives him what he needs to feel like a man: superhero work. Overtly depicting her as the “other woman,” the film requires Elastigirl to intercept a suggestive-sounding phone call, and to trap her husband in a lie, to be able to work toward healing his decimated masculinity.

In Toy Story, the emasculation of the alpha male is the most overt, and arguably the most comic. From the beginning, power is constructed in terms conspicuously gender coded, at least for adult viewers: as they watch the incoming birthday presents, the toys agonize at their sheer size, the longest and most phallic-shaped one striking true fear (and admiration?) into the hearts of the spectators. When Buzz threatens Woody, one toy explains to another that he has “laser envy.” Buzz’s moment of truth, after seeing himself on Sid’s father’s television, is the most clearly gendered of all. Realizing for the first time that Woody is right, he is a “toy,” he defiantly attempts to fly anyway, landing sprawled on the floor with a broken arm. Sid’s little sister promptly finds him, dresses him in a pink apron and hat, and installs him as “Mrs. Nesbit” at her tea party. When Woody tries to wrest him from his despair, Buzz wails, “Don’t you get it? I AM MRS. NESBIT. But does the hat look good? Oh, tell me the hat looks good!” Woody’s “rock bottom” moment finds him trapped under an overturned milk crate, forcing him to ask Buzz for help and to admit that he “doesn’t stand a chance” against Buzz in the contest for Andy’s affection, which constitutes “everything that is important to me.” He is not figured into a woman, like Buzz is, or subordinated to a woman, like Lightning is, or forced to seek a woman’s affirmation of his macho self, like Mr. Incredible is, but he does have to acknowledge his own feminine values, from his need for communal support to his deep, abiding (and, later, maternal) love of a boy. This “feminine” stamp is characteristic of the New Man model toward which these characters narratively journey.

**Homosociality, Intimacy, and Emotion**

Regarding the “love of a boy,” the “mistress” tempting Mr. Incredible away from his wife and family is not Mirage at all but Buddy, the boy he jilted in the opening scenes of the film (whose last name, Pine, further conveys the unrequited nature of their relationship). Privileging his alpha-male emotional isolation, but adored by his wannabe sidekick, Mr. Incredible vehemently protects his desire to “work alone.”

After spending the next years nursing his rejection and refining his arsenal, Buddy eventually retaliates against Mr. Incredible for rebuffing his advances. Such a model of homosocial tutelage as Buddy proposes at the beginning of the film certainly evokes an ancient (and homosexual) model of masculine identity; Mr. Incredible’s rejection quickly and decisively replaces it with a heteronormative one, further supported by Elastigirl’s marrying and Mirage’s attracting the macho superhero. But it is equally true that the recovery of Mr. Incredible’s masculine identity happens primarily through his (albeit antagonistic) relationship with Buddy, suggesting that Eve Sedgwick’s notion of a homosocial continuum is more appropriate to an analysis of the film’s gender attitudes than speculations about its reactionary heteronormativity, even homophobia.

Same-sex (male) bonds—to temporarily avoid the more loaded term desire—are obviously important to each of these films. In fact, in all three, male/male relationships emerge that move the fallen alphas forward in their journeys toward a new masculinity. In each case, the male lead’s first and/or primary intimacy—his most immediate transformative relationship—is with one or more male characters. Even before discovering Buddy as his nemesis, Mr. Incredible secretly pairs up with his old pal Frozone, and the two step out on their wives to continue superheroeing on the sly; Buddy and Frozone are each, in their ways, more influential on Mr. Incredible’s sense of self than his wife or children are. Although Lightning falls in love with Sally and her future vision of Radiator Springs, his almost accidentally having befriended the hapless, warm Mater catalyzes more foundational lessons about the responsibilities of friendship—demanding honesty, sensitivity, and care—than the smell-the-roses lesson Sally represents. He also ends up being mentored and taught a comparable lesson about caring for others by Doc Hudson, who even more explicitly encourages him to resist the alpha path of the Piston Cup world by relating his experiences of being used and then rejected. Woody and Buzz, as rivals-cum-allies, discover the necessary
truths about their masculine strength only as they discover how much they need one another. Sedgwick further describes the ways in which the homosocial bond is negotiated through a triangulation of desire; that is, the intimacy emerging "between men" is constructed through an overt and shared desire for a feminized object. Unlike homosocial relationships between women—that is, "the continuum between 'women loving women' and 'women promoting the interests of women'"—male homosocial identity is necessarily homophobic in patriarchal systems, which are structurally homophobic (3). This means the same-sex relationship demands social opportunities for a man to insist on, or prove, his heterosexuality. Citing Rene Girard’s Deceit, Desire, and the Novel, Sedgwick argues that “in any erotic rivalry, the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved” (21); women are ultimately symbolically exchangeable “for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men” (26).

This triangulation of male desire can be seen in Cars and Toy Story particularly, where the homosocial relationship rather obviously shares a desire for a feminized third. Buzz and Woody compete first, momentarily, for the affection of Bo Peep, who is surprisingly sexualized for a children’s movie (purring to Woody an offer to “get someone else to watch the sheep tonight,” then rapidly choosing Buzz as her “moving buddy” after his “flying” display). More importantly, they battle for the affection of Andy—a male child alternately depicted as maternal (it is his responsibility to get his baby sister out of her crib) and in need of male protection (Woody exhorts Buzz to “take care of Andy for me!”). Cars also features a sexualized romantic heroine; less coquettish than Bo Peep, Sally still fumbles over an invitation to spend the night “not with me, but . . .” in the motel she owns. One of Lightning and Mater’s moments of “bonding” happens when Mater confronts Lightning, stating his affection for Sally and sharing a parallel story of heterosexual desire. The more principal objects of desire in Cars, however, are the (arguably) feminized “Piston Cup” and the Dinoco sponsorship. The sponsor itself is established in romantic terms: with Lightning stuck in Radiator Springs, his agent says Dinoco has had to “woo” Chick instead. Tia and Mia, Lightning’s “biggest fans,” who transfer their affection to Chick during his absence, offer viewers an even less subtly gendered goal, and Chick uses this to taunt Lightning. It is in the pursuit of these objects, and in competition with Chick and the King, that Lightning first defines himself as a man; the Piston Cup also becomes the object around which he and Doc discover their relationship to one another.

The New Man

With the strength afforded by these homosocial intimacies, the male characters triumph over their respective plots, demonstrating the desirable modifications that Pixar makes to the alpha-male model. To emerge victorious (and in one piece) over the tyrannical neighbor boy, Sid, Buzz, and Woody have to cooperate not only with each other but also with the cannibalized toys lurking in the dark places of Sid’s bedroom. Incidentally learning a valuable lesson about discrimination based on physical difference (the toys are not monsters at all, despite their frightening appearance), they begin to show sympathy, rather than violence born of their fear, to the victims of Sid’s experimentation. They learn to humble themselves to ask for help from the community. Until Woody’s grand plan to escape Sid unfolds, Sid could be an object lesson in the unredeemed alpha-male type: cruelly aloft by the toy community, he wins at arcade games, bullies his sister, and, with strategically placed fireworks, exerts militaristic might over any toys he can find. Woody’s newfound ability to give and receive care empowers him to teach Sid a lesson of caring and sharing that might be microcosmic to the movie as a whole. Sid, of course, screams (like a girl) when confronted with the evidence of his past cruelties, and when viewers last see him, his younger sister is chasing him up the stairs with her doll.

Even with the unceremonious exit of Sid, the adventure is not quite over for Buzz and Woody. Unable to catch up to the moving van as Sid’s dog chases him, Woody achieves the pinnacle of the New Man narrative: armed with a new masculine identity, one that expresses feelings and acknowledges community as a site of power, Woody is able to sacrifice the competition with Buzz for his object of desire. Letting go of the van strap, sacrificing himself (he thinks) to Sid’s dog, he plainly expresses a caretaking, nurturing love, and a surrender to the good of the beloved: “Take care of Andy for me,” he pleads. Buzz’s own moment of truth comes from seizing his power as a toy: holding Woody, he glides into the family’s car and back into Andy’s care, correcting Woody by proudly repeating his earlier, critical words back to him: “This isn’t flying; it’s falling with style.” Buzz has found the value of being a “toy,” the self-fulfillment that comes from being owned and loved. “Being a toy is a lot better than being a space ranger,” Woody explains. “You’re his toy” (emphasis in original).

Mr. Incredible likewise must embrace his own dependence, both physical and emotional. Trapped on the island of Chronos, at the mercy of Syndrome (Buddy’s new super-persona), Mr. Incredible needs women—his wife’s superpowers and Mirage’s guilty intervention—to escape. To overpower the monster Syndrome has unleashed on the city, and to achieve the pinnacle of the New Man model, he must also admit to his emotional dependence on his wife and children. Initially confining them to the safety of a bus, he confesses to Elastigirl that his need to fight the monster alone is not a typically alpha (“I work alone”) sort of need but a loving one: “I can’t lose you again,” he tells her. The robot/monster is defeated, along with any vestiges of the alpha model, as the combined forces of the Incredible family locate a new model of postfeminist strength in the family as a whole. This communal strength is not simply physical but marked by cooperation, selflessness, and intelligence. The children learn that their best contributions protect the others; Mr. Incredible figures out the robot/monster’s vulnerability and cleverly uses this against it.
In a parallel motif to Mr. Incredible’s inability to control his strength, Buddy/Syndrome finally cannot control his robot/monster; in the defeat, he becomes the newly emasculated alpha male. But like his robot, he learns quickly. His last attempt to injure Mr. Incredible, kidnapping his baby Jack-Jack, strikes at Mr. Incredible’s new source of strength and value, his family. The strength of the cooperative family unit is even more clearly displayed in this final rescue: for the shared, parental goal of saving Jack-Jack, Mr. Incredible uses his physical strength and, with her consent, the shape-shifting body of his super-wife. He throws Elastigirl into the air, where she catches their baby and, flattening her body into a parachute, sails gently back to her husband and older children.

Through Lightning McQueen’s many relationships with men, as well as his burgeoning romance with Sally, he also learns how to care about others, to focus on the well-being of the community, and to privilege nurture and kindness. It is Doc, not Sally, who explicitly challenges the race car with his selfishness (“When was the last time you cared about something except yourself, hot rod?”). His reformed behavior begins with his generous contributions to the Radiator Springs community. Not only does he provide much-needed cash for the local economy, but he also listens to, praises, and values the residents for their unique offerings to Radiator Springs. He is the chosen auditor for Lizzy’s reminiscing about her late husband, contrasting the comic relief typically offered by the senile and deaf Model T with poignancy, if not quite sadness. Repairing the town’s neon, he creates a romantic dreamscape from the past, a setting for both courting Sally (“cruising”) and, more importantly, winning her respect with his ability to share in her value system. For this role, he is even physically transformed: he hires the body shop proprietor, Ramone, to paint over his sponsors’ stickers and his large race number, as if to remove himself almost completely from the Piston Cup world, even as he anticipates being released from his community service and thus being able to return to racing.

Perhaps even more than Buzz, Woody, and Mr. Incredible do, the New Man McQueen shuns the remaining trappings of the alpha role, actually refusing the Piston Cup. If the first three protagonists are ultimately qualified heroes—that is, they still retain their authority and accomplish their various tasks, but with new values and perspectives acquired along the way—Lightning completely and publicly refuses his former object of desire. Early in the final race, he seems to somewhat devalue racing; his daydreams of Sally distract him, tempting him to give up rather than to compete. The plot, however, needs him to dominate the race so his decision at the end will be entirely his own. His friends show up and encourage him to succeed. This is where the other films end: the values of caring, sharing, nurturing, and community being clearly present, the hero is at last able to achieve, improvedcommunity being present, the hero is at last able to achieve, improved

Piston Cup itself, which slides onto the stage and hits him rudely in the side.

Conclusion

The trend of the New Man seems neither insidious nor nefarious, nor is it out of step with the larger cultural movement. It is good, we believe, for our son to be aware of the many sides of human existence, regardless of traditional gender stereotypes. However, maintaining a critical consciousness of the many lessons taught by the cultural monolith of Disney remains imperative. These lessons—their pedagogical aims or results—become most immediately obvious to us as parents when we watch our son ingest and express them, when he misunderstands and makes his own sense of them, and when we can see ways in which his perception of reality is shaped by them, before our eyes. Without assuming that the values of the films are inherently evil or representative of an evil “conspiracy to undermine American youth” (Giroux 4), we are still compelled to critically examine the texts on which our son bases many of his attitudes, behaviors, and preferences.

Moreover, the impact of Disney, as Henry Giroux has effectively argued, is tremendously more widespread than our household. Citing Michael Eisner’s 1995 “Planetized Entertainment,” Giroux claims that 200 million people a year watch Disney videos or films, and in a week, 395 million watch a Disney TV show, 3.8 million subscribe to the Disney Channel, and 810,000 make a purchase at a Disney store (19). As Benjamin Barber argued in 1995, “[T]he true tutors of our children are not schoolteachers or university professors but filmmakers, advertising executives and pop culture purveyors” (qtd. in Giroux 63). Thus we perform our “pedagogical intervention[s]” of examining Disney’s power to “shap[e] national identity, gender roles, and childhood values” (Giroux 10). It remains a necessary and ongoing task, not just for concerned parents, but for all conscientious cultural critics.

The postfeminist world is a different place for men, and the post-princess Pixar is a different place for male protagonists.


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