

SISTERHOOD

Representation and Representativity of Women and Archetypal Design of Female Characters in Animated Feature Films (2001-2022)

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For my mother, whom I carry within, always.
For all the unwavering, resilient, and kind women in my life.

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RESUMO

Esta tese analisa a representação e a representatividade de mulheres e personagens femininas em longas-metragens de animação *mainstream* lançadas entre 2001 e 2022, com um foco específico no papel, ainda pouco estudado, do design de personagens na construção e comunicação de arquétipos narrativos — uma dimensão crucial, já que estas escolhas visuais e narrativas tendem a reforçar ideologias dominantes e a moldar a percepção do público em relação aos papéis e limites de gênero.

A investigação integra três componentes metodológicas: (1) recolha de dados quantitativos baseada em critérios-chave para a avaliação da representação de gênero numa amostra alargada de filmes, incluindo um estudo de caso; (2) análise interpretativa do design de personagens femininas que incorporam arquétipos narrativos relevantes, a partir de uma amostra mais pequena e relevante; e (3) entrevistas com profissionais da área da animação, com o objetivo de recolher perspetivas sobre os contextos de produção e as tomadas de decisões de design. Em conjunto, estas abordagens oferecem uma compreensão abrangente de como a representação da personagem feminina é construída e comunicada através do design em filmes de animação.

A recolha de dados quantitativos revela uma sub-representação persistente das mulheres e das personagens femininas nas longas-metragens de animação *mainstream*. Os dados indicam que apenas 6,6% dos créditos de realização são atribuídos a mulheres, sendo que a maioria das realizadoras conta apenas com um filme creditado. As protagonistas femininas continuam significativamente em menor número e quase metade dos filmes da amostra não passa o Teste de Bechdel. Um estudo de caso dos estúdios Pixar reflete tendências semelhantes, embora melhorias recentes — sobretudo após 2020 — sugiram que a mudança institucional é possível quando existem compromissos estruturais com a equidade.

A análise de 31 filmes relevantes revelou padrões visuais que associam o design de personagens femininas aos papéis arquetípicos de Mentora, Feiticeira, Guerreira, Amante e Rebelde. Embora muitos dos designs reforcem conceções convencionais de

feminilidade, beleza e alinhamento moral, várias personagens subversivas desafiam essas normas — sobretudo em papéis secundários. O estudo verificou também que as protagonistas continuam amplamente limitadas por marcadores visuais de ternura, inocência e atratividade. Estes resultados evidenciam como o design de personagens reflete e reforça narrativas culturais em torno do gênero, do poder, da identidade e da cultura do patriarcado, sublinhando a necessidade de práticas de design focadas na diversidade e inclusividade.

As entrevistas com profissionais de animação revelaram a persistência de enviesamentos de gênero no design de personagens, particularmente na utilização do conceito de “*appeal*” como eufemismo para beleza, no caso das personagens femininas. Enquanto os grandes estúdios tendem a manter normas visuais convencionais devido a pressões comerciais, criadores independentes procuram representar de forma mais expressiva, pessoal e diversa. Os participantes enfatizaram a importância da autenticidade, da ressonância emocional e da narrativa inclusiva, ao mesmo tempo que apontaram barreiras sistêmicas — sobretudo ao nível da liderança nos estúdios — que dificultam o progresso. Foram recorrentes os apelos à diversidade, à sensibilidade cultural e à mudança estrutural, bem como as preocupações com o impacto da inteligência artificial generativa e da redução de custos na integridade criativa. Estas perspetivas revelam a tensão constante entre os constrangimentos da indústria e uma crescente procura por narrativas justas e autênticas na animação.

Ao combinar análise de dados, interpretação visual e perspetivas profissionais, este estudo propõe uma abordagem crítica e interdisciplinar à área científica do Design e da Animação, oferecendo a académicos e profissionais uma estrutura para enfrentar os enviesamentos de gênero no design de personagens.

Palavras-chave: Mulheres em Animação, Design de Personagens e Arquétipos, Representações de Gênero nos Media, Longas-metragens de Animação Mainstream.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the representation and representativity of women and female characters in mainstream animated feature films released between 2001 and 2022, with a specific focus on the under-researched role of character design in constructing and communicating narrative archetypes—an important consideration, as these visual and narrative choices often reinforce dominant ideologies and shape audience perceptions of gender.

The research integrates three methodological components: (1) quantitative data collection based on key criteria for assessing gender representation across a broad sample of films, including a case study; (2) interpretative analysis of the design of female characters embodying relevant narrative archetypes, drawn from a smaller, curated corpus; and (3) interviews with animation professionals to gain insight into production contexts and design decisions. Together, these approaches offer a comprehensive understanding of how gender representation is constructed and communicated through character design in animated films.

The quantitative data collection reveals a persistent underrepresentation of women both behind the scenes and on screen in mainstream animated feature films. The data shows that only 6.6% of directing credits are attributed to women, with most female directors having only one credit. Female protagonists remain significantly outnumbered, and nearly half the films in the sample fail the Bechdel Test. A case study of Pixar Animation Studios reflects similar trends, though recent improvements—especially post-2020—suggest institutional change is possible when structural commitments to equity are made.

The analysis of 31 relevant films revealed clear visual patterns linking female character designs to the archetypal roles of Mentor, Witch, Warrior, Lover, and Rebel. While many designs reinforced conventional notions of femininity, beauty, and moral alignment, several subversive characters challenged these norms—particularly in secondary roles. The study also found that protagonists remain largely constrained by

visual markers of cuteness, innocence, and attractiveness. These findings highlight how character design both reflects and reinforces cultural narratives around gender, power, identity, and patriarchy, underscoring the need for more diverse and inclusive visual storytelling.

Interviews with animation professionals revealed persistent gendered biases in character design, particularly the industry's reliance on "appeal" as a euphemism for beauty in female characters. While mainstream studios often uphold conventional visual norms due to commercial pressures, independent creators are pushing for more expressive, narrative-driven, and diverse representations. Participants emphasized the importance of authenticity, emotional resonance, and inclusive storytelling, while also highlighting systemic barriers—especially within studio leadership—that limit progress. Calls for increased diversity, cultural sensitivity, and structural change were prevalent, alongside concerns about the impact of generative AI and cost-cutting on creative integrity. These insights underscore the ongoing tension between industry constraints and the growing demand for equitable and authentic storytelling in animation.

By combining data analysis, visual interpretation, and professional perspectives, this study contributes a critical and interdisciplinary approach to animation studies, offering both scholars and practitioners a framework for addressing gender biases in character design.

Keywords: Women in Animation, Character Design and Archetypes, Gender Representation in Media, Mainstream Animated Feature Films.

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GLOSSARY

Anime

Japanese films made using characters and images that are drawn rather than real.

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/anime>

BIPOC

Stands for “Black, Indigenous, and People Of Color”. Pronounced “bye-pock,” this is a term specific to the United States, intended to center the experiences of Black and Indigenous groups and demonstrate solidarity between communities of color. YWCA -

Why We Use Bipoc <https://www.ywcaworks.org/blogs/ywca/tue-03122024-1000/why-we-use-bipoc#:~:text=BIPOC%20stands%20for%20Black%2C%20Indigenous,solidarity%20between%20communities%20of%20color>

Cisbet

Being cisgender (= having a gender that matches the body you were born with) and heterosexual (= sexually attracted to men if you are a woman and women if you are a man). <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/cisbet>

Feature-length Film or Feature Film

The Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences and The British Film Institute define a feature film as having over 40 minutes of runtime. <https://www.bfi.org.uk/bfi-national-archive/research-bfi-archive/bfi-filmography/bfi-filmography-faq>

If a film has less than 40 minutes, it is considered a short film. Although this definition may vary according to different organizations (The Screen Actors Guild suggests that a feature film has a runtime of 75 minutes or more; and the Sundance Festival rules state that a feature film must have at least 50 minutes of duration), we

decided to use the first definition as a guideline, choosing only movies that were at least 40-minute long. *Eligibility Criteria | Screen Actors Guild Awards*. Screen Actors Guild Awards Website. <https://www.sagawards.org/awards/rules-eligibility/eligibility-criteria>; Sundance Film Festival. (2022). *Rules & Regulations For Submitting To The 2022 Sundance Film Festival*. <http://www.sundance.org/submissions-faq>).

Female-coded

Gender-coding is the process of assigning traits or behaviours to certain genders. While there have been discussions in more recent years of coding outside of the gender binary, many references to gender-coding are specifically referring to the genders of male and female. <https://fanlore.org/wiki/Gender-coding>

So, female-coded characters have visual signifiers that are usually associated with the female gender (e.g. long hair, signs of makeup, longer eyelashes, use of dresses/skirts/heels, hourglass figures, developed breasts, etc); they can also have audio signifiers, by having a female sounding voice, i.e. having been voiced by a woman (although there are female characters voiced by men, who have female visual signifiers - Edna Mode, from *The Incredibles* (2004), is voiced by Brad Bird; Roz, from *Monsters, Inc.* (2001) is voiced by Bob Peterson); they can also have a traditional woman's name - or at least, a female sounding name, combined with other attributes that are commonly recognized as female.

Female-presenting

Referring to a person with an outward gender expression that appears feminine. For example, this could be shown through style, mannerisms, body language, etc. Glossary of Must-Know Gender Identity Terms; www.verywellmind.com/glossary-of-must-know-gender-identity-terms-5186274

Gender coding

Assigning particular traits, behaviors, or characteristics exclusively or predominantly to specific genders. APA Dictionary of Psychology, <https://dictionary.apa.org/gender-coding>

Gender parity

Numerical concept related to gender equality. Gender parity concerns relative equality in terms of numbers and proportions of women and men, girls and boys, and is often calculated as the ratio of female-to-male values for a given indicator.

https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/thesaurus/terms/1258?language_content_entity=en

IMDb

Internet Movie Database was launched online in 1990 and is a subsidiary of Amazon.com since 1998. "IMDb is the world's most popular and authoritative source for movie, TV and celebrity content, designed to help fans explore the world of movies and shows and decide what to watch". *What is IMDb?*, [https://help.imdb.com/article/imdb/general-](https://help.imdb.com/article/imdb/general-information/what-is-imdb/G836CY29Z4SGNMK5?ref_=helpart_nav_1#)

[information/what-is-imdb/G836CY29Z4SGNMK5?ref_=helpart_nav_1#](https://help.imdb.com/article/imdb/general-information/what-is-imdb/G836CY29Z4SGNMK5?ref_=helpart_nav_1#)

Live-action Footage

(in films, etc.) action involving real people or animals, not models, or images that are drawn, or produced by computer. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/live-action>

Manga

Japanese comic books and graphic novels considered collectively as a genre.

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/manga>

Meme

An amusing or interesting item (such as a captioned picture or video) or genre of items that is spread widely online especially through social media. [https://www.merriam-](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/meme)

[webster.com/dictionary/meme](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/meme)

MeToo Movement:

“The ‘me too.’ movement was founded in 2006 by Tarana Burke to support survivors of sexual violence, particularly young women of color from low-wealth communities, to find pathways to healing. The movement’s vision from the beginning has been to address both the dearth of resources for survivors of sexual violence and to build a robust community of advocates and allies. In October 2017, the movement went global as the #MeToo hashtag went viral and survivors across the world came forward about their experiences with sexual assault. From #米兔 (translated as “rice bunny,” pronounced as “mi tu”) in China to #Sex4Grades in Kenya to #uykularinkacsin (may you lose sleep) in Turkey, ‘me too.’ transcended national borders. Tarana Burke has visited many countries since then. And as the ‘me too’ movement has grown, many countries have asked to connect with efforts in the US. Their requests have sparked the vision of a global community that centers survivor leadership through deep cross-country relationship building and practice sharing.”

<https://www.globalfundforwomen.org/movements/me-too/>

Rotten Tomatoes

Online platform that aggregates both critics and the general public’s reviews and presents the information through the *Tomatometer* – a metric that classifies each film as *Rotten*, when less than 60% of the reviews of a movie are positive, and *Fresh*, when more than 60% of the reviews are positive. There’s also a *Certified Fresh* status for the best-reviewed films by verified critics: “Certified Fresh status is a special distinction awarded to the best-reviewed movies and TV shows. In order to qualify, movies or TV shows must meet the following requirements: a consistent Tomatometer score of 75% or higher; at least five reviews from Top Critics; films in wide release must have a minimum of 80 reviews.” The Audience Score reflects the opinions of the general public, even guaranteeing a percentage of “Verified Ratings,” “which represents the percentage of users who have rated a movie (...) positively who we can verify bought a ticket”. <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/about>

Shojo

Manga or anime intended primarily for girls. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/shojo>

Tapa

A coarse cloth made in the Pacific islands from the pounded bark especially of the paper mulberry and usually decorated with geometric patterns. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tapa>

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1. INTRODUCTION

This thesis addresses the underrepresentation of women in the animation industry, focusing on how women are depicted in animated feature films through female animated characters. Historically, womanhood and girlhood have been marginalized in animation since its inception. Although progress is being made toward gender parity, significant gaps persist across several key metrics within the industry. Research consistently shows that female characters are not only fewer in number but are also often depicted through stereotypical lenses, reflecting the societal values of the time. This creates a cycle of influence: the content produced reflects the cultural norms of its era, while also having the power to either reinforce or challenge those norms. We believe the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of women in animated films stem from the limited influence of women creators in the industry. As a result, production teams miss out on their valuable input and original stories, which contributes to the continued perpetuation of harmful gender stereotypes.

The gender inequality in this medium becomes evident when presented in this manner:

Imagine that every other weekend you take the children in your life to see an animated movie in the theater. Over the course of a year, you would watch approximately 25 films together. Statistically, 20 of these movies would feature a male protagonist, while only 5 would center on a female lead. This means that your son, nephew, or grandson would have numerous role models to choose from, with male characters depicted in a wide range of roles and attributes – be it strong, frail, handsome, funny, evil, or even a toy, a dog, or an alien. In contrast, your daughter's choices are far more limited. It's likely that the female characters she encounters are portrayed as exceptionally beautiful, unrealistically thin, demure, and predominantly Caucasian.

Historically, both animation and film have portrayed female characters as fewer in number and relegated to less prominent, more passive, and more gender-stereotypical roles. Regrettably, current data indicates that these patterns have remained largely unchanged over the past century.

This implies that popular animated content, which reaches billions of viewers globally, is falling short in offering diverse, inclusive, and representative role models. This shortfall is significant because visual media, especially during formative years, profoundly influences our perceptions. Movies and television shows play a crucial role in shaping children's social beliefs and expectations, particularly concerning gender roles.

This project denounces the ongoing underrepresentation of women and aims to advance inclusive and diverse character design practices. By encouraging critical examination of gender representation, it seeks to address its potential impact on society.

In her *Introduction to Feminist Studies* class, Professor Marinela Freitas, lecturer at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of the University of Porto, began the semester by presenting the key aspects of what it means to be a Feminist Studies' student.

What it means to be a student of feminist studies:

1. Raising ethical questions about how to live better in a world that is sometimes unjust and unequal
2. Creating more egalitarian relationships with others (with more equity)
3. Finding ways to support those who are not supported or are less supported by social systems
4. Fighting against dogmatic narratives (which have become as solid as walls and need to be overcome)
5. Identifying, understanding, and denouncing systemic structures of oppression

These core principles have guided this research and our practice ever since. It helped us to have a clear grasp of the guiding principles that we wanted to use as a compass. This thesis tries to address every single one of these core principles.

1. It aims to raise questions about how popular animated feature films can contribute to a more just and equal world for all.
2. This in turn can foster more egalitarian relationships with others – animation can present a panoply of social settings and characterizations, thus offering the audience a chance to encounter different cultures, practices, social values, in a safe manner; it can promote empathy and understanding for the experiences of others.
3. We investigated those less represented, and thus, less supported, by the animation industry. We tried to unearth the representation biases presented in the movies; the interviews conducted with animation industry professionals served to listen to those who often felt unheard or put aside; and then understand their perspective and learn how the situation could be improved. We propose ways in which to think, discuss and act upon the animation context, in such a way that people who are being left behind (women, in this case) would have a bigger chance at success, being able to tell their stories, being able to be seen and heard.
4. We want to deconstruct the dogmatic narratives being preached in character design practices within the animation context, as well as the set of principles that, if left unquestioned, will perpetuate biases of representation of womanhood in animation, as well as leaving women to be forever the powerless minority in production teams. Unlike dogmatic narratives, we encourage critical thinking and alternative perspectives, challenging the notion of a single ‘correct’ viewpoint. It is necessary to dispute rigid and unquestioned beliefs that perpetuate inequality and oppression.

5. Lastly, we believe it to be important to analyze, observe, identify, and understand the systems that perpetuate inequality and oppression, to then denounce them. By offering a quantitative and qualitative perspective, that is well argued for, we hope to incentivize the animation industry at large, as well as the academic community, to keep the discussion open, without pride, biases, or prejudice. When we use scientific tools to present the current state of affairs regarding the representation of women in popular and contemporary animated feature films, we hope to help create a strong rock-solid foundation from where discussion can blossom and thrive, leading to change towards a more egalitarian future.

1.1. Research Questions, Objectives, and Methods

This research addresses the following key questions:

- What is the current state of representation of female characters in popular animated feature films of the 21st century?
- What is the role of design in communicating and reinforcing character archetypes?
- What kind of correlation exists between character design patterns and the characters' narrative roles?

The main objectives of this thesis are:

- Contribute to a more just, egalitarian, and inclusive society;
- Denounce the underrepresentation of female characters in the context of mainstream animation of the 21st century;
- Make available a mapping of the different narrative archetypes embodied by female characters and their representations in mainstream animation feature films of the 21st century;
- Make available visual and infographic material that summarizes and makes clear relevant data about the contemporary animation paradigm;
- Foster critical thinking around gender representation in the context of popular and contemporary animation feature film;
- Contribute to the strengthening of inclusive and creative character design in the context of animation feature film.

This project relies on three main methods of research: data collection, visual analysis, and interviews.

The collection of relevant data related to the representation of women in animation allows for the better understanding of the contemporary context of popular animated feature films and women's place in it. By looking at key metrics, such as gender of the protagonist of each movie, the gender of the movies' directors, and if the movies pass the Bechdel-Wallace Test, for example, we can assess in broad terms how are women being represented both on and off screen, regarding animated feature films. This research method presents quantitative data and results.

The visual analysis of the content presented by a relevant movie sample, which portray female characters in prominent narrative roles interacting with one another, allows for the investigation of character design trends, and the study of how narrative archetypes and female relationships are portrayed in this context. This research method presents qualitative findings that emerge from the interpretation of data by the researcher.

The interviews with animation industry professionals allow us to access the behind-the-scenes of the data and the content that we analyzed. The interviews provide crucial complimentary information that helps explain what we're seeing on screen and how it came to be.

Lastly, we also found that the presentation of the project in varied contexts, and in several stages of development, was vital to grasp its relevance and acceptance amongst students, practitioners and researchers. This practice of sharing and presenting the research being developed served as a work method that helped to validate the project as it was evolving, as well as pivoting when necessary.

1.2. Literature Review

Here we present a critical overview of relevant studies that helped shape the framework of our research project. By virtue of this project functioning within three main disciplines – Animation Studies, Design Research, and Gender Studies – this contextual chapter aims at bringing together relevant and up to date information relating to the theme of female representation in animation.

We argue that contemporary animated feature films are powerful communication tools with the potential to influence global audiences, supported by their widespread popularity and the learning theories that highlight how media shapes social values and expectations.

We then present a literature review of relevant studies on representation in animation. These studies address matters of representation both on screen – what is seen in a movie – and behind the screen – the people who work in the animation industry and make up production teams.

Although this research project focuses on feature-length animated films, we also include studies related to other forms of popular animated content, such as television series. These studies offer valuable insights into the reach and impact of animation, as well as trends in representation.

1.2.1. The Global Reach and Popularity of Animated Content

In today's paradigm of globalization, popular media content, such as animated television series and feature films, reaches worldwide audiences with ease, becoming increasingly relevant and pervasive. Until very recently, the movie theater was the main way through which audiences got acquainted with new animated feature films, as well as with the consequent DVD or Blu-ray release. While these formats still exist, now media content is empowered by the ubiquitousness of the digital screen and the increasing ease of access to streaming services. The new way of watching animated media

– anywhere, anytime, on demand – accelerates and expands viewership, when compared to older structures of watching content that would limit viewers due to the physical restraints (e.g. the need for fixed equipment, such as VHS tapes or DVD/Blu-ray discs and compatible players, a television set), as well as time restrictions (television schedules or theater screenings).

The decline of movie theaters was rapidly accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic, which forced the closure of theatrical entertainment venues around the globe, as millions of people were in quarantine for a prolonged period (BBC News, 2020; Clark, 2020; Roxborough et al., 2020). This coincided with the advent of new, improved and expanding streaming platforms, such as Disney+, Netflix, Hulu, HBO and Amazon (Adgate, 2021; Ramachandran, 2022; Richwine, 2022). The ease of access to premium content, combined with the stay-at-home policies deployed by many governments during the pandemic, sped-up the process of adopting emergent home entertainment alternatives. This also led to the decline of network television viewership (Schneider, 2021), because the way audiences watch and experience movies and series is changing, apparently heading towards a more customizable experience. It is also important to account for the impressive global reach of these streaming platforms: Netflix and Amazon Prime Video are accessible from virtually anywhere in the world (except in China, Russia, North Korea and Syria), Disney+ is now available in more than 50 countries, and HBO Max can be accessed throughout most of the American and European continents.

This means that measuring a movie's popularity and reach today is not as straightforward as reading box office revenue numbers or DVD/Blu-ray sales; we need to take into consideration its online impact and its at-home viewership (or viewership in personal mobile devices). But the viewership metrics of streaming services are not yet consensual across different platforms and some only share a fraction of the collected data (Baker, 2021; Moore, 2021; Netflix Letter to Shareholders - October 2021, 2021; Sundaravelu, 2021). Regardless of these measuring and transparency issues, reports issued by Nielsen on the most popular shows streamed each year confirmed that the American audience “streamed almost 15 million years’ worth of content in 2021”

(Nielsen, 2022), “more than 19 million years’ worth of content” in 2022 (Nielsen, 2023), and “in 2023, U.S. audiences streamed 21 million years’ worth of video, an incredible 21% increase from the 17 million years’ worth they streamed in 2022” (Nielsen, 2024a) – demonstrating the growth of consumption of media content through streaming services, which now consistently accounts for the biggest driver of TV usage (Nielsen, 2024b).

- Between 2021 and 2023, animated movies were some of the most streamed movies worldwide. In 2021, the top 4 most streamed movies were animated: *Moana*, *Frozen II*, *Raya and the Last Dragon*, and *Luca*; and there were a total of 8 animated movies on the chart of the Top 15 Streaming Movies (Nielsen, 2022).
- In 2022, again, the top 4 most streamed movies were animated movies: *Encanto*, *Turning Red*, *Sing 2*, and *Moana*; 9 out of the top 15 movies were animated; all animated movies in the list, except one (*Sing 2*), were produced and/or distributed by the Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures (Nielsen, 2023).
- In 2023, the top 7 most streamed movies were, again, animated: *Moana*, *Encanto*, *The Super Mario Bros. Movie*, *Elemental*, *Minions: The Rise of Gru*, *Sing 2*, and *Frozen*; ten years after its release, *Frozen* maintains its position as one of the most streamed movies (Nielsen, 2024a).

Another example is the animated movie *The Monkey King*, which was Netflix’s most-viewed film, during its first full week on the platform (J. Lang, 2023), reinforcing the audience’s enjoyment and acceptance of animated movies on streaming services.

Nevertheless, even with the growth and pervasiveness of streaming services, animated films have made a comeback to the movie theaters and are helping revive the industry (Barnes, 2023; Bunch, 2022). Even though audiences may be more inclined to enjoy movies on-demand, animated movies playing in theaters worldwide are still a force to be

reckoned with, as every year they occupy some of the top ten slots for highest grossing movies of each year. Some examples provided by Box Office Mojo¹ are:

- in 2019, *The Lion King* – \$1,656,943,394, *Frozen II* – \$1,450,026,933, and *Toy Story 4* – \$1,073,394,593, all surpassed the billion dollar mark and were the 2nd, 3rd and 8th highest grossing movies of that year, respectively;
- in 2020, Japanese movie *Demon Slayer the Movie: Mugen Train* – \$453,210,959 was the 2nd highest grossing movie of the year, and *The Croods: A New Age* – \$215,905,815 occupied the 10th position;
- in 2021, *Sing 2* – \$408,401,942 came in 10th;
- in 2022, *Minions: The Rise of Gru* – \$939,628,210 came in 5th, and *Puss in Boots: The Last Wish* – \$481,040,100 came in 10th;
- in 2023, *The Super Mario Bros. Movie* – \$1,359,754,799, *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* – \$689,342,516, and *Elemental* – \$478,739,994 occupied the 2nd, 6th and 9th positions, respectively.

In 2024, *Inside Out 2* broke a series of box office records, notoriously becoming the highest-grossing movie of 2024 in the US and worldwide, earning \$1.44 billion globally (more than *Dune: Part Two*) and being the only movie this year to reach the \$1 billion threshold, becoming the first film since *Barbie* to reach that milestone (Aguirre, 2024; R. Scott, 2024). As of September 2024, it has become the highest grossing animated movie of all time and “the 9th biggest movie ever at the worldwide box office” (Tartaglione, 2024).

Animated feature films consistently rank among the most widely viewed and financially successful movies released annually, captivating audiences across diverse demographics. The global box office revenue generated by animated movies frequently surpasses that of many live-action counterparts, underscoring their broad appeal and marketability. Notable animated movies have garnered substantial commercial success

¹ Data consulted on the 4th of September of 2023, at <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/year/world/>.

and lasting cultural impact (e.g. *Frozen*), which emphasizes the enduring popularity and profitability of the animated film genre within the contemporary cinematic landscape.

The current paradigm strengthens the possibility for more people everywhere to watch animated content, as well as the possibility for repetition of content that is readily available through streaming services. It is known that repetition is a common trait among young viewers, as they will watch the same movie, episode or video repeatedly. The widespread presence, ease of access, and possibility of repetition of animated content reinforces the new potential for animation to communicate ideas that will influence and resonate with the audience, especially the younger demographic.

1.2.2. Animated Media's Impact on Social Expectations and Behaviors

Based on established theories in psychology and media studies, that explore social learning and media influence on human behavior, we know that some learning theories, such as social learning theory and cultivation theory, posit that media, including animated movies, play a pivotal role in shaping social expectations, behaviors, and beliefs among audiences. For example, social learning theory, promoted by Albert Bandura, emphasizes the process of observational learning, where individuals, particularly children, acquire knowledge, learn social norms, and adopt new behaviors by watching and imitating relevant examples around them – which can be identified in parents, tutors, peers, or even fictional characters portrayed in media (Bandura, 1977, 2001). Similarly, cultivation theory suggests that prolonged exposure to media content can shape and alter viewers' perceptions of reality, aligning them with the recurrent themes and narratives depicted in the media being consumed (Gerbner et al., 1980; Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Therefore, it is believed that animated content, such as movies and television series, may play a role in children's gender socialization.

Through processes of attention and retention of relevant information and behavior, reinforced by the repeated rehearsal of thoughts and actions, children learn and apply this knowledge to their surroundings and create expectations about others' behaviors. Since learning requires some kind of repetition – of exposure and then of action – repeated exposure to the same piece of media, often voluntarily, enhances the possibility

of certain values, behaviors, and beliefs to be adopted by younger viewers. Repeatedly viewing the same movies is a common occurrence amongst children, since it can offer a sense of comfort and familiarity. They might appreciate the predictability of the narrative and find reassurance in the characters and storylines they already know well. Engaging in repetitive behaviors, like watching the same films multiple times, as well as repeating the same action, also helps children process and comprehend their surroundings. So, by re-watching these movies, children can notice previously overlooked details, gain a deeper understanding of the story, and experience joy in revisiting their favorite scenes, while reinforcing the learning of the values and behaviors that are being communicated: “Repeated viewing leads children to retrieve, rehearse, solidify, and expand existing scripts, resulting in cumulative long-term effects. Children who identify with media characters and who consider television a realistic reflection of the world are especially likely to incorporate and act on its messages” (D. R. Anderson et al., 2001).

The pedagogical potential of animation comes not only from its global reach, massive audiences, and repetitive watching; it also stems from the often-indelible effect moving images have on the viewer. As scholar Forest Pyle explains: “Cinema has a way of leaving the images of certain faces and bodies permanently inscribed in our memories (...). Perhaps no aspect of the cinema is more powerful—or more potentially troubling—than its capacity to confront viewers with such moving bodies and faces, larger than life, images projected in motion and in time” (Pyle, p. 227, 1993).

Moving images convey meanings that are interpreted by the audience, who often passively accept the messages being communicated. So, cinema, along with other contemporary digital media (such as social media), functions as a creator of meaning, disseminating ideals and values, while presenting examples of societal expectations for individuals. As scholar Brian Attiebery puts it:

The technology that constructs the image of Mickey Mouse also constructs larger-than-life images of masculinity and femininity which then become part of our apparatus for interpreting the world and ourselves. Our notions of who we are, whom and how we desire, how we watch others and are watched, whether we speak or remain silent: all

of this is largely determined by the gender roles we have been taught to inhabit, and one of the primary teachers is the cinema (p. 148, 1995).

The idea that animation, especially that which is geared towards children (as is the case for most contemporary mainstream animated feature films), provides a possible framework for interpreting what surrounds us, thus influencing our perception of the world, is common among scholars researching visual culture.

In Henry A. Giroux's critical book on Disney studies, *The Mouse that Roared* (2001), the scholar and culture critic explains at length the effects that Disney animation has on the larger culture. He states that Disney has successfully merged the concepts of entertainment and education, with its "lively and enjoyable" productions, which had reached new levels of influence in the 90's: "Given the corporate reach, cultural influence, and political power that Disney exercises over multiple levels of children's culture, Disney's animated films should be neither ignored nor censored by those who dismiss the conservative ideologies they produce and circulate" (p. 107). He compares the Disney Company to a "teaching machine whose power and influence can, in part, be measured by the number of people who come in contact with its goods, messages, values, and ideas" (p. 19), reinforcing the idea that the wide reach and popularity of certain media can exert massive influence on the cultural life of people who encounter it. As a father of three young boys, at the time of publishing his research, Giroux reflects on the authority of Disney's animated movies:

However, within a very short period, it became clear to me that these films do more than entertain. Needless to say, animated films operate on many registers, but one of the most persuasive is the role they play as the new "teaching machines." I soon found that for my children, and I suspect for many others, these films possess at least as much cultural authority and legitimacy for teaching roles, values, and ideals as more traditional sites of learning, such as the public schools, religious institutions, and the family. Disney films combine enchantment and innocence in narrating stories that help children understand who they are, what societies are about, and what it means to construct a world of play and fantasy in an adult environment. The authority of such films,

in part, stems from their unique form of representation and their ever-growing presence. But such authority is also produced and secured within a media apparatus equipped with dazzling technology, sound effects, and imagery packaged as entertainment, spin-off commercial products, and "huggable" stories" (p. 84).

The "cultural authority" of animated movies and other types of media is corroborated by a review of recent findings, which recognized that regular television viewing has been repeatedly linked to stronger adherence to stereotypical gender beliefs (Ward & Grower, 2020). The researchers also concluded that:

Concerning the nature of these effects, analyses indicate significant connections between young people's screen media use and their general gender role attitudes; their beliefs about the importance of appearance for girls and women; their stereotyping of toys, activities, and occupations; and their support for traditional sexual roles. (Ward & Grower, 2020).

The power of influence that the media presents is undeniable, and the consequences can indeed be dire. There is consensus in that "it is part of animation corporations' responsibility to acknowledge the powerful socializing and educational effect they have on children" (Giroux, 2001).

Animated films, made with younger audiences in mind, may also offer an older audience (adults) a lens through which to explore societal structures and cultural practices, while simultaneously guiding children in developing self-awareness and understanding their role within society (Hinkins, 2007). The implicit and explicit ideologies present in these films are likely to shape the beliefs and assumptions of both adult and child audiences, reinforcing idealized goals and expectations. These movies also serve as a generational bridge, allowing for the transfer of knowledge between two generations – the one creating the content and the one consuming it. Creators of animated content for children play a crucial role in shaping educational narratives, thereby fostering a shared understanding of social expectations across generations. However, there is a risk that these creators, whether consciously or unconsciously, may

perpetuate stereotypes that contribute to the development and reinforcement of biases among their audience, who are increasingly engaged with these animated worlds.

Popular animated feature films are produced within a capitalist industry driven by the goal of continually increasing profits from animated content. Consequently, the pedagogical potential of animation is not realized in an ethically neutral environment but is shaped by marketing schemes designed to maximize financial gains. Scholars have expressed concern over the commodification of childhood (Daalmans & Kessel, 2014; Giroux, 2001), a process in which children are enveloped in a self-perpetuating advertising cycle. This cycle involves commercial products (such as toys, everyday objects, and food), animated content (including films, television series, and streaming media), and real-life experiences (such as amusement parks and live shows), all promoting and reinforcing one another. As a result, children (and adults) are immersed in a commercialized fictional universe where they are cast primarily as consumers.

A clear example of this phenomenon is the Disney Princess line, developed by the Walt Disney Company and introduced in 2000 by Andy Mooney, then president of Disney Consumer Products. The Princess line offers “an immersive commercial transmedia experience for children” (Daalmans & Kessel, 2014), encompassing a wide range of products including food, clothing, toys, books, movies, games, and countless other merchandise items. These products keep children continuously engaged with the characters and story world, permeating nearly every aspect of their daily lives and creating a lasting impact. When looking at Disney princesses body sizes and its influences on young children’s body esteem and gendered play, research has shown that girls whose favorite princess had an average body size (not too thin) were more likely to engage in play typically associated with boys (masculine-type play), which suggests that these princesses may influence girls to explore a broader range of activities (J. Shawcroft et al., 2023). The study suggests that Disney princesses with more average body sizes might have a positive impact on children’s body image and encourage them to participate in a wider range of activities, compared to those who favor thinner princesses.

This seemingly inescapable experience undoubtedly shapes the viewer’s perspective on the world and their own identity. In her thesis, journalist and lecturer Lesley Anne Shore

discusses the influence of animated media on young audiences' sense of self, warning that these films can contribute to identity formation shaped more by consumerist ideals than by authentic self-expression:

All too often, today's child gazes in the mirror and sees an image of self that is filtered through powerful media screens. Instead of shaping the originality of their own imagination, the child is lured by a sea of consumerism: from toys to cyber games and networks, as well as television and film. Instead of seeing a world of limitless possibilities in the shaping of self, the child focuses on confusing role models in the overt sexualization of dolls and hyper-masculinized superheroes. This commercialism turns the young psyche into a commodity vehicle driven by limiting stereotypes that ensure profit and undermine individuality (2013, p. 3).

Growing awareness of the potentially damaging effects of fixed binary gender conceptualizations and other harmful representations has pushed researchers to better understand the forces influencing the development of gender identity and gender-coded behavior in children, including the impact of animated audiovisual content aimed at young audiences. This concern led researchers to analyze the content of animated movies, their production processes, and the creators behind them, to investigate and understand the messaging conveyed in these films.

1.2.3. The Representation of Women and Female Characters in Animation

Studies conducted in the late 20th century revealed significant gender inequalities and stereotyping in animated television media targeting children. These studies concluded that male characters appeared more frequently and exhibited greater aggressiveness and proactiveness, while female characters were less common and were portrayed as more deferent and respectful (Hess & Grant, 1983; Levinson, 1975; Mayes & Valentine, 1979; Sternglanz & Serbin, 1974; Streicher, 1974). An extensive report, by researchers Teresa Thompson and Eugenia Zerbinos (1995), analyzed gender roles portrayals in animated cartoons in the 1990's, to show how they had evolved since the 1970s. The study

revealed there were significantly more male than female characters. This continues to be the norm, as male characters continue to outnumber female characters in animated television shows (Götz et al., 2008; Leaper et al., 2002), despite some progress towards gender parity in more recent years (Meyer & Conroy, 2022). A meta-review concerning media's contributions to the development of gender stereotypes in children and adolescents concluded that "there continues to be an underrepresentation of women and a misrepresentation of femininity and masculinity in mainstream media, although some positive changes are noted" (Ward & Grower, 2020).

Gender discrepancy is also present in animated feature films. A previous study conducted by the author (Sá & Tavares, 2017b), analyzed 214 popular animated feature films, released between 1992 and 2016, and confirmed that, out of 271 protagonists, 217 were male (80%) and 54 were female (20%). In 2019, an extensive report about the role of women in the animation industry, carried out by USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative and Women in Animation (WIA), established that "neither film nor TV is anywhere close to parity" (Smith et al., 2019). The researchers examined the gender of the leads and co leads of the 120 top animated films of 2007-2018, as well as the credited cast across the first episode of the 100 top animated TV shows of 2018. This confirmed, once again, the staggering underrepresentation of female characters: only 17% of the top animated features had a female lead/co lead, and only 39% of the credited cast in the TV shows were women. A more recent study, that analyzed 323 characters from 61 Disney animated movies, released between 1937 to 2019, showed a significant discrepancy between the number of male (60%) and female (40%) characters (J. E. Shawcroft et al., 2022).

Female characters not only appear less frequently but also have fewer lines of dialogue and less screen time than their male counterparts. Thompson and Zerbinos (1995) found that male characters spoke twice as much as female characters in cartoons, a pattern not limited to TV shows. A study analyzing approximately 2,000 films revealed that female characters speak significantly less than male characters—a trend observed in both animated and live-action cinema (H. Anderson & Daniels, 2016). In response to acknowledging such disparities within Pixar Animation Studios, Jessica Heidt, a Department Manager, began investigating gender imbalances by counting lines of

dialogue between male and female characters (Milsom, 2020). Her findings led to the creation of a software tool to help production teams achieve more equitable dialogue distribution, addressing what was once a persistent challenge.

Thompson and Zerbinos also found that characters reflect traits that are typically associated with each gender's social expectations (1995): male characters tended to be more independent, assertive, athletic, technical, and responsible; while the female characters were more emotional, warm, romantic, affectionate, sensitive, frail, mature, and domestic. Male characters were more likely to have some sort of recognizable job, while female characters were less likely to work and more likely to be cast in the role of caregiver; furthermore, male characters were never shown as caregivers, and this is not at all consistent with real-world data of the time. At the turn of the century, gender representation in animated cartoons remained biased, reflecting the stereotypes and social expectations of contemporary culture. In the decades that followed, and continuing to the present day, researchers have found that while gender, racial, and cultural stereotypes persist in animated productions—both in television series and feature films—there have been signs of improvement.

A large-scale quantitative analysis of children's TV worldwide examined the representation of main characters across 24 countries. Researchers found a significant under-representation and stereotyping of female characters, with male characters outnumbering females by more than two to one. The study also highlighted the lack of ethnic diversity, with 72% of characters being Caucasian, and noted the absence of overweight girls or elderly women. The analysis calls for children's TV to address these imbalances by reconsidering the use of stereotypes and promoting more diverse and accurate representations (Götz et al., 2008). Another study looking at television programming for children, found that children tend to prefer shows that present more gender-neutral content (Aubrey & Harrison, 2004). However, while children may prefer shows with gender-neutral messages, traditional gender roles are still prevalent within those programs. For instance, even in gender-neutral contexts, male characters were more likely to exhibit stereotypical behaviors associated with masculinity, such as taking charge and showing ingenuity. This suggests that while children may gravitate towards gender-neutral programming, the underlying traditional gender stereotypes still

play a role in shaping their perceptions and interactions with characters. Although stereotypical and racially biased portrayals of females and racial minority groups remain, we have seen improvement over the years. For example, more recent animated series, such as *Doc McStuffins* (2012-2022) and *Dora the Explorer* (2000-2019) have made progress in representing minority female characters, challenging traditional stereotypes (Keys, 2016).

The worrying (under)representation of both women and minorities in Disney films has been a subject of extensive debate among scholars, who have examined the studio's long history of filmmaking to analyze the evolution of its stories and their underlying messages.

A qualitative analysis of 26 Disney feature films, from 1937 to 2000, revealed persistent issues with gender, race/ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation portrayals (Towbin et al., 2004). Researchers noticed a positive change over this period, even though the reinforcement of traditional gender stereotypes persisted. Men were often depicted as aggressive and heroic, while women are shown as beautiful, dependent, and domestically focused. Even when female characters displayed strength, they often ended up needing rescue from male characters. Additionally, female characters, both human and animal, frequently had exaggerated sexual features. Racial minorities were commonly portrayed negatively or as villains. Although latest films have introduced stronger female characters, they still often face a plot twist that diminishes their autonomy compared to male characters. This analysis also critiques Disney for altering stories to fit societal norms and for historical inaccuracies in their retellings.

It is important to note that The Walt Disney Company maintains a dedicated section on its website² addressing past portrayals in its films, outlining its commitment to producing diverse, inclusive, and culturally sensitive content. There, we find a statement explaining how they're reviewing their offers to either keep them available with an advisory "for negative depictions of people and cultures"³ or completely reinvent them.

² <https://storiesmatter.thewaltdisneycompany.com/>

³ "This program includes negative depictions and/or mistreatment of people or cultures. These stereotypes were wrong then and are wrong now. Rather than remove this content, we want to acknowledge its harmful impact, learn from it and spark conversation to create a more inclusive future

Three of the examples given by the company are from animated movies: the Siamese cats in *Aristocats* (1970), the crows in *Dumbo* (1941), and the Tiger Lily's family in *Peter Pan* (1953). We observed that these concerns primarily pertain to representations of racial stereotypes, while the company has been less explicit in addressing its portrayals of harmful gender stereotypes.

In 2011, a study that analyzed gender roles in nine films from the Disney Princess line, released between 1937 and 2009, focusing on the behaviors presented by prince and princess characters, found that the evolution toward more egalitarian roles is inconsistent over time and stereotypical gender portrayals persist in both older and newer films in the sample (England et al., 2011). Notably, male characters displayed more androgynous traits and less variation in gender roles compared to female characters. Another study of female protagonists in 23 Disney animated features, from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) to *Frozen* (2013), revealed that while Disney has made efforts to reduce stereotypical portrayals in main characters, these stereotypes have merely shifted to secondary characters (Daalmans & Kessel, 2014). The researchers observed that it was only in films like *Brave* (2012) and *Frozen* (2013) that Disney began to move away from gender stereotypes and create more realistic and inspiring role models for children. Regarding *Frozen* and the speech characteristics of its characters, data showed that the six characters in the sample, both female and male, used almost equal number of female speech elements in their dialogues (Azmi et al., 2016). Even though the female characters' behavior is not stereotypical, and they are more heroic, their speech is still very feminine-coded. On the other hand, the male characters, also present feminine traits in their speech, which indicates an attempt to break gender stereotyping. Masculine characters who embrace and display feminine traits have also been present in Pixar movies. A study that looked at these films, which have prominently featured masculine protagonists, in contrast to the stereotypical female leads often criticized in traditional Disney films, notices how they present a progressive model of masculinity (Gillam & Wooden, 2008). The films depict these characters' journey from displaying alpha-male traits, such as emotional distance and competitiveness, to

together. Disney is committed to creating stories with inspirational and aspirational themes that reflect the rich diversity of the human experience around the globe.”

confronting their vulnerabilities and embracing traditionally feminine qualities. This shift highlights Pixar's effort to promote a more nuanced and evolving model of masculinity.

The same study that found a significant discrepancy between the number of male (60%) and female (40%) characters, when looking at gender representation in 323 characters from 61 Disney animated films (released between 1937 and 2019), correlated that data with the gender of the people in the production teams, with the roles of producers, directors and writers (J. E. Shawcroft et al., 2022). The researchers found that female characters were consistently portrayed as more attractive than male characters, but other traits like intelligence, ability, popularity, activity level, family role, and romantic involvement did not vary significantly by gender. Interestingly, in films written by women, male characters were more frequently depicted as parents or children, whereas in films written by men, female characters were more often portrayed as antagonists. Additionally, male characters were depicted as more active in films produced by women, and female characters were more frequently shown as grandparents. The study revealed that the involvement of women in the production process has led to more nuanced and balanced depictions of both male and female characters, underscoring the importance of diverse teams within animation studios – a goal that has, so far, been challenging to achieve.

Despite the reported increase in female practitioners in the industry over the last few years, “women are still underrepresented in the workforce, in senior positions and among the ranks of directors” (Heller, 2018). A recent report on the US animation industry shows how the percentage of women across the pipeline diminishes drastically as you're going up the ranks: 18% in story departments and 16% animators, but only 7% Heads of Story and 8% Heads of Animation, culminating in a woeful 3% Directors (Smith et al., 2019). Nearly every key position in the animation production pipeline is held by men, with women filling only 2% to 21% of these roles.

These statistics highlight the persistent gender imbalance within the animation industry, emphasizing the need for continued efforts to diversify leadership and creative teams to ensure more equitable and representative storytelling.

1.2.4. Summary of the literature review

In the context of globalization, animated television series and feature films have become increasingly pervasive, reaching worldwide audiences with ease, through the advent of digital screens and the growing accessibility of streaming services, which have revolutionized how audiences consume media. This shift has accelerated viewership by allowing content to be accessed anytime and anywhere, a stark contrast to the physical and time constraints of older media formats.

The decline of movie theaters, notably accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, was accompanied by a surge in the widespread adoption of streaming services. The pandemic, combined with the growing capabilities of these platforms, prompted a shift toward a more customizable viewing experience. The current landscape, characterized by the widespread availability and repetition of animated content via streaming services, enhances the potential for animation to communicate influential ideas, particularly to younger audiences. The ease of access and the tendency for repeated viewings among young viewers underscore the significant role animation can play in shaping cultural narratives and values.

Animated feature films remain among the most financially successful and widely viewed movies each year, often surpassing live-action films in global box office revenue, as well as streaming viewership. The consistent success of animated movies highlights their enduring popularity and marketability. Thus, animated movies and television series play a significant role in shaping social expectations, behaviors, and beliefs among audiences, particularly children. Established theories in psychology and media studies, such as social learning theory and cultivation theory, suggest that media, including animated content, can profoundly influence how individuals perceive and interact with the world. Children learn social norms and behaviors through observational learning, where they imitate characters and narratives they see on screen. Repetition, a common trait among young viewers who often watch the same content multiple times, reinforces these behaviors and beliefs, further embedding the messages conveyed by the media.

Scholars have highlighted the powerful influence that companies like Disney exert on cultural norms, merging entertainment with education to propagate specific ideologies.

Animated films, especially those aimed at children, serve as tools for socialization, guiding young viewers in developing self-awareness, and understanding their societal roles. However, there is a concern that these films may also perpetuate stereotypes and reinforce biases, given their production within a capitalist framework focused on profit. The influence of these commercialized narratives on children's development, including their impact on body image and gendered play, is significant, raising concerns about the long-term effects on identity formation and societal expectations.

Therefore, it is important to understand the influence of animated media on both children and adults, as these films not only entertain but also educate and shape cultural perceptions across generations. It calls for greater scrutiny of the content and messages conveyed in animated films, given their potential to reinforce stereotypes or contribute to a more inclusive understanding of gender and identity.

As we've seen, research has consistently shown gender inequalities and stereotypes in animated media. Historically, male characters have been more prevalent and depicted as assertive and proactive, while female characters are often underrepresented and portrayed in more traditional, passive roles. This imbalance extends to the amount of screen time and dialogue, with female characters generally receiving less of both compared to their male counterparts. While there have been efforts to address these issues, such as initiatives to achieve more equitable dialogue distribution and the introduction of more progressive characters, significant gender imbalances remain. Recent studies reveal that female characters are still underrepresented and often stereotyped in both television and film, though some newer productions have made strides in improving representation.

The animation industry, including major studios like Disney, has faced criticism for reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes, despite some recent efforts to diversify and update content. The involvement of more women in key production roles has led to more nuanced portrayals, but achieving gender parity within production teams remains a challenge. Overall, while progress has been made, gender disparities in animated media continue to be a significant issue.

1.3. Significance of the study

This study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of gender representation in the animation industry, by filling in knowledge gaps in academic discourse and offering an updated perspective on current character design practices in the context of popular animated feature films. Listed below are the main contributions of this study to both the academic fields of animation studies and design research, as well as the animation industry.

1.3.1. Updated Data on Key Metrics of Representation

Firstly, the study provides updated data on key metrics related to the representation of women in the animation industry. By analyzing recent data and trends, it reveals the current state of gender portrayal in animated feature films and television series. This is crucial for identifying both progress and persistent gaps in how female characters are depicted, allowing for a more informed discussion about equality and diversity in media representation.

1.3.2. Unveiling Narrative Archetypes and Character Design

Secondly, this research delves into the previously sub explored relationship between narrative archetypes and character design. By examining how these archetypes influence the portrayal of womanhood and girlhood, the study offers a novel analytical framework for understanding character representation. This approach not only enriches the academic discourse on media studies and gender but also provides practical insights for creators aiming to develop more nuanced and diverse female characters.

1.3.3. Mapping Trends and Patterns of Representation

Furthermore, the study maps out trends and patterns of representation, highlighting design practices that may contribute to biased portrayals. By exposing these practices,

the research reveals how certain design choices and narrative decisions can perpetuate false ideas about gender roles and contribute to societal biases. This critical examination is essential for fostering a more equitable media landscape and encouraging the creation of content that reflects a diverse and inclusive range of experiences.

1.3.4. Insights from Animation Industry Professionals

Lastly, the study offers a unique glimpse into the opinions and experiences of animation industry professionals. Through interviews and firsthand accounts, it captures the perspectives of those directly involved in the creation of animated content. These insights are invaluable for understanding the internal dynamics and challenges faced by the industry, as well as for identifying opportunities for improvement. By amplifying the voices of these professionals, the study bridges the gap between academic research and industry practice, fostering a collaborative approach to addressing issues of representation.

In sum, this study is relevant because it not only provides an updated and comprehensive analysis of gender representation in animation but also examines trends in character design and narrative roles. It maps out existing biases and offers practical information for industry practitioners, making it a positive contribution to both the academic research and the animation industry.

1.4. Outline of the study

Chapter I introduces the research project, laying the foundation for the entire study. This chapter presents a detailed discussion of the research problem and formulates the central research questions guiding the investigation. It includes a comprehensive literature review, which situates the study within the existing body of knowledge, and outlines the research design, detailing the methodological approach adopted. Additionally, the introduction highlights the significance of the study, emphasizing its potential contributions to the field of animation and gender representation.

Chapter II examines the current state of female representation in the animation industry, particularly within popular animated feature films. This chapter provides an updated perspective on how women are depicted in animation through a broad contextualizing study that analyzes key representation metrics. It also includes a case study focusing on one of the world's most successful animation studios, offering insights into industry practices and trends concerning female representation. These studies aim to provide a comprehensive overview of the progress and ongoing challenges in portraying women in animated films, as well as the role of women in production teams.

Chapter III delves into the visual analysis of female character design, exploring how these characters convey meanings related to narrative archetypes. The analysis seeks to identify prevalent representation trends and design patterns that communicate specific narrative roles to the audience. This chapter also investigates potential biases in the depiction of female characters in popular and contemporary animated feature films. By doing so, it offers an updated examination of how womanhood is characterized and designed within the context of animation.

Chapter IV presents an analysis of the main insights gathered from interviews with animation industry professionals. While quotes and information from these interviews are interspersed throughout the thesis, wherever relevant, this chapter consolidates the bulk of the information. It organizes the insights by topics, providing a structured and comprehensive view of the perspectives and experiences of those working within the

animation industry. This chapter enriches the research with firsthand accounts and professional observations, offering valuable context to the study's findings.

Chapter V details the various research outputs generated by this project. It explains the methods used to disseminate and communicate the findings across different contexts, reflecting on how these experiences influenced the research process. This chapter discusses the impact of presenting the research in various forums and the feedback received, highlighting the iterative nature of the research and its ongoing development through public engagement and scholarly discourse.

Chapter VI serves as the concluding chapter, summarizing the study and emphasizing its primary contributions to understanding design practices in animated feature films, particularly concerning the design and representation of female characters. It outlines the key findings and their implications for the animation industry. Additionally, this chapter addresses the limitations encountered during the research and provides suggestions for future studies, offering a roadmap for further exploration and development in this critical area of animation studies and design research.

2. THE CURRENT REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN POPULAR ANIMATED FEATURE FILMS

We started the research project by developing two studies that would allow for better understanding of the context of popular and contemporary animation at large and how women and female-coded characters are represented in this industry.

The first study is a contextualizing exercise that investigates the representation of women and female-coded characters in all twenty-first century animated feature films that could be considered popular.

This study has two main purposes: updating and consolidating existing data on the representation of women and female-coded characters in this context, while providing a panorama of the current situation that could inform the research design of this project and subsequent future investigative endeavors.

This study allowed us to reach two main conclusions. The first one is that the criteria often used to categorize a movie's success is biased and that it is difficult – one could argue, almost impossible – to find unbiased, trustworthy, and transparent data on the rating, scoring and viewership of movies. The second is that the representation of women and female-coded characters in this context is still inadequate and imbalanced: women are still grossly underrepresented in directing roles within the animation industry and female-coded characters are still less numerous in popular animated feature films as male-coded characters.

This study confirmed the relevance of this thesis' theme and objectives, as there is a clear need to continue to investigate the possible causes for and consequences of this underrepresentation.

The second study provided information regarding the representation of women and female-coded characters within a major animation studio – Pixar Animation Studios. This studio has long been considered one of the greatest producers of well-crafted animation movies with a tradition of deeply emotional storytelling. It is also known for housing the projects that led two women directors to win an Academy Award (commonly known as an Oscar): in 2012, Brenda Chapman was the first woman to win the award for Best Animated Feature, alongside Mark Andrews, for the movie *Brave*⁴; in 2018, Domee Shi was the first BIPOC woman to win the award for Best Animated Short Film, with *Bao*. Another reason for choosing this studio as a case study, was the release of its project *Turning Red*, Domee Shi's feature-film directorial debut in 2022. The movie is considered an unapologetically feminine movie, about female characters and the adolescent female experience, which we believed was relevant to our research.

We concluded that, although Pixar's troublesome history is male dominated, it is moving towards better gender parity within their production teams.

In summary, these two studies allowed for the uncovering and consolidation of data related to the representation of women and female-coded characters in the context of popular and contemporary animated feature films. Because the literature review always pointed out the lack of female representation in the industry, both on and off the screen, we believed it might be difficult to come across a reasonable number of relevant cases that would allow us to analyze female-coded character design in a sufficient number to explain trends and patterns. The listing of the movies, the systematization of the data set, and the brief analysis done for these studies, allowed us to create a data set from which relevant examples of female representation could be extracted to do the female-coded character design analysis. The findings from these studies also provided a framework to think about female representation, thus shaping the character design analysis process and the discussion of the results.

⁴ The following year, in 2013, Jennifer Lee became the only other woman director to win an Oscar for Best Animated Feature, by co-directing Walt Disney Animation Studios' project *Frozen*, with fellow director Chris Buck.

Both studies were presented in conferences, at an early stage of development, to validate the research methods and the significance of their findings and insights, through peer review and comments from conference participants. In July 2023, we presented and published the paper “*Where are the Women? An Overview of Female Representation in Popular Contemporary Animation Feature Films*”⁵ at CONFIA – International Conference on Illustration and Animation, that took place in Caldas da Rainha, Portugal. Later that year, in October, we presented and published the paper “*Domee Shi’s Turning Red as Feminist Hope for Feature Animation*”⁶ at the Third International Congress – Women Creators: Drawing + Design + Action, in Sevilla, Spain. In this chapter, we present improved and expanded versions of the publications.

⁵ https://confia.ipca.pt/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/confia_2023_proceedings.pdf

⁶ https://url-shortener.me/c/Turning_Red

2.1. Contextualizing Study: An Overview of Female Representation in Popular Contemporary Animation Feature Films

This study and its preliminary findings served to clarify the context of representation of women in the contemporary animation feature film paradigm, while demonstrating and denouncing their underrepresentation. It is relevant to establish this context before delving into the analysis and exploration of female character design and representation, for it offers an overview of industry practices. The research focuses on contemporary representations and intends to offer an updated perspective on the subject; therefore, we gathered data exclusively on movies that were released during the twenty-first century.

To find a relevant sample of movies, we used IMDb to select those that fit the following criteria:

- fully animated feature-length films that were released between January 1st 2001 and April 1st 2022; we excluded any film that had live-action footage to avoid hybrid films that could have animated characters interacting with live actors, thus going beyond the scope of this research;
- movies that had ten thousand or more votes on their IMDb page, to assure a minimum amount of viewership and popularity; an important factor since this research is focused on popular movies that may have a global impact.

We arrived at a list⁷ with 260 movies that adhered to the criteria.

⁷ The complete dataset can be found here: <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/MC2E8>

Before presenting the study, we believe it to be important to clarify some particularities of one of the filtering criteria – the IMDb votes – and the movie database itself, as well as to present a cultural framing disclaimer.

2.1.1. Cultural Framing

It is important to bear in mind that the consulted websites and databases were created in North America and the UK, by English-speaking people⁸, and are mostly used by North American, European and English-speaking users. The data is most likely culturally skewed and represents mainly European and North American interests, thus possibly ignoring the views of South American, Asian, and African movie-goers. It should also be mentioned that possibly significant markets like China impose censorship on the content of mainstream animated films that circulate within it.

The language barrier makes it hard to search for local hits in countries in Asia and Africa. Both China and India, for example, have multibillion-dollar film industries that hardly export; and while Japan is one of the most prolific and talented producers of animation, those movies are mainly produced in the Japanese language, and many don't have a worldwide theatrical release. It is difficult to assess how well some films did in terms of popularity, because some never left their home country, and didn't have worldwide releases. It is also difficult to gain access to some of these movies, since they are not easily available on any streaming services or through DVDs and Blu-rays.

For the scope of this research, we decided to focus on films that had worldwide distribution, either through theater release, streaming services or DVD/Blu-ray release.

⁸ IMDb was created by English film fan and computer programmer Col Needham, and collaborators like Dave Knight and Andy Krieg, in Cardiff, UK. Rotten Tomatoes started as a side project by Asian American college students Senh Duong, Patrick Y. Lee and Stephen Wang, in Berkeley (University of California, USA).

2.1.2. IMDb Votes

IMDb allows users to search and filter movie information by genre. By selecting the genre of *Animation*⁹, the website shows 7,909¹⁰ entries of animated movies, organized by release date. This first step of data analysis confirmed the linear growth of the animation industry during the last two decades: IMDb only has 77 film entries for the year of 2001, but, by the end of the decade, the numbers more than doubled and there were over 200 film entries for the year 2010; during the next decade these numbers more than doubled again, with more than 430 film entries for the year 2019¹¹.

Examining the full list of animated movies released after January 1st 2001 up until April 1st 2022, we then selected only the movies that had, at least, 10,000 user ratings (or user votes).

There are two distinct and important aspects regarding the IMDb votes: the first is the total number of votes and the second is the rating score. The total number of votes reflects the volume of user interaction with the rating system in each movie's page, while the rating score reflects how much the users of the platform supposedly enjoyed or appreciated the movie.

⁹ The incorrect classification of animation as a genre (present in the IMDb website, in the 1998 acclaimed book *Story*, by Robert McKee, in articles by the *LA Times* and *NY Times*, in speeches during the Academy Awards, and many other situations) has been highly criticized by people who actually work in animation, like Brad Bird (seasoned Pixar director), Mark Osborne (*Kung Fu Panda* director) and Guillermo Del Toro (*Trollhunters* creator), who passionately defend that animation is an art form and a medium, that can do any genre.

(<https://www.cartoonbrew.com/ideas-commentary/animation-is-not-a-genre-oscar-edition-109504.html>)

(<https://twitter.com/RealGDT/status/1063527483524423680?s=20>)

Because of this erroneous labeling of animation as a genre, the Animation genre filter in the IMDb website shows almost 8000 entries; while other *real* genres like Family, Adventure and Comedy have respectively 2115, 2099 and 1869 entries. Notwithstanding, this mislabeling helped to accelerate the search for the movies that fit this research's criteria.

(https://www.imdb.com/search/title/?title_type=movie&genres=animation&sort=year,desc&start=6151&explore=title_type,genres&ref_=adv_nxt)

¹⁰ Number consulted on the 11th November 2021.

¹¹ These numbers were registered on the date of consultation of the IMDb website, which was during the month of November of 2021.

The mark of 10,000 user votes serves as an indicator of the popularity and audience number of each film, allowing us to assume that at least that number of people have watched and rated the movie.¹² We must acknowledge that this data is constantly changing because people keep reviewing and rating these films¹³ – for example, as time goes on, more people will watch the movie for the first time and add their rating; also, people may rewatch and re-rate the movie. We noticed that, in only a month's period, some movies in our list gained between 1,000 and 4,000 new ratings on their IMDb page. Nevertheless, the number of ratings rarely goes down – the tendency is to go up – therefore not affecting this research's list of previously selected movies.

On each film's page, we read the available demographic data on the film's user ratings and concluded that:

- most voters are between 18 and 44 years old;
- there are significantly more votes by male users than by female users;
- male users tend to rate movies with lower scores, compared to female users.

Voters age range

The age interval of voters is in accordance with the average age interval of the majority of internet users, although there are significant interactions from older age groups – according to the International Telecommunication Union's 2021 report, “71 percent of the world's population aged 15-24 is using the internet, compared with 57 percent of all other age groups” (ITU, 2021).

¹² It is possible that people may have voted without watching the movie, but we assume that those situations represent only a small percentage of the votes.

¹³ The numbers were updated on the January 4 and March 31, 2022.

Voters gender identification

The same report confirms that there is a global gender gap in internet usage: 62 percent of men are using the internet, compared with 57 percent of women (ITU, 2021). Gender parity in internet usage¹⁴ has mostly been achieved in Europe and the Americas, as well as in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) region and the small island developing states (SIDS). Unfortunately, “the divide remains wide in the least developed countries (LDCs), where only 19 percent of women are using the Internet (12 percentage points lower than men), the landlocked developing countries (LLDCs) (27 percent of women versus 38 percent of men), Africa (24 per cent versus 35 per cent) and the Arab States (56 per cent versus 68 per cent)”.

These findings hint at why there are significantly more votes by male users than by female users in the IMDb platform. It also points to the fact that users from Europe and North and South America are more likely to be active users of this platform, and therefore, the ratings shown on the database do not accurately reflect the preferences of the rest of the world – many who may not have access to IMDb or the movies present in its database.

It is also relevant to clarify that there is a significant number of votes from users who did not disclose their sex identification. For example, the votes for *WALL·E* (2008) – the animated movie with the highest number of votes on IMDb – are classified as follows:

¹⁴ “Gender parity is deemed achieved when the gender parity score, defined as the female percentage divided by the male percentage, stands between 0.98 and 1.02” (ITU, 2021, p.3).

Rating By Demographic

	All Ages	<18	18-29	30-44	45+
All	8.4 1,074,396	8.7 779	8.5 176,867	8.5 456,602	8.2 94,658
Males	8.4 616,033	8.8 553	8.5 130,589	8.5 363,422	8.2 78,011
Females	8.5 155,774	8.3 153	8.4 41,636	8.5 87,513	8.3 14,998
Top 1000 Voters		US Users		Non-US Users	
8.2 826		8.5 152,597		8.4 433,404	

Figure 1 – Table with user ratings information on the IMDb page of the movie *WALL·E* (2008). Image retrieved from https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0910970/ratings/?ref_=tt_ov_rt, March 17, 2022.

The difference between the total number of votes (1,074,396) and the sum of the Male (616,033) and Female (155,774) votes shows that 302,589 votes were not classified. The majority of votes came from male users (57.3%), while female users make up only 14.5% of the total number of votes. Still, the unclassified votes represent a large portion of the result (28.2%) and, if disclosed by the user, could change our understanding of this criteria.

This table also shows that 433,404 users (40.3%) are from outside the United States (US), 152,597 users (14.2%) are from the US and the rest of the users (45.5%) are from undisclosed locations – meaning that the user decided not to provide that information.

Male voters give lower scores than female voters

The trend of men rating movies with lower scores, when compared to women, can also be seen in the *WALL·E* movie ratings data. However, this trend is not surprising, for it is easily recognized across the film critic industry in general (Bailey & Odes, 2018;

Zauzmer, 2018). In a 2016 article, Hickey exposed the enormous gap between female and male voters/critics online, affirming that “when you rely on the wisdom of the crowd on the internet, you risk relying on the opinion of mostly men” (2016). Hickey’s data analysis showed that “seventy percent of IMDb TV show raters are men (...) and that results in shows with predominantly female audiences are getting screwed” (2016).

A recent report on women’s representation and impact as film reviewers in the US has shown that “male reviewers outnumbered women in every type of media outlet considered” and that “men wrote the majority of reviews about films in every genre” (Lauzen, 2022). The report also concluded that, in general, women scored films with a female protagonist higher than their male counterparts – and the reverse is also true, since men rated films with male protagonists higher than the female reviewers. This shows that there is gender bias present in the rating of movies, that we need to acknowledge when using these reviews as criteria in a scientific study.

Impact of voter discrepancy in the study

Given the themes and context of this research, it is important to understand how criteria that is being used to filter the movie sample and is being shaped primarily by the male users of the database can affect the study.

To better understand the scope of the gender differences between the user ratings, we gathered and analyzed the voter data from a sample of 70 movies from our list. We analyzed the discrepancy between the number of female and male voters, as well as the difference in scores given by female and male voters.

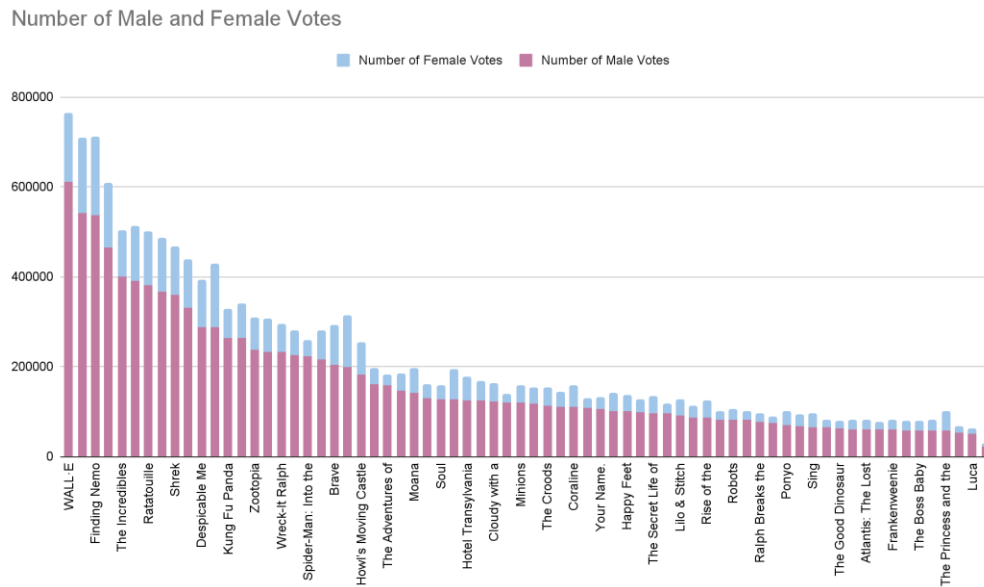


Figure 2 – Graphic showing the discrepancy between the number of male and female votes on each of the 70 films' IMDb page. The data presented here was collected on the 25th of March 2022 and the numbers are very likely to have changed slightly since then.

Figure 2 shows that votes from women comprise, on average, only 24% of the total of votes. The movies with less female votes are *Beowulf* and *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*, with only 13% of votes by women, followed by *The Adventures of Tintin* (14%), *Kubo and the Two Strings* (18%) and *Sausage Party* (18%). The movies with more female votes are *The Princess and the Frog*, with a whopping 42%, followed by *Tangled* (36%), *Corpse Bride* (35%) and *Frozen* (33%). The movies *Rise of the Guardians*, *Sing*, *Coraline* and *Brave* all have 31% of female votes.

This means that, by relying on the number of IMDb voters as a selection criterion for the research sample, we are relying on movies that were mainly selected and upvoted by male voters. The number of votes reflects the support of male viewers and not necessarily that of female viewers. It seems that women are not as involved or active in the rating of movies on the IMDb website, and therefore, their opinions are not as strongly represented on this platform.

We used the same 70 movie sample to investigate the trend of men giving lower ratings than women.

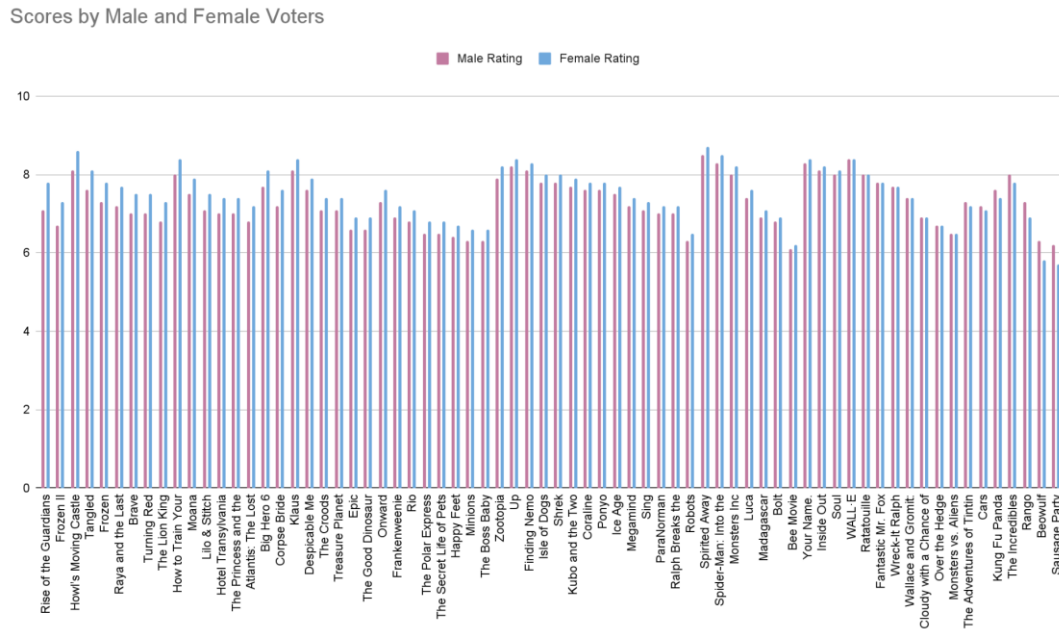


Figure 3 – Graphic showing the tendency of male voters giving lower scores than female voters on the IMDb platform. The data presented here was collected on the 25th of March 2022 and the numbers are very likely to have changed slightly since then.

By analyzing Figure 3, we concluded that:

- the sample is made up of movies with relatively high scores; the male voters scores average 7.3, while the female voters scores average 7.5 (0.2 average difference);
- female voters gave higher scores than male voters to 55 movies (78.6% of the sample);
- male voters gave higher scores than female voters to 7 movies (10%);
- the scores were the same in 8 movies (11.4%).

The movies with higher scores from male voters than from female voters are *Beowulf* (-0.5 difference), *Sausage Party* (-0.5), *Rango* (-0.4), *The Incredibles* (-0.2), *Kung Fu Panda* (-0.2), *Cars* (-0.1) and *The Adventures of Tintin* (-0.1). Arguably, these are movies with male-driven narratives that may appeal more to male members of the audience. The movies with the highest difference in scores, in which female voters rated higher than male voters, are *Rise of the Guardians* (0.7), *Frozen II* (0.6), *Brave* (0.5), *Frozen* (0.5), *Howl's Moving Castle* (0.5).

As of now, it is no longer possible to obtain detailed information about the voters on the movies' IMDb pages, and this data was collected before the IMDb change of policy of voter information disclosure.

In conclusion, despite the gender disparity represented in the IMDb votes, this is still a significant criterion to appraise a movie's success according to a worldwide audience. The sheer number of interactions some movie pages receive alludes to those movies' popularity among moviegoers and reinforces their role as a worldwide popular phenomenon.

2.1.3. Data Analysis

After listing the 260 animated movies that fit the criteria explained in the introductory section of this chapter, we then gathered data that could help us understand the status of the representation of women in the contemporary paradigm of feature-length animation.

We decided to investigate three main data points:

- the gender of the protagonist of each movie;
- the movie's Bechdel-Wallace test result;
- the directors' credits and the directors' gender identity.

Gender of Each Movie's Protagonist

We gathered data on each movie's protagonist and coded each movie using the gender binary male-female (M or F), to understand if the movie presented a male-led or a female-led narrative. There were instances where the movie presented more than a single main character, and the characters were of different genders, so we used M/F to code those cases.

As was previously shown, male characters have been the majority of actors in animated content and women's stories have not been told as often, so we wanted to confirm if this practice was still ongoing.

Firstly, we believe the gender binary language diminishes the opportunity for individualized manifestations of identity, as if reproving those who do not fit into one of the two fixed categories. Nevertheless, representation in popular media content rarely happens outside of the gender binary. This means that characters, and especially main characters, will almost always be clearly presented as unequivocally either male or female. Mainstream media often survives on the premise that it can be easily understood, and its patterns recognized by a large audience. And because the gender binary has been the reference for a long time in Western pop culture, when communicating a character's identity, it is easier to resort to stereotypical traits of femininity or masculinity.

The gender binary proved to be sufficient as a metric in this study, as there was only one queer protagonist in the movies we analyzed. This exception was Hana, a transgender character from *Tokyo Godfathers* (2003), who presents as female. This movie was coded as M/F, since there are several main characters of different genders (Hana and Miyuki are female, Gin is male).

The Bechdel-Wallace Test

The joke in Alison Bechdel's¹⁵ comic strip *The Rule*, from *Dykes to Watch Out For*, where a character explains she follows a strict rule when choosing a film to watch, is a

¹⁵ Alison Bechdel is a North American cartoonist, known for the long-running comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* and her graphic memoir *Fun Home*.

harsh criticism of the alarming gender disparity that dominates the film industry. The guidelines presented in the comic strip are now known as the Bechdel Test or the Bechdel-Wallace Test¹⁶, which is mainly used to expose the lack of female representation in popular movies. To pass the test, a movie must fulfill three criteria: “(1) it has to have at least two named women in it, (2) who talk to each other, (3) about something besides a man”¹⁷. It should not be interpreted as a quality test, but simply as a framework to think about gender representation in movies.

To assess whether a movie passed the test, we resorted to the crowdsourced information available on The Bechdel Test database, whose veracity relies on the engagement of the community and peer revision. Whenever the movie being classified was not yet in the database, we watched the movie and then added our own review to the database, thus contributing to its growth and accuracy.

We coded each movie in our sample according to the following classification:

- *No* – means the movie does not pass the test; e.g., *Up* (2009) only has one named speaking female character (Ellie) who doesn’t talk to any other female characters;
- *Yes* – the movie passes the test, without a doubt; e.g., *Turning Red*’s (2022) story is about the relationships between teenager Meilin, her three best girlfriends and her mother Ming, who all talk to each other about many different topics;
- *Barely* – the movie only has a very brief and irrelevant exchange of words between two female characters about something other than a man; e.g., *Big Hero 6* (2014) has several named female characters, but there is only one very short dialogue exchange between them that is not about a man – in a fight scene, Go Go shouts “Get the mask!” and Honey Lemon responds “Right behind you!”;

¹⁶ Although the test was named after Bechdel, the comic book author acknowledges her friend Liz Wallace as the real creator of the concept. <https://dykestowatchoutfor.com/the-rule>

¹⁷ Definition retrieved from The Bechdel Test database: <https://bechdeltest.com/>

- *N/A* – non-applicable; e.g., *The Red Turtle* (2016) characters don't speak to each other and communicate exclusively through body language.

The use of the Bechdel Test as a selection criterion helps streamline the process of filtering the movies that are in fact relevant for this research project, which focuses on relationships between female characters and their representation: movies that pass the test have a higher chance of portraying meaningful relationships between female characters; while movies that don't pass the test are almost sure not to have any.

We'd like to acknowledge that films that don't pass the test may have female characters in important narrative roles, who are playing a crucial part in advancing the narrative, while creating deep and meaningful relationships with male characters. Albeit important for providing relevant female representation for the audience, these relationships are out of the scope of this research.

It is also important to clarify that passing the test does not make a movie feminist, or an example of good gender representation. For example, *Sausage Party* (2016), a movie whose title is a slang term that means "a group of people with no women in it" and whose main plot is a sausage wanting to have sex with a bun, passes the test and can hardly be called a feminist movie or a good example of female representation.

Moreover, it seems like the test premises constitute a very low standard for representation in films. However, according to The Bechdel Test website, only 56.7% of the 9,329 movies in their database pass the test¹⁸, and so more than 40% of the movies in the database are not up to par with this low standard of representation.

The test has limitations since it can't really be applied to certain movies. *WALL·E* tells the story of two robots whose genders are, at best, questionable (can robots even have a gender?) and they don't talk with each other through an understandable language, only through robotic sounds and body language. *The Red Turtle* (2016) tells the story of a shipwrecked man who meets a woman, with whom he has a son, without the characters

¹⁸ Data consulted on January 3, 2022: <https://bechdeltest.com/statistics/>

speaking a single word. The characters aren't named, and their communication depends solely on physical interaction and body language. A similar narrative strategy is used in *The Triplets of Belleville* (2003), whose characters also don't talk and communicate exclusively through body language and facial expressions.

Directors' Credits and their Gender Identity

The importance of understanding if women are working in leadership roles – such as producer, director, or head of department – lies on the assumption that their unique perspective and personal experience could help guide the teams to create animated content that exposes and shares the experiences of women. Hsiang Chin Moe, chair of Education at WIA, agrees that “decision-making people have, not necessarily bigger, but maybe more effective influence in terms of that on-screen representation” (H. C. Moe, personal communication, December 13, 2022).

In a previous data analysis study, researchers showed that a filmmaker's gender correlates with the Bechdel test: “When writing teams are entirely male, about 50% of films fail the Bechdel test. Add a woman to the mix and only a third of films fail. The seven films written entirely by women all pass the Bechdel test” (Friedman et al., 2017). This shows, once again, that diversity in leadership and creative positions matters. The more diverse the group of decision-makers within big studios, the more diverse and inclusive will be the narratives and representations of the movies these studios produce. If the leadership roles are all being occupied by people who are alike, then we can assume that it will be harder for them to empathize and understand different points of view that aren't similar to their own experience. Unfortunately, this is often what happens.

Brenda Chapman, the first woman to direct an animated feature film in a major animation studio¹⁹ and the first woman director to win an Academy Award for Best Animated Feature²⁰, explains that: “(...) as time went on, being the only woman in the

¹⁹ Chapman became the first woman to direct a major animation studio feature film project in 1998, by co-directing *The Prince of Egypt*, alongside Steve Hickner and Simon Wells, at DreamWorks Animation.

²⁰ Chapman won the award in 2012 for *Brave*. The movie was produced at Pixar Animation Studios, and co-directed by Mark Andrews.

room once again, it was very difficult to make them understand a woman's perspective on female characters" (qtd. in Gardam, 2015).

Tracey Miller-Zarneke, who worked at Disney and is an active member of WIA, explains that the organization has discussed the issue of people in power hiring those who are like them, even if unconsciously: "We in Women in Animation have talked about (...) the fact that 'like hires like'. And 'like' is comfortable with things that they understand, as opposed to stretching their boundaries to understand where a different perspective might have come from" (T. Miller-Zarneke, personal communication, January 23, 2023). This hiring process, which perpetuates the status quo, also results in characters and storylines not being approved if they are something that decision-makers cannot relate to.

This ties back to the fact that men have historically tanked the online ratings of female-led narratives or other shows and movies that aren't specifically targeted at them: "Shows with more than 10,000 ratings are inherently popular and yet men thought the programs in that group that skew female were below average" (Hickey, 2016).

This might be due to a lack of empathy from male viewers towards women-led narratives, since historically they have not had to watch female-heavy content; while women have learned to empathize with men's stories, since they've been in the spotlight for so long and the alternatives were scarce. This reinforces the importance of having diversity in top-leadership roles, as it has been shown to promote gender parity as well as to serve as a driving force to share women's (and minorities') perspectives through story.

2.1.4. Results

Below, we present the results from analyzing each data point previously discussed, within the context of our 260-movie sample.

Looking at the gender of the protagonists of each movie (Figure 4), we concluded that:

- 201 movies have male protagonists (77.3%);
- 54 movies have female protagonists (20.8%);

- 6 movies have more than one main character of both genders (1.9%) – these are *Lilo & Stitch* (2002), *Tokyo Godfathers* (2003), *Gnomeo and Juliet* (2011), *Ernest & Celestine* (2012), *Your Name.* (2016) and *The House* (2022).

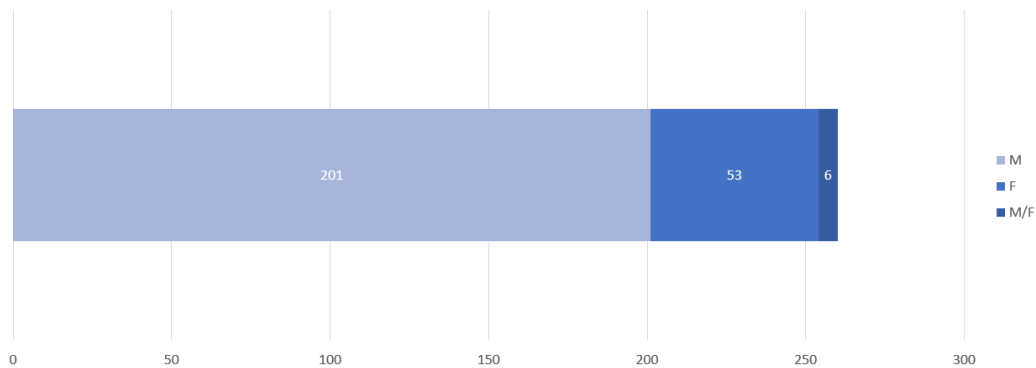


Figure 4 – The graph above shows the number of movies led by a male-presenting protagonist (201 movies), the number of movies led by a female-presenting protagonist (53 movies), and the number of movies with more than one main character, of each gender (6 movies).

The overall results of the Bechdel-Wallace test (Figure 5) show that:

- 120 movies (46.2%) don't pass the test;
- 54 movies (20.8%) barely do;
- 81 movies (31.2%) undoubtedly pass the test;
- 5 movies (1.9%) have no dialogue, and thus the test was not applicable.

Unsurprisingly, looking only at the movies with female protagonists, out of 53 movies, we found that 43 (81.1%) of them pass the test; while only 6 (11.3%) movies barely pass the test, and 3 (5.7%) movies don't. In this group, there's one movie without dialogue (1.9%). Looking at the movies with male protagonists, we found that, out of 201 movies, 116 (57.7%) don't pass the test; 47 (23.4%) barely pass the test, and only 34 (16.9%) do pass the test. In this group, there are 4 movies without dialogue (2%).

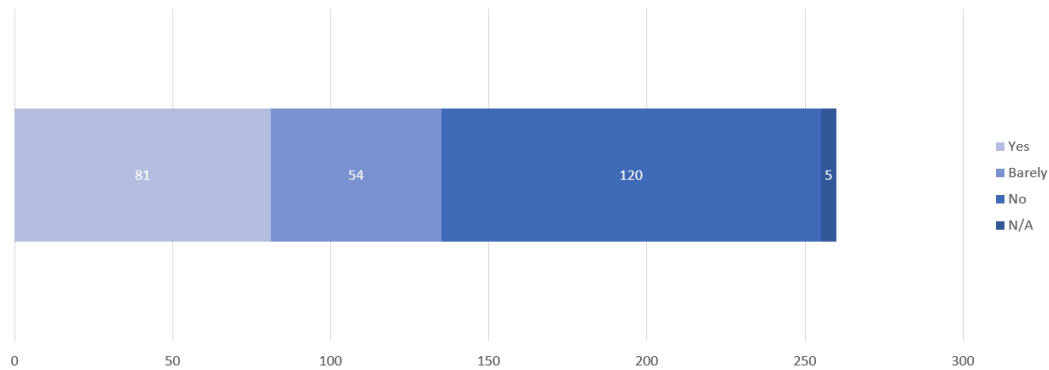


Figure 5 – The graph above shows the results of the Bechdel Test for each of the 260 movies: 120 don’t pass the test, 54 barely pass, 81 pass and the test doesn’t apply to 5 movies.

Figure 6 shows the number of movies that were directed by: a single man (“M Solo”, 136 movies), a single woman (“F Solo”, 4 movies), an all-male team of directors (“M Team”, 99 movies) and a mixed gender team of directors (“M/F Team”, 21 movies).

There was a total of 268 different names, of which 247 (92.2%) were men and only 21 (7.8%) were women. We then looked at how many times each director’s name appeared, since many people directed more than one movie. Most women directors, 15 of them (71.4%), had only one credit, meaning they directed only one movie in the timespan considered for this research. Still, 6 women (28.6%) had two credits, meaning they had directed two movies. Also, there were only 4 occurrences in which there was a woman directing a movie solo: *Kung Fu Panda 2* (2011), *A Silent Voice* (2016), *The Breadwinner* (2017) and *Turning Red* (2022). In every other occurrence, women were paired with one or more male directing partners.

The majority of men directors, 175 of them (70.9%), also had only one credit; 35 of them (14.2%) directed two movies; 22 (8.9%) directed three movies; 9 (3.6%) directed four movies; 3 (1.2%) directed five movies; 2 (0.8%) directed six movies and there was 1 (0.4%) who had directed seven movies – Carlos Saldanha directed *Ice Age* (2002), *Robots* (2005), *Ice Age: The Meltdown* (2006), *Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs* (2009), *Rio* (2011), *Rio 2* (2014) and *Ferdinand* (2017). There were 136 movies that had a single

male director; the rest of the occurrences (124) presented a team of directors, most often all-male, as there were only 21 movies that included a woman in partnership with other male directors.

So, when we take into consideration the number of repeated occurrences on the names of the directors – i.e., the number of movies each director participated in – we realize that the discrepancy of representation is even bigger: in a total of 409 director credits, only 27 (6.6%) are attributed to women.

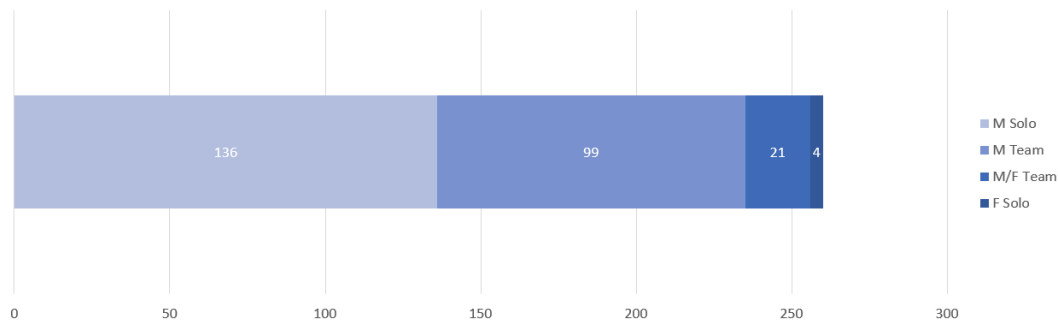


Figure 6 – The graph above shows the number of movies that were directed by: a single man (“M Solo”, 136 movies), a single woman (“F Solo”, 4 movies), an all-male team of directors (“M Team”, 99 movies) and a mixed gender team of directors (“M/F Team”, 21 movies). In these mixed teams, there was always only one woman, except for the team of directors of the anthology movie *The House* (2022), where there were three women and one man.

2.1.5. Discussion

With this contextualizing study, we have shown that women are still grossly underrepresented in the context of popular animated feature films, and we have also explained some of the difficulties around choosing criterion that are fair when conducting a study of this nature, as we noted that the movie industry and its appraisal channels are still male dominated, often offering a skewed and biased perspective.

With this study, we identified 260 movies that could arguably be considered popular, as they’ve had significant audience and interaction from media critics in their movie pages. Looking at these movies, we’ve learned that only 20.8% have a female-led

narrative, with a female-presenting protagonist. We've also found that almost half (46.2%) of the 260 movies don't pass the Bechdel-Wallace test – an admittedly low baseline for female representation in movies. Lastly, we found that there were only 21 women directors, meaning that of all the directors of the 260 movies, only 7.8% were women.

The staggering results confirm the gender imbalance in today's animation industry and show the need to continue the discussion on how to lift the barriers that women and minority groups face when joining the workforce, to be able to discuss this topic in depth and offer solutions that will mitigate the current imbalance.

2.2. Case Study: Female Representation at Pixar Animation Studios

Turning Red (2022) is the latest movie in our 260-movie sample list and it proved itself worthy of special attention because it has a set of characteristics relevant to this research project: it has a female protagonist and a mostly female cast, as well as a woman director and an almost all-female team of heads of production. It was also surprisingly made within Pixar Animation Studios, which has been known for their mostly male-driven stories and dubious reputation regarding their treatment of female and minority employees. This case study aims to expose some of the studio's shortcomings and how these were overcome, ultimately enabling the production of an (arguably) feminist film like *Turning Red* within the studio's environment.

2.2.1. Pixar Animation Studios and its gender disparity history

Pixar Animation Studios has long been recognized as a pioneering force in the world of popular feature film animation. Since its establishment in 1986, the studio has crafted memorable storytelling and animation techniques that result in films that captivate audiences worldwide. Although the studio has received high praise for its work, it has produced mostly male-led narratives, created by male-dominated teams.

During the last decade, there were many employees and collaborators who faced the hardships of feeling like a minority within the studio environment of Pixar: women like Brenda Chapman, Rashida Jones, Sharon Morril, and Cassandra Smolicic have been vocal about feeling uncomfortable, undervalued or unappreciated at Pixar.

Morrill, president of DisneyToon Studios with a stellar record, was forced out by Lasseter, citing "creative differences" (McNary & Gilstrap, 2007). Smolicic, previously a graphic designer at Pixar, wrote an open letter detailing her experience at the studio, which was filled with sexism and harassment (Smolicic, 2018). Jones and her writing

partner Will McCormack left their roles as writers for *Toy Story 4*, citing creative and philosophical disagreements with the studio's management and stating unequal treatment of minority voices, such as women and people of color, within the studio's culture (Jones and McCormack, as cited in Amidi, 2017). Jones and McCormack didn't feel like Pixar was promoting an inclusive and diverse working environment with equal opportunity for everyone:

We parted ways because of creative and, more importantly, philosophical differences. There is so much talent at Pixar, and we remain enormous fans of their films. However, it is also a culture where women and people of color do not have an equal creative voice (Amidi, 2017).

In a cover story interview with journalist Olive Wakefield, Jones explains that the situation with Pixar was complicated:

You look at Pixar's track record and it was one woman directing one film in 25 years, and she was fired. But that doesn't look different from most studios in Hollywood. All I can be is myself, and speak up and be honest when I feel things don't reflect the world as it is today. As a corporation, you will be held accountable (Jones, as cited in Wakefield, 2018).

The "one woman directing one film in 25 years" is Brenda Chapman, a pioneer in animation, as she was the first woman to direct an animated feature film in a major studio, with *The Prince of Egypt* (1998), alongside Simon Wells and Steve Hickner, and the first woman to win the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature with *Brave* (2012), together with Mark Andrews. Due to "creative differences" between Chapman and the CCO at the time, John Lasseter, she was removed from her directorial project, and substituted by Andrews, a less experienced colleague

When Pixar took me off of *Brave* — a story that came from my heart, inspired by my relationship with my daughter — it was devastating. Animation directors are not protected like live-action directors, who have the Director's Guild to go to battle for them. We are replaced on a regular basis — and that was a real issue for me. This was a story that I

created, which came from a very personal place, as a woman and a mother. To have it taken away and given to someone else, and a man at that, was truly distressing on so many levels. But in the end, my vision came through in the film. Sometimes women express an idea and are shot down, only to have a man express essentially the same idea and have it broadly embraced. Until there is a sufficient number of women executives in high places, this will continue to happen (B. Chapman, 2012).

This sentiment of not being heard and having their voices overridden by their male colleagues is shared by Jones:

There is so much behavior I tolerated for so long because I didn't know it was unacceptable. From being talked down to, to having your ideas stolen – like nobody hears your idea until the man says it – to being harassed. You just try to survive your job. You smile and you rage when you get home (Jones, as cited in Wakefield, 2018).

Chapman also explained that “being the only woman in the room once again”, when directing *Brave* at Pixar, made it very difficult to make the rest of the team understand “a woman’s perspective on female characters” (Chapman, as cited in Gardam, 2015). This was reflected in character design choices, for example, where Chapman fought to have a more realistic representation of the protagonist’s mother in *Brave*: “I wanted to give her the middle age spread and more signs of age – they vetoed that. They felt she looked too ‘haggard’ if I gave her any kind of age lines around her mouth or eyes” (Chapman, as cited in Gardam, 2015). When we interviewed Chapman, she stated she couldn’t go through with her vision for Queen Elinor:

She was a larger woman. I wasn’t going to make her obese or anything like that, but she was just going to be thicker... but no, no, no, she had to be slimmed down. So that was very frustrating for me (B. Chapman, personal communication, August 1, 2023).

She also criticized the way the studio handled the movie’s merchandising, since “in a lot of the marketing things for Merida, they cinched in her waist and made her look a

little sexier and gave her the bedroom eyes” (B. Chapman, personal communication, August 1, 2023), which goes against Chapman’s vision of the character.

Chapman traced a new path within the studio, with Merida being “the first princess that wasn’t about a love interest” and not having the “typical Disney princess look that we were sort of force fed for a lot of years” (B. Chapman, personal communication, August 1, 2023). *Brave* was groundbreaking within the studio’s context, in the sense that it pushed visual boundaries, with its character design and technological advancements, while telling a mother-daughter story, which rarely happens in feature film animation. It contributed to the shift that later happened within Pixar to be more accepting of female and minority employees’ voices, but, as we’ll see next, it still took a long time to witness real change.

Production Key Roles by Gender

Given the troubled history within Pixar’s work culture, we set out to investigate the gender distribution within production teams at Pixar. To better understand it, we visited the studio’s website²¹ and consulted the credited names in each movie’s page. The studio released 26 feature films, starting with *Toy Story* (1995) and ending with *Lightyear* (2022). In each movie’s page, the studio presents a list of the people who occupied key roles and unit heads in each movie’s production. We gathered the list of names in each page and coded them as either male (M) or female (F), based on each person’s name and information publicly available on the internet.

The results presented in the graph below (Figure 7) show the discrepancy between the number of women and the number of men credited in the movies’ pages. We can quickly see that, for all of Pixar’s history, women have occupied only a very small fraction of key roles in production teams.

²¹ <https://www.pixar.com/feature-films-launch>

The website was consulted on June 6, 2023.

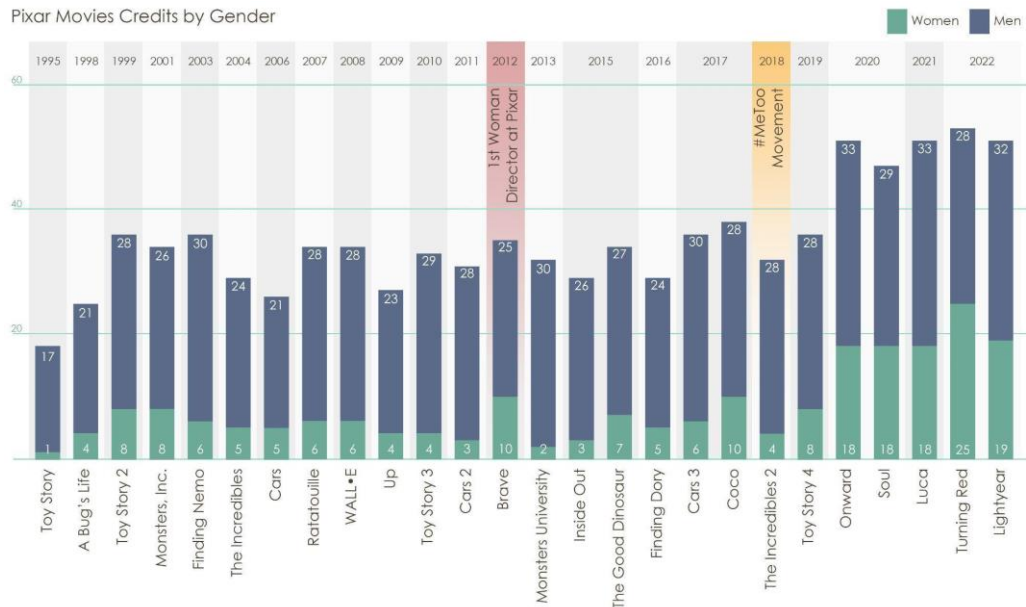


Figure 7 – Graph showing the number of men (blue bars) and women (green bars) credited in each Pixar movie’s page, on the studio’s website. In 2012, the year marked in red in the graph, Pixar released *Brave*, the studio’s first film to be directed by a woman, Brenda Chapman, and the first Pixar film with a female protagonist, Merida. In 2018, the year marked in yellow in the graph, John Lasseter was let go from his role as Chief Creative Officer at Pixar Animation Studios, because of accusations of inappropriate behavior, during the height of the #MeToo movement. Graph created by the authors of this paper.

On average, from 1995 to 2019, only 16.81% of the credits in the movies’ pages are women. This means that, up to 2020, there wasn’t any movie production that had more than 10 women in key positions. Observing the timeline, we see there’s a small increase in the number of women credited in 2012, the year *Brave* was released. This was Pixar’s first movie to be directed by a woman and to have a female protagonist. This film also has the highest percentage of women credited (28.57%) in the movies’ pages, until 2012. We can ascribe this small increase to the director being a woman and the narrative being female-led.

We only see a significant increase in women credited in the movies released in, and after, 2020. On average, between 2020 and 2022, 38.66% of the people credited were women – it more than doubled from previous years. It is also important to note that *Turning Red* is the movie with the most women credited and the one whose data is

closer to gender parity, where women comprise 47.17% of the credits for key positions in the production team.

We strongly believe these improvements are closely related to several events that occurred around 2018, during the height of the #MeToo movement (Chicago Tribune, 2021), “a global, and survivor-led, movement against sexual violence (...) dedicated to creating pathways for healing, justice, action and leadership”²².

In that same year, John Lasseter, then Chief Creative Officer at Pixar Animation Studios, was let go from his role after being accused of inappropriate behavior in the workplace (Keegan, 2021), and was succeeded by veteran animator and director Pete Docter. When Docter accepted the role of CCO, committed to being an ally to underrepresented groups within the studio, he and Pixar president Jim Morris “formalized the creative advisory teams that had been running the studio during Lasseter’s sabbatical, with a commitment to keep them 50 percent female and diversified in terms of age, race and ethnicity” (Keegan, 2021).

This structural change and the commitment from higher-ups to foster inclusiveness and equality within the studio may have propelled the evolution toward more gender-balanced teams, as we see reflected on the data presented in Figure 7.

Nonetheless, there were other initiatives taking place within the studio that were bringing awareness to the subject of fair and equal gender representation.

2.2.2. Growing Awareness and Initiatives within the Studio

While working on *Cars 3* (2017), Jessica Heidt, now Department Manager at Pixar Animation Studios, started investigating the imbalanced gender representation in the studio’s films, by counting the distribution of lines of dialogue between male and female characters, and then presenting that initially shocking data to the directors and their teams (Milsom, 2020). Later, that effort culminated in the creation of a software tool that facilitates this kind of analysis of scripts, allowing production teams to be more

²² As described in the movement’s official website: <https://metoomvmt.org/>

aware of gender representation in the films they're making. Heidt cites the #MeToo movement as a momentum creator for these types of initiatives:

It takes an average of five years to make one of our films, so we didn't always see results immediately. Two years into the process the #MeToo movement happened and that larger cultural shift added momentum and energy to the work. Suddenly women across the world were being heard in a way they hadn't been before and were ferociously fighting for change (Heidt, as cited in Points of Light, 2021).

The global cultural change pushed forward Heidt and her team's work, as it facilitated communication about the topic of fair gender representation in the context of animated feature films.

Around the same time, a new in-studio program dedicated to animated short films helped shape the emerging culture at Pixar. Soon after Lasseter's resignation, the studio announced and released three short films from the SparkShorts program, which was "designed to discover new storytellers, explore new storytelling techniques, and experiment with new production workflows" (Morris, 2019). One of the first short films to come out of the program, *Purl* (2019), directed by Kristen Lester, was made around 2016, so prior to the #MeToo and the cultural changes that followed suit. Lester, who started working at Pixar around 2012, explains that the story is personal and based on her lived experience:

Well, it's based on my experience being in animation. My first job I was, like, the only woman in the room. And so, in order to do the thing that I loved, I sort of became one of the guys. And then, I came to Pixar and I started to work on teams with women for the first time. And that actually made me realize how much of the female aspect of myself I had sort of buried and left behind (Lester in Pixar et al., 2019).

The short film deals with gender inequality and discomfort in the workplace, through the story of a pink yarn ball that must adapt to a hostile work environment at fictitious B.R.O. Capital. Gillian Libbert-Duncan, the producer of the film, felt connected to the story as she felt she had lived through the exact same thing (Pixar et al., 2019).

Turning Red's director, Domee Shi, also mentions feeling similarly, when she started working at Pixar in 2011, as an intern:

Figuring out how to be comfortable in the room and finding my voice took a while. When I first started, I was definitely more nervous. I was one of the few women in the story department. What helped a lot for me was a female story artists support group called the Story Artistas, led by Mary Coleman and Nicole Grindle (Shi in Milsom, 2022).

So, with support from other colleagues, Shi made her way through projects such as *Inside Out* (2015), *The Incredibles 2* (2018) and *Toy Story 4* (2019). In 2015, supported and mentored by Docter, she directed a Pixar Short film, Oscar-winner *Bao* (2019), making her the first woman to direct a short film in the studio (Chen, 2018) and the first woman of color to win the Academy Award for Best Animated Short Film (Grady, 2019). This achievement solidified her position at the studio, prompting her feature film debut project – *Turning Red*.

The growing awareness and consequent demand for gender justice and equality seems to have pushed the studio to restructure, adapt and work towards gender parity. These changes demonstrate the studio's shift towards a more egalitarian system that allows women creators to be heard and seen.

When asked what kind of stories Chapman would want to tell, she answered that she's "trying to create stories where women aren't saved by men or where they take on their challenges themselves and find the solution and no one comes in to save them"; she's also interested in stories of "women working together or mother/daughters or sisters", especially because "those stories don't get told much, especially in animation" (B. Chapman, personal communication, August 1, 2023). Similarly to other opinions we gathered during our interviews, Chapman believes these stories aren't common because "men are still running all the studios" and "they're telling stories that they relate to, so the women are getting sidestepped" (B. Chapman, personal communication, August 1, 2023). This aligns with Miller-Zarneke's perception that the people in charge are "comfortable with things that they understand, as opposed to stretching their boundaries to understand where a different perspective might have come from" (T.

Miller-Zarneke, personal communication, January 23, 2023), which then translates into certain narratives not being told if it's something that the studios' heads can't relate to.

However, with the structural and management changes that happened within Pixar Animation Studios from 2019 onward, it seems that since *Brave*'s production, things have improved, and more opportunities are being created to promote more diverse (and female) storytellers. While Chapman shared that she felt that her voice was not being heard and understood during *Brave*'s production, the crew from *Turning Red* had the exact opposite experience.

2.2.3. The Making of *Turning Red*

Both *Turning Red*'s coming-of-age story and the characters' designs appear to be the inevitable result of having the freedom to acknowledge and accept so many women's inputs during production.

Watching *Embrace the Panda: Making Turning Red* (Milsom, 2022), the documentary film about the making of *Turning Red*, we see that the story resonates with all key members of the production team. As Danielle Feinberg, Visual Effects Supervisor for the movie, puts it:

We've definitely got a lot of expertise on the movie about being 13-year-old girls, for sure. There is definitely a lived experience there that we get to bring to the moviemaking, maybe in a different way than I would have been able to, say on a movie like *WALL-E* (Feinberg in Milsom, 2022).

Both Domee Shi and Rona Liu (Production Designer) were born to Asian immigrant parents and felt connected to Meilin's struggles, while Lindsey Collins (Producer) identified with the mother and helped shape and deepen her character. Shi acknowledges Collins' contribution to the mother character development, since she could only draw from her own experience of being a daughter, and not a mother:

We definitely couldn't have written Ming without input from Lindsey and, like, other moms on the show. I came at it purely from the point of

view of the oppressed teenage daughter. So it was really helpful hearing that other side (Shi in Milsom, 2022).

In a studio with a history like Pixar, where women have always been a minority in production teams, the *Turning Red* crew made history by having a core team of women in key roles. Shi's statement on that accomplishment reflects her astonishment:

Overall, I'm just so proud that we were able to make such an awesome movie with a badass female-led crew, and I have to pinch myself every day because that was unusual. That was an anomaly, that our writer, producer, production designer, associate producer, and VFX supervisor were all women, and we all made this awesome movie that celebrates being a woman and being a girl (Shi as cited in Fleming, 2023).

In the documentary, both Liu and Feinberg state that this is the first time in their career where all of the key leadership on the show are women. The team shared how they felt understood and heard when they shared their struggles to balance working through a pandemic whilst being a mother, a partner and even being pregnant. Liu was pregnant during "crunch time" and she admitted it being the first time she felt comfortable asking their project manager to take a nap, who was also a woman and understood the situation.

For Shi and her team, the experience of creating the characters' looks was very different from Chapman's experience, who had to fight back the production team to have the characters look larger, with signs of aging and overall different proportions from what the norm had been until then for popular feature film animation (B. Chapman, personal communication, August 1, 2023).

Shi's team shares in the documentary that "for Mei, it was important to design her the way that we saw ourselves; her face is round, her ankles are thick" (Milsom, 2022). They also share how they took inspiration from each other's facial features, such as moles, dips and patchy eyebrows, which fostered a sense of security in the artists, who had previously been ashamed of or disliked those features, as Liu explains: "When that part of myself gets celebrated and the director's like, 'hey I like that, let's put it in our main character', you're like, hey, why did I hate that for so long?" (Liu in Milsom, 2022). This translates into characters whose design feels relatable, diverse and inclusive; unlike so

many other female characters in animation whose repetitive design dehumanizes and narrows the female experience and possibility of representation (Gardam, 2015). Hearing the testimonies from the *Turning Red* team, we get the sense that they didn't face the same obstacles as previous teams when trying to share, explain, and materialize their vision.

It is also relevant to note how this movie was made during a global pandemic that forced the production team to work from home. Collins (Producer) explains how their online meetings became a safe harbor, a distraction, and a motivational moment:

What may not be remembered years from now is that this movie was made during a global pandemic, when everyone was alone and home. As the world felt like it was falling apart around us in 2022 and 2021, seeing this crew (virtually) every day became the one thing that grounded us, and brought us joy and a sense of purpose (Collins in Shi et al., 2022, p. 159).

In summary, with Shi's guidance and leadership, the women (and men) in the production team were able to establish a safe and thriving creative environment that allowed for the completion of this movie, which will hopefully serve as an example for productions to come.

2.2.4. Discussion

By examining the evolution of Pixar Animation Studios and the contemporary landscape of animated feature films, we understand that things are moving closer to gender parity within the studio's work environment, but there's still work to be done. Even though Chapman admits that there are many more women working in animation than when she started, she still feels like "mostly the men are getting the jobs" and there still aren't enough women directors. When sharing her perspective on the current situation within the broader context of the animation industry, her remarks are not very hopeful:

I feel like it's still bumpy. And I also feel like right now, there seems to be kind of a backlash against women across the board. Especially in our country [USA], with what laws are being put in place; as far as the Roe versus Wade being taken down²³ (...). It just seems like there's this wave trying to push women back (...). So it's this tug of war. I think it's still very volatile (B. Chapman, personal communication, August 1, 2023).

Nevertheless, many creatives keep working towards a more egalitarian industry. Among them is Domee Shi, who has been described by her peers as someone who they trust and admire, with a clear vision and unique style of communication, humor and tone (Milsom, 2022). She has immense creative and artistic merit, having been recognized by prestigious institutions, such as the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. But let's not forget, Shi stood on the shoulders of giants. She benefited from the structural changes that happened at Pixar Animation Studios – and in the world – because of events such as the #MeToo movement and anti-gender discrimination initiatives that were pointed out previously. Making a movie like *Turning Red* wouldn't be possible prior to 2018, as we could see was the case with previous attempts, such as *Brave*. After the analysis of this case study, we believe that both *Brave* and *Turning Red* stand out as significant and unique additions to the legacy of women-led projects in the context of popular animated feature films.

²³ “On 24 June, 2022, America's top court overturned the 1973 Roe v Wade ruling which had guaranteed women the right to an abortion up until the point of fetal viability, which is about 24 weeks. In its Dobbs v Jackson Women's Health Organization decision, the conservative majority on the court turned over the power to regulate abortion – or ban it outright – to individual states.” From *Four ways the end of Roe v Wade has changed America*; consulted on January 22, 2024, in <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-65956103>

2.3. Current Data on Women in the Animation Industry

One of the primary goals of this research was to present updated data on some key metrics of representation related to the representation of women in the animation industry. The results of our contextualizing study, which analyzed data from 260 movies, and the case study focusing on feature films produced by Pixar Animation Studios, revealed the continued state of underrepresentation of women in the animation feature film industry.

Previous reports on the animation industry have shown the unequal distribution of roles between male and female practitioners, where despite the reported increase in female practitioners in the industry over the last few years, women are still underrepresented, especially in senior positions and among the ranks of directors.

Through our quantitative study, we could ascertain that, out of a total of 268 different names of credited directors, 247 (92.2%) were men and only 21 (7.8%) were women. When looking at how many times each director's name appeared – since many people directed more than one movie – we saw that most women directors, 15 of them (71.4%), had only one credit, meaning they directed only one movie in the timespan considered for this research. Still, 6 women (28.6%) had two credits, meaning they had directed two movies.

Also, there were only 4 occurrences in which there was a woman directing a movie solo: Jennifer Yuh Nelson in *Kung Fu Panda 2* (2011), Naoko Yamada in *A Silent Voice* (2016), Nora Twomey in *The Breadwinner* (2017) and Domee Shi in *Turning Red* (2022). In every other occurrence, women were paired with one or more male directing partners.

The majority of men directors, 175 of them (70.9%), also had only one credit; 35 of them (14.2%) directed two movies; 22 (8.9%) directed three movies; 9 (3.6%) directed

four movies; 3 (1.2%) directed five movies; 2 (0.8%) directed six movies and there was 1 (0.4%) who had directed seven movies – Carlos Saldanha directed *Ice Age* (2002), *Robots* (2005), *Ice Age: The Meltdown* (2006), *Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs* (2009), *Rio* (2011), *Rio 2* (2014) and *Ferdinand* (2017). There were 136 movies that had a single male director; the rest of the occurrences (124) presented a team of directors, most often all-male, as there were only 21 movies that included a woman in partnership with other male directors.

So, when we take into consideration the number of repeated occurrences on the names of the directors – i.e., the number of movies each director participated in – we realize that the discrepancy of representation is even bigger: in a total of 409 director credits, only 27 (6.6%) are attributed to women.

When looking at the case study on Pixar Animation Studios, we found a similar trend of underrepresentation of women in key positions within the production teams. Within the time frame of our research, the studio released 26 feature films, starting with *Toy Story* (1995) and ending with *Lightyear* (2022). On average, from 1995 to 2019, only 16.81% of the key credits in the movies' pages are women. This means that, up to 2020, there wasn't any movie production that had more than 10 women in key positions.

Observing the timeline, we see there's a small increase in the number of women credited in 2012, the year *Brave* was released. This was Pixar's first movie to be directed by a woman and to have a female protagonist. This film also has the highest percentage of women credited (28.57%) in the movies' pages, until 2012. We can ascribe this small increase to the director being a woman and the narrative being female-led. We only see a significant increase in women credited in the movies released in, and after, 2020. On average, between 2020 and 2022, 38.66% of the people credited were women – it more than doubled from previous years.

It is also important to note that *Turning Red* is the movie with the most women credited and the one whose data is closer to gender parity, where women comprise 47.17% of the credits for key positions in the production team. We strongly believe these improvements are closely related to events that occurred around 2018, during the height

of the #MeToo movement. In that same year, John Lasseter, then CCO at Pixar Animation Studios, was let go from his role after being accused of inappropriate behavior in the workplace (Keegan, 2021), and was succeeded by veteran animator and director Pete Docter. When Docter accepted the role of CCO, committed to being an ally to underrepresented groups within the studio, he and Pixar president Jim Morris “formalized the creative advisory teams that had been running the studio during Lasseter’s sabbatical, with a commitment to keep them 50 percent female and diversified in terms of age, race and ethnicity” (Keegan, 2021). This structural change and the commitment from higher-ups to foster inclusivity and equality within the studio may have propelled the evolution toward more gender-balanced teams.

Our research cemented new data that is on trend with previous studies, revealing the ongoing lack of prominent women in the feature film animation industry.

Previous research has also demonstrated that female characters remain underrepresented in animated media, particularly as protagonists in feature films. Our findings confirm that this disparity persists. Within our sample of 260 films, we found that 201 movies (77.3%) feature male protagonists, 54 movies (20.8%) feature female protagonists, and 6 movies (1.9%) have multiple protagonists of both genders.

In addition to protagonist representation, we analyzed how these films perform on the Bechdel test. We determined that 120 films (46.2%) fail the test, 54 (20.8%) barely pass, 81 (31.2%) unquestionably pass, and 5 (1.9%) contain no dialogue (rendering the test inapplicable). Among films with female protagonists, 43 out of 53 (81.1%) pass the test, while 6 (11.3%) barely pass, 3 (5.7%) fail, and 1 (1.9%) has no dialogue. In contrast, among films with male protagonists, 116 out of 201 (57.7%) fail, 47 (23.4%) barely pass, 34 (16.9%) pass, and 4 (2%) contain no dialogue.

These findings indicate not only that female protagonists are significantly outnumbered by their male counterparts but also that female characters speak less frequently and engage in fewer conversations with each other compared to male characters.

The data presented in this thesis underscores the ongoing gender imbalance within the animation industry and highlights the pressing need to diversify both leadership and other members within creative teams. Achieving more equitable and representative storytelling depends not only on recognizing these disparities but also on actively addressing them. The persistence of these issues affirms the continued relevance and urgency of discussions surrounding equality and diversity in media—especially in animation, where representation plays a formative role in shaping cultural narratives.

However, this progress is now under threat. The current political climate has led to the rollback of many diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, with corporations increasingly retreating from these commitments. This backlash represents a significant setback to the strides made over the past two decades and should be understood as a broader assault on the movement toward equality. In this context, the need to advocate for inclusive practices in animation is not just timely—it is essential.

3. EMBODYING ARCHETYPAL NARRATIVE ROLES THROUGH CHARACTER DESIGN

This chapter investigates how archetypal structures and character design contribute to the representation of female characters in mainstream animated feature films. Building on Jungian and narrative theory, the chapter begins by outlining traditional understandings of archetypes and their influence on cinematic storytelling. This theoretical foundation is then critically re-evaluated through a feminist lens, highlighting the gendered limitations of dominant narrative models and advocating for a more inclusive approach to character construction.

The methodology employed for the character design analysis is described in the next section, where we outline the criteria used to identify and examine archetypal traits in female characters across a selection of animated films. Based on John Truby's archetypal typology, adapted for the purposes of this research, the following sections are dedicated to a visual and narrative analysis of characters who embody five key archetypes: the Mentor, the Witch/Shaman, the Warrior, the Lover, and the Rebel. Each section explores how these archetypal roles are represented, subverted, or reimagined through the characters' visual design, personality traits, and narrative function.

The chapter concludes with a summary of the main insights from the visual analysis and identifies recurring patterns, contradictions, and innovations in the portrayal of female characters. We expose how the selected characters reflect or resist traditional archetypal roles and what it reveals about the evolving landscape of gender representation in animated storytelling.

3.1. Archetypes and Narrative Structure

The term archetype was famously used by C. G. Jung, Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, to refer to imagery that “makes use of motifs analogous to or even identical with those of mythology,” and whose function is similar to “instinctual patterns of behaviour” (Jung, p. 65, 1983). He claimed these patterns could be found virtually everywhere, as “they occur in the folklore of primitive races, in Greek, Egyptian, and ancient Mexican myths, as well in the dreams, visions, and delusions of modern individuals entirely ignorant of all such traditions” (Jung, p. 65, 1983). These archetypal constructions are a product of what he called the collective unconscious, which he viewed as the “ancestral heritage of possibilities of representation” (Jung, p. 67, 1983), common to all humanity. Jung understood archetypal manifestations to be “deposits of the constantly repeated experiences of humanity,” where the archetype represents “a kind of readiness to produce over and over again the same or similar mythical ideas” (Jung, p. 70, 1983).

The idea that archetypal imagery transcends cultures and time and is, in a way, ubiquitous, was reinforced by the work of Joseph Campbell, who recognized narrative patterns in myths and folk stories from around the world (Campbell, 1949). He popularized the concept of the monomyth, or “Hero’s Journey”—a basic narrative structure that relies on archetypal characters who embody a set of recognizable, repeatable traits (Campbell, 1949). This structure has had an enduring influence on screenwriting and storytelling in popular media.

In the field of screenwriting, Robert McKee argues that the “archetypal story unearths a universally human experience, then wraps itself inside a unique, culture-specific expression” (McKee, p. 4, 1998), which helps explain the global appeal of stories built on familiar archetypes. Because movies are time-bound and require clarity, archetypal characters are a helpful shorthand. Characters, McKee reminds us, are not real people but narrative constructs—“a work of art, a metaphor for human nature” (McKee, p. 375, 1998)—and their function is to quickly communicate emotional and psychological

meaning. This is particularly important in animated film, where visual design works hand-in-hand with narrative function.

Screenwriter and story consultant John Truby similarly emphasizes the importance of character in constructing narrative. He argues that a film's structure emerges from a web of relationships between characters, and that archetypes play a central role in establishing those dynamics. Truby defines archetypes as "fundamental psychological patterns within a person" (Truby, p. 67, 2007), and considers them essential for storytelling. Although a character is not a real person, it often mimics or condenses human experience. Because of this, filmmakers use archetypal imagery to help audiences interpret a character's emotional journey. Archetypes, Truby writes, "cross cultural boundaries and have universal appeal" (Truby, p. 67, 2007), making them particularly effective for global cinema.

Among the most common archetypes found in movies, Truby includes the Queen/Mother, the Mentor, the Warrior, the Shaman, the Trickster, the Artist, the Lover, and the Rebel (Truby, 2007). Each of these character types exhibits a specific set of traits—often with both positive and negative dimensions—that make them distinct and easily recognizable. Importantly, each archetype has a corresponding shadow, or what Truby describes as "the negative tendency of the archetype" (Truby, p. 67, 2007). This concept echoes Jung's idea of the shadow self, or "the negative side of the personality, the sum of all those unpleasant qualities we like to hide" (Jung, p. 87, 1983). In fiction, we often project human qualities—both desirable and undesirable—onto characters in order to explore moral questions, emotional conflicts, and psychological growth. The archetype, therefore, is not just a narrative device but a symbolic vessel through which audiences interpret and engage with human experiences.

In this research, Truby's framework was used as a starting point for identifying archetypal roles in contemporary animated feature films. Table X presents Truby's descriptions of these archetypes exactly as they appear in *The Anatomy of Story* (2007), allowing for transparency regarding the conceptual foundation of this study. While this list served as a useful guide for categorizing character types during analysis, it also revealed a significant limitation: Truby provides few female-coded examples, with the exception of the Queen/Mother. Moreover, the archetype descriptions are written

entirely in the masculine form and often assume a male protagonist. This gendered framing reflects a broader bias in narrative theory, where female characters are frequently reduced to supporting roles within male-centered journeys.

Archetype	Positive	Shadow
Wise Old Person Mentor Teacher	Passes on knowledge and wisdom so that people can live better lives and society can improve	Can force students to think a certain way or speak for the glory of himself rather than the glory of his ideas
Magician Shaman	Can make visible the deeper reality behind the senses and can balance and control the larger of hidden forces of the natural world	Can manipulate the deeper reality to enslave others and destroy the natural order
Warrior	Practical enforcer of what is right	Can live to the harsh motto of “kill or be killed”; maybe believe that whatever is weak must be destroyed and so become the enforcer of what is wrong
Lover	Provides the care, understanding, and sensuality that can make someone a complete and happy person	Can lose himself in the other or force the other to stand in his shadow

Rebel	Has the courage to stand out from the crowd and act against a system that is enslaving people	Often cannot or does not provide a better alternative, so ends up only destroying the system or the society

Figure 8 – Summary of Truby’s descriptions of selected archetypes (Truby, 2007).

To address this gap, each archetype is revisited in the following chapters, where we reinterpret and expand on Truby’s definitions through the lens of gender and cultural representation. These redefinitions aim to better reflect the complexities and nuances of female characters in animated storytelling and to interrogate how archetypal design intersects with issues of representation and identity.

These observations point to a critical shortcoming in dominant models of character and narrative: while archetypes are often treated as universal, their application is deeply gendered, reflecting and reinforcing the cultural dominance of male perspectives in storytelling.

3.2. A Feminist Perspective on Archetypal Characters

As we explored the concept of archetypes—universal patterns or motifs that recur in myths, stories, and collective imagination—, we see they had a profound influence on narrative theory and character development. Carl Jung's psychological theory of archetypes, Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), and later narrative frameworks developed by Robert McKee and John Truby, and other screenwriting specialists, have become widely adopted across cinema and screenwriting. However, these frameworks are fundamentally shaped by patriarchal assumptions and often exclude or marginalize feminine experiences, particularly in the ways they define the heroic journey and character development.

Jungian archetypes reflect binary notions of gender, with women often symbolized as anima, shadow, or mother—existing primarily in relation to the male subject. Campbell's monomyth—the “Hero's Journey”—centers a masculine-coded quest narrative of departure, conquest, and return, rarely making space for female protagonists or alternative modes of development. As feminist film theorist Teresa de Lauretis (1984) has argued, such narrative structures tend to reproduce male-centered subjectivities, positioning women as passive objects within a male hero's trajectory, rather than as active agents of their own becoming.

Maureen Murdock's *The Heroine's Journey* (1990) emerges as a corrective to Campbell's exclusion, offering a cyclical model of feminine growth that begins with the rejection of traditionally passive femininity, progresses through identification with masculine-coded mentors, and culminates in the reintegration of the feminine—an inner reconciliation that emphasizes healing, authenticity, and interconnectedness. For Murdock, the heroine's path is not about slaying the dragon or conquering the external world, but rather about reclaiming suppressed parts of herself in a society that devalues the feminine.

Similarly, Victoria Lynn Schmidt's *45 Master Characters* (2007) distinguishes between the "Masculine Journey," focused on external conquest, and the "Feminine Journey," which typically starts in disempowerment and moves toward self-worth and renewed agency. Importantly, Schmidt notes that these patterns are not rigidly tied to biological sex, but reflect culturally coded expectations around gendered behavior and values.

Other feminist scholars have further problematized the ways in which dominant narrative structures frame female characters. Laura Mulvey's seminal essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) introduced the concept of the "male gaze," describing how women in film are often reduced to passive spectacles designed for heterosexual male pleasure. Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1993) interrogates how women who deviate from passive or nurturing roles—such as witches or rebels—are frequently cast as abject or threatening, reinforcing patriarchal boundaries of acceptability. These insights are crucial when analyzing certain archetypes, such as the Witch, which is often visually marked by excess, deviance, or otherness in animation.

Feminist scholar bell hooks (1992) has also emphasized the importance of "oppositional gaze"—a way of looking that resists dominant, often patriarchal, interpretations. When women—and especially women of color—create and interpret media, they can challenge dominant archetypes and reimagine subject positions that are more inclusive, plural, and resistant to stereotypical constraints.

Considering that mainstream animated feature films exert a significant influence on shaping young audiences' beliefs, expectations, and ideals, it becomes essential to interrogate how these archetypal models function within them. Because children internalize gendered expectations in part through media exposure, animated films that rely predominantly on male-oriented archetypal structures and visual norms risk reinforcing narrow ideals of femininity—ones that equate worthiness with beauty, submission, or moral virtue.

This concern is further underscored by the persistent underrepresentation of women both on-screen and in animation production (Smith et al., 2019; Meyer & Conroy, 2022; Author, 2023). Studies have demonstrated that when women hold creative power

behind the scenes, they bring more diverse and nuanced representations to the screen. As Murdock (2013) warns, “if women see themselves through a male lens and continuously measure themselves by standards of a male-defined culture, they will find themselves deficient or lacking in the qualities that men value” (p. 13).

By adopting a feminist lens to examine archetypes, this research expands the interpretative possibilities of female characters while challenging the gendered power structures that continue to shape cinematic storytelling. Engaging with feminist theories of narrative and character, it critiques the dominance of traditional archetypal models and advocates for a reimagining of character design and storytelling—one that includes, rather than marginalizes, the feminine. In doing so, it contributes to broader calls within feminist film and media studies for more equitable and inclusive cultural narratives.

3.3. Character Design Analysis Method

Looking at the 260 movies we had previously gathered for the contextualizing study, we filtered that initial list, in order to achieve a final sample that would provide a strong base for the analysis of female character design in the context of popular and contemporary feature film animation. The movies in the final sample had to follow this filtering criteria:

- have a runtime of over 40 minutes;
- be entirely animated, with no live-action scenes;
- released between January 1st 2001 and April 1st 2022;
- have more than 30.000 IMDb votes;
- have an IMDb rating of more than or equal to 7;
- have a Rotten Tomatoes score of more than or equal to 60%, both by the critics and by the general public;
- undoubtedly passes the Bechdel-Wallace Test;
- have a female-coded protagonist.

To guarantee that the movies were popular, we filtered only the movies that had high ratings on trustworthy platforms, such as IMDb and Rotten Tomatoes. We didn't use any criteria that reflected box office earnings or viewership counts from streaming services, because this data is not readily available, in a coherent manner, for all the films present in our list. We compiled a list of 31 movies that met the filtering criteria; the full table is available in Appendix A.

The final movie sample consists of the following titles:

Spirited Away (2001)	The Tale of the Princess Kaguya (2013)
Lilo & Stitch (2002)	When Marnie Was There (2014)
The Cat Returns (2002)	Inside Out (2015)
Tokyo Godfathers (2003)	The Little Prince (2015)
Howl's Moving Castle (2004)	Your Name. (2016)
The Girl Who Leapt Through Time (2006)	Finding Dory (2016)
Persepolis (2007)	Moana (2016)
Ponyo (2008)	Zootopia (2016)
Coraline (2009)	Abominable (2019)
The Princess and the Frog (2009)	The Croods 2: A New Age (2020)
Tangled (2010)	Wolfwalkers (2020)
The Secret World of Arrietty (2010)	Encanto (2021)
From Up on Poppy Hill (2011)	Raya and the Last Dragon (2021)
Brave (2012)	The Mitchells vs The Machines (2021)
Wolf Children (2012)	Turning Red (2022)
Frozen (2013)	

Figure 9 – Final corpus of analysis, composed of 31 movies.

All movie titles are presented here in their English version, to facilitate the reading and interpreting of this document. The full table with information regarding each movie's title, year of release, IMDb votes and rating, Rotten Tomatoes scores, gender of the protagonist, and Bechdel-Wallace test result can be consulted in the Annexes section.

For each movie, the first phase of the analysis process went as follows:

- Watched the movie and confirmed it passed the Bechdel-Wallace test in a complete and unequivocal way, thus confirming the presence of established relationships between female characters;
- Wrote a short synopsis of the narrative, to give context to the analysis;
- Listed all the female-presenting characters that actively participate in the narrative, by speaking and interacting directly with the protagonist and other relevant characters;
- Gathered the names of each identified female character – some characters' names are not said explicitly during the film and had to be identified later, through information available on the internet (e.g. Chihiro's mother's name is not mentioned in *Spirited Away*, even though the director of the movie, Hayao Miyazaki, called her Yuko Ogino, in the book *The Art of Spirited Away*); when the character wasn't named but still played a significant role in the movie's narrative, we used the expressions used in the movie to address them (e.g. in *Persepolis*, both Marjane's mother and grandmother are not named, and are simply called Mother and Grandmother; in *The Little Prince*, the protagonist and her mother are called, respectively, The Little Girl and The Mother).

After finalizing the list of characters to be included in the analysis, focusing on identifying correlations between character design and archetypal narrative roles, we then looked for characters that exemplified specific archetypes, using John Truby's framework as a guide. Five archetypes were chosen—Mentor, Shaman, Warrior, Lover, and Rebel—each of which is universal, easily recognizable, and present in the films analyzed. Starting from Truby's definitions, we further explored the meanings of each

archetype within the contexts of storytelling, cinema, and, more specifically, animation. This allowed us to establish a working definition for each archetype, which we then used to classify and identify the relevant characters in our sample. The final list of characters and their identification with specific archetypes can be found in Appendix B.

Following this, we conducted an in-depth visual analysis of each character. By examining screenshots from the films, we cataloged key design elements—such as body shape, clothing, facial features, and color schemes—that conveyed the character's archetypal role and narrative function. Finally, after completing the individual analyses, we compared the designs within each archetypal group to identify visual patterns, highlighting both the similarities and differences in how these roles are embodied across the films.

We acknowledge the subjectivity of the identification of the occurrences, as it was filtered through the researcher coding the data, who interpreted the way the characters are presented in the movie and recognized certain characteristics that they believed were strongly represented in some characters.

We would also like to note that the movies that comprised our sample were produced in the USA, Japan and Europe, thus differences in culture could potentially affect the way the archetypes are interpreted and portrayed.

3.4. Mentors

“In fairy tales, this aged force is personified by an old person who is often portrayed as one-sided in some way, indicating that one’s psychic process is also developing in a onesided manner. Ideally, an old woman symbolizes dignity, mentoring, wisdom, selfknowledge, tradition-bearing, well-defined boundaries, and experience... with a good dose of crabby, long-toothed, straight-talking, flirtatious sass thrown in for good measure.”

—Estés, C. P., 1992, p. 165.

3.4.1. What defines the female Mentor archetype

Truby presents this archetype as being embodied by the character who “passes on knowledge and wisdom so that people can live better lives and society can improve” (2007, p. 68). He also explains that the shadow of this archetype “can force students to think a certain way or speak for the glory of himself rather than the glory of his ideas” (2007, p. 68). Curiously, the author provides the reader with a dozen examples, all of which are male, except for Miss Havisham from Charles Dicken’s novel *Great Expectations*. Miss Havisham, a truly dark interpretation of the Mentor archetype, shapes the young characters Pip and Estella’s lives through negative and manipulative means, projecting her bitterness onto their lives – also, she is arguably an embodiment of the shadow Queen/Mother archetype.

In general, the lack of female Mentors is notorious: from classical mythology to popular media, we are bombarded with male-coded Mentor characters, where creators “tend to stick to either the ‘wise old man’ archetype (...) or the ‘failed man who is turning his life via the success of his students’ trope” (Karandikar, 2018). Very well-known, and

male, examples are Chiron, Merlin, Yoda, Obi-Wan Kenobi, Mr. Miyagi, Dumbledore, Hannibal Lecter, and Morpheus²⁴, to name only a few. Even though there's no apparent reason for why the set of characteristics that frame the Mentor archetype could not be embodied by female-coded characters, "there seems to be a subconscious bias that does not consider women accomplished enough to be in a position of disseminating knowledge" (Karandikar, 2018).

Besides the patriarchal belief that women cannot (or should not) be as knowledgeable and accomplished as men, another argument can be made to explain the lack of female Mentors in popular stories. Lillian Doherty, author and Professor of Classics at the University of Maryland, argues that to grow up "is to free ourselves from this position of dependence on a woman (or women, in the case of multiple caregivers)" (2001, p. 52) and that this separation and emancipation from the mother figure may result in "an unconscious resentment and mistrust of women in authority" in our adulthood (2001, p. 52). Since a female character embodying the role of the Mentor can be interpreted as an authority in their field of knowledge, thus symbolizing a kind of superiority, it may be inferred that audiences would be suspicious of them or even dislike them.

Nevertheless, we argue that representing female-coded Mentor archetypal characters on screen can demonstrate to global audiences that women, like men, are equally capable of embodying the sage and guiding roles. Such portrayals can have a positive impact, by showcasing women as aspirational, wise, and trustworthy figures, fostering greater inclusivity and inspiration in mainstream media, for both the men and the women in the audience.

So, despite often being depicted as male, the Mentor archetype represents a character who, regardless of gender, guides, teaches, or supports the protagonist, by providing

²⁴ Chiron – the intelligent centaur from Greek mythology, who had several pupils such as Achilles and Jason; Merlin – the mythical magician from King Arthur's legend; Yoda and Obi-Wan Kenobi – old Jedi masters who teach and guide the protagonist in the *Star Wars* saga; Mr. Miyagi – Karate master who teaches the protagonist in the 1984 movie *The Karate Kid*; Dumbledore – white-bearded wizard who offers guidance to younger characters in the *Harry Potter* saga; Hannibal Lecter – the sophisticated psychopath who helps the protagonist of *Silence of the Lambs* solve crimes; Morpheus – the stoic figure that instructs Neo, in the *Matrix* saga.

wisdom, resources, or tools to help them overcome challenges and achieve their goals. Mentors are knowledgeable and experienced, serving as a source of inspiration and moral grounding. It is a common trope for the Mentor character to have previously faced a situation similar to the protagonist's, using their lived experience to guide. They often challenge the protagonist to grow by imparting critical lessons that prompt the protagonist to delve into a deeper understanding of themselves and their journey. While traditionally associated with nurturing and positive guidance, the archetype can be subverted or complicated by flawed or manipulative mentors.

3.4.2. The female Mentor in animation

The female Mentor is scarce in feature film animation and is often portrayed, arguably, in ways that reflect traditional gender roles. Female mentors may take on a maternal or nurturing role, thus reinforcing traditional gender roles of women as caregivers. We may also consider that their mentorship often revolves around interpersonal or emotional matters, more than the strategic or practical wisdom imparted by male mentors such as, for example, Merlin in *The Sword in the Stone* (1963), Baloo and Bagheera in *The Jungle Book* (1967), Phil in *Hercules* (1997), Master Oogway in *Kung Fu Panda* (2008), or Peter Parker in *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018).

These trends are found in characters such as fairy godmothers and grandmothers, who are responsible for guiding, protecting, and advising the young female protagonists. In both *Cinderella* (Geronimi et al, 1950) and *Sleeping Beauty* (Clark et al, 1959) the fairy godmothers provide the protagonist with magical assistance and encouragement in moments of hopelessness. The role of the grandmother as a mentoring figure to the young female protagonist can be found in examples such as: Grandma Willow in *Pocahontas* (Gabriel & Goldberg, 1995), who offers moral and emotional guidance to her granddaughter Pocahontas in her times of need; Grandmother Fa in *Mulan* (Bancroft & Cook, 1998), who offers support to Mulan, as well as caring for her safety.

Because popular feature animation is a medium that has historically killed or suppressed the mother character in its stories (Bell et al., 1995), the role and responsibility of guiding and advising the protagonist never befalls the mother (and

rarely any parent character), and is instead transferred to these grandmotherly figures, who impart wisdom, while nurturing and protecting the young protagonist.

Mentor characters are typically expected to be older than the protagonist, reflecting their accumulated knowledge and life experience. However, this presents a challenge for the representation of female mentors, as popular feature animation has provided some of the most iconic conflicts between older and younger female characters, rather than friendship or mentor-mentee dynamics.

Some of the iconic examples are: Evil Queen and Snow White (in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, 1937); Stepmother/Stepsisters and Cinderella (in *Cinderella*, 1950); the Queen of Hearts and Alice (in *Alice in Wonderland*, 1951); Maleficent and Aurora (in *Sleeping Beauty*, 1959); Medusa and Penny (in *The Rescuers*, 1977) Ursula and Ariel (in *The Little Mermaid*, 1989). And some more recent examples are: the Other Mother (the Beldam) and Coraline (in *Coraline*, 2009); Mother Gothel and Rapunzel (in *Tangled*, 2010); Dr. Zara and Yi (in *Abominable*, 2019); Chelsea Van Der Zee (Queen Nerissa) and Ruby Gillman (in *Ruby Gillman, Teenage Kraken*, 2023).

Referring to examples from mythology, folk tales and Disney movies, writer Nan Monroe explains that “women’s jealousy of each other is so baked into our folklore that we keep re-introducing it into new stories, and so we keep feeding the idea that relationships between women are innately hostile” (2018).

Even though there are good examples of female friendship, they’re certainly not the norm. So, when a movie like *Ralph Breaks the Internet* (2018) presents a friendly and caring mentor/mentee relationship between an older female character, Shanks, and a younger female character, Vanellope, people see it as a rare and refreshing take. Shanks, an “adult” character in a racing videogame, recognizes young Vanellope’s skill and potential as a racer. Their relationship is built on mutual respect, with Shanks sharing her wisdom, offering guidance, and protecting Vanellope as though she were her younger sister. In NPR’s podcast *Pop Culture Happy Hour*, one of the hosts claimed it is “the most subversive thing that this movie actually does, is it presents a relationship between two women, one of them young, one of them older, that’s supportive rather than adversarial” (Holmes et al., 2018).

3.4.3. Results from our sample

Focusing on the Mentor archetype's description previously established, we identified four characters in our sample who embodied it. We didn't find any clear example of embodiment of the shadow of the Mentor archetype, who passes on knowledge and wisdom to their mentees in a manipulative and corruptive way.

The four characters that embody the mentor archetype are Lin from *Spirited Away* (Miyazaki, 2002a), Kazuko from *The Girl Who Leapt Through Time* (Hosoda, 2006), Grandmother from *Persepolis* (Satrapi & Paronnaud, 2007), and Gramma Tala from *Moana* (Bush et al, 2016).

There are two other characters that, in some way, imparted wisdom to the protagonist and behaved, if shortly, like the Mentor archetype: Hitoha Miyamizu from *Your Name*. (Shinkai, 2016) and Nai Nai from *Abominable* (Culton & Wilderman, 2019). These two characters appear for brief moments, where they share knowledge and wisdom with their granddaughters (the movies' protagonists); however, these grandmother characters didn't seem to play a very influential role in the behavior or path chosen by their granddaughters and thus we will not dive deeply into their analysis.

Looking at the characters we identified as embodying the Mentor archetype, we noticed a stark difference in the ages of the characters: Lin and Kazuko are young adults, while Marjane's Grandmother and Gramma Tala are elders. This immediately forced us to consider two distinct groups which we will present separately.

Wise Grandmothers

In our sample, we found that these elder archetypal characters of the mentor share some design features that help convey their narrative roles. We observed that they have predominantly round shapes, which facilitates the audience's understanding of them as approachable and affable characters. This reinforces their role as someone that the protagonists can confide in, without fear of judgment or reprehension. Their silhouettes lean towards heavier and stouter than the rest of the cast, which helps communicate their age and their well-established presence in the story world, like a rock that has been

there for a long time. The two characters have wrinkles and signs of aging, which conveys a sense of maturity and experience. These design choices are based on the natural aging process that humans go through, connecting the creation of fictional characters to the real-life human experience.

Gramma Tala, seen in Figure 10, is the one who teaches Moana, her granddaughter, about their people's voyager heritage and encourages her to follow her own path. She represents the courage and fearlessness of times past, when their people would sail, discover new islands, and make new settlements. She "has a sense of the voyagers in her" and is "a bit more quirky" than the rest of the villagers, according to Bill Schwab, Art Director of Characters for the movie (Julius et al., 2016, p. 55). This is reflected not only by her actions and speech, but also through her design.

Her figure is not only composed of rounded shapes, but also makes use of square shapes, which gives her a sense of authority and stability. Her white hair, half-tied up with a colorful island flower, alongside her rugged face, loose arm skin and wooden cane, convey her old age.

The movie's director, Ron Clements, explains that: "Gramma Tala is one of the oldest people in the village. She's one of the few who is really connected to their past, who knows their history of navigation, and what they've lost" (Julius et al., 2016, p. 56). This is what makes her a traditionally positive Mentor/Teacher archetype, as she has important knowledge that will be lost if it is not taught to the heroine, and that wisdom transfer will allow for societal improvement. She also follows two more tropes common in the cinematic Mentor archetype character: she gives Moana a life-saving gift (her necklace) and dies.

After her death, she still guides Moana during her journey as a spectre (Figure 11), but later reappears in the shape of a manta ray. Her design echoes the relationship Gramma Tala had with this animal, as she flaunted a big Polynesian-style manta ray tattoo on her back, possibly making her the first animated grandmother with ink on her skin.



Figure 10 – Frames from *Moana* (2016). Gramma Tala smiles at Moana with wide eyes, expressing her eccentric personality. She inspects a wound on Moana's foot, showing care for her granddaughter.



Figure 11 – Frames from *Moana* (2016). Moana speaks to Gramma Tala on her deathbed. After her grandmother's death, Moana sets sail on her boat and is encouraged by spirit manta ray, an embodiment of Gramma Tala. Later, Moana encounters her grandmother's spirit.

In *Persepolis*, Marjane's Grandmother is a constant source of wisdom for her, both guiding her and reprimanding her when needed. As animation scholar María Lorenzo Hernández stated, Marjane's "relationship to her grandmother will be particularly essential, as she becomes Marjane's support and model to follow in moments of crisis" (2010). The film's black and white palette, as seen in Figure 12, emphasizes the Grandmother's white hair, as most other characters in the family have black hair.

This film also differs from *Moana*, as it is drawn, rather than 3D modeled; and the aging signs of the Grandmother character are represented as lines under and on the corner of her eyes, around her mouth and on her chin. She always appears very well-groomed, wearing a chunky pearl necklace and a ring.

Although varying in style, the two characters present unequivocal female signifiers, such as hair adornments, jewelry or a dress/skirt. The way these gender cues are represented are definitely not subtle. They are indeed rather unapologetic and point to a character trait that is common in the two of them: empowerment, authority and a feeling of them being masters of themselves, with a will to do as they please. These design choices convey the message of them being unafraid of the term feminine, often considered a tainted word (Murdock, 1990). In their old age, these characters know themselves and the world around them, and feel confident in presenting in their unique ways.

It could also be argued that these characters reflect the concept of femininity as performance, and establish the female body as one that needs embellishment, rather than simply existing in their natural states – unadorned, untattooed.



Figure 12 – Frames from *Persepolis* (2007). Marjane speaks with her grandmother.

There are two other grandmother characters who offer advice and reprimands to the movie's protagonists – they are Hitoha Miyamizu and Nai Nai (Figure 13 and 14). Even though their role in the movies is much smaller and less relevant than the examples that were analyzed previously, they still offer glimpses of the mentor archetype. Hitoha tells her granddaughter, Mitsuha Miyamizu, that, a long time ago, she has been in the same kind of situation as Mitsuha, where she could experience living in another person's body. A mentor who has previously been in the same position as their mentee is an archetype trope; examples of this are Haymitch Abernathy, the mentor to Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games* movies, Rocky Balboa, former World Heavyweight Champion, mentoring Adonis Johnson, the son of his late friend and former rival Apollo Creed, in *Creed* (2015) or Peter Parker, a more experienced Spider-Man than the newcomer Miles Morales, in *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-verse* (2018).



Figure 13 – Frame from *Your Name.* (2016), showing Hitoha Miyamizu carrying her grandmother.



Figure 14 – Frame from *Abominable* (2019), showing Nai Nai, the protagonist’s grandmother.

Both Hitoha and Nai Nai have a predominance of round and square shapes in their design, thus communicating safety and warmth, as well as sturdiness and resilience. They both use colorful clothing and adornments: although somewhat discreet, Hitoha has a bright green kimono and ties her hair up with a red string, just like her granddaughter Mitsuha; Nai Nai’s design is less subtle and she wears a garish tracksuit, while sporting thick rimmed glasses, a pink butterfly hair clip and chunky jade jewelry around her wrists and fingers.

These characters are also elders, and their age is communicated through the sagging skin, the indication of wrinkles around their eyes and mouth, and, in Hitoha’s case, the gray hair.

All four of these characters share design similarities: their shape language, where circles and squares prevail; the use of statement clothing and adornments; and the signs of old age. This indicates a pattern in design for the mentor archetype within our movie sample.

Savvy Young Women

The other two characters in our sample that embody the Mentor/Teacher archetype are much younger and are not grandmothers. Both Lin and Kazuko are young adults, much closer in age to the teenage protagonists of both movies. Both Lin and Kazuko's character designs bring them closer to the protagonist: they have similar color palettes and similar design language, with sharp and slender shapes that resemble those of the main characters of the movies.

Lin and Chihiro, from *Spirited Away*, shown in Figure 15, wear the same uniform, as they are both working similar jobs in the bathhouse. However, Lin is more experienced, since she has been working there longer, and is able to teach Chihiro how to do her job and survive in this new place. The closeness in age – when compared with the grandmother characters we analyzed previously – offers a sense of sisterly relationship, where the older sister (represented by Lin) imparts guidance and knowledge to the younger sister (represented by Chihiro).

Lin also has strong female signifiers that contrast with Chihiro's ingénue look: she has glossy pink lips, an indication of make-up, and very long hair, whose cut loosely resembles the common Japanese *bime* haircut, associated with ancient coming-of-age celebrations. These visual signs, combined with her confident and sensual movement and acting, depict her sexuality and agency. She appears on screen as a more mature figure than Chihiro, whose childhood innocence is represented both by her lack of knowledge and androgynous figure, not yet defined by sex. Still, Lin's design conveys the idea of a young adult, without it being overly sexualized. The movie's director, Hayao Miyazaki, is actively involved in crafting the characters looks and is known for creating young adolescent heroines, "whom he chooses not to sexualize, opting instead to explore the interiority of his characters" (Shore, 2013, p. 15); unlike many other Japanese anime creators who choose to depict female characters as overtly sexual creations.



Figure 15 – Frames from *Spirited Away* (2001). Lin, an experienced bathhouse worker, assisting Chihiro, a newcomer.

Lin's character design contrasts greatly with the "nonthreatening" and "unavailable" bodies of the grandmother characters we analyzed before. As a young adult, Lin approaches what has been described as the "time of treachery, consumption, and danger in the feminine life cycle" (Bell et al., 1995, p. 116), embodied by middle-aged villains in older popular animated feature films. These are characters whose sexual bodies are often portrayed as evil, with predatory natures. These characters' designs were often inspired by animals, as the "construction of their bodies on predatory animals heightens the dangerous consumptive powers of the femme fatale" (Bell et al., 1995, p. 117). Even though we believe Lin's character design is far removed from the classical Disney villain design, it is interesting to note that her initial design featured more exaggerated features and was indeed inspired by animals such as the weasel and the sable, who are quick and smart-looking predators with long and slender bodies (Miyazaki, 2002). Her sharp triangular facial features communicate her cunningness and astuteness; her thin elongated figure communicates her nimbleness and quick wits. The final design is subdued and more human-like, while still reflecting the animal reference.

The similarities in design between Lin and Chihiro bring them closer and convey to the audience that they are in similar situations; but the age gap, reflected in their difference in size, body maturity and manner, distinguishes Lin as a character that is a bit further down the journey and therefore has important wisdom to impart on the protagonist, thus embodying the Mentor/Teacher archetype.

What we observed in *The Girl Who Leapt Through Time* is very similar to what we just described: Kazuko and Makoto's visual resemblance, as seen in Figure 16, enhances the potential to read their relationship as that of older/younger sisters – even though Kazuko is Makoto's aunt. Kazuko was the main character in the manga series that inspired Mamoru Hosoda's movie; so, she has indeed walked the protagonist path and was once able to time leap. This known trope of the Mentor archetype, where the mentor shows signs of having once been in the role of the hero, is also shown here: Kazuko can mentor Makoto, because she has been in a similar situation and has important knowledge to share with her.

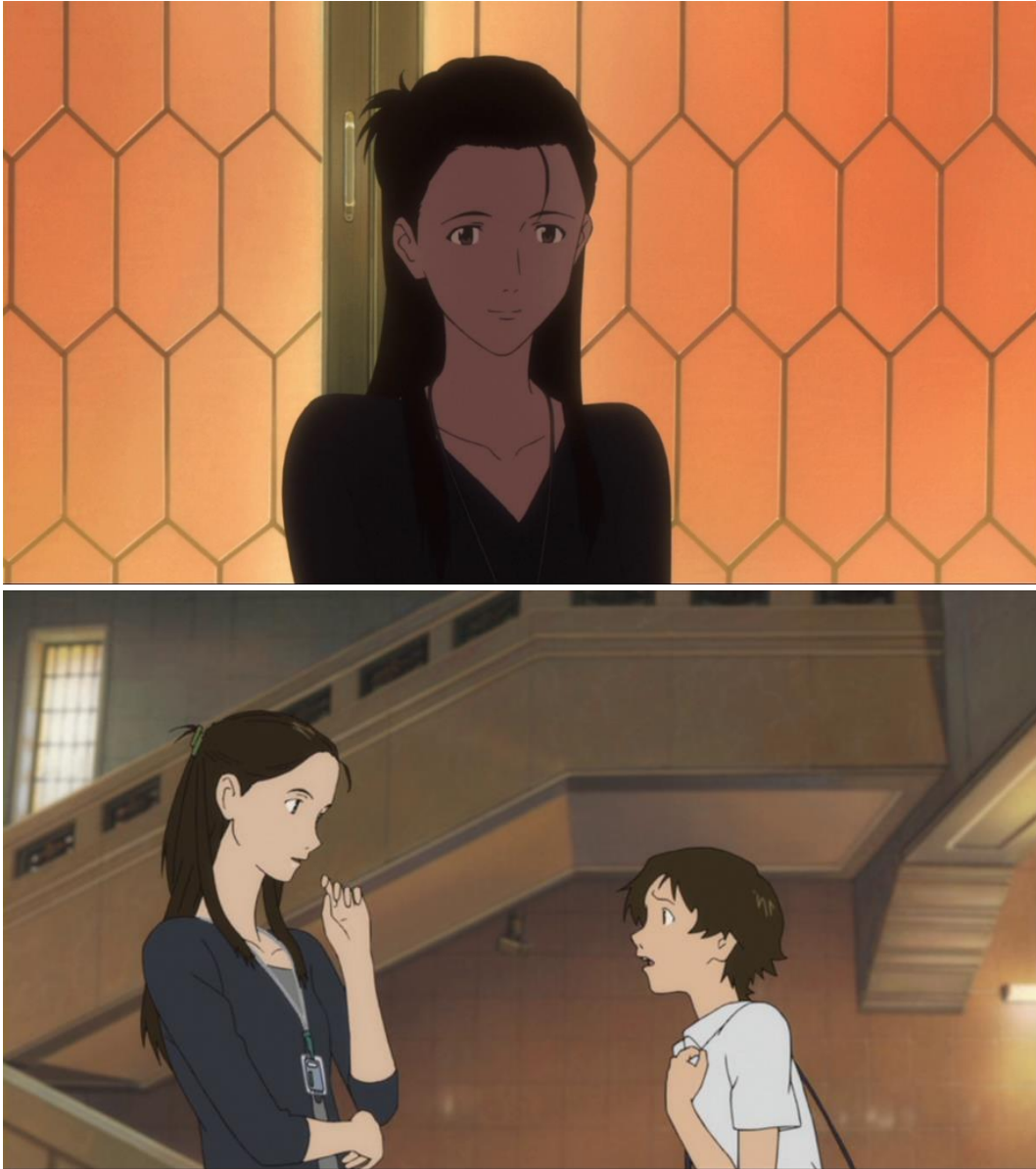


Figure 16 – Frames from *The Girl Who Leapt Through Time* (2006). Kazuko advises Makoto.

As we have seen with Lin and Chihiro, Kazuko's design – elegant slender shapes, long hair – contrasts with the androgynous look of the short-haired protagonist Makoto, who is portrayed as an athletic carefree high-schooler. Kazuko's design is also bare of any notable adornments, such as make-up or jewelry. This gives her look a more austere feeling, which greatly contrasts with the warm and inviting appearance of the adorned grandmother characters.

3.4.4. Discussion

Old age in female-coded bodies

Our observations of the first group of grandmother characters that act as Mentors stand somewhat in contrast with past trends in the design of grandmothers for popular feature animation. The grandmother characters were designed as endomorphs, as old women past menopause, “whose bodies are nonthreatening, unavailable, and harmless” (Bell et al., 1995, p. 119), without cosmetics, jewelry, or adornment, and served as a symbol of the feminine sacrifice and nurturing.

However, the grandmother characters in our sample are not embodying the Mother archetype, that cares for and protects the protagonist; they are embodying the Mentor archetype, who “passes on knowledge and wisdom so that people can live better lives and society can improve” (Truby, 2007, p. 68). These characters' value comes from their experience and wisdom, which they can impart to their mentees (in this case, the protagonists), and not from their ability to nurture. Their age is not used to represent a body free from sexuality, now dutiful in the selfless nurture of others; their age is a symbol of sageship. As feminist activist Karen de Crow puts it: “If there is anything behind a face, that face improves with age. Lines show distinction and character: they show that one has lived, that one may know something” (as cited in Wolf, 1991, p. 27).

We can say there has been a shift in perspective: although they share similarities with previous grandmother characters' designs from older movies, these designs have new and changed meanings. What used to mean nurture and comfort (meanings related to

actions and the physicality of the body), now means intellect, perceptiveness, authority, and sagacity.

White hair in female-coded bodies

A notable characteristic of these older characters is their white hair, since it is commonly understood in mainstream media as a visual sign of old age²⁵. However, this is a misconception of how the loss of color in one's hair occurs and can further perpetuate negative feelings associated with having white hair, especially as a woman. Chollet points out that “white hair is all the more powerfully associated with aging and infertility for being seen almost exclusively among older women; and yet, it's not rare for it to begin appearing in your late twenties or even earlier” (2022, p. 113). The author shares a friend's insight, revealing that the reason she disliked seeing her mother's white hair is that it prompted thoughts of her death, to which Chollet ingeniously replies: “But who thinks about death when they see Richard Gere or Harrison Ford?” (2022, p. 123). The aging female body serves as a powerful reminder that women possess an identity that exists independently of their roles for others, awakening the fear that women inspire when they exist “not only to create and nurture others but to create and nurture her Self” (Macdonald & Rich, 1983, p. 80).

During the Covid-19 related lockdown, with no place to go and hair salons closed, women everywhere stopped dyeing their hair and many felt “liberated”, “emancipated”, and “no longer a slave to that horrible white stripe that appears every three weeks” (Judkis, 2021; Obordo & Guardian readers, 2021; Susman, 2022), even though some

²⁵ Even though it is common to spot younger characters in animated television series, both from North American and Japanese productions, who are designed with white hair, it is rare to see it in feature films. Rare examples of this are Princess Kida, from Disney's *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* (2001), or Jack Frost, from DreamWorks' *Rise of the Guardians* (2012). Another notable example is *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004), where the initially brown-haired Sophie becomes old and gray. In the end of the movie, Sophie's youth returns but her hair remains silver, which Howl says looks like “starlight” and refers to it as being beautiful – a positive reinforcement towards how the audience may perceive having white hair at a young age. Usually, white hair is used in designs of older characters, both male and female, such as Ursula (*The Little Mermaid*, 1989), Cruella de Vil (*101 Dalmatians*, 1961), Carl (*Up*, 2009), Coco (*Coco*, 2017), Alma (*Encanto*, 2021) just to name a few.

had been dyeing their grey since their teenage years. During lockdown, people were outside of public view, and thus felt liberated to experiment, without other's judgement immediately falling on them. Women said they felt they were setting an example for their daughters, while saving time and money – a luxury that is often denied to women, who are constantly bombarded with advertising telling them that beauty requires exactly that, time and money, plus often effort and pain. Women going grey are defying a system that values youthful beauty and that pushes us to proudly distance ourselves from *old women*. It poses the very important question: “What kind of power might there be in looking older?” (Gardner, as cited in Judkis, 2021).

Featuring older female characters with white or grey hair as wise mentors in animated feature films may help destigmatize going grey by associating this natural (and what should be a morally neutral) physical attribute with positive and inspiring moral qualities.

Self-expression and age in female-coded bodies

We found it interesting that the younger mentor characters lacked gaudy feminine accessories, displaying instead more natural gender cues. This means their gender was conveyed not through pronounced adornments but through elements like long hair, silhouette, and overall design. They exhibit visual traits conventionally deemed feminine and typically considered attractive in our society, such as thinness, elegance, and delicate facial features. We believe this somewhat reflects contemporary gender expectations regarding one's age and gender. These characters are still of marriageable age, expected to comply with certain social values of femininity, including those of modesty and attractiveness, which may hinder their opportunity to express themselves freely and unapologetically, as their older counterparts do:

With time, a woman's individuality will have come to the fore. She will have gained experience, if not confidence. Now, the tolerance threshold is low: a woman who is self-assured, who asserts her opinions, her desires and dislikes, is very swiftly written off as a harpy, a virago, by both her partner and her peers (Chollet, 2022, p. 116).

At the risk of being rejected by society (and by men), the young woman shouldn't be extravagant or stand out; they should instead look discreet, while still being attractive. On the other hand, the older female is free of those expectations and can present in a "quirky" way.

It also may be interesting to note that the two younger mentor characters are from Japanese movies, while the grandmother characters that embody the same mentor archetype are from North American and European productions. Although the sample is too small to draw any definitive conclusions, there may be a difference in the understanding of the female-coded mentor figure between Western and Eastern cultures.

Nevertheless, as mentioned in the introduction of this section, Shanks mentoring Vanellope in *Ralph Breaks the Internet* (2018) – a North American production not included in our sample – demonstrates how the mentor-mentee relationship can be represented as an 'older sister/younger sister' dynamic in animated feature films produced outside of Japan.

3.5. *Witches and Shamans*

“The Witch is arguably the only female archetype that has power on its own terms. (...) Wife, sister, mother, virgin, whore – these archetypes draw meaning based on relationships with others. The Witch, however, is a woman who stands entirely on her own.”

—Grossman, P., 2017. Foreword. In T. Kitaiskaia, *Literary Witches: A Celebration of Magical Women Writers* (p. 5). Seal Press.

3.5.1. What defines the Witch or female Shaman archetype

In *The Anatomy of Story*, Truby doesn't mention the word Witch, choosing instead to describe the Magician/Shaman archetype – which arguably shares many similarities with the Witch, but is not immediately associated with a female character. Both the Witch and the Magician/Shaman are entities who have supernatural abilities, often capable of controlling the unpredictable forces of nature. Truby interprets the Magician/Shaman archetype as being embodied by a character who “can make visible the deeper reality behind the senses and can balance and control the larger hidden forces of the natural world”, as well as the character who “can manipulate the deeper reality to enslave others and destroy the natural order” (Truby, 2007, p. 69). The author does not include any female characters in the list of more than a dozen examples used to illustrate this archetype, merely referencing the *Harry Potter* saga (which features both witches and wizards) without specifying any characters.

In her poignant book, *In Defense of Witches: The Legacy of the Witch Hunts and Why Women are Still on Trial*, Mona Chollet traces the horrors of the witch hunts of centuries past to the continuing persecution of women today. Witches have long been

associated with female power, independence, and knowledge, often framed as a threat by patriarchal societies. This archetype embodies women's potential for autonomy and influence, as well as societal anxieties about these qualities: "The witch embodies woman free of all domination, all limitation" (Chollet, 2022, p. 10). Historically, accusations of witchcraft were a tool for suppressing, controlling, and even killing women who defied societal norms or wielded power outside traditional structures. One significant catalyst for the "witch" (aka women) hunting and burnings that swept Europe from the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries was women's medical knowledge and effectiveness as healers. This persecution coincided with the rise of science and the professionalization of medicine, which deliberately excluded women from their traditional roles as healers, as men sought to dominate the medical field (Wolf, 1991, p. 221). The witch became associated with "the violence of nature, raised storms, caused illness, destroyed crops, obstructed generation and killed infants", thus associating the "disorderly women" with "chaotic nature" and men's need to control both (Merchant, 1980, p. 127).

The persecution of women – particularly those associated with knowledge, power, and old age – has been perpetuated for centuries through the enduring image of the witch in our culture. This figure, often depicted as a haggard, bitter, ill-intentioned, and fearsome old woman, has frequently been used in tales to embody villainy and impart moral lessons to impressionable audiences. Examples abound across myths (e.g., Circe, Hecate, Morgan le Fay), folklore (e.g., *Hansel and Gretel*, *East of the Sun and West of the Moon*, *Prince Lindworm*, *Snow White*, *Jorinde and Joringel*, Baba Yaga), and literature (e.g., William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve's *Beauty and the Beast* L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, C. S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Tomie dePaola's *Strega Nona*, Roald Dahl's *The Witches*). These works illustrate the persistence of this portrayal, weaving the image of the witch into the cultural fabric as a symbol of fear, transgression, and often, punishment.

However, the Witch archetype is characterized by a striking dichotomy: "Historical representations of the witch have flitted between the ugly hag and the brazen sorceress,

at times depicting her as a bestial old woman with drooping breasts, and at others as a saucy temptress who brews love potions to bewitch men” (I. Scott, 2016). The Witch thus represents the two sides of what society most fears about women: sexual emancipation (the temptress witch) and aging (the hag witch).

The archetype of the Witch as temptress – a sexually empowered, man-seducing, and occasionally man-killing woman – has experienced a resurgence in contemporary culture. This figure appears in both independent cinema, such as Anna Biller’s *The Love Witch* (2016), and major hit television and streaming productions like *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) and *The Witcher* (2019-). Characters like Melisandre and Yennefer exemplify this trope, wielding power over men through a combination of magical abilities and sensual allure.

Nevertheless, the witch has become more than a historical symbol of societal fear towards powerful women. In her book, Chollet also highlights the evolution of the Witch archetype into a modern, commercialized figure that aligns with contemporary neoliberal values:

You’d be hard-pressed to find a more enduring and potent archetype than the witch; she has served as a shorthand for women’s power and potential – and, for some, the threat of those things – for much of human history. And yet, nowadays, witches have become a neo-liberal girlboss-style icon. That is to say, capitalism has gotten ahold of her; and, like so many things capitalism touches, she is in danger of dissociating from her radical roots (2022, p. 6).

The early signs of the Witch’s transformation into a commercialized, girl-power symbol emerged alongside the rise of second-wave feminism, the growing popularity of Wicca, and cultural productions such as *Bewitched* (1964–1972), where the nose-twitching witch Samantha grapples with the expectations of being the perfect housewife. Subsequent decades saw the advent of new waves of feminism, coupled with critiques of the historically misogynistic portrayals of witches. This cultural shift, along with the sheer proliferation of witch-themed shows and characters, contributed to reshaping the witch’s image in popular culture – from a feared crone or dangerous

temptress to a more relatable, determined, palatable, and morally upright figure. Cultural productions such as *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987), *The Craft* (1996), *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1996–2003), *Charmed* (1998), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), *Practical Magic* (1998), the *W.I.T.C.H.* and the *Harry Potter* franchises, the *Wicked* musical and film, and the reimagining of *Maleficent*, illustrate how the witch archetype has evolved beyond its traditionally negative connotations, becoming a symbol of empowerment and agency in contemporary media.

Nonetheless, agreeing with Cholet's observation, Naomi Fry, staff writer at *The New Yorker*, points out that "this latter-day witchiness has often been corralled to commercial ends: an Urban Outfitters shirt bearing the words "Boss Ass Witch," say, or the women-only co-working space the Wing referring to itself as a 'coven'" (2018). The Witch, in certain representations, can thus be seen as a commodified symbol of empowerment – one that celebrates personal ambition, self-branding, and capitalist success rather than embodying a truly radical or subversive figure. These portrayals often align with societal expectations for women, presenting palatable and visually appealing female figures that resonate with contemporary ideals of empowerment and agency, yet stop short of really challenging the status quo. Therefore, this transformation risks stripping the archetype of its historical depth and radical critique of societal power structures, reducing it to a marketable and sanitized image of "empowered femininity" that shifts the focus from collective empowerment and systemic change to individual success within existing structures.

Andi Zeisler, co-founder of Bitch Media and author of *We Were Feminists Once*, previously critiqued the trend of softening feminist symbols, expressing a need for a more confrontational and unsettling representation of feminist power. Commenting on the Women's March after the first Trump presidential election and the *pussyhat* project²⁶, she told *Elle* magazine that she felt it was the time to get scary: "We need to go full witch. We need to really scare some folks" (Zeisler, as cited in Kahn, 2017). Rather than the pink cheery optics that dominated the march, Zeisler was hoping for a

²⁶ The pussyhat, a pink, brimless cap, was widely crafted and worn by women participating in the 2017 Women's March in the United States. It originated from the Pussyhat Project, launched by Los Angeles-based screenwriter Krista Suh and architect Jayna Zweiman, to create a unifying symbol for the march.

channeling of the dark, scary, unsubmitive Witch, as an embodiment of fearsome defiance. Her comment highlights a tension between the commodification of empowerment and the need for a bolder, more disruptive feminist stance to address the urgent and often terrifying challenges facing women in contemporary society. And that disruptive feminist stance could very well be grounded in the primordial Witch archetype.

In summary, the Witch archetype represents a powerful, fierce, independent figure who embodies wisdom, often connected to the natural or supernatural world. She is typically associated with magic, transformation, and knowledge. While often vilified as a symbol of danger or rebellion against established order, the Witch can also represent liberation, self-acceptance, and feminine power. Her portrayal reflects societal attitudes toward women's autonomy and knowledge, shifting between fear of her defiance and admiration for her power.

3.5.2. The Witch in animation

The Witch is deeply rooted in the fabric of fairytales, serving as a recurring figure of power, magic, fear, and mystery. These powerful women defy societal expectations of subservience, wielding supernatural abilities that can shape narratives in complex ways. Witches often act as agents of change, influencing the protagonist's journey either by aiding them or imposing challenges that must be overcome. They can curse or punish, but their actions often come with deeper implications – forcing characters to confront their flaws, learn critical lessons, and emerge stronger. Like the witches themselves, their solutions are never straightforward; they often involve riddles, conditions, or consequences that demand introspection, growth, and transformation from the protagonist.

Many early feature animated productions drew inspiration from well-known fairy tales, with Disney being known for adapting and commodifying these timeless stories. From its inception to the present, the company has produced numerous films featuring prominent examples of witches and shamans, many of them inspired by folktales and

old stories, including *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *The Sword in the Stone* (1963), *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *The Emperor's New Groove* (2000), *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), and *Brave* (2012). Renowned Japanese animation studios, such as Studio Ghibli, have also drawn upon the archetype of the old, frightening, or manipulative witch in films like *Spirited Away* (2001) and *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004).

In many of these films, the Witch appears as a pivotal character, often punishing the protagonist, teaching them a lesson, or helping them by sharing ancient knowledge. Their magical solutions often come at a price, requiring the protagonist to engage in self-reflection, confront their fears, or repair broken relationships. The Witch serves as a guide or a test, challenging characters to believe in themselves or accept their circumstances, ensuring that the resolution is earned rather than simply handed over. Some are driven by malevolence, while others are good doers. In the live action remakes of some of the Disney movies, the witches are now portrayed as neither wholly benevolent nor malevolent, as it is seen in the *Maleficent* movies. However, in all the animated movies mentioned above, the Witch is represented as a hag, a scary (often older) woman, sometimes living in isolation, who is subservient to no one.

Their isolation from society, whether self-imposed or due to ostracization, places these characters on the fringes margins – both physically and metaphorically – dwelling in remote or concealed locations such as secluded castles, enigmatic wooden cabins, or houses hidden deep within the swamps. This isolation not only emphasizes their otherness but also grants them the autonomy and freedom to operate outside societal norms.

However, the depiction of witches isn't confined to older, menacing figures; younger witches have also made their mark in animation. In animated television, even though there are examples like the "Bored Witch" (*La Bruixa Avorrida*, in Catalan), from Roser Capdevila's franchise of *The Triplets*, the Witch character has often taken the form of teenage characters. Some examples of shows with teenage witches, that blend magical adventures with the relatable pre-teen and teen struggles, are *Sabrina: The Animated Series* (1999–2000), *Ojamajo Doremi* (1999–2000), *W.I.T.C.H.* (2004–2006), *Little Witch Academia* (2017), and, more recently, the acclaimed *The Owl House* (2020–

2023). In animated feature films, Japanese productions have explored the young witch character thoroughly as well, in movies such as *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989), *Mary and the Witch's Flower* (2017), and *Earwig and the Witch* (2020).

The emergence and evolution of young witch characters in animation are closely tied to the popular Japanese manga and anime genre of magical girls. In series like *Sailor Moon* (1992–1997), *Cardcaptor Sakura* (1998–2000), and *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* (2011), young girls with magical abilities combat evil forces to protect the world. While these characters do not embody the classic archetype of the Witch, they reflect its enduring influence. This trend of young, magic-wielding heroines, whose narratives shift the focus to themes of growth, self-reliance, and personal responsibility, highlights the lasting appeal and adaptability of the Witch character in contemporary storytelling.

3.5.3. Results from our sample

Within our sample, we looked for instances where characters embodied the Witch archetype. We recognized six occurrences, where four share many similarities and two appear as contrasting. Because of this, we divided our subjects into two groups. The first one is composed of Yubaba and Zeniba from *Spirited Away* (Miyazaki, 2001), the Witch of the Waste from *Howl's Moving Castle* (Miyazaki, 2004), Mama Odie from *The Princess and the Frog* (Clements & Musker, 2009), and The Witch from *Brave* (Andrews & Chapman, 2012). All of these characters share many design resemblances and form a clear pattern of representation of the Witch archetype in our sample. The other group is composed of Granmamare from *Ponyo* (Miyazaki, 2008), and Elsa from *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013), which appear outside the emerging pattern of representation, and could be better described as Goddess or Sorceress.



Figure 17 – Frames from *Spirited Away* (2001). Yubaba and her twin sister Zeniba, who appear identical but represent opposing aspects of the same entity.



Figure 18 – Frames from *The Princess and the Frog* (2009). Mama Odie speaks to Tiana and Naveen, both in frog form, while stirring a large cauldron. She has a pet snake, Juju.

Ancient and Grotesque Women

In *Spirited Away*, Yubaba and Zeniba are twin sisters, who represent duality within a single entity: while Yubaba is greedy and ruthless, Zeniba is caring and forgiving. Nonetheless, both are nuanced characters and are not entirely good or evil. They are powerful sorceresses who can either enslave or set free the people around them. Yubaba is the main antagonist of the movie and openly displays her power, greed and controlling nature. On the other hand, Zeniba, who initially appears to be as menacing as her twin sister, reveals herself to be kind, helpful, and extremely powerful.

Their design is memorable and unique (Figure 17) due to their huge disproportionate heads with grotesque facial features. They are designed as caricatured old women, with exaggerated wrinkles, a prominent crooked nose, and an enormous wart in the forehead, between their eyebrows. They also have obvious female signifiers, such as the long hair (which is tied up most of the movie but is eventually shown as extremely long and flowy), the ostentatious jewelry, the gaudy make-up and the old-fashioned dress.

Yubaba and Zeniba appear otherworldly, especially when compared to the human-looking characters in the movie: Chihiro and Haku (the young boy depicted on the right, being embraced by Yubaba's hair, in Figure 17) have delicate, pretty, and rounded features, within a proportionate design that is very appealing; on the other hand, the sorceresses don't appear to be human, due to their uncommon size and shape.

In *The Princess and the Frog*, Mama Odie (Figure 18) is a 197-year old blind and eccentric character that also embodies the Magician/Shaman archetype. She is known to be a voodoo priestess of immense power, feared by many around the swamps of Louisiana. She is designed as a black woman, overweight, with loose skin and wrinkles, indicating a lack of teeth. She wears a white dress and turban, adorned with dramatic accessories like enormous golden earrings, a necklace, a bracelet, and a large blue ring. She walks and dances barefoot, wearing black glasses that hide her blind eyes.

The grotesque design of her face and silhouette highly contrasts with the design of the young protagonist Tiana in her human form, whose delicate features and baby-like face are conventionally appealing. Even though Mama Odie appears scary in her first appearance, we soon learn that she is kind and generous, although tough and

unconventional. Like Zeniba and Yubaba, this character isn't simply good or bad, but rather complex.

In *Brave*, the Witch (Figure 19) is a hermit that lives with her pet crow, in a cottage hidden deep in the Highland woods. She disguises herself as a humble woodcarver, although she is quickly discovered to be a magic-wielding witch, who offers spells in exchange for profit. Even though she appears harmless, her magic is powerful and dangerous.

As the previous characters, the Witch's design presents exaggerated signs of old age, such as wrinkles, loose skin, bony fingers and gray hair. Her facial features are exaggerated, angular, and disproportionate: a sharp chin with white hairs, an enormous nose, missing teeth, and oversized, asymmetric ears. She also carries some accessories that help her stand out, such as her many earrings (including a type of earpool) and necklaces. When shown side-by-side with the movie's protagonist, whose rounded features and slim figure create an appealing design, we clearly see how the Witch's design appears as contrasting, off-putting and grotesque, in relation to the other female characters in the movie.

Interestingly, Steve Purcell, one of the film's co-directors and a key contributor to its visual development, expressed a particular fondness for the design of the Witch. He remarked:

I found myself really invested in the Witch since I had written and boarded the first drafts of her scene, performed her temporary voice in scratch, and even modeled for the pose that was used for the sculpt. (...) When the Witch emerged from our characters department, she was a thing of beauty" (2012, p. 92, *The Art of Brave*).



Figure 19 – Frames from *Brave* (2012). The Witch uses magic to control sharp flying objects. She is suspicious of Merida but ends up selling her a spell.

Purcell's deep personal involvement in the Witch's conception—ranging from scripting and storyboarding to voice work—highlights a complex dynamic between male creators and the archetype of the powerful older woman. In the history of animation, witches and other older female characters with magical or authoritative power have frequently been designed with exaggerated, often masculine traits. These characters are typically denied the visual “appeal” expected of younger or protagonist female characters, whose designs adhere to narrow standards of beauty and softness. As a result, the witch is often rendered as grotesque, angular, or comically grotesque—traits traditionally associated with male character design practices, who are allowed a wide range of visual representation. In some cases, these older female figures are even voiced by men, reinforcing their detachment from femininity as it is conventionally portrayed in animation. This pattern suggests an uneasy relationship with female power, especially when it exists outside the bounds of youth or beauty, and reveals how gendered biases in character design continue to shape the representation of age, agency, and authority on screen.

In *Howl's Moving Castle*, the Witch of the Waste (Figures 20 and 21) is a powerful sorceress, who has been using her magic to pursue Howl, a handsome, vain, and formidable wizard, who has fallen out of love for her, after realizing she was using magic to look younger and more beautiful than what she actually is.

The design of the Witch of the Waste evolves throughout the movie, as the narrative shifts and the character is forced through challenges. Initially, the Witch of the Waste is presented as a towering overweight womanly figure, with exaggerated neck fat and a broad chest. She dresses in sumptuous clothes: long black dress, high heels, long fur coat, and matching hat, adorned with delicate jewelry, such as her red and golden earrings, and bead necklace. She has pink-dyed hair and wears bright-colored makeup.



Figure 20 – Frames from *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004). The Witch of the Waste visits Sophie in the hat shop and casts the aging curse on her.



Figure 21 – Frames from *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004). Top: the Witch of the Waste struggles up the stairs to meet Madame Suliman. Bottom: she is rendered powerless by Suliman, revealing her true age and appearance.

This character's design changes as she climbs a long flight of stairs; the exertion causes her body to appear as though it's melting, losing its definition and dignified, solid presence. When the Witch of the Waste reaches Madame Sulliman's palace at the top of the stairs, she has become a blob of fat, with exaggerated distortion to her facial features and body proportions. Madame Sulliman is a powerful mage who strips the Witch of the Waste of her magic, thus revealing her true age. Her final design shows amplified signs of aging and decaying, such as warts, wrinkles, and rolling layers of fat. She is depicted as an ancient woman, now powerless, with her shrunken silhouette and grotesque facial features.

It is interesting to note that the Witch of the Waste is voiced by a male actor, a choice that hints at associations with drag performance and elements of queer coding. The practice of assigning male voices or mannerisms to female-presenting characters²⁷ can also be observed in Roz from *Monsters, Inc.* (2001) and Edna Mode from *The Incredibles* (2004), both of whom are portrayed by male actors. These characters share an intimidating presence, often challenging societal norms around traditional femininity. Their exaggerated traits – whether in voice, demeanor, or appearance – underscore their roles as figures of authority, mystery, or comic relief, while subtly engaging with themes of gender performance and identity.

The Male-Coded Magician/Shaman Character

We intuitively thought that this representation pattern was unique to female characters that embody the Witch archetype in the context of popular and contemporary animated feature films, because even within two of the movies where these characters appear in (*The Princess and the Frog* and *Howl's Moving Castle*), we saw that male-coded magicians are designed differently. By quickly analyzing the movies in our list, we gathered a few examples of male-coded characters that embody the

²⁷ It is common practice in Japanese animation, for example, to have women voice actors assigned to male characters, without it being considered a sign of queer-coding or femininity in the character. It is often seen as an artistic choice of associating higher pitched voices with pleasantness, innocence, and goodness, and deeper pitched voices with unpleasantness, danger, authority, mystery, and heroism.

magician/shaman archetype to observe if there were any similarities between the female and the male-coded characters. We did a brief analysis of Howl from *Howl's Moving Castle*, Dr. Facilier from *The Princess and the Frog*, Bruno from *Encanto* and Magnifico from *Wish*²⁸.

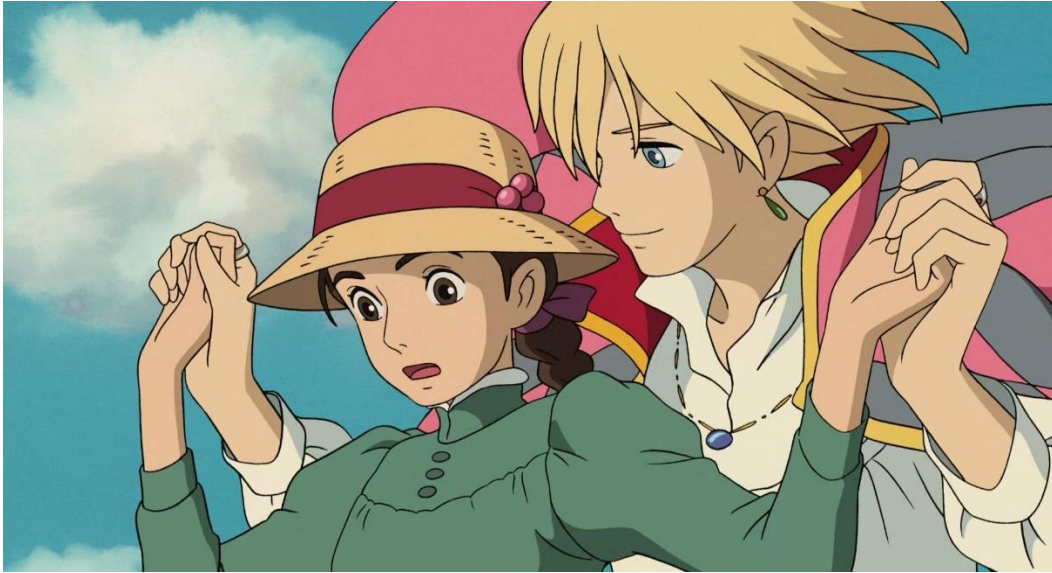


Figure 22 – Frame from *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004). Howl rescues Sophie and flies her to safety.

All four characters present the moral ambiguity associated with both sides of the archetype, as they can either use their powers for good or for evil – at least, that's how we perceive them. Although Howl (Figure 22) is kind to Sophie, he is still vain and selfish and uses his powers both for good causes (he helps Sophie) and for less meritorious ones (he is a crucial pawn in a senseless war). Dr. Facilier's (Figure 24) voodoo powers could be used for good, like Mama Odie's, but he chooses to manipulate other people into deals that will only benefit him. Even though Bruno (Figure 23) has no control over his visions of the future and is only able to share what he saw would

²⁸ This movie was released in 2023, after our defined timeline, and is not part of our movie sample. However, it adheres to the filtering criteria of our sample and we thought it provided a relevant example to the discussion at hand.

happen with the people around him, people still perceive him as dangerous, as if he is responsible for making the visions come true; that is why he lives in isolation, ostracized by his family and community. Lastly, Magnifico (Figure 25) appears to use his magical powers to uphold order and good fortune for his kingdom, until he is unveiled as an egotistical villain who only grants harmless wishes to his subjects, while keeping the power to himself. This complexity of character seems to be an essential trait of both the witch and the magician/shaman archetype in our sample.



Figure 23 – Frame from *Encanto* (2021). Bruno uses his divination powers to help Mirabel.

These examples of the archetype in its male form didn't share the design trends of the female characters. These male magicians are not coded as grotesque, otherworldly, or ancient. Their design, although imbued with cues that hint at their power, is much closer to the protagonists' designs; so, they don't stand out as much as the female-coded characters previously analyzed. They do wear some adornments, which are mostly capes and simple jewelry: Howl wears a fine necklace, rings, earrings and a cape; Bruno wears a poncho, resembling a cape; Dr. Facilier wears a top hat decorated with a feather, a cane, and a necklace with a tooth; Magnifico wears embroidered clothing with a cape. We also

noticed they are presented as adults, who don't look haggard or too old. On the contrary, they are even designed as attractive characters.



Figure 24 – Frame from *The Princess and the Frog* (2009). Prince Naveen makes a deal with the conman and shaman Dr. Facilier.

Howl is considered very beautiful by other characters in the movie and by audiences worldwide²⁹. He presents as an elegant and stylish young man, with delicate facial features, bright blue eyes, and shoulder-length blonde hair. Bruno has big “puppy eyes” and rounded facial features, framed by soft long curls, which are very similar to the rest of his family, communicating a sense of belonging and closeness with his siblings, nephews and nieces. Dr. Facilier may be considered an appealing character, since he is

²⁹ There are a panoply of examples on the online discourse about Howl's beauty and attractiveness. Only on YouTube, one is bombarded with titles such as *Animated Men I'd Sell My Body To: Howl Pendragon - YouTube*; *Howls SEXY eyes - Howls Moving Castle*; *Let Howl melt your heart all over again.* ❤️🔥; *Howl Saying Thats my girl*; *Howl's Persian dub bc it's HOT AF*; *Howl is a drama queen... but we love him for that.* 🖋️🌟. Online essays, such as *How my thirst for Howl cured me of my softboi fixation*, write about how Howl fits the *bishie* category, also known as beautiful boys in anime, who often present more feminine features in their design.

tall and slender, a smooth talker³⁰ who knows how to be charming and convincing enough. He presents some quirky features, like his ears, his carefully drawn mustache, the dark shadow around his eyes and the gap between his teeth. Nevertheless, these do not make his design unappealing, but rather interesting. Magnifico's design is very obviously drawn with typically attractive male attributes, even resembling the voice actor's face (Chris Pine). He is designed as a tall, fit, tan-skinned gray-haired man, with charismatic and angular features. His piercing blue eyes are highlighted by thick angular eyebrows and his chin is framed by his goatee and mustache. In summary, none of these characters are overweight or severely underweight, blatantly ugly, extremely old, disproportionate or grotesque. They are the exact opposite.



Figure 25 – Frame from *Wish* (2023). Magnifico shows Asha the wishes he has collected.

³⁰ Having Keith David voicing this character also helps to communicate his suaveness. This character is also the target of online discourse about how attractive he is: *Top 10 Attractive Disney Characters; Dr Facilier, why are you so sexy?; What makes Dr. Facilier hot.*

The Youth and Beauty of the Goddess and the Sorceress

The second group of magical-wielding female-coded characters present in our movie sample is composed of Granmamare from *Ponyo*, and Elsa from *Frozen*. This group didn't appear as a trend, as there were only two occurrences, and they shared only a few similarities. However, they show the possibility of representing magic-wielding, powerful, and wise female characters as being beautiful, elegant, and youthful – appearing in total opposition to the first group of more typical witch characters.

Ponyo's mother, Granmamare (Figure 26), is a wise powerful goddess, who grants her daughter's wish to become human. Throughout the movie, she uses her magic to help people, such as fixing a ship's engine and granting vitality and mobility to a group of elderly women. Her design is imbued with traditionally appealing features associated with femininity. Her delicate face presents soft golden eyes, a straight nose and full lips. Even though she wears make-up – violet eyeshadow, mascara, and coral lipstick – it is not presented as gaudy or garish, but rather as tasteful and feminine. Granmamare has extremely long wavy pinkish hair, adorned with a piece of golden and coral forehead jewelry, with matching earrings and necklace. She can change her body size, both appearing human-sized (though tall) and as a gigantic figure in the ocean. She wears a long and loose pale blue dress that reveals her large breasts.

Several visual attributes contribute to conveying a sense of otherworldliness (such as the glow that surrounds her, her gigantic size), helping to establish her status as goddess and differentiating her from the rest of the human cast.

Even though Granmamare's powers and narrative role are aligned with the Magician/Shaman archetype that we chose to guide this research (“can make visible the deeper reality behind the senses and can balance and control the larger of hidden forces of the natural world”), her design leads us to consider her as something different than a magician, shaman or witch.

We've seen that the previous characters all had a duality within them, a tremendous power associated with both a capacity for goodness and for evil. Those characters appear menacing, even if they later reveal to be kind-hearted and well-intended.



Figure 26 – Frames from *Ponyo* (2008). Granmamare, Ponyo's mother, in her giant goddess form, interacting with her husband Fujimoto.

Granmamare is definitely not like that. Her design doesn't communicate ambivalence or complexity as a character. She is benevolent, soft spoken, kind, wise, and compassionate, without a hint of malevolence or greediness. Therefore, the audience never senses the possibility that she might use her magic to enact the shadow archetype of the magician/shaman ("can manipulate the deeper reality to enslave others and destroy the natural order"), as the other characters could.

For this reason, we don't think she truly embodies the archetype of the witch. Nonetheless, Granmamare is a larger-than-life magic-wielding female-coded character that represents a possibility for a positive representation of the powerful woman archetype. Having such examples present in popular and contemporary animated media allows the audience to project themselves in such figures.

In Chollet's book, *In Defense of Witches* (2022), she shares the story of a friend, who never having heard of the neo-pagan cult of the goddess, would imagine herself as Granmamare, whenever she needed to be in touch with her own strength. To this woman, whose motherhood is an important part of her life, the sea goddess represented a role-model mother figure that is both gentle and powerful. Chollet expertly explains the importance of such examples:

We must not underestimate our need for examples—whether shared by the majority or drawn from a counterculture—that support us, even if only subconsciously, that provide meaning, impetus, resonance and depth to our life choices (2022, p. 39).

We could argue that *Frozen*'s Elsa (Figure 27) had a similar effect in audiences worldwide, by providing an example of a powerful magical female character, who is also very attractive, vulnerable, and flawed. The movie's plot revolves around Anna's path to find and help her sister Elsa, who fled to isolation, after accidentally cursing her queendom to be in perpetual winter. We learn in the beginning of the movie that Elsa once hurt her sister Anna with her ice powers and has since then been hiding her magical capabilities and herself from the world.

Gaby Hinsliff, columnist for The Guardian, makes the following observation of the parallels children may find between their own experience and *Frozen*'s narrative:

Elsa's storyline – accidentally hurting her sister, and being sent away for it – is instantly recognisable on a domestic level to any child banished to their room for fighting with a sibling, which may be why *Frozen* appeals to both sexes. But crucially, whatever Elsa does, Anna's love never falters. For children grappling with the surprisingly murderous rage of the preschool years, watching Elsa struggle to tame her powers sends a reassuring message that you can experience intensely dark, angry feelings and still be loved (2023).

Elsa is presented as a magic-wielding soon-to-be-queen young woman, who is as beautiful as Disney princesses usually are – enormous “doe eyes”, on a round baby-like face, atop an extremely thin hour-glass silhouette. Her character design is imbued with stereotyped female signifiers associated with animated female beauty: long lustrous blonde hair, subtle make-up, sparkly ice-blue dress, and crystal heels. So, even though Elsa represents emancipation, courage, and power, she is still designed as the innocent powerless female character of older animation works. She is the embodiment of the delicate balance between social progressive ideals and capitalism, as Hinsliff explains:

The challenge for a brand like Disney in such a climate, then, was to gently modernise its princesses without antagonising traditionalists. The result was Anna and Elsa, who may be thrillingly powerful – Anna gallops around on horseback fighting wolves, while Elsa can kill by pointing a finger – but still embody the improbably wasp-waisted, doe-eyed, swishy-skirted beauty of Disney's 1930s *Snow White* (2023).

Elsa's powers can be used for good or for evil, and it is demonstrated in the story how deadly they can be if she doesn't know how to control them. So, she is characterized by the duality of magician, shaman or witch archetype, whose powerful magic can be both dangerous and lifesaving. However, unlike the first group of characters, Elsa is packaged in an appealing design that continues to uphold socially accepted gender expectations for female-coded characters, such as beauty, elegance, and youth.



Figure 27 – Frames from the movie *Frozen* (2013). Elsa, confident and self-assured, stands in the ice palace she created, ready to defend it from intruders.

We believe this may also be prompted by the fact that Elsa is one of the protagonists of *Frozen*, making her the only protagonist in our sample to embody this archetype. All other characters that embody this archetype in our sample are secondary to their movie's plot. Elsa fulfills a two-fold purpose for Disney Animation Studios: the need to appeal both visually and emotionally to audiences, by presenting a pretty princess that is in alignment with the zeitgeist. Viv Groskop, comedian and columnist for The Guardian, makes a similar observation:

Meanwhile, to Disney's delight, the sister protagonists Elsa and Anna got to be two ideal things at once: princesses who didn't need to be rescued (appropriately PC), but still princesses who could be marketed as dolls (necessarily lucrative) (2019).

Elsa does not represent a typical iteration of the witch archetype; rather, she is a derivative figure, akin to characters from the *magical girl* genre. She embodies the commodification of the magical, powerful, and defiant woman, packaged in a more palatable, non-threatening design, while still playing as a contemporary, appropriate, and relevant role model for children.

3.5.4. Discussion

Femininity as performance in old age

The first four instances of depictions of the Witch archetype, embodied by female-coded characters, share many design similarities. All of them have what could be at first glance considered unappealing designs, in the sense that they are depicted through exaggerated, distorted, and grotesque visual elements. This may be considered off-putting to the audience, especially when compared to their movie's protagonists' designs, which are usually delicate, feminine, and adhering to society's beauty standards. These magic-wielding characters are branded by old age, ugliness, and obesity (except for the Witch, from *Brave*, who appears as extremely thin), physical traits considered largely undesirable in contemporary society.

We found these characters to be heavily adorned with opulent or conspicuous accessories, jewelry and/or makeup. The female signifiers in their design hint at beauty expectations, such as using jewelry, clothes, and makeup to enhance one's beauty; but feminine beauty is tainted and subverted in their designs. The accessories and makeup these characters present add to their peculiar appearance and abnormal existence, but not to their beauty. There is an element of camp that connects their design to societal ideas of queerness and drag performances. These witches' femininity is not pure, natural, or demure. It is in fact the opposite: provoking, irksome, gaudy, and performed. Even though it was subtler, we observed a similar trend in the design of the older mentor characters, whose design also encompassed striking accessories; especially when compared to the design of the younger female mentors, whose femininity was conveyed through more 'natural' cues, bypassing the need to adorn their figures to communicate their gender.

This exaggerated, performative femininity aligns with broader cultural associations between excess, deviance, and the grotesque. As Russo (1994) notes:

The images of the grotesque body are precisely those which are abjected from the bodily canons of classical aesthetics. The classical body is transcendent and monumental, closed, static, self-contained, symmetrical, and sleek; it is identified with the "high" or official culture of the Renaissance and later, with the rationalism, individualism, and normalizing aspirations of the bourgeoisie. The grotesque body is open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing; it is identified with non-official "low" culture or the carnivalesque, and with social transformation (p. 7).

This tension between performed femininity and the grotesque underscores how the design of Witch characters deviates from normative ideals of feminine beauty and embodiment. Their adorned, excessive appearance—marked by theatrical accessories and exaggerated traits—echoes the grotesque body described by Russo: irregular, and mutable, in stark contrast to the sleek, symmetrical ideal of classical aesthetics. These characters' subversion of beauty norms through exaggerated, performative femininity not only distances them from socially sanctioned representations of womanhood but

also aligns them with a tradition of marginal, transformative figures in visual culture. As such, the grotesque becomes a visual strategy through which these characters are marked as both powerful and other, reinforcing their narrative roles as outsiders or threats within their respective worlds.

The defiant old Witch versus the docile Sorceress/Goddess

It seems to be more common to present powerful magical female-coded characters with design features that are culturally associated with witches. This means they tend to be designed as extremely old, overweight or overly skinny, scary or grotesque, inhuman, or even deformed. When the Witch is depicted as a powerful, authoritative, and even fearsome figure, their design often emphasizes the traits society finds most unsettling about women – particularly those who exist outside the bounds of conventional desirability. These characters challenge the expectation of women as objects of visual pleasure or carnal desire, embodying a phase of life beyond reproductive prime: the crone, a symbol of wisdom, autonomy, and defiance against societal norms.

This is not true for the male-coded characters that play similar narrative roles, since these characters are mostly adult men with appealing design features. We believe this to be a reflection of the unfair and biased societal expectations that fall upon the two genders.

Nevertheless, there were two examples of powerful magical female-coded characters that defied the pattern described above, as they were designed as beautiful young women. They do not embody the defiant aspect of the Witch archetype – their designs adhere to conventional beauty standards; their femininity is natural as they do not rely on adornments to convey their gender; their nature is kind and forgiving, unlike the insubordinate and uncontrollable will of the Witch; their power is benevolent, because they would not harm others willingly, in opposition to the punishing Witch who is not afraid of using their powers to impart lessons to those who seek easy answers.

Possible consequences of designing the Witch as a hag

After the design analysis, we pondered on the possible implications of the representation of the witch archetype as a grotesque or gaudy old woman, reflecting on the consequences of designing powerful female-coded characters in total opposition to contemporary beauty standards. Do these characters portray power, knowledge, and autonomy as something undesirable to the audience?

We believe it may have both positive and negative consequences, depending on the cultural context, audience reception, and execution.

On one hand, these designs could challenge societal norms, by rejecting conventional beauty standards and disrupting deeply ingrained stereotypes (beauty = goodness), broadening the representation of femininity and power in media. It could also help empower audiences, as viewers who feel excluded by narrow beauty ideals may see themselves reflected in these characters, fostering self-acceptance. Having old powerful characters may also encourage authenticity in storytelling, urging creators to prioritize character depth, individuality, and narrative significance over aesthetic conformity, leading to richer and more diverse storytelling. These characters can help promote more diverse role models, showing that power and worth are not tied to physical appearance but to values, skills, and inner strength – independent of age or beauty.

However, they may face resistance from audiences accustomed to conventional beauty standards, potentially affecting popularity and marketability. In industries driven by market demands, such as mainstream animation, unconventional designs might face challenges in gaining widespread acceptance, impacting merchandise sales and promotional success. The audience might want to distance themselves from ‘ugly’ characters, preferring to identify with a young and beautiful character, which could represent an idealized version of themselves.

Additionally, poorly executed designs risk being perceived as tokenistic or stereotyped, reducing characters to symbols rather than multidimensional figures. Success depends on meaningful integration into compelling narratives, which can reshape perceptions of beauty, power, and femininity.

3.6. *Warriors*

“...Today it is rarer to see a woman who can’t fight for herself
or help out in a fight than one who can.”

—Neroni, H., 2005, p. 38.

3.6.1. What defines the female Warrior archetype

In his book *The Anatomy of Story*, screenwriting teacher and author John Truby defines the Warrior archetype as a “practical enforcer of what is right”, as well as someone who “can live to the harsh motto of kill or be killed”, and who “believes that whatever is weak must be destroyed and so becomes the enforcer of what is wrong” (Truby, 2007, p. 67). Alongside this description, he provides several examples of characters who embody this archetype (such as Achilles, Luke Skywalker and Han Solo, the Seven Samurai, Thor...) – of which none are female. This obvious oversight in the representation and recognition of female examples shows how the female characters embodying the Warrior archetype has been often disregarded.

In *The Modern Amazons – Warrior Women On-Screen*, the authors are focused on investigating the representation of warrior-like female character on film and choose to use the term “amazons” to describe them:

Regardless of origin, we use the term Amazon loosely and interchangeably with general references to “warrior women.” Popular culture appropriates the term Amazons to describe female-run societies in general, or simply to label women who attempt fight the system or appear strong-spirited or rebellious. These are the traits that we have set

out to investigate within female action characters (Mainon & Ursini, 2006, p. 2).

As independent filmmaker and academic Lee-Jane Bennion-Nixon points out, the “warrior woman” in film has been called many different names, but “what anchors this figure is her propensity towards violence” (2010) – Hilary Neroni, for example, focuses on the “violent woman”(2005). Bennion-Nixon admits this is not the only defining trait of the female warrior, as she can be “recognised by the physical and/or mental strength she displays in the face of adversity” and that it is “this combination of strength and tendency towards violence that makes her a distinct manifestation of ‘womanhood’” (2010).

Because on-screen violence has been primarily a masculine activity, “the depiction of a violent woman upsets this association of violence with masculinity” (Neroni, 2005, p. 19). The warrior woman presents a different version of womanhood, in the sense that violence is often regarded as a fundamental signifier of masculinity. As Neroni asserts, violence is “an activity that inevitably enhances a man’s masculinity as much as it would conversely detract from a woman’s femininity” (2005, p. 42). Therefore, the female character committing violence (or simply showing the willingness and ability to do it), completely reverses traditional gender positions, allowing the female warrior to appropriate masculine attributes, capabilities, and privileges. This character embodies a complex array of contested meanings surrounding femininity, challenging and disrupting established social norms and expectations.

In summary, and drawing from the perspectives presented, we can define the female warrior archetype in cinema as a complex figure marked by physical and mental strength, resilience in the face of adversity, and a propensity toward assertive, and sometimes violent, action.

3.6.2. The female Warrior in animation

Even though the “violent woman” has arguably existed since early cinema (Neroni, 2005), in recent decades, the portrayal of female characters as Warriors in cinema has

become more prominent – or, at the very least, more visible – and it has always challenged traditional gender roles.

In animated feature films, it was not until the 1980s, with iconic productions such as Miyazaki's *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), that female characters embodying the Warrior archetype – exemplifying courage, resilience, and a willingness to engage in violence – began to emerge. In subsequent decades, more films have portrayed female characters who exhibit physical strength, wit, and prowess, including Motoko Kusanagi in *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), San in *Princess Mononoke* (1997), Mulan in *Mulan* (1998), and Kida in *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* (2001), just to name a few. Alongside these heroic figures, several female antagonists also adopt violent traits, representing what Truby describes as the “shadow” side of the Warrior archetype (2007). As Shore observes, “several of Miyazaki's most aggressive antagonists are female, such as Lady Eboshi in *Princess Mononoke*, who represents industrialization against nature, or Princess Kushana, who leads the assassination of Nausicaä's father while he withers away in his bed” (2013, p. 15). Helga from *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* (2001) similarly embodies a villainous, violent role. Indeed, this was more common in earlier films, where female villains were often depicted engaging in violence, such as Maleficent in her dragon form (*Sleeping Beauty*, 1959) or Ursula as a giant sea monster (*The Little Mermaid*, 1989).

While female warrior characters appear occasionally in animated feature films, they are frequently depicted in animated television series, where the archetype has been widely embraced and developed. Series like *Revolutionary Girl Utena* (1997), *Sailor Moon* (1992-1997), *Steven Universe* (2013-2019), *Kim Possible* (2002-2007), *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2005-2008) (featuring numerous female martial artists), *Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts* (2020), and, more recently, *Arcane* (2021-2024) exemplify this trend. Many of the female characters in these shows exhibit strength, agility, and moral conviction, and, while their violent acts are often defensive or protective in nature, they are portrayed as capable fighters. There are also examples of villainous female warriors, often appearing in opposition to the series protagonists. Some notable examples are Jasper (*Steven Universe*), Shogo (*Kim Possible*), Kuvira and Azula (*Avatar: The Last*

Airbender), Emilia (*Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts*), and Ambessa Medarda (*Arcane*).

Both heroic and villainous female characters provide nuanced interpretations of the Warrior archetype, incorporating qualities such as emotional resilience, empathy, intelligence, ruthlessness, and a range of moral perspectives. This increasing prominence of female Warriors in animation reflects a gradual yet significant shift toward more inclusive and diverse representations of strength.

These animated characters are also distinguished by a restraint in the degree of violence they exhibit, often limited to acts of self-defense rather than offensive aggression. Animation frequently emphasizes their potential for strength, agility, and athleticism, conveying an implied capability for violence rather than overt acts of harm. Consequently, the portrayal typically stops short of graphic displays like blood, wounds, or direct infliction of injury, allowing the characters to embody power without the explicit enforcement of violence seen more commonly in live-action productions.

In terms of appearance and design, animated depictions of female warrior characters have generally diverged from the hypersexualized portrayals often found in live-action cinema, where violent women or ‘butt-kicking babes’ are frequently stylized through clichés such as *femme fatales* or supermodels in dominatrix-inspired leather (Neroni, 2005). Given that many animated feature films primarily target younger or family audiences, they tend to avoid overt sexualization. However, some animated films intended for adult audiences, like *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), still reflect an idealized, male-centered gaze in their character designs. Even in family-oriented films, characters sometimes exhibit exaggerated, over-sexualized physical traits, and more so female characters than their male counterparts, as seen in *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* (2001).

This section of the thesis aims to give an updated perspective on the representation of the warrior archetype when it is embodied by female characters in popular animated feature films of the 21st century. We believe this is an important archetype to understand and discuss as it can be understood as “a reminder, a challenge, and a call to arms, an empowered figure that projects a representation of ‘womanhood’ who is more than capable of being heroic no matter what comes her way” (Bennion-Nixon, 2010).

3.6.3. Results from our sample

Looking at our movie sample, we searched for examples of female-coded characters embodying the Warrior archetype and we identified five instances where characters exhibit varying degrees of alignment with the archetype's definition. The characters we recognized as embodying significant aspects of this archetype include Gran from *The Croods: A New Age* (2020), Mebh from *Wolfwalkers* (2020), Luisa from *Encanto* (2021), and both Raya and Namaari from *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021). Notably, we did not find any examples in films released before 2019, which suggests that the emergence of this archetype in female characters from popular animated feature films is a relatively recent phenomenon.

Even though these characters differ immensely in their overall design, they all present visual cues that communicate their role as a practical enforcer. All characters have some physical trait that indicates strength (visible muscles), athleticism (broad shoulders, fit bodies), and/or aggressiveness (sharp teeth, weapons).

Gran – The Unyielding Matriarch

Gran (Figure 28) from *The Croods: A New Age* is designed as an old lady with exaggerated facial features (such as a big nose and droopy cheeks), unkempt white hair, and is missing all her teeth, except one. She wears a dress made from a reptile's skin and uses a wooden cane to walk, which doubles as a weapon. Her design is meant to convey how old she is, playing on the improbability of her still being alive in the cutthroat fictional prehistorical world her family lives in. Like the rest of the design of the characters in the Croods family, they're meant to be slightly off putting, by depicting them as unsophisticated, wild, and resilient. Their design challenges the notion of appeal, by having a movie centered around cave people with visual traits that are usually considered less attractive – such as disproportionate bodies, thick heavy brow ridges, and strong jawlines.



Figure 28 – Frames from the movie *The Croods: A New Age* (2020). Gran rallies the women to rescue the abducted men, dramatically revealing her toned abs and that her “hair” is actually an animal acting as a wig.

Although every member of the Croods family is physically capable of violence and athleticism – they must be, if they want to survive – Gran is particularly adept at it. In several instances throughout the movie, she displays her warrior spirit along with a propensity for violence. When Eep (her granddaughter) has a disagreement with her brother Thunk, Gran roots for the fight to continue, shouting “Get him, Eep! Go for the groin!”, while their father tries to stop the fight. When the family forms a “kill circle” to protect themselves from possible dangers, she screams “Today is a good day to die!” – again showing her willingness to deal with danger head on. She clearly shows the audience she is audacious and not afraid of death: when they encounter another family’s settlement, and don’t understand what it is really, she says: “I’ve seen it all. Well, that’s it for me. I’m glad it’s you, Chunky.” And proceeds to walk into the family death cat’s mouth, as if she would be eaten by it.

Despite her seemingly frail appearance and constant jokes about being old and ready for natural selection, Gran reveals herself to be even tougher. In a moment of necessity, she explains she was once the “queen matriarch of a warrior tribe of wimmins³¹”, known as the Thunder Sisters, who “faced down danger and kicked death in the crotch”. Gran’s true strength is revealed, as she takes charge in rallying the group of female characters (plus Thunk, her grandson) to fight back and rescue the male characters, who had been taken by a group of revengeful monkeys. To inspire the group, Gran strikes a warrior pose on top of a rock, showing her surprisingly sculpted abs in Amazon-esque clothing. She then assigns new war names to each character and applies war paint to their faces – thus creating a new version of the Thunder Sisters. Coming up to this scene, we also learn that Gran is actually bald and that she uses Wigasus, her flying rodent pet, as a wig.

Gran’s character embodies the fearless and practical enforcer of what is right, challenging initial perceptions and showcasing her hidden strength.

³¹ The term “wimmins” is a playful variation of “women,” used humorously to highlight a group of strong, independent women. It emphasizes a fierce, empowered group of women. Originally, variations like “womyn” and “wimmin” were adopted by some feminists to distance the word “woman” from “man,” reflecting a rejection of patriarchal language. While rooted in feminist language reform, “wimmins” has also become a quirky, lighthearted term celebrating female strength and camaraderie in popular culture.

Mebh – The Untamable Feral Girl

In *Wolfwalkers*, Mebh Óg MacTíre (Figure 29 and 30), a young girl living in the woods with her mother and a pack of wolves, is one of the last *wolfwalkers*—a mythical group of beings who can transform into wolves.

The film, whose story is set in 17th century Ireland, is noted for its distinctive, hand-drawn animation style and its exploration of themes of nature, conservation, and the clash between civilization and the natural world. This is also reflected in Mebh's design. She is drawn with loose, sketchy lines – the animators often left the drawing guidelines visible and deliberately avoided a polished finish. This design choice contrasts deeply with the drawing of the townspeople, who are depicted with straight, rigid black lines, reflecting the strictness and rigidity of their civilized society. The forest's fluid and unrefined lines visually symbolize the natural world's inherent fluidity and impermanence, untouched by human efforts to impose order and control.

Mebh has big wild red hair, with leaves and branches tangled up in it – a visual signifier of her fierce, untamed nature. She is designed with rounded and short shapes, to communicate her childishness, youthfulness, playfulness, and good heartedness. The softness of her overall design is broken by her sharp teeth and claws, as well as her bitten-off ear, which reveal her fearlessness, aggressiveness, and resilience, as well as her ability to defend herself and those she loves.

Her facial design is particularly interesting for a young female protagonist in an animated feature film. Even though her face is very round and appealing, her eyes are designed with black thicker lines, that indicate hair or fur, looking like a mix of bushy eyebrows and exaggerated eyelashes. She also features makeup – or what could be described as facial markings or war paint – as there are three small dots beneath her lower lash line, and a dark shadow that extends from her nose to her forehead, resembling the pattern of a wolf's nose. She also has a pair of big round golden earrings, which is something quite unusual in the design of younger female characters. Both the jewelry and face paint can be seen as indicators of her connection to nature and an allusion to tribal customs.



Figure 29 – Frames from the movie *Wolfwalkers* (2020). Mebh feels frustrated and heartbroken, after Robyn sends her off, and she threatens the town folks that have imprisoned her mother.



Figure 30 – Frames from the movie *Wolfwalkers* (2020). Mebh and Robyn's bond is portrayed like that of sisters, marked by intimacy and trust.

Because she was raised in the woods, she moves with the agility and quickness of a wild animal, unconstrained by the norms of civilized society. This contrasts sharply with Robyn's design (the movie's protagonist), who appears more civilized, sleek, and intellectual. While Robyn's slender and streamlined design embodies sophistication and civilization, Mebh's design represents raw physicality and instinct.

Mebh is a sweet and carefree character, who tries to maintain a positive attitude despite her underlying worry for her missing mother, who was captured by the townspeople when she was in her wolf form. In the forest, Mebh is at ease, exuding comfort and affection towards the wolves and other creatures, reflecting her deep connection with nature. However, although Mebh is not inherently menacing, she resorts to intimidation when it is necessary for her survival, such as securing food or, towards the end of the film, rescuing her mother. Her actions are driven by a strong sense of justice and a commitment to protect her pack, highlighting her determination to fight for her kind and ensure their survival.

Luisa – The Vulnerable Warrior

In *Encanto*, when we first meet Luisa (Figure 31 and 32), she proudly displays her immense strength and her role as a practical enforcer for the greater good. Luisa possesses superhuman strength, which she uses to help with various tasks, from lifting heavy objects to supporting her family and community in practical ways. Her strength is a symbol of her role as a protector and a pillar of support for others. And that is reflected in her design.

Luisa is very tall and visibly muscular, something unprecedented in the context of popular animated feature films for a female character. She has a large neck, broad shoulders, and massive arms – the silhouette of a bodybuilder or weightlifting enthusiast. Nevertheless, she has many female signifiers, from her clothing and accessories to her hair. She wears a delicate white blouse, with simple red ribbon on the chest and frilly details. Her pleated long purple skirt has a bottom sash embroidered with geometric motifs, depicting dumbbells. She has tiny feet and uses *espadrilles*, made of fabric, with ribbons that tie around her ankles. She has hair that is long enough to be

braided and tied up in a bun, with a red ribbon. The curly wisps of hair that are loose from the bun frame her face and give a feeling of softness. She also wears tiny delicate pearl earrings. Her strong, athletic, and muscular build contrasts with her feminine and delicate attire, which might typically be expected of a character with a more masculine or practical wardrobe.

During Luisa's musical act, *Surface Pressure*, the audience gets to know more about the character, and learns of her fears of inadequacy. Even though she sees herself as being "tough as the crust of the Earth", she also confesses: "I'm pretty sure I'm worthless if I can't be of service". The scene presents Luisa in a series of hypothetical scenarios, where she plays the role of hero and savior. She embodies the role of the warrior, for example, when she substitutes for a scared Hercules running away from a fight with Cerberus. In this brief scene, Luisa wields a sword and shield and it is implied that she killed the three-headed dog (the audience only sees the creature losing consciousness behind Luisa).

Even though Luisa is not involved in any sort of violence during the movie's narrative, we argue that Luisa also embodies the shadow warrior archetype (believing "that whatever is weak must be destroyed"), in that she holds negative preconceptions about being weak and potentially failing her family's expectations. She fears the inability to physically bear the burdens placed on her by her family. Instead of projecting this shadow archetype onto others she might regard as weak, she directs her anger inward, toward herself.

When she slowly loses her extraordinary strength, she starts to despise her perceived weakness. Luisa's sense of self-worth is closely tied to her ability to be altruistic through her physical strength. Without that, she feels as though she has lost her purpose and fears she can no longer fulfill her role in helping her community. Her arc contributes to the film's larger message about the importance of embracing one's true self and understanding that self-worth is not solely defined by one's abilities or contributions to others.



Figure 31 – Frames from the movie *Encanto* (2021). Luisa’s formidable physique is accentuated when contrasted with Mirabel’s smaller frame.



Figure 32 – Frames from the movie *Encanto* (2021). Despite her tough, unbreakable exterior, Luisa also reveals a gentle, soft-hearted side.

This portrayal of Luisa is a powerful example of subverting expectations through character design. Her appearance suggests unwavering strength, yet she is also deeply vulnerable, as she carries the heavy burden of responsibility and fears letting everyone down. This duality makes Luisa a complex and compelling character.

Raya and Namaari – Rivalry and Friendship

In *Raya and the Last Dragon*, Raya, the protagonist, and Namaari (who could be considered the antagonist) have a complex relationship characterized by both rivalry and a deep, underlying connection. They were connected as children who grew up in neighboring tribes but their relationship crumbles when Namaari betrays Raya and her people, leading to a conflict that separates them and ignites a long-standing enmity. They are portrayed as formidable opponents with contrasting ideologies – Raya is driven by hope and unity, while Namaari is motivated by fear and control, exerted by her mother.

Both Raya (Figure 33) and Namaari (Figure 34) are designed to convey a sense of danger and strength, achieving it through different visual solutions.

Raya's character design features loose and messy hair, a long cape, and a hat that often obscure her identity, adding a sense of mystery. Her outfit is practical and rugged, consisting of traditional-looking clothing elements, inspired by Southeast Asian cultures³². She also carries a sword, with a distinctive undulating blade. This silhouette is reminiscent of a wanderer character, travelling alone, with an aura of enigma, such as The Man with No Name, the Sergio Leone's iconic character portrayed by Clint Eastwood in films like *A Fistful of Dollars* and *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*.

³² "To ensure this cultural authenticity, the filmmakers formed a story trust of Southeast Asian cultural experts, including choreographers, musicians, linguists, architects, cultural experts, martial artists, and anthropologists. In the early days of making the film, a group of filmmakers and artists traveled to Laos, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, and Singapore to gain inspiration. The key creative team itself consisted of people with Southeast Asian cultural backgrounds, and they shared their life backgrounds and added details they felt were important." <https://news.disney.com/southeast-asian-culture-in-raya-and-the-last-dragon>



Figure 33 – Frames from the movie *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021). Raya journeys with Sisu by boat, brandishes her sword with a menacing expression, and confronts Namaari in her traveling attire of a long cape and wide-brimmed hat.

Even though Raya clothing and accessories invokes the identity of a rugged, somewhat dirty, skilled, enigmatic warrior, who's been through difficult situations, other design elements, such as her body and face, are much more conventionally attractive and remind the audience of her role as a member of the Disney Princess line. Although her body shape is somewhat concealed by the fit of her clothing, she has a slender and elegant figure that matches her round, delicate, and attractive looking facial features.

Raya's rugged attire and rounded features contrasts sharply with Namaari's sleek and polished look. While Raya's attire and overall design reflect a life of struggle and resilience, marked by a weathered and practical style, Namaari's design is characterized by its clean lines and precise details, emphasizing sophistication and control. These design choices reflect her fierce commanding presence, as well as her status as daughter of Virana, Chief of the prosperous Fang tribe. Namaari's body shape deviates from the norm for female characters in feature animation: her shoulders have prominent muscles and appear larger than her hips, creating an athletic V shape that is more commonly found in male characters. Her facial features are more angular, with thinner eyebrows and lips, and narrow eyes with a sharp, upturned angle at the corners, giving them a strikingly cat-like appearance. Her haircut is bold, precise, and also surprisingly daring for a young female character in an animated feature film: she sports an asymmetrical bob, with a one-sided undercut, and a small braid with golden adornments. Her clothing is clean-cut, with many metal details, which enhance her status – she wears a cream-colored top, somewhat loose fitted pants, with a gold belt over a red sash. This is where she secures her weapon of choice: twin swords used for close combat. She also uses a crossbow and engages in hand-to-hand combat.

Both characters are portrayed as strong and determined, each believing they are fighting for what is right. They wield sharp blade weapons and demonstrate their physical prowess and athleticism through direct confrontations. Raya's design suggests a more savage and wild quality, while Namaari's design communicates a sense of calculated danger and sophistication.

Despite their antagonistic roles throughout the film, compromise and the possibility of healing old wounds is at the core of the narrative's themes, translating in Raya and Namaari reconciling in the end.



Figure 34 – Frames from the movie *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021). Namaari searches for Raya with her crew, follows her trail, and ultimately confronts her in an intense sword fight.

3.6.4. Discussion

Visible strength and subverting expectations

The design of these characters effectively conveys aggressiveness through a combination of visual elements, such as facial expressions, sharp design shapes, and props like weapons – while most characters interact with traditional weapons, Mebh relies on her teeth and claws, highlighting a more primal form of strength.

All six characters exhibit moments of physical prowess or engage in dangerous activities, such as direct physical altercations with others, where they take advantage of their athleticism and strength. Their designs also incorporate traits that are traditionally perceived to be more masculine, such as visible muscles and impressive physiques, further emphasizing their capability for physical activity and aggressiveness.

In general, the female warriors defy traditional preconceptions about gender roles – who should be strong, who should fight back, and who has sculpted, athletic bodies. The characters in our sample also show this subversion of expectations through their design. Luisa, for instance, is a gentle giant whose immense physical power is matched by her tender heart and deep sense of responsibility. Far from a stereotypical brute, she is feminine, vulnerable, and her strength is always employed in the service of others, making her a symbol of care and selflessness. Similarly, Gran's design plays with contrasts: she is initially portrayed as a frail, elderly woman, often joking about her readiness to embrace death. However, she surprises both characters and viewers by revealing her six-pack abs and the ability to still "kick ass" despite her age. Mebh is in fact just a child, drawn with mainly rounded affable shapes. While playful, she is also dangerous and fierce, ready to fight (and bite) anyone who threatens her family.

While Raya and Namaari's sleeker, more athletic designs align with audience expectations for young adult female characters capable of combat, they also incorporate innovative and even subversive elements. Raya stands out as the first character in the Disney Princess lineup to adopt a rugged, casual aesthetic, with loose, unkempt hair, a special sword, and, notably, pants – an unconventional choice for a Disney Princess, or truly for any female character in animation. As for Namaari, her edgy sleek haircut, V-shaped frame, and sharp weapons also defy feminine expectations. Like Raya, she also

wears pants, underscoring their functional, battle-ready looks. These design choices align Raya and Namaari with contemporary warrior archetypes, comparable to characters from the animated series *Arcane*, such as Vi, Caitlyn, Ambessa, and Sevika, who similarly balance strength, practicality, and individuality in their appearances, providing interesting and diverse female representation.

The female warrior in animation continues to push the boundaries of gender expectation, offering representation diversity, by expanding the possibilities of mixing gendered visual cues to obtain thoughtful, deep, and authentic designs.

3.7. Lovers

“We know Eros when we experience a passionate connection to a particular landscape, to our work, to an activity, to a cause, a religion, a way of life. We know Eros is at work when our connection with something is so strong that the thought of losing it brings intolerable pain. Without Eros, we can be born but never really live: our Souls simply never fall to earth. It is Eros—passion, attachment, desire, even lust—that makes us really alive.”

— Pearson, C. S., 1991, p. 173.

3.7.1. What defines the Lover archetype

Truby describes the lover archetype in its positive form as being a character that “provides the care, understanding, and sensuality that can make someone a complete and happy person”; in its shadow form, the lover is characterized by losing oneself in the other or forcing the other to stand in their shadow (Truby, 2007, p. 70).

The character embodying the Lover archetype is known for the deep connections it establishes with other cast members, often requiring honesty, vulnerability, passion or love from the Lover character. In her book *Awakening the Heroes Within*, American author and educator, Carol S. Pearson, dedicated to building upon the work of Jung, Hillman, and Campbell, describes the Lover archetype as one that seeks bliss, unity, and a profound sense of oneness, driven by a deep desire for connection and harmony. Its greatest fear is the loss of love or the pain of disconnection (1991). When faced with challenges, this archetype responds by embracing them with love and understanding.

This archetype's core task is to follow its passions and fully commit to what it loves, offering the gifts of unwavering commitment, boundless passion, and the joy of ecstasy.

Even though the Lover archetype is connected to different forms of human love (parental, familial, spiritual, friendly) it is often mostly associated with romantic love:

“You might think of the Roman love god and goddess – Cupid and Venus – and of classic cinematic heartthrobs like Clark Gable, Cary Grant, Sophia Loren, or Elizabeth Taylor. This is the realm of hearts and flowers, long strolls on sunset beaches, dancing in the moonlight – of the romantic love story in both its comic (live happily ever after) and its tragic forms (torn apart by death – Titanic – or circumstances – Casablanca).” (Mark & Pearson, 2001, p. 178)

The theme of star-crossed lovers, who defy all odds to pursue their love only to face inevitable separation, is a recurring motif in narratives across cultures and time periods. This tragic archetype is richly illustrated in mythology, folklore, literature, and contemporary culture. Examples range from Orpheus and Eurydice in Greek mythology to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Tristan and Isolde from Celtic legend, Guinevere and Lancelot of Arthurian tales, and the doomed romance of Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. More recent depictions include Kathy and Tommy in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2010) and Hazel and Gus in John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012), alongside many more examples. Portuguese literature and culture also embrace this theme, offering iconic examples such as Carlos da Maia and Maria Eduarda in Eça de Queirós' *Os Maias*, Simão Botelho and Teresa de Albuquerque in Camilo Castelo Branco's *Amor de Perdição*, and the legendary love story of D. Pedro I of Portugal and Inês de Castro. The prevalence and renown of such tales emphasize the enduring allure of love stories marked by passion and tragedy.

The Lover archetype is also embodied in characters whose unrequited love leads to a tragic end, as seen in Hans Christian Andersen's tale *The Little Mermaid*. In this tale, the mermaid bargains with the sea witch to gain legs in exchange for her voice, to live on land as a human, next to her beloved prince. However, if the prince marries someone

other than herself, she will perish. Right before the prince's wedding to another woman, the little mermaid's sisters bring her a dagger that the Sea Witch has given them in exchange for their hair. If the little mermaid kills the prince, she becomes a mermaid and can go back to living with her family. However, she is unable to bring herself to harm the prince she loves, choosing selflessness over violence: she throws herself into the sea and dissolves into foam upon the waves. This version of the story stands in stark contrast to Disney's sanitized and idealized adaptation, which features a rose-colored glasses happy ending and doesn't force the protagonist to reveal her true character (selfish) by having to make a seemingly impossible choice.

In other stories, the Lover archetype embarks on a more fulfilling journey, where their sacrifice and devotion ultimately lead to the love and connection they seek. Characters like Elizabeth Bennet (originally from Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*), Jane Eyre (originally from Charlotte Brontë's novel of the same name), Bridget Jones (originally created by British writer and columnist Helen Fielding), and even Samwise Gamgee (originally from J. R. R. Tolkien's work *The Lord of the Rings*) exemplify this archetype. Each demonstrates the Lover's capacity for emotional growth and the value of relationships founded on mutual respect and understanding. Elizabeth and Jane learn to balance their feelings with self-worth and morality, Bridget navigates personal insecurities to find love and fulfillment, and Samwise's unwavering loyalty and selflessness show a love rooted in courage and devotion. These characters highlight the transformative potential of love when paired with self-respect and emotional maturity.

In summary, we believe the Lover archetype is represented in a character that embodies love, passion, devotion, selflessness, and the capacity to connect deeply with others, often bringing out the best in themselves and those around them. It can be both associated with great sacrifices, loss, and tragedy, as well as happiness, fulfillment, and personal growth. The lover archetype in its positive form is about deep connection and emotional fulfillment, while its shadow form can lead to obsession, loss of self, or destructive behavior.

3.7.2. The female Lover in animation

The lover archetype in animation has often been associated with more traditional, antiquated notions of the princess trope. This archetype frequently embodies traits aligned with classical femininity, such as gentleness, patience, nurturing, and selflessness. Early animated princesses, like Snow White (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, 1937) Cinderella (*Cinderella*, 1950), and Aurora (*Sleeping Beauty*, 1959), exhibit these characteristics, embodying the "ideal" feminine virtues of being caring, domesticated, and virtuous. The roles they play are often defined around love, whether romantic or familial: they fall in love with a prince, they care for the animals and people around them, they are kind and available to meet other's needs.

However, while these characters reflect classical ideals of femininity, consequent interpretations of the lover archetype retain elements of care and love but also display independence, ambition, and emotional complexity, breaking away from these delicate, passive representations. These more recent characters blend traditional feminine qualities with assertiveness, intelligence, and agency, challenging the older, more restrictive interpretations of the lover archetype and of the princess trope.

While still shaped by traditional gender expectations, characters like Belle (*Beauty and the Beast*, 1991), Pocahontas (*Pocahontas*, 1995), and Esmeralda (*The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, 1996) stand out for their ability to see beauty and goodness in others, acting from the heart to save and care for those around them. They embody a nurturing and caring presence, and whose love and compassion have transformative power. However, unlike earlier Disney heroines, these characters display a spirited independence and rebelliousness, challenging the more passive roles assigned to their predecessors.

In a different interpretation of the lover archetype, Meg (*Hercules*, 1997), initially portrayed as a *femme fatale* who uses her charm in service of Hades' evil plans, gradually transforms as she experiences genuine love with Hercules. She ends up sacrificing her life to save him, as she leaps to push him out of the way of a collapsing pillar that crushes and kills her – she is, however, later saved by Hercules, who dives into the underworld to rescue her soul. Similarly, Chel (*The Road to El Dorado*, 2000) initially uses her charm

and sensuality as a tool for survival, aligning herself with the explorers Tulio and Miguel, who promise her a share of their newfound fortune and a ride to leave her city in exchange for her knowledge of the place they are in. She is initially driven by a desire for freedom and a better life, but as her feelings for Tulio deepen, she becomes emboldened and decides to leave with him, as a couple.

Nevertheless, Pocahontas, Esmeralda, Meg, and Chel's representations are problematic, for many reasons, including cultural and historical inaccuracies, the exoticization and sexualization of their characters, and the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes (Lacroix, 2004). While these characters are portrayed as young adults, their depiction often relies on provocative, sensual behavior that is generally considered inappropriate for female characters in animated feature films aimed at young audiences. They use their physicality to seduce male characters, wear revealing outfits, and exhibit behaviors such as provocative dancing (Esmeralda) or sensually massaging body parts, either theirs or their male counterparts (Chel). In Chel's case, the narrative even implies a sexual relationship, further contributing to the adult-coded nature of these portrayals.

These characters are, very obviously, not only the objects of love, but the objects of sexual desire: in *Hunchback*, Frollo is consumed by his sexual desire towards Esmeralda, blaming her for seducing him, and Phoebus falls in love with her, after being awed by her enticing dancing; in *Hercules*, when Phil, the Satyr, first meets Meg, he comments on her beautiful appearance and tries to seduce her, while Hercules is love-stricken at Meg's first sight as a damsel in distress; in *El Dorado*, both Miguel and Tulio are entranced by Chel's sensual movements and appearance, culminating in Tulio's giving in to the temptation of touching her; in *Pocahontas*, the interactions are more subdued and John Smith's love at first sight for Pocahontas seems more pure – even though she is designed as a statuesque super model.

There's also another interpretation of the Lover archetype, who appears to not be as commonly embodied by female characters in animation, but that is similar to Samwise Gamgee, in *The Lord of the Rings*. In the Japanese anime series *Cardcaptor Sakura* (1998-2000) – based on the manga series of the same name by CLAMP, an all-female manga artist group – Tomoyo embodies this other type of lover archetype, by ways of her selfless love and unwavering devotion to her best friend Sakura, the series

protagonist. While she harbors romantic feelings for Sakura, Tomoyo is content simply being by her side, valuing their bond over reciprocation. Tomoyo blends older notions of the female Lover archetype with more contemporary traits of independence and resourcefulness. She embodies traditional femininity through her gentleness, elegance, long adorned hair, and mastery of skills like sewing and singing. At the same time, she aligns with more contemporary expectations by demonstrating technological expertise, resourcefulness, and bravery.

Although this is not an extensive analysis, we concluded that female characters embodying the Lover archetype in animation are typically designed to align with conventional societal expectations of femininity, emphasizing beauty, daintiness, and sensuality. Earlier portrayals of this archetype often depicted women as submissive, domestic, and passive. However, beginning in the 1990s, these characters began to exhibit more empowered traits, characterized by a bold embrace of their sexuality and physicality, combined with a rebellious spirit and bravery. These characters are most often portrayed within heterosexual and heteronormative relationships, while examples of the Lover archetype as a selfless, devoted friend or family member are rarer in animation.

3.7.3. Results from our sample

In our sample, we identified six female characters who embody the lover archetype in its positive form. Notably, we did not find any characters representing the shadow aspect of the lover. The five instances we identified are Sophie, from *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004), Tiana, from *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), Rapunzel (*Tangled*, 2010), Anna, from *Frozen* (2013), Marnie, from *When Marnie was There* (2014), and Eep, from *The Croods: A New Age* (2020).

Sophie, Tiana, Rapunzel, and, arguably, Eep and Anna are the central characters in their respective films, while Marnie plays a crucial role as the deuteragonist to the movie's protagonist. As key characters driving the narrative, their designs are intricately tied to the storylines, reflecting their personal journeys and thematic significance. This connection between character design and narrative importance required a deeper, more

nuanced analysis of their visual representations, as their appearances are deliberately crafted to enhance and support the overarching messages of the films.

Rapunzel, Sophie and Tiana – Princesses, Haircuts and Other Physical Transformations

Tangled (2010) is Disney's adaptation of the German tale *Rapunzel*, famously recorded by the Brothers Grimm. The character design in *Tangled* is steeped in familiar stereotypes often found in classic fairy tales. At the center is the blonde, young, beautiful kind-hearted princess, who effortlessly befriends animals, and embodies grace, elegance, and care. Opposing her is the "evil stepmother" figure, Mother Gothel, whose design evokes witch-like qualities or even anti-Semitic stereotypes with her dark, curly hair, angular features, cold blue eyes, and hooded crimson velvet attire. She manipulates Rapunzel with cunning words and a controlling demeanor, to feed her vanity and desire for perpetual youth. The "prince" archetype is reimagined as Flynn Rider, a handsome, quick-witted thief who masks his selfless and kind heart behind a roguish exterior. Meanwhile, the two Stabbington brothers are cast as stereotypical villains, portrayed as ugly, brutish, violent, and dangerous – reinforcing the erroneous idea that external appearances reflect inner morality. They are also shown as unintelligent and easily manipulated, enhancing their role as foils to Flynn Rider's charm and wit and Mother Gothel's manipulation. The only exception are the ruffians and thugs in the tavern, who, however, offer a slight subversion of the expected tropes. While they appear grotesque, intimidating, and are prone to violence, Rapunzel's influence reveals their hidden aspirations and dreams, painting them as more than just criminals. This moment of transformation highlights Rapunzel's ability to see beyond appearances and inspire others to embrace their better selves – maybe asking the audience to do the same, a contradictory message within a stereotype-filled movie.

Rapunzel's design (Figure 35 and 36) is very similar to other Disney female protagonists. She is characterized by a slim figure with an elongated torso, a very thin waist, and a large head. Her facial features are soft and expressive, including big round green eyes, full rosy cheeks, a small, upturned nose, and full lips. The combination of a

large head and big eyes adds to the baby-face effect, a recurring design technique employed to Disney's female leading characters. She wears a delicate pink and lilac dress adorned with floral embroidered details, lace, and a corset-like bodice. Being confined to her tower for most of her life, she walks barefoot, as she never needed shoes.

Her most iconic feature is her extraordinarily long blonde hair, measuring 75 feet/ 22.86 m (Kurtti, 2015), which shines magically when she sings an incantation that can heal other people. Rapunzel's golden hair symbolizes the sun, as the movie's story explains that a droplet of sunlight once fell to the ground, giving rise to a magical golden flower with healing powers. When the Queen fell gravely ill during her pregnancy, the kingdom's guards and villagers sought the flower to save her. Once they found it, its magic healed the Queen, restoring her health. As a result of the flower's sun-infused magic, Rapunzel was born with extraordinary golden hair, imbued with the same healing powers. The hair features a distinctive swoop curl on her forehead, adding to its uniqueness. It is also designed to appear as a solid, serpent-like mass rather than individual strands, almost giving it the texture and flow of fabric, thus allowing Rapunzel to manipulate it with ease. Rapunzel's hair is more than just a physical trait; it is deeply intertwined with her identity. Throughout the movie, she frequently interacts with it, using it as an aid to various tasks and expressing her personality, thoughts, and emotions through it. Rapunzel's long hair is consistently depicted as an utilitarian element of her design. She uses it to restore Gothel's youth and heal Rider's injured hand; it acts as a rope and whip; it even lights up dark spaces.

While her hair proves useful at times, it also becomes a burden—especially in the kingdom, where it draws attention. In a tender moment, Rider enlists four young girls who braid Rapunzel's hair with flowers, making it more manageable and symbolizing visually her adaptation to a new environment. This new identity is quickly shattered, when, later, after a romantic boat scene with Rider, Gothel tricks Rapunzel into believing he has betrayed her. As she tries to escape, her once-empowering braid gets caught on a tree, turning into an obstacle and leaving her vulnerable.



Figure 35 – Frames from the movie *Tangled* (2010). Rapunzel uses her hair creatively – as a rope to catch Pascal, her pet chameleon, and to hoist herself onto the walls to paint her murals.



Figure 36 – Frames from the movie *Tangled* (2010). Rapunzel uses her hair as a rope to secure Rider to the chair and to light up the cave that is quickly flooding.

During the movie's climax, Rapunzel negotiates for Rider's life, who has been gravely wounded when Gothel captured him. Before Rapunzel surrenders her freedom to heal him, Rider sacrifices himself: he grabs a shard of broken glass from the floor, and swiftly cuts her hair (Figure 37). As the golden locks fall away, they lose their magical properties, turning brown and signaling the end of their enchantment – and the impossibility of healing and saving him. Rapunzel is left with brown, short, disheveled hair, marking a striking transformation in her design, as she loses her most iconic feature. (Rapunzel mourns Rider's death but revives him when a single tear falls onto his skin, suggesting that the magic still resides within her.) This drastic change in her appearance symbolizes her liberation from both her gift and her curse. The short brown hair visually aligns her with her mother, the Queen, who also has brown hair, further emphasizing Rapunzel's reclaimed identity as a princess. The Queen also dresses in lilac, matching Rapunzel's signature color palette.

Throughout history, women cutting their hair has been a powerful metaphor for personal transformation, a shedding of burdens, and embracing new identities. In this case, it is Rider – now also embracing his true identity as Eugene – who makes the choice for Rapunzel, forcing her into her true identity as princess.

One could argue that the film implies an association between blonde hair being magical and special, while brown hair appears plain or unremarkable. However, the movie tries to redeem itself from this potential criticism when Eugene, after coming back to life, affectionately tells Rapunzel that he 'has a thing for brunettes.' This moment places value and appreciation on her new appearance, celebrating what might otherwise be considered ordinary.



Figure 37 – Frames from the movie *Tangled* (2010). Rider cuts Rapunzel's hair to free her from Gothel, leading to her emotional reunion with her mother.



Figure 38 – Frames from the movie *Tangled* (2010). Rapunzel takes the initiative in kissing Eugene (Flynn Rider).

Rapunzel's hair serves as a powerful visual metaphor throughout the film, representing both a gift and a curse. When it hinders her escape or becomes a tool for others to control her, it symbolizes the burdens tied to her identity – her kidnapping, isolation, and fear of being valued solely for her magical abilities rather than her true self. This fear aligns with the Lover archetype's core vulnerability: the desire to be loved for who they are, not for what they can provide. Conversely, when Rapunzel uses her hair to move, fight, or heal those she loves, it is seen as a gift – a source of empowerment and connection. This duality reflects Rapunzel's own conflicting feelings about her magic and the life it has dictated.

As a lover, Rapunzel challenges traditional gender expectations. Not only is she highly capable of surviving on her own and saving Eugene, but she also takes initiative in their romantic moments, such as being the one to kiss him after reviving him (Figure 38). At the end of the movie, she further subverts norms by taking the lead – sweeping Eugene into her arms, holding his head, and hovering over him in a pose typically associated with male characters, thus demonstrating her power and assertiveness. Their relationship is built on mutual trust and respect, with neither adhering to rigid gender roles; both take initiative and actively express their love for one another. Through her kindness and unwavering belief in him, Rapunzel helps Eugene rediscover his true self and embrace vulnerability. The Lover archetype often inspires transformation through love and compassion, as seen in Eugene's growth into a more selfless and genuine person.

In *Howl's Moving Castle*, Sophie is initially presented as a young woman living a quiet and somewhat repressed life (Figure 39). She seems introverted, self-conscious, and perceives herself as unremarkable. Her design communicates this resolve to hide from the world: she first appears as a plain girl with wispy bangs, simple clothing, brown eyes, and brown hair, tied in a single braid adorned with two pink ribbons.

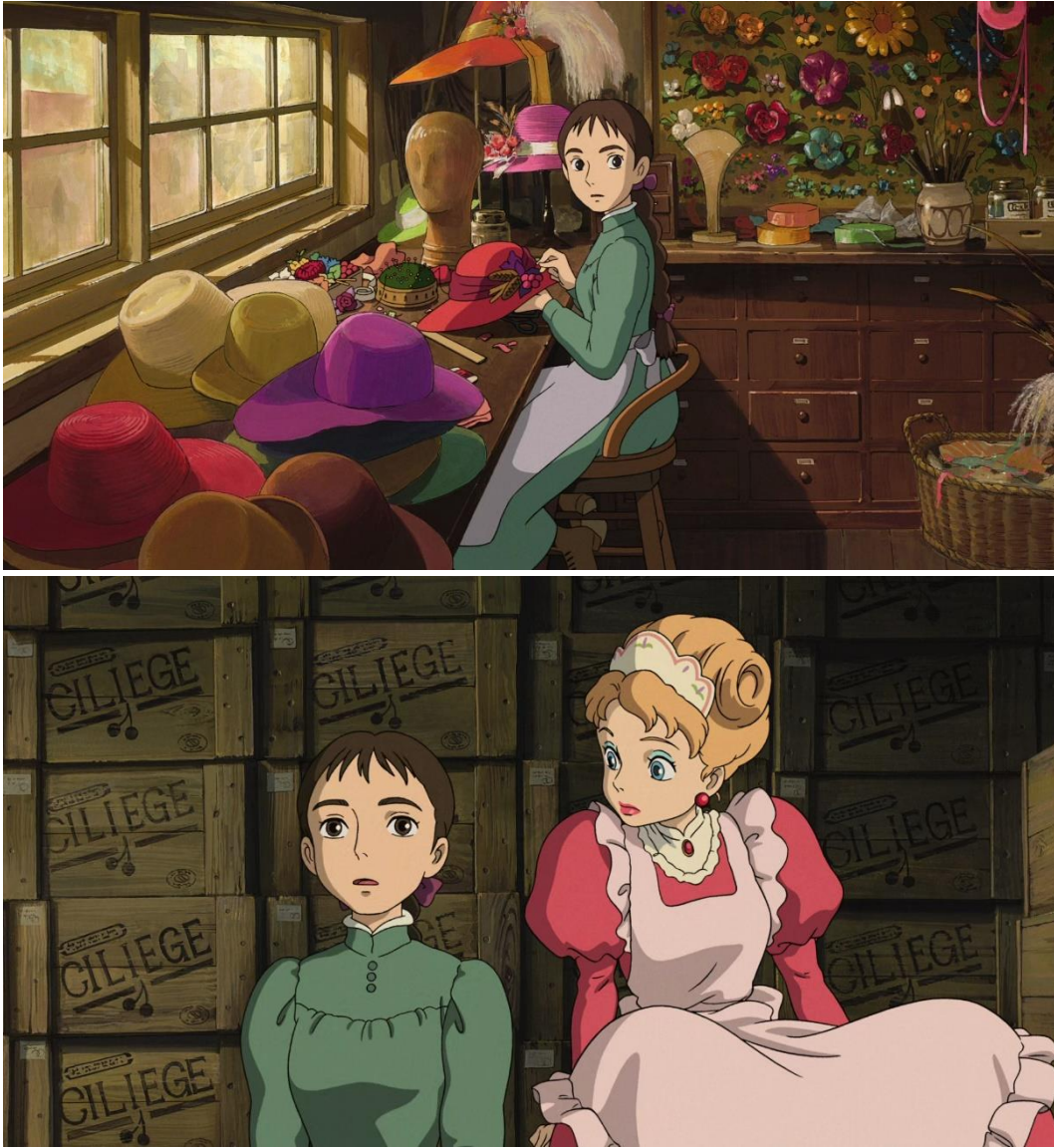


Figure 39 – Frames from the movie *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004). Plain-looking Sophie, who works at a hat shop, is the visual opposite of her younger sister Lettie.

Her presentation contrasts starkly with her younger, more outgoing sister, Lettie, for example, who wears makeup and earrings, has her blonde hair in a voluptuous updo, and dresses in a bright pink dress and apron, with puffy sleeves and frills (Figure 38). Sophie's initial design reflects the way she lives life: silently, quietly, unremarkably. Her sense of duty and responsibility keep her tethered to the hat shop she works in, and she resigns herself to a life of monotony.

Before leaving the shop when work is done, Sophie grabs her hat – beige and simple, unlike the hats she was working on, which had bright colors and big flowers – and looks in the mirror. She smiles and tries to strike a pose, but quickly feels embarrassed and pulls the hat tightly over her face, concealing it. Even though she feels insecure about her appearance, two soldiers stop her on the street: they praise her looks (“She sure is a cute little mouse.”), harass her (“Say, how old are you? Do you live around here?”) and scare her (“She is even cuter when she’s scared.”). When Sophie is cornered by the soldiers, she meets Howl, who saves her from that possibly dangerous and definitely uncomfortable encounter. Howl appears as a knight in shining armor, with his golden flowy hair, delicate face, and beautiful clothing and jewelry (Figure 22). His flamboyant, elegant, and whimsical design captures his vain, confident, and narcissistic personality at the beginning of the movie. Even though he rescued Sophie, he fails to recognize the predatory behavior of the soldiers, telling her simply to “Don’t hold it against them, they’re harmless”. So, while Howl may appear charming and helpful to Sophie, it's clear that he's not a hero at this point in the story.

Due to Sophie's encounter with Howl, the jealous Witch of the Waste curses her, out of spite, to become an old woman (Figure 40). Sophie's new appearance is, one might argue, unappealing: her hair turns grey, her skin becomes wrinkly and sagging, her eyes, nose and ears grow, her posture crumbles forward.



Figure 40 – Frames from the movie *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004). Sophie reacts in shock to her transformed appearance and later tenderly cares for Howl as he rests in his bedroom.

This curse is not just a physical transformation; it serves as a catalyst for Sophie's emotional and psychological growth. She feels compelled to venture into the unknown, seeking a way to break the curse. The journey leads her to Howl's castle, where she quickly adapts to a new role as caretaker. She looks after Howl, while also scolding him for his childish tantrums, and manages the castle by cooking, cleaning, and caring for its tenants.

As an old woman, Sophie is assertive, cunning, resourceful, and courageous. She is not easily intimidated by Howl's scary temper tantrums or the powerful witches Madam Sulliman and the Witch of the Waste. She doesn't hide; she is outspoken. Looking like an old woman liberates Sophie from the insecurities and fears that held her back as a young woman: "The good thing about being old is you've got so little to lose", she says.

Nevertheless, the curse isn't static and her appearance fluctuates according to her emotional state (Figure 41) – although there is not a linear relationship between the two, when she feels confident in her love for Howl or when she is happy and calm, she may look younger; when she is feeling self-conscious and says derogatory things towards herself (like "I've never once been beautiful!"), she may appear old again.



Figure 41 – Frames from the movie *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004). Sophie's appearance changes smoothly as she speaks confidently, going from old woman to her younger self.

Throughout the movie, Sophie heals those around her by offering love, compassion, and strength. She cares for young Markl, and for the old Witch of the Waste, by feeding them and nurturing them. She rescues Turnip, a cursed scarecrow, at least two times, and after he returns the favor, she kisses him, breaking his curse. He regains his human form, which could only be achieved by a true love's kiss – leaving to the interpretation of the audience what true love might mean; since it is clear that Sophie loves the people around her, without reservations. When Calcifer asks for something of hers to consume and regain his strength, she offers him her braid, which he cuts off and quickly gulps down. She then breaks his curse and sets him free – also giving him a kiss (Figure 42). Like Rapunzel, Sophie's hair serves as a symbolic sacrifice made for someone else's well-being, representing transformation, liberation, and her transition into a more confident and empowered role. Finally, Sophie returns Howl's heart to his chest, breaking his curse. They embrace each other and kiss.

Sophie helps others grow into better versions of themselves by forgiving their mistakes, caring for them, and recognizing their potential, even when they cannot see it for themselves. It is by offering love and compassion to others, as well as to herself, that the curse is broken, and she is restored to her youthful form – now with short silver hair, a visual reminder of the sacrifices she made and the lessons she learned. As Shore wrote:

Multiple states of consciousness are explored in *Howl's Moving Castle* after teen Sophie is cursed by a witch that forces her to assume the body of a 90-year-old. Sophie experiences life as the triple *anima*: mother, maiden and crone. In this polymorphous state, Sophie learns much more about herself and womanhood than she could have envisioned from merely an adolescent sense of self (2013, p. 16).

Sophie's arc is an exploration of personal growth, highlighting how external challenges can lead to internal strength. She transforms from a shy, self-doubting young woman to a confident, loving, and self-assured person, and her design serves as a visual metaphor of this transformation. Sophie embodies the transformative power of love – not superficial romance, but a deeper love rooted in self-acceptance, compassion, understanding, and confidence in one's own abilities, values, and morals.



Figure 42 – Frames from the movie *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004). Sophie, restored to her true self with freshly cut silver hair, gazes lovingly at Howl after saving him and returning his heart, then kisses Calcifer in gratitude.

Tiana, the protagonist in *The Princess and the Frog*, is the first Black character in the Disney Princess line, depicted as a hardworking African American young woman living in New Orleans during the Jazz Age. Tiana appears in three different forms throughout the movie: as a young child, as an adult, and as a frog.

In the beginning of the movie, we see young Tiana, and young Lottie, listening to the fairytale about a girl who kissed a frog and transformed him into a prince (Figure 43). Tiana's design already shows some hints at what her future might entail: she wears a simple yellow crown and a green dress, hinting at the story where she is transformed into a frog (green) and becomes a princess (crown). As an adult, she is designed with brown skin, wavy black hair, honey-colored eyes, and a slim silhouette. She has rounded facial features, with disproportionately big eyes and full lips, as well as subtle makeup, creating the familiar baby-face effect of Disney princesses. She wears several clothes throughout the movie, but we learn that she wears a simple blue or yellow dress with a white apron daily – the uniforms for her two jobs as a waitress. This reflects the fact that Tiana's life is characterized by her relentless work ethic. However, this single-minded focus on her professional goal of opening her own restaurant leaves little room for fun, relaxation, or relationships.

Tiana's characterization is somewhat reminiscent of Cinderella (*Cinderella*, 1950), who was also a dedicated, diligent worker, tirelessly performing chores for her stepmother and stepsisters. However, Cinderella's dream of escaping her oppressive life and finding happiness is tied to magical intervention and marrying a prince, while Tiana's dreams of building a successful happy life for herself are grounded in her own efforts and perseverance. Tiana reflects contemporary values and expectations for character development, agency, and representation: she is not waiting for a magical "wish-upon-a-star" resolution; she is self-reliant, career-driven, and takes an active role in solving her problems.



Figure 43 – Frames from the movie *The Princess and the Frog* (2009). Young Lottie and Tiana listen to a fairytale read by Tiana’s mother, establishing her social class. Adult Tiana later enters her bedroom, exhausted from a night shift as a waitress.



Figure 44 – Frames from the movie *The Princess and the Frog* (2009). Lottie exaggerates her expressions while applying mascara, showcasing animators pushing female character limits – something rarely seen, lest they look unappealing or ugly. She then comically adjusts her cleavage, preparing to impress Prince Naveen, while Tiana feels heartbroken after her restaurant offer is refused.

This also contrasts with Lottie's characterization: although she and Tiana are close – due to Tiana's mother working as a skilled seamstress for Lottie's family – Lottie has always received everything she desired without having to work for it, simply because her father is wealthy and spoils her with love and gifts. Lottie's design reflects her family's wealth, her personality, and her single aspiration for becoming a princess. She has blonde hair, blue eyes, and round features, and always dresses in pink, thus emphasizing her playful, girlish demeanor. Although Lottie's design embodies the *idea* of the typical princess, by appearing to be feminine and delicate, she is much more fun and unpredictable than, for example, Aurora, Cinderella or Snow White: she is drawn with exaggerated expressions and animated with wide gestures and a caricatured sense of movement (Figure 44), unlike the princesses of the past who were often modelled and animated after delicate actresses and ballet dancers³³. In contrast, Tiana's design is notably demure, and she moves with grace, characterized by deliberate movements and restrained expressions. The contrast between Tiana and Lottie's designs mirrors that of Sophie and her sister Lettie: both protagonists are portrayed with modest, understated designs, while their close female counterparts embody a more stereotypical representation of femininity, designed primarily to be admired for their beauty.

Like Sophie's, Tiana's journey is shaped by a transformative curse. When she meets Prince Naveen, who has been turned into a frog by Dr. Facilier, he convinces her to kiss him to break the spell, by offering money to start her business. However, because Tiana is not a princess, the kiss backfires, and she is also turned into a frog (Figure 45). This unexpected transformation pushes Tiana out of her comfort zone and into an adventure through the Louisiana bayous in search of a cure. As a frog, Tiana's design retains strong feminine signifiers: her eyes are outlined in black with prominent eyelashes, and her slender figure suggests a feminine hourglass silhouette. In contrast, Naveen's frog design is sturdier and less delicate, with larger shapes. While he is perceived as *a* frog, she is distinctly interpreted as being *a female* frog.

³³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SNkjc6ok2KQ>
<https://cartoonresearch.com/index.php/live-action-reference/>



Figure 45 – Frames from the movie *The Princess and the Frog* (2009). Tiana works as a waitress at Duke's before being transformed into a frog after kissing Prince Naveen, leaving her embarrassed and scared.

It is common practice in animation to exaggerate the anthropomorphism of female animal characters by using gendered signifiers that unmistakably code them as female (Sá & Tavares, 2017b). These visual cues – such as makeup, skirts, hairstyles, and accessories – are drawn from human gender constructs rather than from the natural traits of the animals they represent.

The transformation she goes through and the journey she embarks on is crucial to her growth, as it teaches her that there is more to life than just work and ambition – there is also joy, spontaneity, and the importance of living in the moment. Tiana mostly learns this from Naveen, who is charming and carefree, but has been living a hedonistic lifestyle, where he didn't have the need to pick up any useful skills. Unlike older fairy tales, where passivity was the key feature, Tiana's relationship with Prince Naveen is one of mutual growth. Both characters help each other become better versions of themselves. This portrays a more equitable, modern view of relationships, where partnership and shared experiences lead to individual growth. Their relationship grows into love for each other, when they both understand and accept each other's faults, strengths, and different perspectives on life – they love each other “warts and all”, as they say in the movie. With newfound confidence in who they are and what they mean to each other, they resolve to live happily together as frogs and marry in the swamp (Figure 46). However, their marriage kiss breaks the curse, and they are both returned to human form. In true Disney princess style, a puffy, elaborate, glittery green dress magically appears, momentarily transforming Tiana into a quintessential fairytale princess.

Tiana's embodiment of the lover archetype shows that love is not one-sided or based on appearances; it's about compassion and understanding for each other's strengths and weaknesses. Through her relationship with Naveen, Tiana learns to reassess her values, realizing that life isn't just about hard work. While she initially feels morally superior for her dedication, Naveen helps her become less judgmental and appreciate the importance of relationships and enjoying life's moments. In return, he learns the value of hard work from Tiana.



Figure 46 – Frames from the movie *The Princess and the Frog* (2009). Tiana and Naveen marry while still frogs, and their curse is lifted after they share a kiss.

Anna and Marnie – Familial Love

In *Frozen*, Anna and Elsa are sisters and princesses of the kingdom of Arendelle. Even though both sisters can be considered the main characters, we argue that Anna is in fact the protagonist, because the audience follows her journey closer, and she is the catalyst for all the characters' arcs.

Anna's design helps inform the audience of the progression of her story as it often reflects what is happening to her in the narrative. She appears as a child and as a young woman, wearing several different outfits and going through one significant physical transformation.

The sisters' designs are actually very similar in many ways (Figure 47). They both wear their hair braided: Anna wears two long lower braids on each side of her head, and Elsa rocks a single chunky French braid. Both sisters' figures are very slender, with big heads, wasp waists, elongated torsos, and tiny feet. Their faces are also very similar, with exaggerated big round eyes, full cheeks, upturned tiny noses, and small lips. While they both have blue eyes and pale skin, Anna is marked by a unique freckle pattern on her cheeks and shoulders, absent in Elsa. Although they seem to have a very similar base model to their design, some added elements contrast sharply: Elsa's platinum blonde hair and icy blue attire reflect her magical ice powers, while Anna's warm-toned, honey-colored hair and green outfits evoke warmth and vitality.

When we first see the sisters, they are children playing together and they both wear their signature colors: green, for Anna, and blue, for Elsa. During one of these play sessions, Elsa accidentally strikes Anna on the head with her magical ice powers, turning a streak of Anna's hair white (Figure 47). Because this puts Anna's life in danger, the sisters grow apart, as Elsa, who can't control her magic, isolates herself to avoid hurting anyone again. We also noted that, from this moment on, both characters' clothing always has an element of black, while still maintaining their signature colors. Black may signify the loss of their relationship and them growing apart, due to Elsa's fear of losing control over her powers.



Figure 47 – Frames from the movie *Frozen* (2013). Anna and Elsa have similar designs as children and adults. After Elsa’s coronation, Anna, Olaf, and Kristoff set out to find her ice castle.

Black appears again, this time more prominently, when the girls' parents die at sea, during a storm. Both Anna and Elsa dress in black, as is customary in some cultures during mourning periods. During Elsa's consequent coronation as the Queen of Arendelle, both sisters wear ornate dresses, made with shades of green and blue, with prominent black elements.

Once Elsa's coronation goes wrong and she flees to North Mountain after cursing the kingdom into an eternal Winter, Anna decides to run after her. This is a time for an outfit change again: her green dress becomes comically frozen, and she is forced to gear up with weather appropriate clothing, such as black tall boots, a long-sleeved black and blue dress, blue gloves, a pink cloak and bonnet. Her cloak features a small detail at the top: two heart-shaped metal clasps that fasten it, possibly hinting at the important role that love plays in her life (Figure 47).

When Anna finds and confronts Elsa, she is hit for the second time by her sister's magic. As she was hit on the chest, the curse is worse this time and her hair – all of it – slowly turns white. As the curse progresses, ice patterns emerge on her skin, and the tips of her fingers turn icy blue. After consulting with the trolls in the forest who understand about magic, Anna learns that “Only an act of true love can thaw a frozen heart”. After misunderstanding what that meant at first, she hopelessly admits to not knowing what love really is; and to this Olaf (a supporting character) explains that “love is putting someone else's needs before yours”. Understanding this, Anna ends up sacrificing herself to save Elsa, jumping in front of her sister to protect her from a deadly sword, swung by the evil Prince Hans – even if it meant turning into ice and risking her own life.

Like Sophie and Tiana, Anna goes through a physical transformation alongside her discovery of love's power and true meaning. At this moment, her body and clothes become blue and translucent, like ice (Figure 48). Anna's act of true love toward her sister Elsa breaks the curse and revives her. Following this, Elsa asks, 'You sacrificed yourself for me?' to which Anna replies, 'I love you.' This selfless act not only saves Anna but also inspires Elsa's journey of self-love and discovery, enabling her to better control her powers and lift the curse she cast over the kingdom.



Figure 48 – Frames from the movie *Frozen* (2013). Elsa is devastated to find Anna frozen, because of her magic. Anna is released from the curse, celebrating with Kristoff, Elsa and the people of Arendelle.

After summer has returned and the eternal winter curse has broken, Anna is seen dressed again in her usual shades of green, now with her hair completely honey colored, no white streaks in sight (Figure 48).

Anna's character arc revolves around her deep love for her sister, Elsa, and her unquenched desire for connection. Even though she exhibits some rebellious tendencies, she is driven by love, hope and self-sacrifice, thus, we believe, identifying more strongly with the lover archetype (rather than the rebel archetype, for example).

At the beginning of the movie, Anna represents the lover archetype who is desperate for deep connection and who feels alone – the greatest pain one can inflict on the lover archetype. Because her sister lives in isolation and the kingdom walls are shut from the outside world, she is starved for affection, attention, and human interaction.

This makes her easy prey for ill-intended Prince Hans, who plans to marry into the royal family of Arendelle. Anna's initial romantic relationship with Hans reflects her idealized view of love, as well as serving as a critical observation of previous representations of romantic relationships in older Disney movies (and many Hollywood romances), where couples would fall in love at first sight and marry immediately.

Anna ultimately learns, through her interactions with her *other* romantic interest, Kristoff, the importance of meaningful connections over superficial attraction. In one of the songs of the movie, the trolls emphasize Anna's role as a Lover, suggesting that love can bring out the best in others, as seen in her ability to inspire Kristoff and to see beyond his apparent imperfections. After going through a hard journey together, their relationship deepens and their affection for each other grows. At the end of the movie, Anna and Kristoff do not get married. Instead, Anna replaces Kristoff's destroyed sleigh, prompting him to express his elation by saying he could kiss her. Notably, Kristoff asks for Anna's consent before doing so, and only after she agrees do they share a kiss. This moment, possibly the first openly consented kiss in mainstream animated films, represents a progressive shift in animation history, setting a positive example for younger audiences about the importance of consent in romantic relationships.

Throughout the movie, the lover archetype is visible in Anna's actions as she bonds with everyone (people, animals, snowmen) around her, cares for them, trusting them, showing them vulnerability, and seeing their beauty. She believes that "no one wants to

be alone”, as she says in the movie. Through her relationships with Elsa and her romantic interests, Anna experiences significant personal growth, learning about trust, sacrifice, and the transformative power of love.

Marnie, from *When Marnie Was There*, appears as a mysterious and lively girl who lives in a grand, old mansion that Anna, the movie’s protagonist, discovers near the marsh. Marnie is charismatic, adventurous, and full of life – everything Anna is not. They quickly form a close friendship, with Marnie offering the companionship and understanding that Anna desperately craves. Marnie is the first person with whom Anna feels completely accepted and free to be herself. Their relationship becomes a source of comfort and joy for Anna, who feels less alone whenever she’s with Marnie.

Marnie is portrayed as an elegant, idealized figure with long, beautifully curled blonde hair, bright blue eyes, and graceful movements (Figure 49). She wears fancy dresses in soft, pretty colors, exuding femininity and tenderness. In contrast, Anna has a tomboyish casual appearance: her brown hair is cut short and messy; she wears polo shirts, shorts, and sneakers. Despite Anna’s (arguably) more masculine appearance, it is Marnie who takes on a confident role, often guiding and leading Anna, who is shyer and more reserved. Their dynamic challenges the social expectation that Anna, given her outward appearance, would be the more assertive and daring one. Marnie’s background as a foreigner, being part of a British family living in Japan, further sets her apart and contextualizes her golden locks.

Through their interactions, Anna begins to confront her inner turmoil and insecurities, stemming from the fact that her parents died, she is adopted, and also of mixed heritage. On the other hand, Marnie finds solace in Anna’s company, although she feels abandoned by her parents, who leave her for long periods of time at home, to be taken care of by housemaids that bully her. Their relationship is one of mutual support and healing, as they each help the other to face their fears and past traumas (Figure 50).

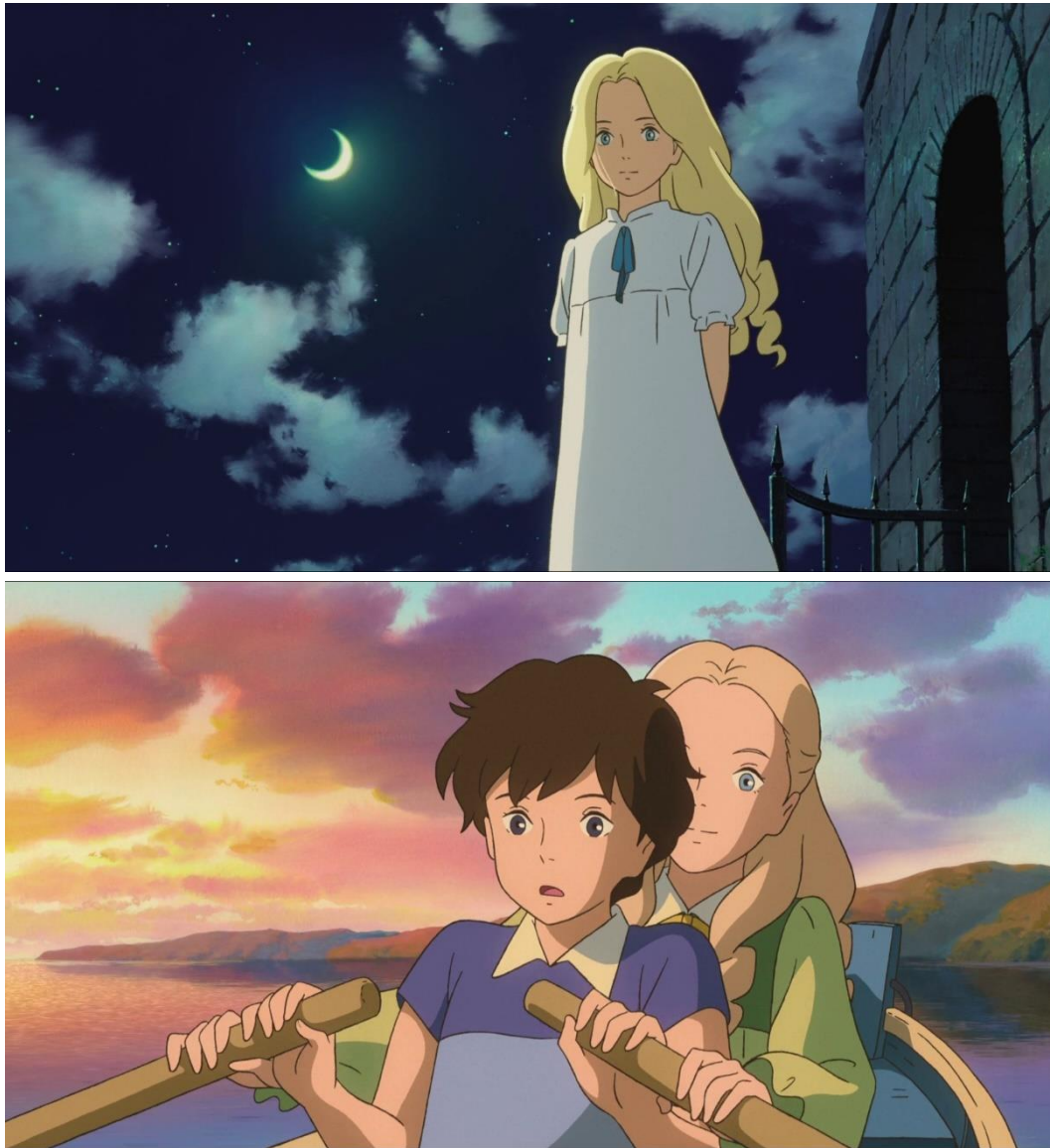


Figure 49 – Frames from the movie *When Marnie Was There* (2013). Marnie appears as a mysterious angelic figure in the night, who helps Annas safely moor the boat she used to get across the marsh. She later teaches Anna how to properly row the small boat they often use to meet each other.



Figure 50 – Frames from the movie *When Marnie was There* (2013). Marnie comforts Anna when she cries. In a flashback scene, Marnie in her old age cares for Anna, her granddaughter, after her parents died.

As the story progresses, we learn that Marnie is a figment of Anna's imagination, connected to her subconscious and her past. Eventually, it is revealed that Marnie is, in fact, Anna's grandmother, and the memories Anna shares with Marnie are based on real events from Marnie's life. We learn that Marnie grew up in Japan and married a Japanese man, with whom she had a daughter named Emily. This reveals Anna's mixed heritage, as she is Emily's daughter. Anna's eyes are also blue, although not as bright as Marnie's.

Near the end of the movie, we see Marnie through various stages of her life: marrying, grieving the loss of her husband, clashing with her teenage daughter, and eventually caring for her infant granddaughter Anna, after her daughter's death. Throughout this montage, Marnie's appearance changes to reflect the passage of time, with her hair gradually greying and signs of aging, such as wrinkles, becoming apparent. Despite these changes, she retains blue eyes, curled hair, and overall elegance.

The realization that Marnie is a manifestation of her grandmother allows Anna to understand her own history and identity more fully. It helps her come to terms with her feelings of abandonment and loneliness, ultimately allowing her to begin healing and accepting the love of her foster family.

Marnie embodies the lover archetype by providing Anna with deep emotional connection, understanding, and unconditional love. This archetype, in its positive form, is characterized by the capacity to form meaningful bonds that enrich and transform the lives of others. Through Marnie's nurturing support, Anna experiences healing and growth, highlighting Marnie's role as a source of profound care and transformation.

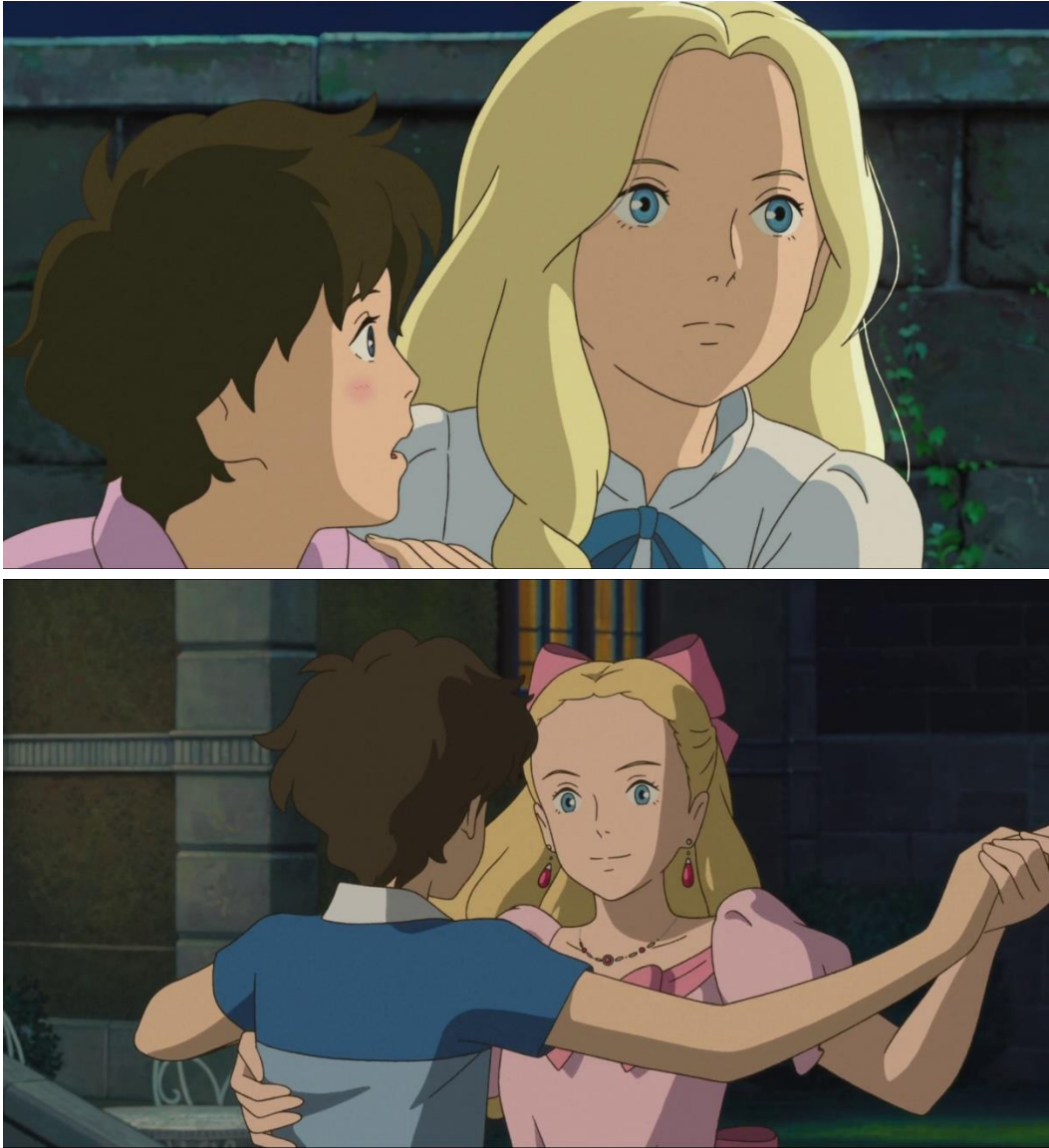


Figure 51 – Frames from the movie *When Marnie was There* (2013). These are two examples of Anna blushing and slight embarrassment when Marnie touches her, holds her or takes the lead, for example, while teaching her to dance.

Heightened by their contrasting designs (Figure 51) – Marnie’s feminine appearance and Anna’s more androgynous look – their relationship can be interpreted as a metaphorical exploration of discovering one’s sexuality, particularly in the context of early same-sex attraction. As is typical of coming-of-age stories, the characters experience growth and self-discovery throughout the narrative. In several instances, their relationship appears tinged with romantic undertones: e.g. Anna displays jealousy when Marnie dances with a boy at a party, and she often blushes when Marnie touches her or takes the lead, whether teaching her to row or to dance. While the film does not explicitly frame their bond as romantic, the intensity of their emotional connection and the depth of their affection suggest a parallel to a young person’s first love. Both characters openly express that they love each other more than anyone else. However, this love may be interpreted not as romantic desire but as a profound, soulful connection and unconditional familial love. Through this relationship, Anna learns to embrace her identity, find peace with her past, and open herself up to love and connection in the present.

Eep – Romantic Cishet Love with a Twist

In *The Croods: A New Age*, Eep continues to embody the adventurous spirit that defined her in the first film, *The Croods* (2013). She is a strong-willed, adventurous young woman who is eager to explore the world beyond the confines of the cave she lives in, and the overprotective, survival-focused mindset of her family.

Eep’s design is unique and surprising for a young female protagonist in an animated feature: a strong and athletic build, featuring muscles and a robust frame, with her shoulders being larger than her hips (Figure 52). This physicality aligns with her active, adventurous role in the story and signifies her capability, athleticism, and resilience. Eep’s design is intended to resemble our idea of a Neanderthal, with her short legs and elongated upper body (arms and torso) reflecting a more primal structure. This design choice emphasizes her ability to move on all fours, similar to an ape, highlighting her connection to a more primitive stage of human evolution. She wears a halter-neck dress made from animal hides, again highlighting her rugged cave-woman nature. Eep has

green eyes and red wild hair, that creates a messy, voluminous look. Red haired female characters in animation have long been associated with a rebellious spirit and adventurous personality, such as Ariel from *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and Merida from *Brave* (2012). Eep also has what could be commonly considered physical imperfections: her teeth have wide gaps between them, she has many scars throughout her body, and is even missing a pinky toe, which she hides with half a peanut shell. Eep's design stays the same until the end of the movie.

In this sequel, the Croods and their pets meet the Bettermans, a more "evolved" modern family living in a utopian environment. The Bettermans look down on the Croods as savage and inferior. When they encounter Guy, they try to pair him with their daughter Dawn, creating tension with Eep and making her feel insecure. Early in the film, Eep and Guy are deeply infatuated (Figure 53), focused on each other to the point that Grug, Eep's father, worries they might leave the family behind.

Eep and Guy's relationship fractures as they drift apart—Guy is drawn to the Bettermans' ideal of a perfect future, while Eep feels judged and unworthy. Their conflicting desires, along with outside interference from Grug and the Bettermans, deepen the divide between them. After time apart and reflection, Eep, aided by the Thunder Sisters, rescues Guy from danger. They recognize their mistakes and renew their love for each other.

By the film's end, Eep and Guy's relationship grows stronger through shared experiences and personal growth. They realize their love can thrive alongside their individual dreams—Eep embraces her adventurous spirit while staying committed to family, and Guy accepts his identity instead of conforming to the Bettermans. Their bond matures as they balance personal goals with their commitment to each other.

Eep and Guy's journey emphasizes the importance of mutual support and understanding in a relationship. They grow individually and together by appreciating each other's strengths and values. Their bond evolves from simple attraction to a deeper partnership based on love, respect, and acceptance of each other's backgrounds and personal growth.

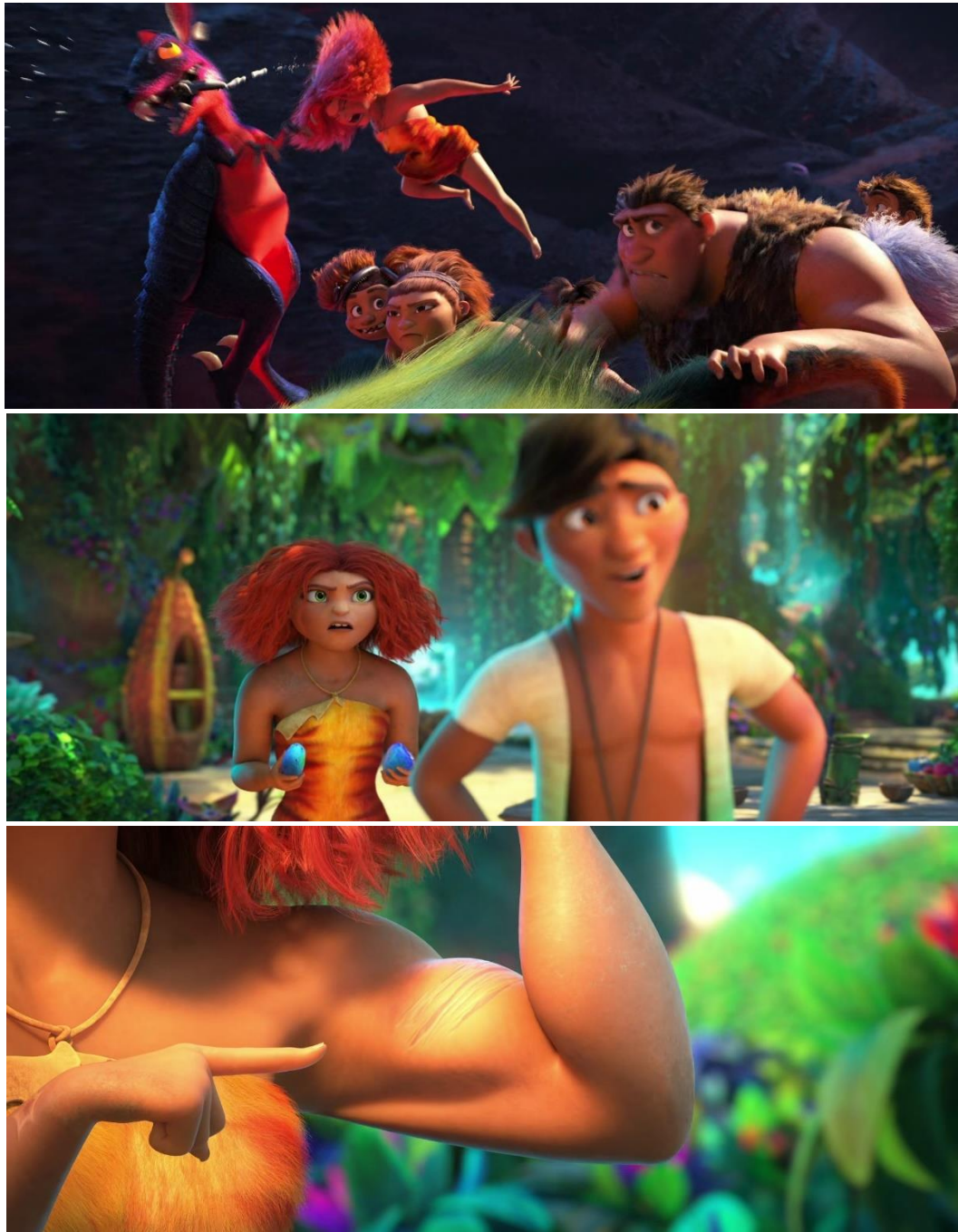


Figure 52 – Frames from the movie *The Croods: A New Age* (2020). Eep is athletic, strong, and fierce. When Guy begins to adopt the Bettermans' beauty and cleanliness standards, she feels judged and inadequate — although she still embraces her scars with pride, confident in who she is.



Figure 53 – Frames from the movie *The Croods: A New Age* (2020). Eep is a fierce, unconventional female character who often takes the lead, embracing a role traditionally seen as more ‘masculine’ in her relationship with Guy.

3.7.4. Discussion

Love and Physical Beauty

The characters embodying the lover archetype in this analysis each offer a surprising twist on traditional expectations. While their designs somewhat conform to traditional expectations of the archetype, Rapunzel and Anna are still represented with a modicum of subversion: they initially present themselves as the fragile, innocent, dreamy princess trope, but ultimately reveal their strong, athletic, proactive nature, showing they can take care of themselves and those they love. Nevertheless, their designs are still very much aligned with traditional concepts of feminine beauty, the Disney princess character, and the expectation of beauty in a character that develops a romantic relationship in a movie.

Truly surprising is Sophie's representation, since she spends much of the film as an old, 'ugly' woman, subverting the typical portrayal of youthful and beautiful love interests in animation. Even though she returns to her young self in the end, the deep bond she develops with Howl is built on emotional connection rather than (simply) superficial attraction.

Similarly, Tiana is transformed into a frog for most of the story, making her physical appearance irrelevant to her romantic relationship. Although, in the end, she marries an arguably attractive prince and is returned to her beautiful young human appearance, their relationship is based on mutual understanding, support and love, not physical beauty.

Marnie, whose design is the typical template of the soft feminine lover, surprises the audience because she represents a different type of love altogether, as she is revealed to be the memory of Anna's grandmother, offering unconditional familial love rather than romantic affection.

Lastly, Eep also defies expectations with her Neanderthal-like appearance, far from the typical 'princess' image. Her relationship with Guy is built on mutual care and protection, with Eep often acting as the savior and rescuer, thus challenging traditional gender roles in romance.

Each of these characters defines the lover archetype, by showing that love is not limited to physical attraction or romance, but rather about emotional depth, connection, support, and selflessness.

Still, there remains a consistent connection between the narrative arc of the lover archetype and conventionally attractive character design. Both Rapunzel and Anna are designed as traditionally beautiful characters, maintaining this appearance throughout their respective films. While each undergoes a change in their design – Anna's subtle transformation with the loss of her white streak and Rapunzel's more dramatic haircut and hair color change – these alterations do not diminish their overall beauty.

Although Sophie and Tiana are loved for who they are 'on the inside' – because of their personalities, values, and actions –, they are ultimately "rewarded" with their beauty when their curses are broken. Despite their partners falling in love with them based on their inner qualities, their transformations into beautiful versions of themselves at the end reflects a familiar narrative pattern. This echoes older stories like *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), where Belle falls in love with the Beast despite his monstrous appearance, only to have him transformed into a handsome prince, which feels like a "reward" for her love. It suggests that the final prize for loving beyond appearances is the restoration of external beauty, reinforcing traditional associations between love and physical attractiveness.

Shrek (2001) is a notorious (and rather unique) counterexample to the idea that the final reward for loving beyond appearances is the restoration of external beauty. At the end of the movie, Fiona, a beautiful human who had been cursed to transform into an ogre each night, remains in her ogre form permanently, after falling in love with Shrek (who is also an ogre). Instead of being "rewarded" with a return to her original human beauty, she finds happiness and acceptance in her ogre form, showing that love isn't tied to conventional standards of attractiveness. This reversal of the outcome subverts the expectation that love leads to physical perfection, celebrating instead inner beauty and authenticity. It challenges the traditional fairy tale idea that outward appearance must match an idealized beauty standard in order for the couple in love to have a happy ending.

In Marnie's case, she is portrayed as beautiful from the outset, and it's possible that her angelic beauty initially captivated Anna, sparking her interest. However, since their relationship ultimately evolves into something familial and platonic rather than romantic, beauty is not framed as a "reward" in this dynamic. Unlike folk tales where external beauty serves as a prize for recognizing inner goodness, in *When Marnie Was There*, the bond between Anna and Marnie is built on deeper emotional connections, with beauty playing a much less central role.

To conclude, Eep completely defies the typical beauty expectations associated with the lover archetype. Unlike traditional characters, she undergoes no physical transformation, "glow-up", or outward change between and throughout the first and second movies. Her growth, as well as Guy's, occurs internally, with no visual shift or metaphor in their designs to symbolize it. Eep is a rare female protagonist who remains true to her rugged appearance, which includes dirty skin, scars, disheveled hair, and worn clothes. Dawn's reaction to Eep further highlights her impact. Despite being more princess-like with her soft groomed hair, delicate facial features, and elegant silhouette typical of animated female characters, Dawn admires Eep without judgment. She values Eep's strength, adventurous nature, kind heart, and even her musky smell and scars. This acceptance and friendship from Dawn, who embodies a more traditional femininity, highlights the positive message in Eep's design – one that embraces authenticity and celebrates non-conventional beauty.

Dresses Everywhere

Even though each of these characters has a unique personality and character arc, they all share one design feature: the dress. The dresses worn by each character reflect not only their personalities and journeys but also the world they inhabit. Rapunzel's dress, with its romantic Renaissance-inspired design, aligns with the fairytale setting of *Tangled*. Tiana's attire evolves from simple work dresses that reflect her status as a service worker to a luxurious, glittery green wedding gown, symbolizing her new status as a princess (although she married a disinherited prince with no fortune), and later to a fashionable 1920's style dress, when she opens her dream business. Sophie's plain blue

vintage-looking dress contrasts sharply with the exuberant clothing of her mother, sister, and the powerful witches she encounters in *Howl's Moving Castle*, emphasizing her humble, grounded nature. Anna's wardrobe in *Frozen* incorporates elements of Nordic folklore, reflecting the cultural inspirations behind the movie's production design. Marnie's clothing in *When Marnie Was There* – a series of simple, old-fashioned dresses, including a delicate blue nightgown and a puffy pink party dress – suggests her status as a wealthy girl from a bygone era. Eep's dress in *The Croods: A New Age* is bold and practical: the short length that allows for free movement and the halter-neck cut shows off her broad shoulders and back. The fact that the dress is made from an animal's skin or fur reinforces her dangerous and self-sufficient nature, implying she hunted and killed the animal. Notably, all members of the Croods family wear similar animal-skin garments, regardless of gender. Only Guy, Eep's love interest, who represents a more advanced stage of human evolution, wears trousers instead.

Each character inhabits a world that represents an idealized or fantasized version of the past, inspired by real historical contexts but altered to serve the fantasy's purposes. Because all stories take place in the past and have European and North American influences, it is fitting to see these female characters wearing their antique, retro, or vintage-style dresses. The only exception is Eep, whose animal skin garment seems fitting for the fantasized Stone Age setting her story takes place. Even though their settings aren't exactly real, every movie is inspired by a particular historical context: Rapunzel, Sophie, and Anna's stories take place in imagined European locations, arguably during the 19th century; Tiana lives in 1920s New Orleans; young British Marnie is an apparition from the early 20th century, visiting her modern-day Japanese granddaughter. Because dresses were the dominant garment for women until very recently in European and North American societies, their inclusion in the characters' designs grounds them within their respective worlds. While the choice to wear trousers in these settings might suggest rebellion or defiance, the decision to dress them in (somewhat) fantasized period-appropriate clothing ensures they conform to the societal norms of their fantasy historical contexts.

As we mentioned in the Warriors' section, it is incredibly common for animated female characters to be designed wearing dresses, and so, examples of pants-wearing

characters like Raya and Namaari truly stand out. We believe that, in general, female characters in animation often wear dresses for two primary reasons: first, dresses have long been associated with femininity in many cultures, and in some cultures – particularly in European and post-colonization North American countries – they are even regarded as exclusively feminine garments; second, animation (and cinema in general) often relies on quick visual cues to help audiences instantly recognize a character’s identity and role, due to the limited duration of a movie. As such, creators frequently use stereotypes, tropes, and familiar concepts to communicate these traits effectively. In other words, dresses are often used in animation as a simple, iconic visual cue to clearly distinguish female characters, ensuring there is no ambiguity for the audience in interpreting the images. The use of dresses becomes especially significant when the character embodies an archetype like the Lover, which may be closely tied to traditional gender expectations.

In contemporary European and North American society, where it is now so common for women to wear trousers, it’s easy to forget the long, arduous, and turbulent struggle of the people who fought for everyone’s basic right to wear them (Chapman, 2017). So, to see an entire gender of animated characters continuously designed with a garment which defined women’s status as *less than*, is unsatisfactory, to say the least.

Young Characters

We also noted that the four characters are young, with three of them being 18 (Rapunzel, Anna, Sophie) or 19 (Tiana, Eep) years old, while Marnie is only 12 years old³⁴. This reflects a broader trend in popular animated feature films, where protagonists and other cast members are often younger, in an attempt to appeal to a younger audience. This ties back to the common misconception that animation is mostly a children’s media, and that they would be the primary audience of animated movies, prompting animation studios to focus on narratives that are deemed appropriate for children’s consumption.

³⁴ We refer to Marnie in her preteen appearance as a 'ghost,' since that is how she primarily appears throughout the movie.

Also, younger characters may feel more relatable to younger audiences, since they often go through coming-of-age experiences and have the potential to grow and change, that may resonate with viewers who are themselves experiencing growing pains. The lover archetype can be tied to the exploration of identity, relationships, and emotions, which may have a stronger impact when it happens to a younger person who is still forming their identity. Younger characters are often depicted at a stage in life where they are still forming their values, beliefs, and sense of self. So, this flexibility allows for a dynamic portrayal of the lover archetype, as these characters navigate relationships and personal growth.

It is also possible that these characters are young due to the idealization of youth, and its embodiment of virtuous qualities, such as innocence and purity, which reflect an idealized form of love.

3.8. *Rebels*

“In every act of rebellion, the rebel simultaneously experiences a feeling of revulsion at the infringement of his rights and a complete and spontaneous loyalty to certain aspects of himself. Thus he implicitly brings into play a standard of values so far from being gratuitous that he is prepared to support it no matter what the risks. Up to this point he has at least remained silent and has abandoned himself to the form of despair in which a condition is accepted even though it is considered unjust.”³⁵

—Camus, A., 1951, p. 22.

3.8.1. What defines the Rebel archetype

Truby describes the Rebel archetype as being embodied by characters who show “the courage to stand out from the crowd and act against a system that is enslaving people” (2007, p. 68). Conversely, the shadow side of this archetype “often cannot or does not provide a better alternative, ultimately only destroying the system or society” (Truby, 2007, p. 68). The author writes the following examples, without providing any further

³⁵ It is worth highlighting that Camus employs masculine pronouns to describe the figure of the rebel, reflecting the broader convention of treating the masculine as a neutral or default form. However, given that the archetype of the Rebel is not inherently tied to any particular sex or gender, it would be more appropriate to refer to this figure using gender-inclusive language. As discussed in this chapter, individuals of all genders—including men, women, and non-binary people—may identify with the stance and values embodied by the archetypal Rebel.

explanation: “Rebel Without a Cause, Crime and Punishment, Notes from the Underground, Madame Bovary”.

Our interpretation is that the author chose these oeuvres because each of them features main characters that resist societal norms; however, they ultimately fall into the Rebel’s shadow side, leading to personal or societal destruction rather than constructive change. In *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), directed by Nicholas Ray, Jim Stark rebels against his parents and society, rejecting authority and superficiality. However, his defiance lacks clear purpose, resulting in tragic consequences. Similarly, Dostoevsky’s protagonists in *Crime and Punishment* (1866) and *Notes from the Underground* (1864) rebel in destructive ways: Raskolnikov rejects moral and legal codes by committing murder, believing himself above conventional morality, but his rebellion leads to psychological collapse; The Underground Man embraces alienation, nihilism, and self-destruction without offering an alternative vision. Emma Bovary in Gustave Flaubert’s novel *Madame Bovary* (1856) rejects the constraints of bourgeois life in search of passion and excitement, but her rebellion is self-indulgent and escapist, leading to ruin and her tragic death. Like the other characters mentioned, she dismantles her life without constructing a better alternative, embodying the destructive nature of the Rebel’s shadow side.

French philosopher Albert Camus explores the philosophical and historical dimensions of rebellion in his work *The Rebel* (1951), analyzing how individuals and movements resist oppression and how their defiance can either affirm human dignity or descend into tyranny. We found his ideas to be closely related to the construction of the Rebel archetype in cinema, where these characters are often depicted as either forces for change or destructive figures who undermine their own cause.

Camus argues that rebellion originates as an assertion of justice and human worth, a refusal to accept oppression or absurdity. However, he warns that if rebellion loses sight of its ideals, it can devolve into tyranny. When revolutionaries destroy a system without offering a better alternative, they embody a nihilistic type of revolution. Additionally, Camus differentiates between personal rebellion and collective revolution, a tension often reflected in cinema, where many Rebel characters start as isolated figures but eventually question whether their defiance serves a greater purpose.

Rebels in cinema often begin their journey alone, driven by personal motives, yet their defiance against an oppressive and unjust system ultimately inspires others to join their cause. Whether acting out of self-interest or a deeper sense of justice, these characters become symbols of revolution, sometimes willingly, other times reluctantly. Notable examples of the Rebel archetype in live-action cinema include V (*V for Vendetta*, 2005), Katniss Everdeen (*The Hunger Games* franchise, 2012-2015), Furiosa (*Mad Max: Fury Road*, 2015; *Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga*, 2024), and Joker (*Joker*, 2019). Each of these figures, despite beginning as solitary revolutionaries, moved by apparently selfish causes, ultimately ignites widespread resistance, demonstrating the transformative power of rebellion. Which is not always clear is if, in the end, they offered a better solution to the system they opposed.

These examples illustrate how Rebel characters often engage in and incite violence, underscoring their frequent overlap with the Warrior archetype. In *The Modern Amazons*, Mainon and Ursini describe the “Amazon” or “warrior woman” in film as a figure who “attempt[s] to fight the system or appear[s] strong-spirited or rebellious” (2006). This characterization of the female Warrior closely aligns with the Rebel archetype, as both challenge oppressive systems through defiance and confrontation. The authors’ explicit use of the word “rebellious” further reinforces this connection, highlighting the thematic and narrative parallels between these two archetypes.

Nevertheless, while in cinema it is often associated with conflict, rebellion does not always entail violence. We believe the defining trait of the Rebel archetype is its unwavering defiance against the status quo, manifesting across history in diverse cultural and artistic forms. Real-life figures like Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr., and Rosa Parks exemplify this archetype through their resistance to injustice, using nonviolent protest to drive societal change.

In summary, in literature and art, Rebels are depicted as both heroes and anti-heroes, reflecting the archetype’s complexity. Psychologically, the rebel embodies a deep desire for autonomy and self-assertion, often emerging in response to perceived limitations on personal or collective freedom. Key traits of the rebel include independence, boldness, and strong convictions. They challenge societal norms and often pursue a cause or ideal, but their intensity can create conflict with defenders of the existing order. While Rebels

are catalysts for change – driving political, social, and cultural progress – their actions can also lead to alienation if not tempered by responsibility and awareness of consequences.

3.8.2. The female Rebel in animation

Rebellious female characters have been present in mainstream animated films since at least the 1980s. In *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), directed by Hayao Miyazaki and based on his original manga series of the same name, the protagonist Princess Nausicaä defies societal and political expectations of the post-apocalyptic world she inhabits. Her rebellion is not just rooted in disobedience but in a deeper moral and ethical stance that challenges the destructive ways of the toxic and war-torn world around her. Nausicaä is a courageous forward-thinking, environmentally conscious rebel who fights to heal the planet rather than destroy it. Even though she is athletic and highly skilled in combat, she seeks understanding and peace, rejects the militaristic worldview that dominates her society, and advocates for a symbiotic existence with the natural world. Her character is defined by her resistance to war, environmental destruction, and societal fear, making her a consequential female figure in feature animation.

While not as groundbreaking as Nausicaä, Princess Eilonwy from *The Black Cauldron* (1985) represents an early step in the same direction within Disney's portrayal of female characters. Eilonwy defies the traditional *Disneyesque* 'damsel in distress' trope by demonstrating courage, intelligence, and a willingness to confront danger, helping to drive the plot forward alongside her male counterparts. She is the one who frees Taran, the movie's protagonist, from the dungeon where they are imprisoned, and though her involvement is somewhat limited, she accompanies him throughout their adventure until the end.

Also from this decade, and perhaps one of the most iconic examples of a rebellious animated female lead in Disney productions, is Ariel from *The Little Mermaid* (1989): she directly challenges her father's authority, actively pursues her desires, and seeks to change her circumstances. Her defiance of familial expectations, as well as her

determination to follow her desires marked a significant shift in how female characters were portrayed in North American feature film animation, paving the way for more independent and assertive heroines in subsequent years. Other notable examples from the 20th century include Pocahontas (*Pocahontas*, 1995), San (*Princess Mononoke*, 1997), and Mulan (*Mulan*, 1998), who also embody aspects of the Lover and Warrior archetypes, besides the Rebel archetype. These characters laid the foundation for the Rebel archetype's continued evolution, with more recent characters like Merida and Moana capturing the rebel spirit in increasingly nuanced and dynamic ways.

We also found there to be a clear connection between the emergence of the Rebel archetype in mainstream feature animation and the feminist movement. The evolving portrayal of female characters in animated films reflects broader societal changes driven by feminist ideologies, particularly those stemming from second-wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s. These shifts influenced movie production in the following decades. Second-wave feminism advocated gender equality, challenging traditional gender roles, and emphasizing women's rights, independence, and autonomy. This influence is evident in animated characters who began to defy conventional expectations of passivity and virtue, characteristics often imposed on female characters in earlier animation. Instead, some female characters began to exhibit traits of assertiveness, courage, and resistance to oppressive norms – the hallmarks of the Rebel archetype. However, mainstream animation, especially those produced by major studios, often lags in adopting these changes. This delay can be attributed to a concern for public reception and financial success, as animation studios tend to prioritize meeting audience expectations to guarantee profit. Consequently, mainstream animation typically remains a step behind social movements, avoiding potentially groundbreaking or controversial portrayals.

As feminism and societal expectations have evolved, emphasizing individuality, diversity, and the deconstruction of gender stereotypes, portrayals of female characters in popular feature film animation have similarly transformed. This shift is reflected in the emergence of complex and nuanced representations of female characters who undertake journeys of self-discovery and empowerment, moving beyond traditional and

simplified portrayals to embody more diverse and dynamic experiences. This evolution is exemplified by the emergence of the Rebel archetype, which aligns with the push for more independent and assertive female figures.

Even when characters do not solely or wholly embody the Rebel archetype, rebellious traits such as defiance of authority, a strong sense of self, a desire for freedom, and independence are prevalent among many female animated characters. We believe the prevalent rebellious nature of female characters in animation can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, there is a strong desire to challenge and subvert traditional gender roles and stereotypes, particularly those perceived as limiting or oppressive. Secondly, to ensure financial success and maintain relevance in the market, animated films strive to connect with contemporary audiences through relatable and aspirational narratives. Rebellious female characters, who question authority and forge their own paths, resonate strongly with contemporary themes of empowerment and individuality. Their stories appeal to viewers who value self-expression and autonomy. Lastly, rebellion is easily associated with adolescence, making it a significant element in coming-of-age stories. In this context, rebellious traits symbolize growth, agency, and autonomy, reflecting the character's journey towards self-discovery and independence.

While not every female character in animation fully embodies the Rebel archetype, many display rebellious traits, particularly those who challenge restrictive systems, seek transformation, and demonstrate strength, resilience, and independence. This complexity makes it more difficult to categorize them strictly within a single archetype, as they often blend elements of multiple character models.

As Portuguese animator and short-film director Sara Naves observed in our conversation, female protagonists in animated feature films frequently must leave their familiar environments to achieve personal fulfillment and social acceptance:

When there is a female character, she is always a heroine who, against all odds, goes beyond what is expected. Somehow, she has to step out of her context to assert herself. And this is a serious issue; it's a form of

assertion. Whereas in the case of male characters, there is more comedy, it's apparently easier to caricature without losing interest... empathetic interest. Without losing an empathetic relationship with the character, in my opinion.

Naves' insight underscores how female protagonists are often framed through narratives of struggle and self-assertion, positioning their rebellion not merely as a personal journey but as an essential aspect of their character arc. Unlike their male counterparts, who are often allowed greater comedic flexibility, female leads frequently bear the weight of proving themselves against societal constraints in a more serious manner. This reinforces the notion that, in contemporary animated films, a character's rebellion is not just a narrative device but a fundamental trait that defines and shapes the portrayal of female protagonists.

3.8.3. Results from our sample

We identified more than 20 characters who have rebellious traits, and exhibit traits of independence or non-conformity. However, we found that most of them had their primary motivations and growth aligned more with other archetypes that are based on curiosity, innocence, love, and exploration rather than rebellion for the sake of challenging authority, dismantling oppressive systems, or breaking free from constraints. Their narratives focus more on self-discovery, inner conflict, and familial bonds rather than defying societal norms or resisting authority, which we identified as key aspects of the Rebel archetype.

So, with this said, and using the broader definition of the archetype we described earlier, we identified seven characters in our sample who we believe truly embody the Rebel archetype, who are openly defiant, and who display the courage to stand out and act against a system, situation, or individual that, while not necessarily 'enslaving,' was hindering, limiting, or manipulating others or the character themselves. The seven characters are Marjane from *Persepolis* (2007), Ponyo from *Ponyo* (2008), Merida from *Brave* (2012), Kaguya from *The Tale of Princess Kaguya* (2013), Moana from *Moana* (2016), Yi from *Abominable* (2019), and Mei from *Turning Red* (2022).

It is important to mention that even for the characters discussed, their alignment with the Rebel archetype is often intertwined with other archetypes (such as Explorer, Hero, or Seeker – which are not mentioned in Truby’s list of common film archetypes and were not considered as archetypes to be explored in this thesis). The core rebellious elements are present, but their journeys often involve aspects of exploration, self-discovery, and heroic action, which enrich their character development beyond rebellion. Nevertheless, our focus will be on the relationship between their design and their rebellious nature and actions.

Additionally, since all seven characters are protagonists in their respective films, their design analysis is more in-depth. This is because their visual development is intricately tied to the narrative, much like the Lover characters discussed previously.

Marjane

Persepolis (2007) is a hand-drawn animated feature film with a striking black-and-white aesthetic, adapted from the autobiographical comic book of the same name by Marjane Satrapi. The film chronicles Satrapi’s early life, depicting her experiences growing up during the Iranian Revolution of the 1970s and her eventual departure to Europe in search of freedom. Satrapi (as cited in Rosser, 2020) initially resisted adapting her comic book into a film, as she recalled:

I did everything not to make that film when first asked. I said, let’s make a black-and-white film, hand-drawn, 2D, including the voice of Catherine Deneuve. Incredibly, the producer came back and said OK, to which I thought, ‘Shit, now we have to do it!

Despite her initial hesitation, *Persepolis* premiered at Cannes in 2007, where it won the Jury Prize and went on to receive multiple accolades, including the César for Best First Film and an Academy Award nomination, making Satrapi the first woman director to be nominated in the Best Animated Feature Film category.



Figure 54 – Frame from the movie *Persepolis* (2007). A brief moment of coexistence between two versions of Marjane: her younger self, shown in black and white to represent the past, and her present-day self, in a limited color palette, smoking a cigarette while waiting at the airport to return to Tehran.



Figure 55 – Photographs of Marjane Satrapi at different ages, highlighting her distinct widow's peak and beauty mark — two recognizable features carried over to the design of her animated character in *Persepolis*, originally developed for the graphic novel. Left: Photographer and exact date unknown; estimated early 2000s. Right: Rome, Italy – November 16, 2012. Marjane Satrapi attends the 7th Rome Film Festival at Lancia Café (Photo by Vittorio Zunino Celotto/Getty Images for Lancia).

At the beginning of *Persepolis* (2007), the audience meets adult Marjane as she prepares to board a flight back to Tehran, her hometown (Figure 54). In the airport bathroom, she carefully ties a black scarf around her head, tucking in every strand of hair to ensure none is visible. This opening scene immediately establishes the film's central themes of identity, cultural displacement, and the constraints imposed on women in post-revolutionary Iran.

The visual style of *Persepolis* closely mirrors Satrapi's original comic book aesthetics, characterized by thick black contour lines, angular simplified shapes, and high-contrast imagery achieved through a stark black-and-white palette. The film employs a dual visual approach to distinguish between past and present: while the present is rendered in color, Marjane's recollections of her past are depicted in black and white. This artistic choice not only enhances the film's nostalgic tone but also aids the audience in navigating the timeline of the narrative.

In the present, adult Marjane wears a black headscarf tied beneath her chin, along with black trousers and a red jacket (Figure 54). She bears a distinctive beauty mark on the right side of her nose and has well defined widow's peak³⁶, details drawn directly from the real-life Marjane Satrapi (Figure 55). This deliberate resemblance underscores *Persepolis's* status as a work of documentary animation, where character design serves as a crucial communicative tool. As Scott McCloud (1993) describes in *Understanding Comics*, the process of abstraction in cartooning – what he terms “amplification through simplification” – allows artists to strip away extraneous details to emphasize essential meaning. He explains, “When we abstract an image through cartooning, we're not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details. By stripping down an image to its essential ‘meaning,’ an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can't” (McCloud, 1993, p. 31). In *Persepolis*, this principle is at work in Marjane's character design: while she retains key physical traits that connect her to Satrapi herself – such as her beauty mark and her black hair – the simplified, stylized design of the animated character enables a broader audience to emotionally engage with her story.

³⁶ A widow's peak is a distinct V-shaped point in the hairline at the center of the forehead. Instead of a straight or rounded hairline, the hairline dips down in the middle, creating a peak. It's a genetic trait and is often used as a recognizable feature in character design or portraiture.



Figure 56 – Frames from the movie *Persepolis* (2007). Young Marjane leads a group of children in bullying a boy she suspects is the son of a supporter of the new Iranian regime. Her rebellious nature is depicted through her actions as well as through the clothes she wears.

This balance between specificity and abstraction is a defining strength of *Persepolis*. A highly representational style might reinforce the perception that Marjane's story is unique to her, creating a sense of distance between the viewer and the narrative. In contrast, the film's stylized, minimalist aesthetic encourages identification, allowing audiences to project themselves onto the character's experiences. As McCloud further argues, "when you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face – you see it as the face of another. But when you enter the world of the cartoon – you see yourself" (1993, p. 36). By employing this visual strategy, *Persepolis* not only strengthens its emotional impact but also fosters a deeper sense of empathy in its viewers. The film's artistic choices ultimately serve its broader purpose: to make Marjane's experiences – of exile, cultural conflict, and self-discovery – resonate universally, offering audiences a poignant and accessible lens into the struggles of an Iranian woman navigating life in exile.

From the outset of the film, Marjane's character is defined by her rebellious nature, as her journey is shaped by a deep desire for personal freedom, a tendency to question authority, and a willingness to challenge oppressive norms. As a child, she admires Bruce Lee, embodying a spirited and mischievous personality marked by curiosity and defiance. Her strong sense of justice is evident when she attempts to take matters into her own hands, inciting a group of children to bully a peer whom she believes to be the son of a man working for the new Iranian regime (Figure 55). This early act underscores her inclination to resist oppression, even if her understanding of justice is still developing.

As Marjane grows older, her rebellious nature manifests in her embrace of Western culture, despite the risks involved. She purchases heavy metal music on the black market, where men clandestinely sell forbidden items such as music albums and makeup. She also adopts Western-style clothing, wearing Nike basketball sneakers and a jacket on which she has scrawled the phrase "*Punk is not dead*" (Figure 55). However, even in her defiant attire, she must still comply with the regime's dress codes by wearing the mandatory black headscarf. Marjane's nonconformity soon attracts the attention of older people. Confronted and accused of promoting the decadence of the West, she is questioned and threatened on the street. However, with quick thinking, she manages to evoke sympathy from her interrogators, convincing them to let her go unharmed. This

moment underscores her resilience and adaptability in navigating an oppressive system while holding onto her personal identity.

In the classroom, Marjane openly challenges her teacher's false claims about government abuse, an act of defiance that results in her expulsion and deeply concerns her parents (Figure 57). Aware of her rebellious tendencies and fearing for her safety, they decide to send her to a French lycée in Vienna to protect her from potential arrest.

In Vienna, Marjane faces numerous challenges, many of which stem from her strong-willed nature, profound frustration, and deep sense of isolation. Initially, she resides in a boarding house run by Catholic nuns, but due to language barriers, she struggles to form friendships and feels increasingly alienated. Her rebellious streak once again emerges when, in response to a nun's derogatory remark about the Iranian people's supposed lack of manners, she retorts by insinuating that all nuns were once prostitutes. This confrontation leads to her expulsion from the boarding house. Despite living abroad, Marjane's reaction underscores her pride in her Iranian identity and her unwillingness to accept cultural prejudices.

As a teenager, Marjane's design is visually striking, characterized by the use of black in her clothing and hair, which blend seamlessly without visible contour lines. This stylistic choice draws attention to her facial expressions and body language, particularly her hands, which are white and outlined, and serve as key expressive elements throughout the film. Additionally, her thick, wavy hair is consistently depicted as a solid mass (Figure 57), without loose strands, further reinforcing the minimalist yet powerful aesthetic of her character – while resembling the mandatory headscarf imposed on women by the Iranian regime.

As a teenager in Europe, Marjane struggles to adapt to a new culture and navigate the complexities of identity and belonging. In an attempt to fit in at a party, she briefly abandons her usual black sweater and pants—an outfit that conceals all but her hands and feet – for a short black dress that hangs loosely off her shoulders, exposing more of her body (Figure 58). Her use of makeup is emphasized through changes in her character design, with thicker contour lines around her eyes and exaggerated eyelashes, visually marking her transformation.

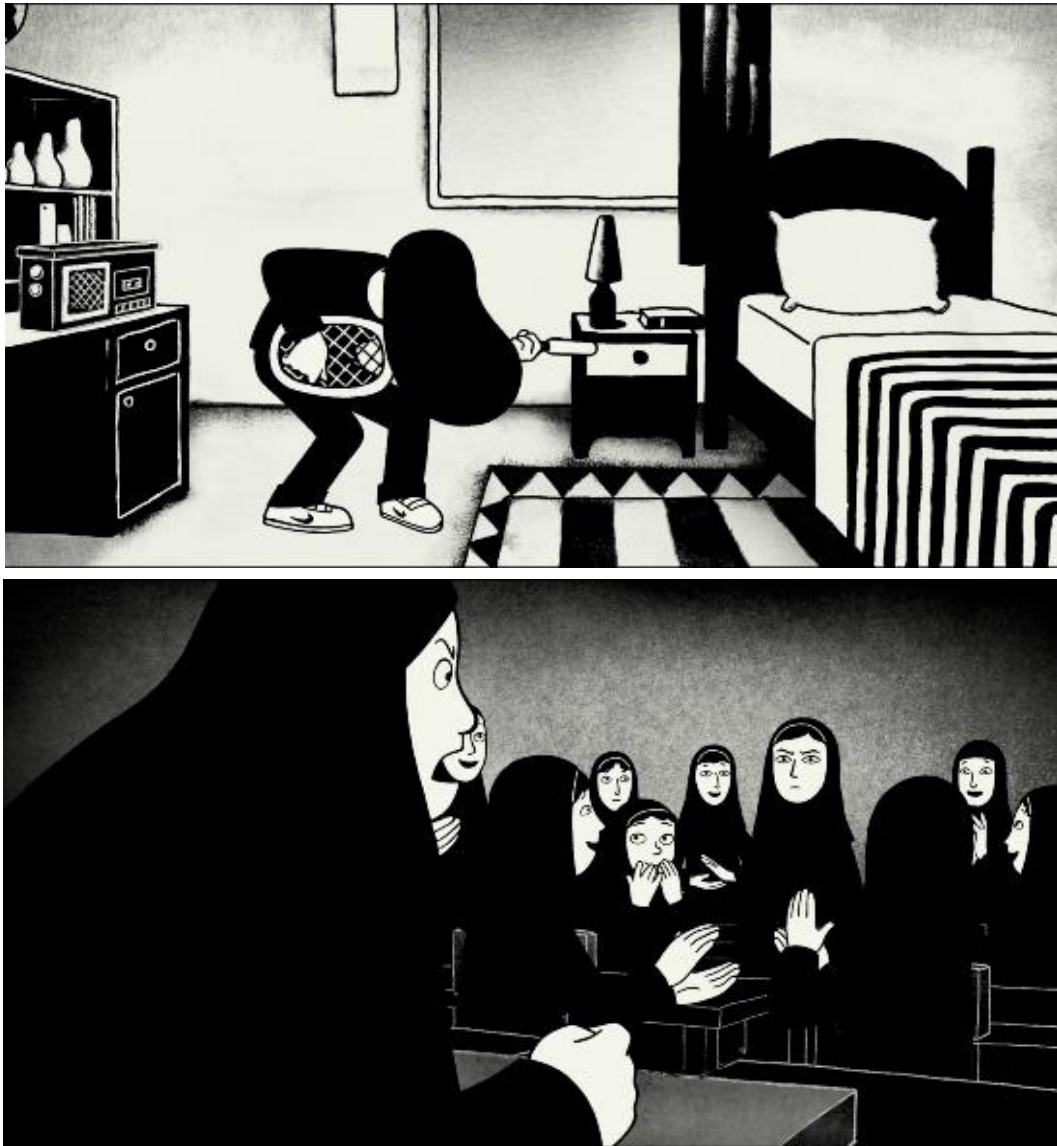


Figure 57 – Frames from the movie *Persepolis* (2007). Teenage Marjane pretends to play guitar using a racquet. Marjane stands up in class to oppose her teacher's false claims about government abuse, an act of defiance that results in her expulsion.



Figure 58 – Frames from the movie *Persepolis* (2007). Marjane in a more revealing outfit and makeup. Marjane's head becomes comically huge and menacing, as she expresses rage.

Throughout the film, Marjane retains her volatile temperament, responding impulsively to provocation, fiercely defending her cultural heritage, and grappling with a persistent sense of alienation. In a moment of comically exaggerated animation, her figure distorts grotesquely – her head becomes giant and her teeth sharp – when she erupts in rage at a group of girls, she overhears speaking disparagingly about her (Figure 58). Despite her efforts to assimilate, a series of conflicts and personal setbacks leave her feeling increasingly lost. She eventually falls ill and makes the decision to return to Tehran, believing that, with the war over, life at home might have improved. However, upon her return, she is confronted with the devastating reality that her country and loved ones have endured immense suffering in her absence. As she reflects, *"Everyone around me has suffered immensely. I was a stranger in Austria, and now I've become one in my own country."* Marjane's alienation deepens, leading her into a profound depression that culminates in a suicide attempt by overdose. In a hallucinatory sequence, she speaks to God, ultimately finding the resolve to continue living and try again.

The move to Tehran is accompanied by a subtle but significant change in her character design: the triangular part in her hairline – previously dividing it into two curtain-like sections – now inverts into a heart-shaped outline on her forehead, a hairline feature commonly known as a widow's peak. We also see that her face is slowly losing its roundness, becoming increasingly thin and pointed at the chin, indicating the maturing of her constitution.

Following a comic montage set to *Eye of the Tiger* – a playful homage to the iconic training sequence in *Rocky* (1976) – Marjane regains her determination to live and begins to take better care of herself. In a rare and striking moment for feature animation, she is depicted stepping out of the shower, wrapped in a towel, when she notices the hair on her legs (Figure 59). Shocked, she promptly waxes it off. After this "glow-up", Marjane appears more confident and engaged with life. She enrolls in university, socializes with peers, and eventually meets a boy for whom she begins to "doll up." This shift is subtly reflected in her character design: the black contour around her eyes becomes more pronounced, suggesting mascara, and her lips, previously depicted as a simple line, now appear fuller, indicating lipstick. However, the societal constraints of post-revolutionary Iran remain ever-present. While waiting for her date, Marjane, in an

attempt to avoid arrest for wearing makeup, approaches a police officer and falsely accuses a nearby man of staring at her, prompting his arrest instead (Figure 59). When she later recounts the event to her grandmother, justifying her actions as a necessary choice between her own safety and another person taking the blame, her grandmother admonishes her, stating, *"Everyone has a choice."*

This moment serves as a pivotal turning point in Marjane's moral development, highlighting the complex negotiations of personal agency, survival, and ethical compromise under oppressive systems.

In yet another act of defiance, Marjane confronts regime representatives when they visit her school to impose even stricter regulations on women's appearance (Figure 60). She boldly challenges their discourse, questioning why modesty laws apply exclusively to women while men face no equivalent restrictions. Her resistance, however, only deepens her sense of entrapment. After yet another encounter with the modesty police, she likens herself to a caged animal, stripped of her freedom. Soon after, she bids farewell to her family and departs Iran – this time, forever. The real-life Marjane Satrapi has spoken candidly about the reality of her exile and her life in France: "I cannot go back," she states. "First it was a chosen exile, then it became a forced exile. I don't want to return to a dictatorship and spend the rest of my life in jail being tortured" (as cited in Rosser, 2020).

Marjane's narrative embodies the Rebel archetype, as she consistently resists societal and political constraints imposed upon her in Iran. Her journey is marked by an intense desire for personal freedom, questioning authority, and challenging oppressive norms. At the same time, her story is also one of self-discovery, as she navigates the complexities of growing up, learning to stay true to herself, and preserving her integrity in the face of oppression.



Figure 59 – Frames from the movie *Persepolis* (2007). Marjane reacts with shock upon noticing the hair on her legs, just before waxing. Now back in Tehran, she navigates the restrictions imposed on women, including the mandatory headscarf and the ban on makeup — which she defies, resulting in a confrontation with the modesty police.

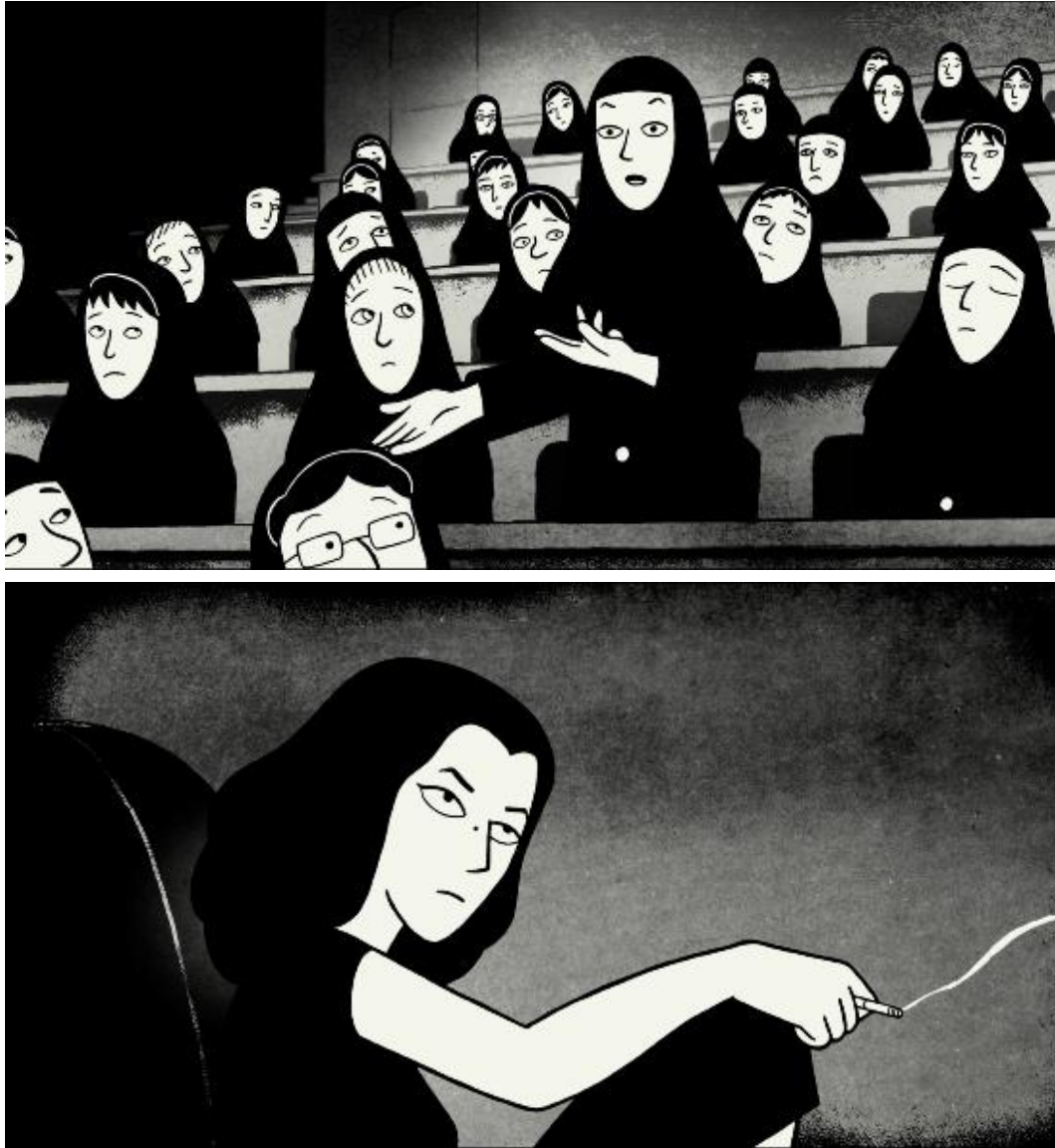


Figure 60 – Frames from the movie *Persepolis* (2007). Marjane challenges regime representatives during a school visit in which they attempt to impose stricter rules on women's appearance. Now an adult, Marjane smokes a cigarette with a resolute expression as she prepares to leave Tehran.

Ponyo

Ponyo embodies the Rebel archetype through her unwavering desire to become human, defying both her father's expectations and the natural order of her existence. Ponyo's journey is not one of rebellious defiance just for the sake of romance but rather an earnest pursuit of self-determination, mirroring a child's instinctive desire to explore beyond imposed boundaries.

As a reimagining of the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale *The Little Mermaid*, Miyazaki's *Ponyo* offers a unique perspective that diverges from the traditional Hollywood or Disney-style romance. Instead, the film explores themes of environmental preservation, the impact of humanity on nature, the interconnectedness of all living beings, and the innocence of childhood love. It is a tender and honest representation of childhood, love, friendship and the strength of community.

Ponyo's physical form is in constant flux, reflecting her magical nature and accompanying her rebellious narrative arc, so it is important that we explore her design changes alongside the narrative.

At the start of the film, Ponyo quietly sneaks out of her burrow, careful not to alert her father, Fujimoto. After gently sending her curious sisters back inside, she sets off alone, wrapping herself in a bubble and riding a jellyfish toward the surface (Figure 61). Her practiced movements and joy in the sunlight suggest this isn't her first escape.

In these first scenes, Ponyo is a fish, although an unusual-looking one: she possesses an eerily human-like face atop a wobbly bright pink body, whose shape and undulation resembles a dress. Her round white belly matches the bottom of her fin, which is also white. She has a wide face, with eyes far removed from the center, and very simplified features – no eyebrows, and simple subtle lines to identify her mouth and nose. She has short red hair, with tiny strands that flow with the ocean soft current. She doesn't have arms, hands, legs or feet – instead, she has two small pointy fins on the side of her body, mimicking arms, and the bottom half of her body moves as the rippling fins of a cuttlefish.



Figure 61 – Frames from the movie *Ponyo* (2008). Ponyo gently kisses her sisters, waves goodbye, and sets off on her adventure. She drifts atop of a jellyfish, reaching close to the ocean's surface, basking in the sunlight.



Figure 62 – Frames from the movie *Ponyo* (2008). Ponyo is trapped in a glass jar, dragged along the ocean floor by a boat's net scraping the seabed. She is rescued by Sosuke, who frees her from the jar.

As Ponyo drifts to shore atop a jellyfish, she admires a yellow house on a green hill — Sosuke's home — revealing her fascination with the surface world. Her journey is interrupted by a fishing boat dragging waste across the ocean floor, entangling Ponyo in debris (Figure 62). The film's critique of human-made pollution becomes evident as she becomes entangled in a mass of discarded waste — old car tires, packaging, and household debris — alongside fellow sea creatures desperately trying to escape. Trapped inside a glass jar, she struggles to escape until Sosuke finds and frees her. He is sad to notice that she appears lifeless, but just as he begins to worry, a small drop of blood forms on his finger from the broken glass and, in a swift, almost instinctive motion, Ponyo licks the droplet. To Sosuke's delight, the little "goldfish," as he calls her, is alive. Overjoyed, he eagerly runs back up the hill, taking Ponyo with him. This moment echoes the myth of Persephone, who becomes tethered to the underworld after consuming pomegranate seeds, symbolizing an irreversible connection to a new realm. Similarly, Ponyo's act of tasting Sosuke's blood signifies a bond that ties her to the human world. Just as Persephone's fate is sealed by what she consumes, Ponyo's sip of Sosuke's blood marks the beginning of her irreversible journey toward becoming human. This act not only deepens her connection to Sosuke but also suggests a mythical inevitability — she is no longer just a fleeting visitor to the surface but now intrinsically linked to it. This metaphor is reinforced when Sosuke later offers Ponyo a bite of his sandwich, and she eagerly snatches the entire slice of ham, munching with delight, further cementing her transition into the human world through eating.

Showing rapid learning, Ponyo soon speaks her new name ('Ponyo'), Sosuke's name, and "suki" (Japanese for "like" or "love"), openly expressing her affection for him. But her joy is cut short when her father, Fujimoto, appears from the ocean, using magic to summon waves that forcibly take her back to the sea. At home underwater, Fujimoto warns her against the human world, blaming humans for polluting the ocean and harming marine life. He tries to feed her ocean food and calls her by her original name, Brünnhilde³⁷, to assert control. Ponyo refuses both, insisting on the name given by

³⁷ In *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (*The Ring of the Nibelung*), Richard Wagner's cycle of four epic German-language operas, Brünnhilde is the daughter of Erda, the earth goddess, and Wotan, the chief of the gods. Upon being awakened by Siegfried's kiss, she renounces her immortality and becomes human. Ponyo's given name, which she rejects, is Brünnhilde — a reference that subtly invites comparisons between the

Sosuke, symbolizing her rejection of her father's authority and her attachment to humans. Defiant, she declares she will become human like Sosuke.

Unlike her father, who abandoned human life to protect the sea, Ponyo longs to become human. She demands hands and feet, rejecting her fins. Through her magic, small, chicken-like feet and arms emerge from her fins. She no longer has a white belly, and her body takes on the shape of a dress with white puffy shorts underneath. We can also see her face morphing into distorted features, with very round eyes and an extremely long mouth, creating a wider face. Losing control, Fujimoto traps her in a magical bubble, but Ponyo continues to grow, resisting his restraint—a visual symbol of the oppressive force he represents in her life (Figure 63).

After Fujimoto gives her a magic concoction, Ponyo briefly reverts to her original form. But as soon as she awakens, she regrows limbs and teeth, becoming larger and more peculiar. She frees herself and her tiny sisters, unleashing a flood through their father's burrow. She reaches a well, whose magic allows her to complete her metamorphosis. At last, Ponyo fully assumes the form of a human child, with proper hands and feet, a youthful face, and flowing hair.

In this scene, Ponyo is drawn freely, without much regard for maintaining structure, rather emphasizing her transformation and emotion. She is pulled into Fujimoto's chamber by the strong current and becomes momentarily an icon of herself – a simplified version of her silhouette, somewhere between her fish, chicken and human form. She floats for a moment, suspended in the water, until she lands softly on the edge of the magic well. The wobbly lines not only represent the motion of the golden water, imbued with Fujimoto's potions, that surrounds Ponyo, but also this moment of being malleable and transforming. This is also a moment of pause in the movie, where the music stops, while Ponyo admires her new body: she looks curiously at her hands, peaks at her belly button and tugs on her hair, as if to confirm that it is all real (Figure 64). The music crescendo starts when Ponyo leaves the burrow, riding a giant golden fish, in her newfound human body.

two narratives. Both characters undergo a transformative journey tied to a moment of awakening: in Ponyo, this occurs when she tastes a drop of blood from Sôsuke's finger, symbolically sealing their connection and initiating her transition to human life.



Figure 63 – Frames from the movie *Ponyo* (2008). Fujimoto desperately tries to contain his daughter, who has suddenly sprouted chicken-like feet and arms, by trapping her in a magical bubble.

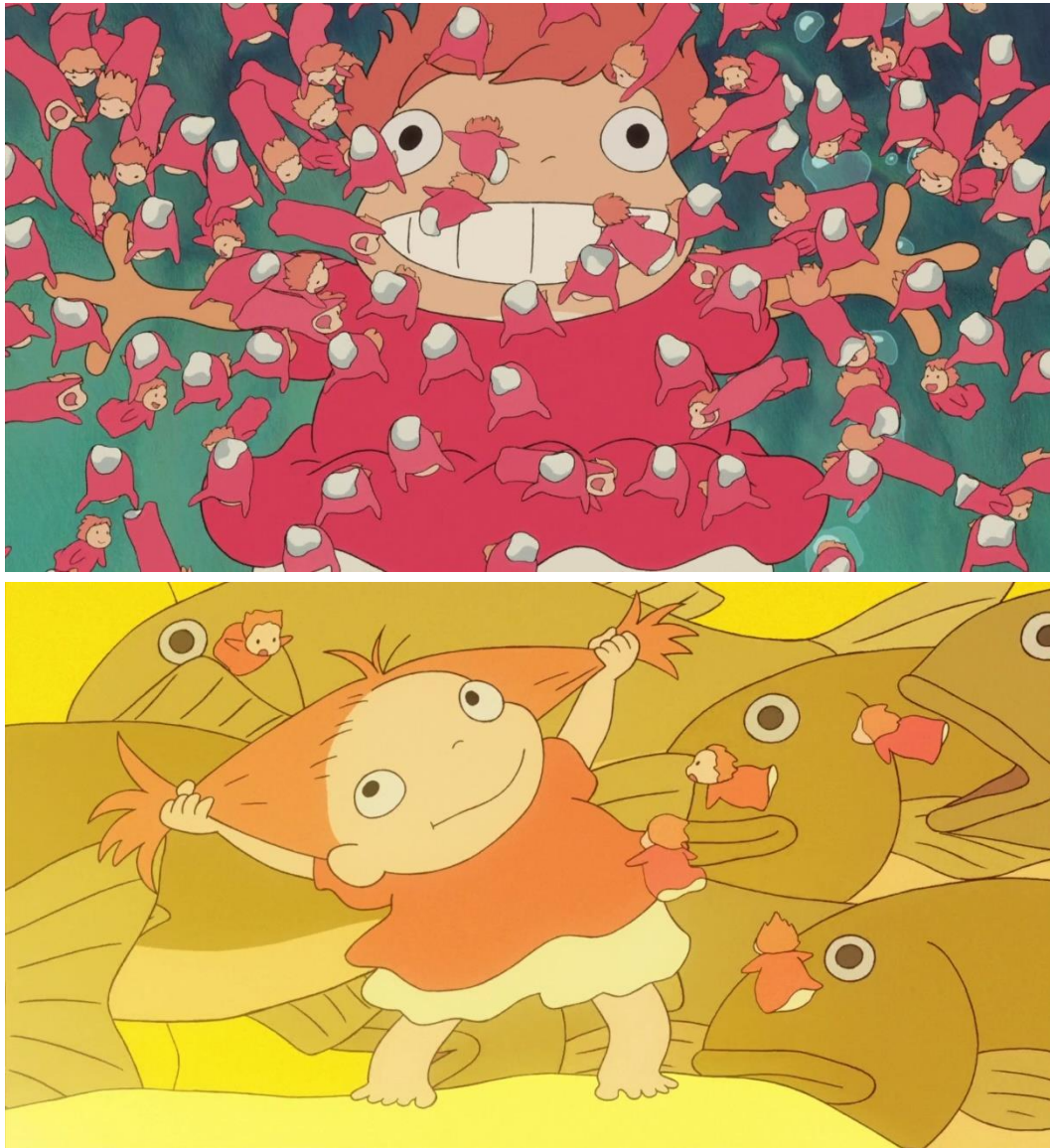


Figure 64 – Frames from the movie *Ponyo* (2008). Ponyo beams with excitement as she sprouts arms and legs. Using more magic, she fully transforms into a human girl and curiously explores her new body and hair.

Accompanied by her sisters swimming elegantly beside her, Ponyo exclaims triumphantly, “*I’m free!*”. In one of the most iconic and memorable moments of feature film animation, Ponyo, now fully human, dashes across a giant school of fish that turn into towering waves (Figure 65), in a display of strength and determination. This breathtaking and climactic sequence, which Miyazaki created as he hummed and thought of Wagner’s *Ride of the Valkyries* (NHK World Japan, 2019), showcases Ponyo’s unyielding resolve to reunite with Sosuke: “The essence of this movie is in this one picture” (Miyazaki in NHK World Japan, 2019). As she runs, leaps and flips effortlessly over the massive waves, Ponyo soon catches up to Lisa’s car and, finally, reaches Sosuke. Dodging Lisa’s attempt to catch her, Ponyo dashes through and throws herself into Sosuke’s arms, wrapping herself around him in an overwhelming display of joy and affection, unable to contain her happiness.

Ponyo’s bright pink attire, coupled with her red hair, stands out against the dark, tempestuous sky and the crashing, marine-blue waves beneath her. When talking about the process of coloring the film, Studio Ghibli’s veteran artist Michiyo Yasuda explained that she ignored some anime conventions, such as dulling or changing the colors of the characters when they are underwater, to explain to the audience that the characters are immersed: “When it comes to this film, if the color of Ponyo is blunted, it will unfortunately no longer be Ponyo. Ponyo should always be Ponyo” (News Zero - Nippon News Network, 2008). Ponyo’s iconic bright pink dress and red hair are important to convey her personality and identity, and so it wasn’t altered significantly all throughout the film.



Figure 65 – Frames from the movie *Ponyo* (2008). Ponyo runs and leaps effortlessly across towering waves and a stormy sea to reach Sosuke on land. In the end of the movie, Ponyo joyfully reunites with Sosuke, fulfilling her wish to be human.

As a human, Ponyo is small, like a five-year-old child (Figure 65). Her outfit of a round bright pink dress over white, ballooned puffy shorts emphasizes her youthful innocence and playfulness, adding to her cuteness. However, despite her childlike appearance, Ponyo is anything but delicate – she is loud, determined, and relentlessly perseveres even when exhausted. Running barefoot, she embodies unrestrained curiosity and an untamed, free-spirited nature – mirroring what we’ve discussed in the case of Rapunzel. Her red hair is also a reinforcement of her energetic and headstrong personality, since red hair in animated characters as long stood as a visual symbol of rebellious, fiery, and fierce personalities, as seen in examples such as Ariel (Ponyo’s Disney equivalent, in the North American reimagined version of the same fairy tale, *The Little Mermaid*, 1989) Jessie (the spunky cowgirl from *Toy Story 2*, 1999), Anastasia (the hotheaded lost princess from *Anastasia*, 1997), Fiona (the independent and capable princess from *Shrek*, 2001), and countless more.

Ponyo doesn’t engage in physical violence. She is athletic and faces her challenges head on, but there’s no relation with the Warrior archetype. Nevertheless, there is an obvious connection to the Lover archetype. The motivation for her rebellion and consequent transformation is her love for Sosuke and her need to feel close and connected to him. Her design also aligns with some of the trends we found in the Lover archetype, because she is designed with typically feminine attributes: her pink, white, and red color palette, her dress, her round shapes, and cheeky face.

Merida

Brave (2012) tells the story of Merida, a rebellious Scottish princess who clashes with her mother, Queen Elinor, over her future. When a reckless wish turns Elinor into a bear, mother and daughter must mend their fractured bond and learn to truly understand each other before it’s too late. Instead of centering yet another princess story around romance, a theme frequently explored in animated films about princesses, director Brenda Chapman sought to depict an authentic mother-daughter relationship, drawing inspiration from her own experiences with her daughter (Lerew et al., 2012). She also envisioned an “old-world folktale—dark, yet mysterious and magical” (Lerew

et al., 2012, p. 15). As a result, *Brave* is set not in the medieval era but in the Dark Ages of the Scottish Isles, during the obscure and enigmatic period of the Pictish people. These two defining aspects of the film—the candid depiction of a mother-daughter dynamic and its unique historical setting—distinguish *Brave* within the princess trope movies.

Merida is an obvious embodiment of the Rebel archetype, as she actively resists the traditional expectations her mother, Queen Elinor, places on her as a princess. Her rebellious nature comes through in her refusal to conform to traditional gender roles, the idea of arranged marriage, and “behaving like a princess”, which is central to her conflict with her mother. Merida craves freedom, adventure, and the ability to define her own path in life. Her rebellion is also seen in her passion for archery and her love of the outdoors (Figure 66) – activities that are considered unsuitable for a princess in her society. As director Mark Andrews explains, “Merida is crossing from childhood to adulthood. She feels her life is being planned to the nth degree and she doesn’t get to be herself” (as cited in Lerew et al., 2012). This rebellion, however, is not just about defiance; it’s about understanding and compromise as she eventually learns to see things from her mother’s perspective while still asserting her individuality.

Merida’s design process began with early sketches by Steve Purcell, the film’s head of story, who became deeply invested in the character after Chapman pitched the story to him during the film’s initial development (Lerew et al., 2012). Later, Character Art Director Matt Nolte’s interpretations further refined Merida’s look, building upon both Purcell’s initial drawings and Production Designer Steve Pilcher’s paintings. All iterations maintained her most striking feature: a voluminous mass of wiry, red curls (Figure 65). Shading Art Director Tia Kratter underscores the technical challenges involved in achieving the right look for Merida’s hair, which required advances in Pixar’s animation software. Chapman explains, “Merida’s wild, red, curly hair is so much a part of her character—it represents who she is—this wild child” (as cited in Lerew et al., 2012, p.66). She adds that their early story concept involved Merida’s mother constantly attempting to tame her daughter’s hair, while Merida persistently resisted, setting it free.



Figure 66 – Frames from the movie *Brave* (2012). Merida's unruly curly red hair always stands out as a striking feature of her design, matching her adventurous and fierce personality.



Figure 67 – Frames from the movie *Brave* (2012). King Fergus and the triplets share Merida’s most distinctive design feature—her vibrant, curly red hair—visually linking them as a family. In contrast, Queen Elinor stands apart, emphasizing her difference in both appearance and character.

Much like the color design process for *Ponyo*, the team carefully ensured Merida's hair remained obviously red and vibrant throughout the film. They maintained a delicate balance between the character's red hair and the surrounding environment (Figure 66), as Pilcher explains: 'We really thought about how Merida's red hair would be accented in different environments, working with palettes that complement and harmonize with it. You don't want to upstage it, but yet you don't want to make it garish. You're always thinking in context" (as cited in Lerew et al., 2012, p.68). Beyond its visual impact, Merida's unruly red curls serve as a symbolic extension of her untamed spirit, emphasizing her resistance to constraint and tradition. Additionally, they establish her lineage, reinforcing her Scottish heritage³⁸. The redness of her hair also helps to communicate how Merida closely identifies with her father, both physically and psychologically. Beyond sharing his carefree, adventurous spirit, and playful demeanor, she also inherited his bright red, curly, unruly hair, and striking blue eyes (Figure 67). Furthermore, they share the color palette of their clothes, marked by a deep hue of dark greenish blue.

But because the movie's plot centers around the tumultuous relationship between mother and daughter, Merida and Elinor's appearance reflects that tension and opposing views. Although they have similar facial features (round faces and delicate facial features), which reinforce their familial bond, their color palettes and hair are very distinct. For instance, Elinor's eyes are brown, she wears a bright silky green dress, and her hair is exceptionally long, straight, and dark, with a single white streak at the front, always neatly secured with a golden string – appearing in almost total opposition to the symbolism of Merida's appearance (Figure 67).

Merida also looks very similar to her siblings, the triplets: all of them share bright blue eyes, delicate facial features, round faces, and red curls (Figure 67). This similarity is intentional, to convey their alliance, and showing the audience that they are close and get along, which was something important for Chapman (as cited in Lerew et al., 2012, p.87):

³⁸ Scotland is the second country, after Ireland, with the highest incidence of red-haired people in the world, despite red-haired individuals comprising only about 2% of the global population (World Population Review, 2024).

I felt like we've seen arguing brothers and sisters before. So we thought, What if Merida and the boys are allies? What if they actually like each other? What if she bribes them with sweets, and what if they'll do anything for her? They just look up to her – they think she's so cool.

Due to this strong identification of Merida with her father, it was important for the production team to find a balance on how to portray both the feminine and the masculine sides of Merida. As Story Artist Emma Coats (as cited in Lerew et al., 2012, p. 73) explains:

With Merida, one thing Brenda [Chapman] really understood was how easy it could be to tip Merida over into a tomboy. But it's not that she wants to be a boy. She's a girl, she likes being a girl – she just doesn't like some of the things that come with being a girl in that time. Her temperament is more like her father's than her mother's. That doesn't mean that she doesn't like dresses, for example. I initially played her more tomboyish, but then I started digging down through layers and I saw that she's a really three-dimensional person. There's the person she shows people, and then there's who she really is, and she's always doing a balancing act between them.

Merida's signature outfit is a long, dark greenish blue gown designed for ease of movement. Throughout the film, she is frequently seen engaging in physically demanding activities (Figures 66 and 67) – riding her powerful Clydesdale horse, Angus, at full speed; climbing treacherous mountains; and demonstrating exceptional skill with a bow and arrow. This emphasizes her athleticism and adventurous spirit. This physicality also connects Merida to some aspects of the Warrior archetype. Like the Warrior characters we analyzed, she wields weapons such as a bow and arrow and a sword, displaying both fierceness and determination; and, rather than waiting for others to act, she takes matters into her own hands. Towards the end of the movie, Merida defends her mother when her father, unaware that Elinor has transformed into a bear, attempts to harm her. She also battles Mor'du, the giant cursed bear, to protect her mother, when she is tied down by ropes.



Figure 68 – Frames from the movie *Brave* (2012). Merida is shown as a skilled archer, an agile cliff climber, and a capable sword fighter.

At the start of the film, Queen Elinor carefully prepares Merida for her royal duties, teaching her the skills expected of a future wife and diplomatic counselor. This culminates in the announcement of Merida's arranged marriage—a political alliance with the neighboring clans. However, the moment sparks major conflict, as Merida resists the rigid expectations and insists she's not ready for marriage (and may never be). A change in outfit visually symbolizes Merida's struggle against societal expectations. She is forced into a bright sky-blue satin gown—starkly different from her practical dark green-blue dress—and a tightly pulled corset that restricts her movement and breath (Figure 69). The dress covers nearly her entire body, including a headpiece that hides her wild curls, effectively erasing her identity. Its constrictive design embodies the pressures of royal duty and of her mother's expectations. When the suitors compete for her hand in marriage, Merida unexpectedly enters the challenge herself, declaring she will shoot for her own hand. She has removed the head covering, her hair now free and flowing. Tearing her restrictive dress to move freely, she confidently joins the contest and, with remarkable skill, outshoots all the suitors (Figure 70).

After this rebellious act, Merida and Elinor have an explosive argument. In a moment of fury, Merida shouts that she'd rather die than become like her mother and slashes the family tapestry, cutting Elinor's image from the rest. Enraged, Elinor grabs Merida, snatches her sword, and throws her bow into the fire, breaking Merida's heart. Overwhelmed, Merida runs off in tears as Elinor, instantly regretful, tries to save the burning bow. Merida flees into the forest, where a fall from her spooked horse leaves her blue silky gown torn and muddy—visually reflecting her broken bond with Elinor and the unraveling expectations of royalty. After discovering a Witch in the forest, Merida buys a spell intended to change her mother's mind about the arranged marriage. Unknowingly, she turns Elinor into a bear, forcing the two of them to escape into the wilderness together. Merida switches back to her signature dark green-blue dress and cape, shedding the restrictive gown as she prepares to survive the wild and undo the curse.



Figure 69 – Frames from the movie *Brave* (2012). Queen Elinor prepares Merida to meet her suitors by dressing her in a tight corset and a fancy bright blue satin gown, complete with a head covering that conceals her unruly hair.



Figure 70 – Frames from the movie *Brave* (2012). Frustrated and bored by the suitor presentations, Merida takes her fate into her own hands: she lets her hair loose, tears the restrictive gown her mother chose, and enters the archery contest herself—outshooting all three suitors.

In the forest, Merida teaches her mother to fend for herself, through practical survival skills—the very talents Elinor once dismissed. This reversal highlights the value of Merida’s independence while also deepening their understanding of each other. Later, when they return to the castle, it is Merida who adopts Elinor’s skills—diplomacy, composure, and storytelling—to de-escalate a brewing conflict among the clans. In doing so, she honors her mother’s teachings and proposes a new path, freeing both herself and the young suitors from the burden of arranged marriage.

Merida, as a Rebel, challenges the system that once suppressed her freedom and initiates lasting change for future generations. She also begins to repair the family tapestry, symbolizing her desire to mend her relationship with Elinor. But the curse is only broken when Merida faces the monstrous Mor’du, takes responsibility for her actions, and vulnerably expresses her love and gratitude to her mother. In this emotional moment of reconciliation, Merida’s personal growth becomes clear—she no longer rejects her mother’s values, but sees strength in both their ways of life.

Merida will be a leader – a great leader – in her own right, in her own way. She doesn’t have to do it the same way her mom did it, but she needs to acquire a little more wisdom and judgement. The journey she takes with Mum-Bear helps her do that. It sets her priorities straight (Chapman as cited in Lerew et al., 2012, p.70).

In the film’s final moments, Merida and her mother appear more united than before. Their long hair flows freely in the wind as they ride horseback through the wilderness, both dressed in similarly styled dark bluish gowns—visually echoing their newfound harmony (Figure 71).



Figure 71 – Frames from the movie *Brave* (2012). Merida and Elinor reconcile, now understanding and accepting each other more fully. Their appearances reflect this change: Elinor wears her hair in a more relaxed, loose style, and her dress closely resembles Merida’s in both color and design. Together, they ride through the wilderness, their hair flowing freely in the wind.

Moana

Moana (2016) follows the journey of its titular protagonist, a spirited teenage girl who embarks on a daring mission to prove herself as a master wayfinder and fulfill her ancestors' unfinished quest. Moana embodies the Rebel archetype by defying the societal and familial expectations placed upon her as the daughter of the chief, by venturing beyond the reef, rejecting the limitations dictated by her community. However, her rebellion is not merely an act of defiance – it is deeply intertwined with a heroic journey. As she sets out to save her people, Moana undergoes a transformative quest for self-discovery, aligning her personal growth with the collective well-being of her community, through the restoration of their wayfinding heritage. By reclaiming their seafaring traditions and overcoming their fear of the unknown, Moana not only secures her own destiny but also empowers her people to embrace their identity and navigate the world with renewed confidence.

Director John Musker describes Moana as a fearless, tenacious, and intelligent young woman who “yearns to be something that she doesn’t yet have a name for, something that doesn’t seem to be a possibility in her world” (as cited in Julius et al., 2016, p. 30), lacking a clear role model to follow. Her father, Tui, is the village’s chief and he’s expecting Moana to be his successor; however, she doesn’t see herself in that role. As co-director Chris Williams explains: “She’s going through what a lot of adolescents go through. Others tell her who they want her to be. (...) Moana tries on these identities, but ultimately, she realizes that she needs to be herself”(as cited in Julius et al., 2016, p. 30). Here, we see rebellion again connected to adolescence and a coming-of-age story of personal discovery.

The film opens with Gramma Tala telling the legend of Maui, the demigod who stole the heart of Te Fiti, and the prophecy of a hero who will restore it. While other children react with fear, baby Moana is captivated. Her father, Chief Tui, interrupts, insisting no one should sail beyond the reef and that the island is the only safe place. As tensions rise, Moana wanders off and encounters the ocean, which playfully connects with her and offers her the heart of Te Fiti. But before she can accept it, her father intervenes, and she drops the heart on the beach. This moment marks Moana as the chosen one, caught

between those who believe in her destiny (Gramma Tala and the ocean) and those, like her father, who let fear dictate their desire to keep her safe and confined within the island.

Moana is depicted at three different stages of her life—baby, child, and teenager—with consistent design elements that ensure continuity and reinforce her identity as she grows (Figure 72). As a baby, Moana is designed to be irresistibly cute. She has short, dark brown hair parted to the side, adorned with a bright pink island flower. Her outfit is minimal, consisting only of a simple fabric wrap around her hips, resembling a diaper, and a small seashell necklace. Her proportions emphasize her cuteness, with a round, chubby physique, a prominent tummy, and an oversized head that is nearly a third of her total height. She also features some signature traits of Disney's female character designs—large expressive eyes, a small round nose, and full lips.

As the film's first musical number unfolds, we witness Moana's transition into childhood and later into adolescence. Her hair grows longer, now styled in loose, wavy locks pulled back from her face, though she continues to wear a bright pink flower. She also wears a different seashell necklace, reinforcing her connection to the ocean. Her attire evolves into a woven beige fabric wrapped around her torso, featuring a subtle floral pattern, paired with an orange knee-length skirt with fringed edges. Notably, she is always barefoot, emphasizing her deep-rooted bond with nature and island life. This design choice also connects Moana to other barefoot animated heroines like Ponyo and Rapunzel (and even previous animation heroines, such as Pocahontas and Ariel) whose lack of shoes symbolizes their curiosity, free spirit, and connection to nature. As a teenager, Moana has long, wavy dark hair that reflects her Pacific Islander heritage. As she sails, Moana often ties her hair into a practical high bun to keep it out of her vision and prevent it from interfering with the precise movements needed to navigate her boat.



Figure 72 – Frames from the movie *Moana* (2016). As the film's first musical number unfolds, we witness Moana's growth, from baby to teenager.



Figure 73 – Frames from the movie *Moana* (2016). Moana alternates between wearing her hair loose and in a topknot while sailing. Though she wears the same outfit for most of the film, she appears at the end in a more ceremonial version that retains key elements—like the red top, waist sash, and beige skirt—reflecting her growth and new role.

When designing Moana, the character team also aimed to create a facial structure that authentically represented Pacific Islanders. According to production designer Ian Gooding, “Moana has a beautiful hexagonal face shape”, with high cheekbones and a well-defined jawline; features, he believes, also reflect her inner strength (Julius et al., 2016, p. 31).

Her proportions are also novel for a Disney heroine: she has sturdy limbs, stubby hands and feet, and lacks the exaggerated wasp waist seen in previous Disney princesses (Figure 73). Producer Osnat Shurer remarks that Moana’s design has “proportions reflective of real girls her age” (as cited in Julius et al., 2016). However, we’d argue these proportions are not reflective of reality. Rather than aiming for strict realism, these proportions reflect the deliberate choices of the production artists, who studied and stylized anatomy to suit the film’s production design. Since many of the characters wear minimal clothing, the artists needed to exaggerate anatomy in a way that remained both believable and appealing; as character designer Bill Schwab notes, “There is a fine line between realistic and designed characters” (as cited in Julius et al., 2016, p.31). Moana represents a new standard for Disney female protagonists—still beautiful and appealing, yet not overly thin or idealized. Instead, she is athletic, chubby, and undeniably charming, breaking away from previous princess body types.

Before Moana’s travels and growth, we see her in a ceremonial red outfit (Figure 72) – which connects red to royalty within the story world. This garment draws inspiration from the Samoan *taualuga* ceremony, featuring a stunning headdress made from natural elements found in the island. The bodice and skirt are made to look as if they are crafted from *tapa*, adorned with pandanus leaves, feathers, and cowrie shells.

Her iconic outfit—the one she wears throughout her heroine’s journey, sailing across the ocean until she restores the heart of Te Fiti to bring life back to her island—consists of a reddish crop top wrapped around her chest, featuring subtle darker patterns and two decorative strings adorned with what appear to be small white shells (Figure 73). She also wears a beige skirt made from woven fabric, which carries the same floral pattern as the top she wore as a child. A reddish sash, similar in color and texture to her crop top, is tied around her waist over the skirt.



Figure 74 – Frames from the movie *Moana* (2016). Moana appears small and fragile next to the male characters, who also serve as obstacles in her journey. In contrast, she and her mother share a similar design and stature, visually reinforcing their alliance.

Visual Development Artist Neysa Bové explains how “Moana's clothes lend important clues to her personality. Moana is a fearless oceanic Princess. We wanted to make that relatable to today's audiences and pay tribute to Pacific culture” (as cited in Julius et al., 2016). Her outfit evolves throughout the film—starting in shades of orange, made from dust tapa and pandanus fabric, and later transitioning to red, to represent the powerful woman she becomes.

At the end of the movie, Moana leads her people on new sailing expeditions, now fully embracing her role as their leader. Her ceremonial outfit reflects this transformation, featuring bold, unapologetic red (Figure 73). She wears a large flower crown made of red leaves and small white flowers. Her crop top, crafted from red petals (or feathers), is adorned with a decorative string of white shells and an asymmetrical shoulder strap with a touch of bright green. A decorative red fringe tie wraps around her bicep. Her skirt consists of beige fibers, dyed red at the bottom, and is paired with a red belt featuring a subtle floral pattern, with rows of red and green leaves cascading down the front.

Another iconic element of Moana's design is the necklace Gramma Tala gives her. As Moana begins to learn the responsibilities of a future chief, the island suffers—coconut trees die, and fish disappear. Seeking answers, she turns to Gramma Tala, who reminds her of Maui's legend and reveals she witnessed the ocean choose Moana, secretly keeping the heart of Te Fiti safe after Moana lost it. She then shows Moana the hidden voyaging boats, reigniting her purpose. Before passing away, Gramma Tala gives Moana a locket necklace to carry the heart and urges her to find Maui and restore balance. The locket, made from abalone shell, holds the green stone and features a macramé chain with white pearls. Its ocean-blue tones contrast with Moana's warm color palette, making it a visual focal point in her design.

Moana's role as a Rebel is emphasized not only through her actions but also through the design contrasts between her and the male figures who attempt to restrain her (Figure 74). Both Gramma Tala and her mother, the women in Moana's life who support her adventurous spirit, have designs which are much closer to that of the protagonist. Contrastingly, her father, Chief Tui, enforces order and tries to confine her within the island's safety; similarly, Maui, another dominant male figure, initially serves as an obstacle on her journey rather than an ally. These dynamics are visually reinforced

through character design. When compared with these two male characters, Moana is small in stature, with rounder, more elegant features; while both her father and Maui are significantly taller, broader, and more physically imposing. Their designs are sturdy, blockish, and heavy, with massive hands and squarish proportions, making them appear more menacing. The exaggerated contrast in size and form underscores Moana's defiance, positioning her as a determined underdog challenging the authority and expectations imposed upon her. Despite these differences, a shared design language ties them together—such as thick ankles and chubby feet, even though the men's hands and feet are much bigger—ensuring visual cohesion within the world of the film.

Moana's athleticism (Figure 75) is also defining trait, aligning her with other animated female characters who embody the Rebel archetype. Schwab notes that "Moana is an action hero. She's capable and fit" (as cited in Julius et al., 2016, p. 31). She demonstrates remarkable physical prowess throughout the film—climbing out of Maui's cave with near-contortionist agility, diving off a cliff into the sea to chase after her boat, and skillfully maneuvering her vessel with daring acrobatics while facing Te Kā. Her strength and resilience are further emphasized in combat situations, as she wields her boat paddle as a weapon, fighting off the Kakamora, a tribe of scavengers that attack her and Maui during their journey. So, beyond her rebellious nature, Moana also exhibits traits of the Warrior archetype. Her physical capability and unwavering determination reinforce her role as an action hero—one who is not only strong-willed but also fully equipped to take on challenges through both intellect and strength.

Moana's character design reflects the artists' respect for Pacific Island cultures and the protagonist's own journey of self-discovery, blending authenticity with Disney's signature stylization to create a heroine who is both aspirational and deeply grounded in the world that inspired her.



Figure 75 – Frames from the movie *Moana* (2016). Moana is portrayed as an action-hero—agile, capable, and athletic.

Yi

In *Abominable* (2019), Yi, a young girl from Shanghai, embarks on a journey to help a lost Yeti return to its home in the Himalayas, all while navigating her own grief over the loss of her father. As the protagonist of a film co-produced by DreamWorks Animation, Pearl Studio, and Zhong Ming You Ying Film, Yi's character design reflects a blend of Western animation sensibilities and distinctly Chinese cultural influences. The whole production design of the movie speaks to both the modern Chinese identity and the film's efforts to authentically represent Yi's world.

Yi has brown, almond-shaped eyes with upturned corners, accentuated by a bold dark outline formed by her carefully designed eyelashes (Figure 76). Her dark, well-defined eyebrows add to her expressive features. She has a small, round nose, equal in width to her delicate mouth, where a full semi-circle upper lip contrasts with a thinner bottom lip. Her head is notably round, reflecting the overall shape language of the film. Yi's chin-length, straight black hair – a common hair type among Chinese people – is parted to the side, with wispy bangs that frame her face.

Her silhouette is distinctly stylized and slightly exaggerated. Like many animated female characters, she has a large head atop a long torso and slim, elegant arms. Her hips are slightly wider, her thighs remain slender, but her calves are noticeably chubby, creating a distinctive tear-shape at the bottom of her legs. Her large ankles and short-looking feet further enhance her unique and recognizable silhouette.

Yi's outfit consists of a red t-shirt featuring an illustration of a headphones set, paired with denim shorts that have small tears in the front and a patch decorated with skulls and lightning strikes. She wears dark gray tights underneath, reinforced with two knee patches, as well as knee-high striped socks in red and light green. Completing her look are dark purple ankle boots with a white front and heel, along with a small, practical brown crossbody bag adorned with patches.



Figure 76 – Frames from the movie *Abominable* (2019). Yi speaks with her grandmother before leaving the house to secretly go to work.



Figure 77 – Frames from the movie *Abominable* (2019). Yi, an excellent violinist, can use Everest’s magic by playing on her violin whose strings have been substituted by the yeti’s fur. Yi bonds with her travel companions, Jin, Peng, and Everest.

The graphics on her clothing—headphones, skulls, and lightning bolts—may be associated with a rebellious and non-conforming nature, reinforcing her independent and defiant personality. These symbols carry a combative meaning, reflecting the inner turmoil she experiences – as any normal teenager. Also, we noted that the color red appears once again as a main feature in the design of a Rebel character.

The patches on her clothing and bag may also hint at her financial situation or frugality. Rather than buying new items when they wear out, Yi is resourceful, mending and repurposing her belongings. Her clothes also accumulate dirt throughout the film, reflecting the physically demanding menial odd jobs she takes on daily, such as babysitting, walking dogs, and hauling trash. Like Tiana, Yi is one of the only female protagonists in our sample who works. During her summer holidays, she spends every waking hour taking on various jobs, all without her family's knowledge – neither her mother nor her grandmother are aware of her relentless work schedule.

Yi's design remains consistent throughout the movie, maintaining a distinct visual identity that aligns with the film's recognizable character design style.

Yi embodies aspects of the Rebel archetype, though her rebellion differs from other more expected portrayals. She is not fighting against an oppressive system but instead imposes restrictions on herself, taking on excessive responsibility while avoiding grief, rest, and healing after her father's premature death. Rather than accepting her family's support, she distances herself emotionally and focuses intensely on personal goals—specifically, earning money to go on a trip her father had planned for her family, even if she must go alone.

Her most overt act of rebellion occurs when she decides to help Everest, the lost Yeti who appears on her rooftop while fleeing from a corporation intent on capturing him. Through her courage, resourcefulness, and determination, Yi rescues Everest from the scientists who had previously imprisoned him, fighting for his freedom and, by extension, the protection of all wild creatures like him. Her rebellion becomes a path to healing: by running away with Everest and her friends Peng and Jin (Figure 77), she unknowingly embarks on the journey she had once dreamed of taking with her father.

Yi's growth is also reflected in her interactions with others. She manages to shift the perspective of Dr Burnish, the founder of the corporation trying to recapture the yeti, convincing him to protect wildlife rather than exploit it, while directly, physically, confronting Dr. Zara, who seeks to harm Everest. Her willingness to physically fight—an act aligned with the Warrior archetype—further reinforces her role as an active force for change. By changing the minds of those in the organization that endangers Everest and other creatures, she helps establish a new status quo where they are no longer at risk.

Mei

Turning Red (2022) tells the story of 13-year-old Chinese-Canadian teenage Meilin Lee (Mei), who suddenly finds herself going through puberty and transforming into a giant red panda whenever she experiences strong emotions. At the center of the plot is Mei's relationship with her overprotective and demanding mother. The story grew from Shi's own experiences: "This film is very personal to me, as it was very much inspired by my own life growing up in Toronto and being the only child of my overprotective mom and dad" (Milsom, 2022). The film's coming-of-age narrative and character designs seem to naturally emerge from the creative freedom that allowed for the acknowledgment and integration of diverse female perspectives during production.

As we mentioned before, Shi's team designed Mei to reflect their own features: they incorporated personal traits like moles, patchy eyebrows and thick ankles, and, seeing these traits celebrated in Mei, helped them embrace features they once disliked (Milsom, 2022). This approach to character design fosters relatability, diversity, and inclusivity, contrasting with the repetitive, idealized designs of many female animated characters in feature films.

Mei is depicted with a chubby physique and proportions that emphasize her cuteness – short limbs, a large head, and a rounded body (Figure 77). Her facial design deviates from the conventional aesthetic of 3D animated feature films, much like how Merida challenged traditional notions of a female protagonist's appearance. Unlike the polished beauty of Disney princesses, Mei's features are more unconventional. Her brown eyes

are rounder, positioned closer together, without the usual cat-eye, pretty, sexy, upturned corners.

As stop-motion animator and director Emma De Swaef noted in our conversation, wider-set eyes tend to give a character a sense of gravitas, whereas closer-set eyes contribute to a more playful, innocent expression:

Like Muppets have their eyes close together (...) and also Wallace and Gromit. There's something about these characters that, they're a bit naive and warm, that I like about. If you have eyes further apart, it gives more of a serious, gravitas, and this [*makes a circle with her thumb and index finger on both hands, over her eyes, mimicking goggles*] is humor.
(E. De Swaef, personal communication, November 8, 2022)

Additionally, Mei's nose is small, rounded, and positioned high between her eyes. Her dark eyebrows display individual strands of hair. Her highly expressive mouth, that expands and contracts in a panoply of exaggerated shapes, further connects her design to what is often referred to as the *CalArts style*³⁹, *bean-mouth style*, or *thin-lined animation*. This animation style, which emerged in the 2010s, especially associated with 2D animation and animated television series, is characterized by simple, rounded shapes—such as tubes and ovals for limbs and a bean-shaped head—as well as thin contour lines. This design approach enhances animation fluidity, facilitating squash-and-stretch movements and exaggerated expressions. However, when executed poorly, it can appear flat or lacking in visual depth.

Although *Turning Red*'s character designs reflect the personal art styles of director Domee Shi and lead production designer Rona Liu—both influenced by 1990s *shoujo*

³⁹ The term “*CalArts style*” was first used as an insult in 2010, in a now deleted blog post by *Ren & Stimpy* creator John Kricfalusi – who was accused of sexual misconduct by two women in 2018 (Lange, 2018) – to criticize California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) alumni like Brad Bird for copying Disney's animation style, moving away from the more detailed animation of the 1980s and 1990s. Over time, the term lost its original meaning and became a catchall insult for the thin-line, simplified animation style seen in many 2010s cartoons, such as *Steven Universe*, *Gravity Falls*, and *ThunderCats Roar*—even though many of their creators didn't attend CalArts. This style's rise is largely due to digital animation tools, HD television, and anime's influence on Western animation.

manga and anime—the film also adapts elements of the *bean-mouth style* to 3D animation.



Figure 78 – Frames from the movie *Turning Red* (2022). Mei rushes home from school after having a moment of fun with her friends, Miriam, Priya, and Abby.

While this style has traditionally been associated with 2D animated television, its application in *Turning Red* demonstrates how its expressive qualities translate to three-dimensional characters. Despite a degree of anatomical realism, Mei's design retains the exaggerated expressions and flexible movement characteristic of this animation trend. Character designer Keiko Murayama, describes her artistic approach to designing characters for this film:

“My first goal with character design for *Turning Red* was to retain the energy and vibrant personalities from Domee's initial sketches. We created a style inspired by the charming anime masters of the '70s and '80s, merging that look with a Western design approach” (as cited in Shi et al., 2022, p. 43).

As a Chinese-Canadian teenager born to a Chinese immigrant family, Mei's design incorporates culturally and temporally specific details. Her straight, chin-length black hair is side-parted and accessorized with two hair clips, reflecting late 1990s and early 2000s fashion. The film includes various references to this era, from boy bands to the characters' clothing and accessories. Mei wears thin metal-framed glasses, a red cardigan over a rounded-collar shirt, a purple skirt, cropped pink ankle-length leggings, short light pink socks, and gray and pink sneakers. Additionally, she carries a Tamagotchi attached to her backpack strap, and her instrument case is decorated with stickers. These elements, including her glasses, rounded collar, and a sticker reading “*This Girl Loves Math*”, reinforce her characterization as a studious, obedient, and hard-working teenager striving to meet her family's expectations.



Figure 79 – Frames from the movie *Turning Red* (2022). Mei transforms into a giant red panda, and when she finally relaxes and returns to her human form, she realizes her hair has permanently turned red.

The morning after experiencing a profound humiliation—caused by her mother revealing the romantic drawings Mei made of a teenage supermarket clerk—Mei undergoes a sudden transformation into a red panda (Figure 78). In this form, she becomes significantly larger, covered in bright red and orange fur with white patches, a fluffy tail, and furry cheeks and ears. Despite these changes, her brown, round, close-set eyes remain unchanged, ensuring that the audience can still recognize her as Mei. Upon calming down and returning to her human form, Mei's hair is now red. To conceal this transformation when she goes to school, she wears a red beanie adorned with pink maple leaf patterns—a symbol of Canada, which also appears on her pajamas.

Notably, Mei is clearly associated to red, standing out visually from her more muted surroundings. While her friends—Miriam, Priya, and Abby—are each associated with distinct colors (green, yellow, and violet, respectively), Mei is characterized by a dominant red palette in her clothing and hair. This is reminiscent of *maho shoujo* (magical girl) ensembles, where protagonists often share similar designs but are distinguished by color schemes (Sá & Tavares, 2017a). However, *Turning Red* takes this further by ensuring that each main character—not just Mei and her friends, but also her parents—has unique design features that reflect both their personalities and narrative roles.

The influence of Japanese anime and manga is also evident in how Mei's emotions are visually exaggerated. When she sees a boy she finds attractive, her eyes widen dramatically, appearing extra glimmery with heart and star-shaped reflections (Figure 79)—an iconic stylistic choice frequently used in anime to emphasize strong emotions like infatuation or excitement.



Figure 80 – Frames from the movie *Turning Red* (2022). Mei is entering puberty and discovering feelings of attraction towards boys.

Mei experiences overwhelming and uncontrollable emotions and, most notably, acts on them. She channels her feelings into spicy imaginative sketches of herself with her crushes and, in panda form, openly expresses her attraction. When she sees the cute supermarket clerk, she excitedly exclaims, “*Awooga!*”—a direct reference to Tex Avery’s short film *Red Hot Riding Hood* (1943), in which a cartoon wolf is completely enamored by the sultry, jazzed-up Red Riding Hood, responding with exaggerated gestures and a cartoonish “*Awooga!*”, followed by a series of awkward, thirsty mutterings. This iconic pop culture moment, also referenced in *The Mask* (1994), has since become a widely recognized meme used to signify thirst—a slang term for craving attention, affection, or sexual attraction. This comedic (but relatable) expression of desire is a rarity for animated female characters—especially teenage protagonists—who are seldom depicted expressing feelings of lust and desire. As she undergoes puberty, these emotions manifest physically: she becomes acutely aware of her attraction to boys, experiences heightened bodily sensations, and even notices a stronger body odor.

Her transformation into a giant red panda serves as a powerful visual metaphor for the emotional and physiological changes of adolescence. Beyond the clear association of the color red with menstruation—reinforced by her mother’s mistaken assumption that Mei has gotten her first period, referring to it as the “blooming of the red peony”—the panda’s clumsy, oversized, and uncontrollable form reflects Mei’s inner turmoil.

After embracing her panda and learning to control it, Mei undergoes a subtle but significant transformation in her appearance (Figure 80). She now ties her red cardigan around her waist, revealing her pink shirt, and accessorizes with a black choker—a staple of early 2000s fashion. She also adds small star stickers to her ears, mimicking earrings, while her wrists are adorned with friendship bracelets identical to those worn by her best friends and a pink Casio-style watch.



Figure 81 – Frames from the movie *Turning Red* (2022). When she is in red panda mode, Mei feels free and brave. When she accepts it as a part of her, she feels more authentic and allows herself to show parts of that panda, even when she is in her human form.

In panda mode, Mei is expansive, uninhibited, and free, prompting Miriam to remark, “You’re such a rebel now!”. During this period, Mei and her friends work tirelessly to raise money for 4*Town’s Toronto concert, believing that attending their favorite boy band’s show will mark their transition from girls to young women. However, Mei is living a double life and still pretends to be the same dutiful daughter she has always been whenever she is around her family.

Traditionally, the women in the Lee family have viewed their pandas as a curse, sealing them away in amulets to maintain control and propriety. Mei, however, is faced with a choice: conform to this legacy or embrace her panda—an embodiment of the wilder, more instinctive, and unrestrained parts of herself. In a defining act of rebellion, she rejects the path laid out for her and chooses to keep her panda, accepting her flaws, emotions, and complexities as integral to her identity. Her transformation into a red panda symbolizes the embracing of uncontrollable feelings—passion, excitement, embarrassment, and desire—emotions she learns to own rather than suppress.

Visually, *Turning Red* reinforces this theme through its symbolic use of the color red. Found in Meilin’s clothing, hair, and fur, red represents transformation, rebellion, raw emotion, and the rites of puberty. It encapsulates the messy, unpredictable, and powerful journey of growing up.

Mei embodies the rebel archetype, and her journey is one of emotional liberation from an oppressive relationship with her mother, and herself. Mei embraces her individuality, forges her own identity as a growing teenager, and establishes a new status quo for her family, breaking the tradition and embracing her panda.

Kaguya

The Tale of The Princess Kaguya (2013), directed by Isao Takahata and produced by Studio Ghibli, is a retelling of the classic Japanese folktale *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter*. The film follows Kaguya, a mysterious girl found inside a glowing bamboo shoot by an older couple, who raise her as their own. As she grows at an unnatural pace, her extraordinary beauty draws the attention of noble suitors and even the emperor himself. However, Kaguya struggles with the expectations placed upon her, longing for the freedom and simplicity of her early life in the countryside.

The movie's stunning visuals are characterized by its crafted, hand-drawn aesthetic, evoking traditional Japanese ink wash paintings. The visual style lives on the textures of graphite, charcoal, and watercolor, with loose, gestural lines that create a sense of movement and liveliness, even in stillness. The soft, muted color palette enhances the film's dreamlike quality, evoking an ancient world where magic and gods feel tangible. When bright, saturated colors appear, they carry an even greater emotional impact, heightening key moments in Kaguya's journey.

Kaguya undergoes a magical physical transformation over the course of the film. When we first see her, she appears as a tiny, doll-like human (Figure 82) inside a glowing bamboo stalk, discovered by a bamboo cutter while he is out in the grove working. She has round black eyes, a very round face with rosy cheeks, and sleek black hair tied back in a ponytail with a pink accessory. She wears a delicate white kimono decorated with subtle gray flowers, lined with a neon green interior, over a pink pair of *hakama*—traditional Japanese trousers usually worn under a kimono jacket. The bamboo cutter is convinced that she is a divine gift from Heaven.

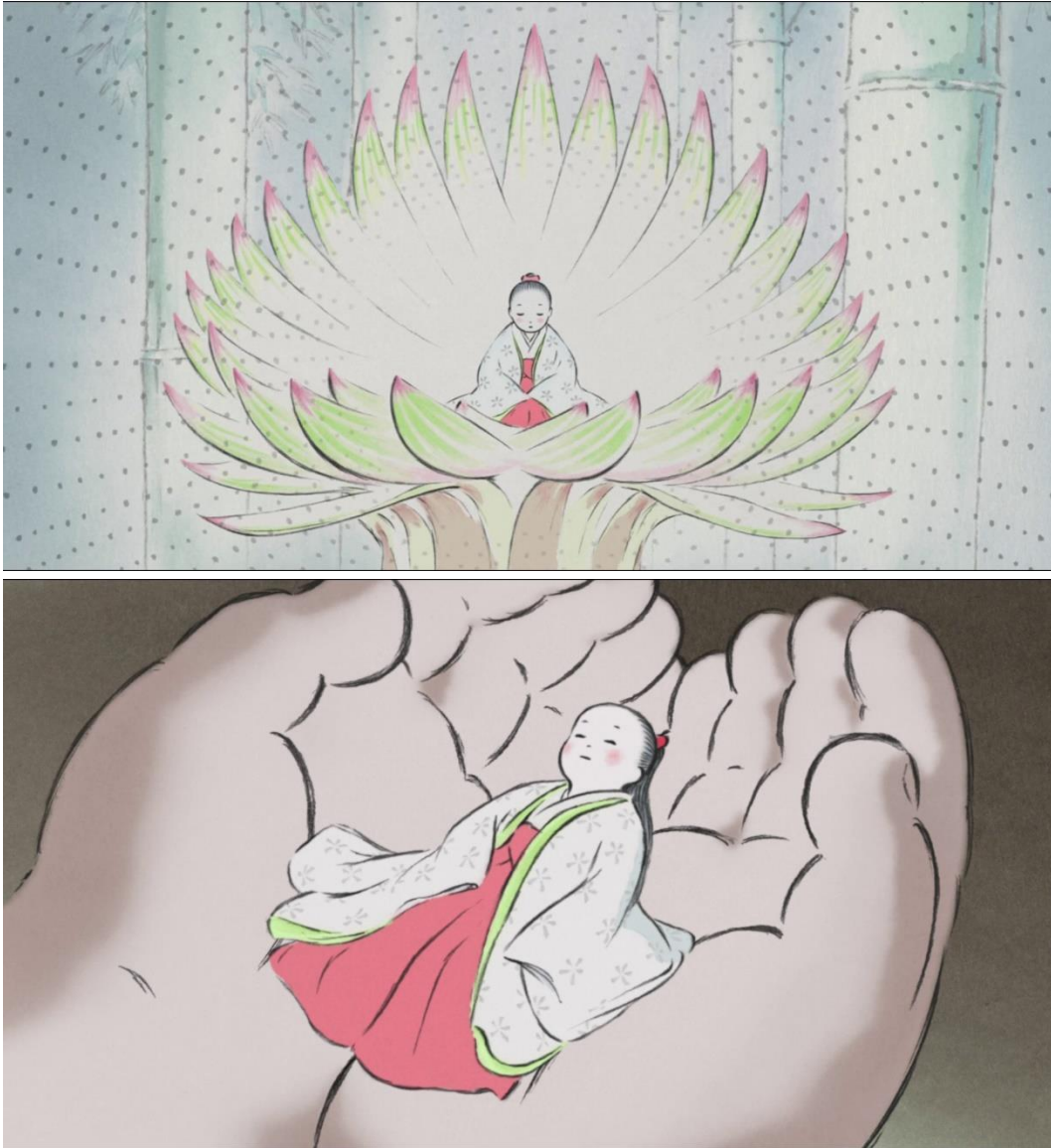


Figure 82 – Frames from the movie *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* (2013). Kaguya, a tiny princess, mysteriously appears inside a bamboo shoot.

Overwhelmed with joy, he takes Kaguya home and shows her to his wife, who quickly and gently scoops her up. As she cradles Kaguya in her hands, the little princess suddenly begins to stretch and transform, growing into a normal-sized human baby (Figure 83). The wife interprets this as a sign that Kaguya has chosen her to be her mother. As the couple marvels at the miraculous transformation, the wife speculates that Kaguya appeared in her miniature princess-like form to reveal the noble woman she is destined to become. They agree that they must raise her properly so that she can fulfill the grand expectations set by her first appearance.



Figure 83 – Frames from the movie *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* (2013). Kaguya magically transforms from a tiny, doll-like princess into a full-sized human baby, as her adoptive mother reaches out to hold her.

The baby soon bursts into laughter and leaves the couple in awe. With each laugh, Kaguya grows rapidly, evolving from crawling to walking within moments. Soon she is a curious toddler accompanying her father to the bamboo grove. When she reaches out to pet a litter of piglets, their mother charges, but a village boy, Sutemaru, rescues her. At that instant, Kaguya grows again, now appearing as an older child (Figure 84).



Figure 84 – Frames from the movie *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* (2013). Kaguya grows unnaturally quickly, going from a tiny baby to a young child in a very short period.



Figure 85 – Frames from the movie *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* (2013). Kaguya arrives at their new mansion and starts her training to be a noble lady.

Throughout these rapid transformations, her clothing remains simple. From infancy to childhood, she wears a light yellow kimono with a delicate pink flower pattern, fastened at the side with a string (Figure 84). As she matures into a young teenager, her hair grows longer, and her outfit subtly evolves—a simple wrap-around dress now layers beneath her kimono. She is always barefoot. Kaguya continues to grow, playing freely with the village boys, radiating an intuitive, fearless, and joyful spirit.

However, Kaguya's father soon discovers two more gifts from Heaven in the bamboo grove—gold and delicate, finely crafted garments. He interprets this as a divine sign that confirms that Kaguya is destined for a life of luxury and nobility. Believing this is the key to her happiness, he decides to raise her as a noble princess, certain that she will thrive in a grand mansion among the aristocracy of the capital. But, this could not be further from the truth—Kaguya had been truly happy living in nature, playing freely with her friends, and exploring the fields and woods without constraint.

Following her father's wishes, Kaguya is taken to the capital, where he has built a great mansion for her. When she awakens from her journey, she is greeted by a group of ladies-in-waiting dressed in pink, who drape a red kimono over her shoulders, adorned with a delicate white flower pattern (Figure 85). Once again, we see a Rebel character associated with the color red. At first, Kaguya is enchanted by her new home, delighting in its luxuries and playfully exploring its vast spaces. However, her joy fades as she realizes the strict expectations of nobility—no running, jumping, or carefree play. What once felt wondrous soon becomes a gilded cage.

During her training to become a proper lady (Figure 85), Kaguya is taught etiquette, calligraphy, and how to play the koto. Her appearance reflects this transition—her long, dark hair is now tied in a loose, low ponytail with a pink ribbon, and she wears a simple white blouse, a pink pair of hakama, and a pink kimono adorned with a flower pattern. Even though her garments change, Kaguya continues to resist the strict rules imposed upon her—she indulges in drawing when she should be practicing calligraphy and adamantly refuses to have her eyebrows plucked and her teeth blackened, defying Lady Sagami's insistence that such modifications are essential to become a proper princess.



Figure 86 – Frames from the movie *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* (2013). Although Kaguya remains a curious and playful child, she is forced to restrain herself and behave as a proper noble lady.



Figure 87 – Frames from the movie *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* (2013). Kaguya flees the mansion in a fit of rage.

Kaguya's face is designed with appealing, familiar proportions, aligning with the aesthetics commonly seen in animated female characters. However, this contrasts sharply with the exaggerated, more caricatured designs of other characters in the film. Her tutor, Lady Sagami, resembles traditional Japanese illustrations of women with white painted faces, evoking a stylized, rigid elegance (Figure 85). Meanwhile, her lively lady-in-waiting, Menowarawa (Figure 86), has a rounder, more expressive face, with slitted eyes and an exaggerated mouth, similar to the design of some of the village children. The noble man who presents Kaguya with her name also has a caricatured face, of exaggerated proportions. Among the cast, Kaguya's features stand out for their naturalism—only Sutemaru, her childhood friend and love interest, shares the same balanced facial proportions as she does, reinforcing their connection.

During her naming ceremony—until then she had been called “Lil’ Bamboo” by friends and “Hime” by her parents—the guests celebrate for days. As the festivities drag on, they demand to see Kaguya, as their conversation soon turns cruel, filled with slander and disdain for her commoner origins. Hearing this, she is overcome with emotion and storms out of the mansion. She races through the empty city streets, shedding away the outer layers of her ceremonial kimono as she runs. Her flight is a raw, visceral moment of rebellion—her form becomes almost unrecognizable as animator Shinji Hashimoto's expressive gesture drawing takes center stage (Figure 87). Kaguya's center of gravity is exaggerated and tilted forward, making it seem as if she is about to fall. She is no longer confined by careful lines; instead, she becomes a force of nature, her movement captured through loose, furious charcoal strokes that convey her inner turmoil, rage, and madness. Her red garment, standing out against the dark, monochromatic night, further amplifies the intensity of her escape. Kaguya flees to the mountains of her childhood, collapsing in the snow. She awakens back at the mansion, as if her escape had been only a dream.

This experience changes her—she appears defeated, resigned to her fate. For the first time, she submits to the expectations placed upon her, allowing her eyebrows to be plucked and her teeth to be blackened (Figure 88). She dedicates herself to her studies in pensive silence, preparing to fully embody the role of a noble princess.



Figure 88 – Frames from the movie *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* (2013). Kaguya yields to societal expectations, enduring the plucking of her eyebrows and the blackening of her teeth to conform to the rigid standards of a noble lady.

As word of her beauty spreads, Kaguya receives lavish gifts, and five noble suitors soon arrive seeking her hand. Though she seemed resigned to her confinement, she once again asserts her rebellious nature, rejecting Lady Sagami's claim that marriage is the ultimate form of happiness. Refusing an unwanted union, Kaguya sets each suitor an impossible task: to retrieve a legendary, nearly unattainable treasure.

After driving away the persistent suitors and onlookers outside her mansion, Kaguya goes to see the cherry blossoms. The joy of being in nature again quickly turns bittersweet as she realizes her noble status now separates her from the people she once lived among. On her way home, she meets Sutemaru, who has turned to stealing to survive; when he is caught and beaten, Kaguya blames herself. For the next three years, she lives quietly in the mansion, trading her colorful kimono for a simple white garment with a sash.

Meanwhile, Kaguya's suitors all fail her impossible challenge. They lie, cheat, steal, and even perish in their attempts, proving none can give her what she truly longs for. Devastated, she lashes out in another fit of despair, destroying her mother's garden—a miniature replica of her childhood home—declaring it to be just as false as she has become. She confesses she believes her existence brings misery to everyone.

When summoned to serve in the Emperor's court, Kaguya refuses, even threatening to take her own life if forced. Declaring, "No one will own me," she defies his authority, but he remains undeterred. Visiting her in person, the Emperor admires her beauty and musical talent, and, in an abusive display of power, he embraces her from behind, violating her personal space and disregarding her will (Figure 89). Terrified, Kaguya becomes incorporeal, slipping from his grasp like a spirit. This serves as a powerful visual metaphor for disassociating from one's body when it is touched without consent. At that moment, she realizes that in her desperation, she has called out to the Moon, pleading to return home. The restrictions imposed upon her have stifled her freedom and joy, making her time on Earth unbearable. *"I was born to truly live, like the birds and the beasts,"* she laments.



Figure 89 – Frames from the movie *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* (2013). The Emperor seizes Kaguya without consent, leaving her terrified and vulnerable. To escape his grasp, she becomes immaterial, slipping away like a spirit.



Figure 90 – Frames from the movie *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* (2013). In a dream-like sequence, Kaguya reunites with Sutemaru, embracing him affectionately as they take flight together, experiencing a moment of true freedom, unbound by the social expectations that had constrained them and kept them apart from each other.

Despite her regret at summoning the celestial beings, Kaguya knows her fate is sealed and she will be taken back to the Moon. As a final request, she longs to return to her childhood home one last time. There, she reunites with Sutemaru, now a father. For a fleeting moment, she sheds her heavy kimono layers, revealing her simple white shirt and pink hakama, showing Sutemaru that she was always fit for a simple life in the countryside. They run together, faster and faster, until they take flight, soaring over the landscape (Figure 90). In that instant, they experience the happiness they could have had if they had been free to choose their own path.

At last, the time comes for Kaguya to return to the Moon. A celestial parade descends to escort her home. Though she begs for more time, the Moon people place a celestial robe upon her shoulders, erasing all her earthly memories (Figure 91). Seated on a throne, she wears a golden crown and a flowing pink robe, finally looking like the princess her parents thought she were. As she gets closer to the Moon, her vibrant colors fade into black and white, a stark contrast between life on Earth and life on the Moon. On Earth, existence is messy—it is full of pain, joy, and passion. On the Moon, there is only peace, but that peace comes at the cost of feeling.

Kaguya's journey is defined by her embodiment of the Rebel—fiercely resisting the constraints imposed upon her. She rejects a life of nobility, refuses to marry without love, and longs for the freedom to run wild in nature. Though she fights against those who seek to control her, her defiance is not always enough to secure her freedom. In the end, despite her resistance, she is pulled away from the life she yearned for.



Figure 91 – Frames from the movie *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* (2013). Kaguya's earthly memories vanish as the Moon people come to take her back.

3.8.4. Discussion

Created by Women Writers/Directors

We noticed that *Persepolis*, *Brave*, *Abominable*, and *Turning Red* were all written and directed by women or had a leading female screenwriter, story creator, or director. This raises the question: is there a correlation between women creators and the predominance of female Rebel characters in animated films?

Among the 31 films in our final sample, only six had women directors (*Persepolis*, *Brave*, *Frozen*, *Abominable*, *Encanto*, and *Turning Red*). Of these six movies, four have female protagonists who we believe align with the Rebel archetype (*Persepolis*, *Brave*, *Abominable*, and *Turning Red*). This suggests a possible tendency for female creators to depict heroines who challenge oppressive forces, whether societal, cultural, or familial.

However, notable examples of rebellious female protagonists also emerge in films directed by men. *Ponyo*, *Moana*, and *The Tale of Princess Kaguya* were all directed by male filmmakers. Two of these—*Ponyo* and *The Tale of Princess Kaguya*—were based on existing tales and helmed by Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata, respectively, two of the most notorious animation directors in history. Studio Ghibli, the studio they co-founded, has a long-standing reputation for telling empowering stories featuring both male and female characters. Miyazaki, in particular, is renowned for his portrayals of strong, independent, and intelligent young female protagonists, often surrounded by a diverse and complex cast that includes female figures in diverse roles. Similarly, Ron Clements and John Musker, the directors of *Moana*, have experience crafting stories centered on independent and strong-willed female leads, having previously directed *The Little Mermaid* (1989)—arguably Disney’s first major Rebel heroine—and *The Princess and the Frog* (2009).

While men have also contributed to the portrayal of rebellious female characters, the influence of women creators appears to bring a heightened focus on narratives that emphasize resistance, autonomy, and the dismantling of restrictive norms.

Red as a Symbol of Rebellion

A recurring visual pattern among the seven characters identified as embodying the Rebel archetype is their strong association with the color red in their design and presentation. When Marjane appears in the present, waiting at the airport, she wears a red jacket over a dark, all-black outfit. Ponyo wears a bright pink-red dress and has red hair. Merida's wild, untamed curls are a striking shade of fiery red. Moana's outfit gradually incorporates more red as she embraces her identity and leadership role. Yi is dressed in a red t-shirt. Mei not only wears red, but her black hair turns red, and she transforms into a giant red panda. Finally, Kaguya is clad in red during the film's most climactic moments, at one point becoming a furious, red tempest racing across the fields.

Of the seven Rebel characters analyzed, three have red hair—a particularly notable trend given the rarity of red hair in the real world. Naturally occurring in only about two percent of the global population, red hair is most commonly found in Ireland and Scotland. Across history and cultures, red hair has been imbued with diverse symbolic meanings. In Polynesia, it was seen as a sign of noble ancestry, whereas in Europe, it has been historically linked to immorality, Jewish identity (often persecuted), and even supernatural associations such as lycanthropy and vampirism (World Population Review, 2024).

In animation, red hair has long been used as a visual shorthand for rebellious, passionate, and strong-willed personalities, particularly in female-coded characters. Iconic red-haired protagonists in feature films include Nausicaä from *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), Jessica Rabbit from *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988), Ariel from *The Little Mermaid* (1989), Anastasia from *Anastasia* (1997), Jessie from *Toy Story 2* (1999), Fiona from *Shrek* (2001), and Elastigirl from *The Incredibles* (2004), among many others. Animated television shows have reinforced this association even further, with characters such as Pepper Ann (*Pepper Ann*), Wilma (*The Flintstones*), Jane Jetson (*The Jetsons*), Misty (*Pokémon*), Ginger (*As Told by Ginger*), Kim Possible (*Kim Possible*), and Daphne (*Scooby-Doo*), to name just a few. Moreover, animated girl squads frequently feature a red-haired leader or standout member, as seen in *Winx Club*, *The*

Powerpuff Girls, *Sailor Moon*, *W.I.T.C.H.*, and *Totally Spies*. This recurring visual pattern reinforces the perception of red hair as a marker of boldness, individuality, and defiance.

Color theory provides insight into the psychological and physiological effects of red. The color is deeply tied to emotional responses, often evoking both positive and negative reactions depending on the context. It is strongly associated with dominance, attention, and emotional intensity. Research suggests that red enhances the perception and identification of anger, particularly when contrasted against a red background, reinforcing its link to heightened alertness and potential threats (Sutton & Altarriba, 2015; Young et al., 2013). However, red is not solely tied to danger and aggression—it is also connected to passion, excitement, and energy. In emotionally charged situations, red naturally draws attention, amplifying the emotional tone of a given context (Kaya & Epps, 2004; Kuniecki et al., 2015).

Red also has a measurable impact on attention and behavior, particularly in situations with strong emotional significance. Studies indicate that red effectively captures and sustains attention, influencing both cognitive and motor responses (Kuniecki et al., 2015). Additionally, red is implicitly associated with dominance, leading to faster and more accurate recognition of dominance-related concepts. Neurophysiological studies further suggest that exposure to red increases arousal and concentration, reinforcing its role in enhancing focus and vigilance (Kim, 2024; Mentzel et al., 2017). However, emotional responses to red can vary across cultures, with some research indicating that color associations may be shaped by cultural context and individual experience (Kaya & Epps, 2004).

Ultimately, red is a color of intensity, passion, and defiance—qualities that align closely with the Rebel archetype. Whether through character design, narrative symbolism, or psychological impact, red emerges as a powerful visual and thematic motif that underscores the bold, disruptive, and passionate nature of these protagonists.

Rebellion in Different Cultural Settings

The cultural backgrounds of the Rebel characters analyzed suggest a strong correlation between their respective story environments and their acts of defiance. Notably, Merida is the only European, white character among them, while the others are of Asian or Polynesian descent.

Some of these stories take place in the past—a somewhat fictionalized past—where societal norms were stricter. Merida, Moana, and Kaguya all live in imagined historical settings where they struggle against oppressive traditions. Merida lives in an ancient Scottish world where she resists patriarchal expectations, particularly those imposed by her mother, and the pressure to enter an arranged marriage. Moana, a Pacific Islander, challenges the stagnation and forgetfulness of her people's ancient customs, defying expectations to reclaim their lost history of voyaging and exploration. Kaguya rebels against the rigid, absurd customs imposed on noblewomen in Heian-era Japan, rejecting the weight of wealth and luxury in favor of the simplicity of rural life.

In contrast, Marjane and Mei exist in more recent historical settings, navigating personal freedom and individuality amidst societal expectations and impositions. Marjane grows up in Tehran during the turbulent period following the 1979 Iranian Revolution, a time of political upheaval, increasing government oppression, and rigid social control. Mei, a teenage girl of Chinese heritage living in Toronto at the turn of the century, pushes back against familial expectations that emphasize obedience, academic success, and filial duty—values deeply rooted in Chinese culture.

Lastly, Ponyo and Yi exist in (somewhat) contemporary story worlds, set in Japanese and Chinese societies, respectively. Ponyo defies her father's control and the boundaries between land and sea, choosing to transform into a human and live with the boy she loves. Yi, on the other hand, struggles with grief and emotional isolation, having built walls around herself after her father's passing. By the end of her journey, she breaks free from these self-imposed constraints, all while helping the abducted yeti, Everest, escape captivity.

Despite their differing backgrounds, these characters share a common thread: they challenge the limitations imposed upon them—whether by family, tradition, or larger

sociopolitical forces—emphasizing a universal theme of rebellion against restrictive systems. In doing so, they often embody the feminist heroine, resisting the specific limitations placed on women and rejecting the societal expectations that seek to define their roles and freedoms.

3.9. Key Findings from the Visual Analysis

In this chapter, we explored the previously underexamined relationship between narrative archetypes and character design in animated feature films. By analyzing how these archetypes inform representations of womanhood and girlhood, the study proposes a new framework for understanding female character design, with the aim of fostering critical thinking and offering practical insights for creators aiming to develop more nuanced and diverse female characters in animation and related media.

Our analysis revealed a strong connection between the narrative and the archetypal roles that characters embody, and the way they are visually designed. This suggests that narrative archetypes remain highly prominent in contemporary animated feature films, often serving as effective tools to convey story meaning quickly and efficiently. The visual design of a character plays a crucial role in reinforcing these narrative intentions. Through this analysis, we were able to identify recurring trends and patterns in the representation of female characters, thereby shedding light on design practices that may contribute to biased or limiting portrayals.

To conduct the design analysis of female characters embodying certain well-known narrative archetypes in animated feature films, we gathered a sample of 31 relevant movies. These movies adhered to quality and popularity criteria, as well as female representation metrics that would make the analysis possible. We chose five narrative archetypes that were embodied by female characters in these animated feature films: Mentors, Witches, Warriors, Lovers, and Rebels.

The analysis revealed that each archetype tended to exhibit distinct design characteristics that supported the identification of a character as an embodiment of a specific narrative and archetypal role. This suggests that character design plays a crucial role in communicating universal concepts such as archetypes, with certain visual cues

functioning as readily recognizable signals that help audiences understand a character's role within the narrative.

Mentor characters were frequently associated with old age, conveyed through visual markers such as sagging skin, wrinkles, and wider, squarish silhouettes. Their age was often further emphasized through the use of gaudy accessories, which were typically absent in the designs of younger characters. Witches and Shamans relied heavily on caricature, often featuring exaggerated traits and deviations from conventional beauty standards. These designs served to visually communicate the fear and power associated with their roles. Warrior characters consistently displayed visual elements that emphasized their readiness to fight and protect, most commonly represented through the presence of sharp weapons or pronounced musculature. These figures were often designed to appear physically strong and potentially dangerous, going beyond mere athleticism. Lover characters, by contrast, were typically depicted as young, innocent, and traditionally feminine, with delicate facial features, dresses, and long hair. All Rebel characters in the sample shared the use of red as a recurring visual motif, and most were portrayed as teenagers, visually embodying themes of resistance and youth.

However, not all characters conformed neatly to the expected visual codes of their archetypes. Some Mentors, for instance, were younger adults rather than wise elders, creating a greater sense of proximity and relatability to the protagonists they guided. This was often reinforced by visual similarities between the Mentor and the protagonist's designs. While Witches and Shamans were generally designed to be unattractive, other characters with similar narrative functions—such as powerful female figures labeled as sorceresses or goddesses—were instead rendered as conventionally beautiful. Warrior characters also demonstrated complexity and contrast within their designs. For example, Luisa's imposing, muscular frame suggested strength and menace, yet her narrative also emphasized emotional vulnerability and gentleness. Conversely, Mebh, though her design is rounded, small and arguably cute, proved to be fierce and dangerous. Within the Lover category, Eep challenged traditional expectations through

her more androgynous design, which incorporated traits typically coded as masculine. While most Rebels were teenagers, Ponyo stood out as a much younger child character who nonetheless defied imposed expectations, reinforcing her archetypal role through behavior rather than age.

Throughout the visual analysis of female character designs, several recurring themes emerged that speak to broader cultural narratives and representational practices in animation. One major area of inquiry was the depiction of age in female bodies—particularly how old age is visually encoded through features such as white hair, and how age can afford characters a greater sense of authenticity and freedom in their self-expression. We also examined the notion of femininity as a form of performance, especially in older characters, and how beauty is frequently equated with moral goodness, perpetuating the association between specific visual traits and ethical values. Another pattern observed was the tendency to represent female power through visually "unappealing" features, often linking strength and authority with a departure from conventional attractiveness. The analysis also explored how love and desirability are frequently tied to physical beauty and socially constructed ideals of femininity. Surprisingly, the prevalence of dresses as a staple of female character design was notable, even among otherwise subversive or unconventional characters. Lastly, we found that female protagonists coded as Middle Eastern and Asian were often positioned within the Rebel archetype, suggesting a complex interplay between ethnicity and culture, narrative role, and visual coding. These thematic observations offer valuable insight into how gender, power, age, and cultural identity continue to shape character design in animated feature films.

Our analysis also revealed clear signs that high-quality, thoughtful content is being produced within the field of animated feature films. Many of the characters studied offer compelling, diverse, and multidimensional representations of femininity—some of which defy conventional expectations and stereotypes. These characters transcend simplistic tropes and serve as exciting, meaningful role models for both young and older

audiences. The 31 films selected for in-depth analysis presented numerous female characters whose visual design reinforced their narrative complexity and subversive potential. However, when considering the broader sample of 260 films with which this thesis started, it becomes evident that progress across the industry is neither consistent nor linear. While some creators and studios are actively engaging with more progressive and imaginative portrayals, others continue to rely on more traditional, limited approaches. While progress hasn't been linear—and interesting and complex female characters certainly exist in older films—it's encouraging to see a growing number of recent productions featuring female characters with greater creativity, narrative depth, and visual originality.

Nevertheless, persistent patterns remain in the design of main female characters, where beauty and cuteness continue to dominate. The appeal of these characters often hinges on visual markers of innocence, daintiness, softness, and physical attractiveness. Rarely did we encounter female protagonists whose design challenged these traditional notions of appeal in any significant way. In contrast, greater creative freedom appears to be afforded to secondary characters. These supporting roles often allow for more experimentation in visual style, humor, caricature, and exaggeration, resulting in designs that are more daring, unconventional, and even subversive. This contrast suggests a lingering hesitation within mainstream animation to stray too far from normative beauty standards when it comes to central female characters, despite clear evidence that more innovative and resonant representations are not only possible, but also increasingly well-received.

By uncovering these design practices and narrative patterns, this research highlights how specific creative choices can reinforce limiting assumptions about gender roles and contribute to broader societal biases. Such critical analysis is crucial for promoting a more equitable and inclusive media landscape, one that supports the development of content reflecting the full diversity of human experience and offering more authentic, representative models for all audiences.

4. INTERVIEWS WITH ANIMATION PROFESSIONALS

Alongside the data collection and analysis of animated films, we conducted interviews with animation practitioners and individuals whose work is closely connected to the industry. These interviews provided valuable insights into the creative process and the varying production dynamics across different studio contexts. While the film analysis offered access only to the final product, the interviews enabled a deeper exploration of the decision-making processes behind the scenes. They also offered a range of perspectives and personal experiences from diverse professionals, enriching our understanding of how representation is shaped in practice.

4.1. Interview Process and Methodological Approach

The interviewees were contacted through LinkedIn, their personal email accounts and/or their social media accounts. We used the snowball sampling approach to reach out to possible interviewees, as most of them were contacted after being referenced by someone else who had already been interviewed. This way, we were able to have a larger reach and expand our network. Our goal was to interview a large and diverse group of people that could provide a range of different perceptions, so we aimed at gathering contacts worldwide.

We interviewed 33 people, from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, with ages ranging approximately from 20 to 60 years old⁴⁰. The interviewees were from and worked in the following countries: Portugal, Germany, Belgium, Spain, France, Poland, England, United States of America, Canada, Brazil, India, and Japan.

For this study, we didn't conduct any interviews with animation practitioners from or working in Africa, Australia, or the Middle East. This decision was based on several considerations. First, the cultural and professional contexts of these regions differ significantly from those of the other interviewees, which could have complicated the harmonization of experiences and potentially skewed the study's conclusions. The unique perspectives and experiences of practitioners from these regions warrant a level of depth and attention that extends beyond the scope of this thesis. Additionally, logistical challenges in accessing and connecting with professionals from these regions, due to geographic and network limitations, further influenced this decision. As this study's main researcher is based in Europe, the research naturally gravitated towards participants within close proximity, reflecting the realities of the researcher's network and available resources.

⁴⁰ The interviewees were not asked to disclose their exact age or date of birth.

Our interviewee sample is heavily female-skewed: 22 people identify as female, 8 identify as male and 3 identify as trans and/or non-binary. We believe this happened because of the snowball sampling effect: due to the themes discussed during the interview (inequalities in the workplace, the lack of diverse representation in animated content, etc), people were more likely to recommend other people who identified as women or as other underrepresented minorities, because of their lived-experience and authority to speak on these subjects. This is what the interviewees often told us when we asked for recommendations of people who would be willing to share their experience and be interviewed for this project. The interviewees were all involved in the animation industry but held varied roles within it. At the request of some interviewees, their identities have been kept anonymous.

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured way, where the interviewer had a script with a set of fixed questions but allowed the conversation to flow naturally and to go in unexpected directions. The interviewer script was loosely based on the key points presented below:

- what was their first contact with animation and if they felt inspired, influenced or changed in any way by the animated content they watched;
- if they feel like animation can play an educational role and if they consider the outcome and influence the content they produce may have on its audiences;
- if representation is a theme of interest to them and if they consider it when performing their roles within the animation industry;
- what do they think of the contemporary paradigm of female representation in popular animated feature films in general;
- what are the creative processes and the decision-making structure like within the projects they've worked on and if there's room for debating representation themes.

The interviews occurred between May 12th 2022 and September 1st 2023. They were mostly conducted through Zoom, although some happened in person. We recorded the screen when meeting through Zoom, so we had a video and an audio track. For the in-person interviews, we recorded only audio; with two exceptions where we were able to capture video. These video and audio recordings served only as a tool for faithful citation of the interviewees' words and will not be shared publicly, as this was the agreement with the interviewees. Most interviews took between 40 minutes to 1 hour.

The process of gathering information came from both the notes taken during the interviews, as well as from post-interview analysis of the recorded materials. To facilitate the process of faithful citation, we used Microsoft Word's automatic transcribing tool, by uploading the audio files of each interview. We rewatched each interview attentively, to correct any transcription mistakes that the software might have generated. By rewatching the interview, alongside its transcription, we were able to identify the most important parts and insights of each conversation.

The insights and perspectives shared by the professionals interviewed for this research have been woven throughout the thesis as valuable primary sources. However, this chapter brings these voices into focus, offering a consolidated analysis of the most significant themes that emerged from these conversations. Organized thematically, this section presents a broader view of the current landscape of the animation industry as perceived by those working within it.

While many of the interviewees' reflections did not align perfectly with the more structured discussions in earlier chapters, they nonetheless provide critical depth and nuance. Their experiences and opinions shed light on how industry professionals understand and navigate their creative environments, the narratives they help shape, and the visual culture they contribute to. These testimonies not only enrich our understanding of industry practices but also contextualize ongoing challenges related to gender representation and character design.

The primary themes that surfaced through these interviews—and which hold particular relevance to this study—include:

- The design of female characters and the evolving notion of ‘appeal’;
- Audience identification with animated characters, particularly protagonists;
- The role of character design in fostering emotional connection;
- The composition of production teams and the dynamics within creative studio environments;
- The broader impact of representation in animated media.

These themes will be addressed in more detail in the next section, drawing on the diverse experiences of the interviewees while also offering a critical lens through which to examine their views. Together, their insights contribute to a richer understanding of how the industry is grappling with questions of identity, inclusivity, and creative responsibility.

4.2. Emergent Themes and Recurring Concerns

In our interviews with animation professionals, several recurring themes emerged around the design of female characters. Practitioners widely acknowledged that character design serves not only to attract and engage audiences but also to visually situate characters within the story world while subtly communicating the cultural values of the time of production. A key point of discussion was the asymmetry in the visual treatment of female versus male characters. Female characters, in particular, tend to carry an excess of gendered signifiers—often in an attempt to clearly mark their femininity—whereas male characters are more frequently designed with, what is often considered, neutral or “default” traits. This disparity underscores how visual conventions in animation continue to reinforce traditional gender norms, often privileging physical beauty and conventional femininity as necessary components of female representation.

Central to this discussion was the concept of appeal, a term consistently referenced by professionals yet rarely defined with clarity. In character design, appeal is broadly understood as the quality that makes a character attractive or compelling to viewers. However, as many practitioners noted, predicting what will resonate with audiences is far from straightforward. As a result, designers often rely on established formulas—visual strategies that have proven successful in the past. This practice frequently draws from stereotypical or reductive representations, particularly when it comes to designing female characters. As described in *The Art of Brave* (p. 65), appeal remains a “visceral impression” tied to charm and life in a character’s appearance—an elusive quality that has guided animation aesthetics since the early days of the Disney studio. Yet, this pursuit of appeal often leans into normative ideals that limit the diversity and complexity of female characters on screen.

Sabine Heller, currently Vice-President of Creative Operations at Mikros Animation, who has often been in charge of guiding and managing the translation of 2D character

designs into their three dimensional sculpted and rigged form for animated feature films, explains the balance to be made between appeal and representation issues:

There's always a part of it where you have to attract the audience, and then, there's also the part that, in some ways, you also want to represent what's going on in life and in our society, and also make sure that people can identify with those characters.

Heller also attempts at defining the concept of appeal when discussing female character design for a North American animated feature film production:

Generally, for characters, you want to have APPEALING characters. So, appeal means so many things. Appeal is, in some ways, an attraction. Appeal is, in a lot of ways, that you want to be looking at this character and think 'oh this is an amazing character, I'm interested in this character'. It doesn't necessarily mean that it's a beautiful character, right? But for female characters often it has a little bit of that. When you go to the Disney-esque kind of thing, there is definitely still this emphasis on it. It's basically one of those rules, that you wanna have appealing characters that will attract the audience and make them interested in them.

As Heller said, the word 'appeal' is often substituted for 'beauty' when it comes to designing female characters. This implies a gendered bias that suggests that female characters on screen need to be beautiful to be appealing, while the audience may find the appeal of a male character in other types of characteristics, which aren't necessarily tied with beauty. The interviewees believed that, in animation, Disney has set the standard for animated female beauty. The presence of Disney feature films is ubiquitous and extends through time, it perseveres and keeps on communicating a somewhat rigid set of ideas of what it means to create an appealing female character. Tracey Miller-Zarneke, previously Production Department Management at Walt Disney Feature Animation and author of several "The Art of..." animation books, explains:

[Disney Princesses] were a well-ingrained presence for a long time.
[Moana] is still very pretty. They definitely have a ground level of, it

needs to be appealing for the masses. They need to sell the tickets and merchandise and all that stuff. But what does pretty mean, right? And how important is that to the story? Is it? It's not really that important seemingly in today's world. They're a machine. They know what works for them. Mostly.

This last sentiment, that North American studios are a machine that tramples creativity and originality, is echoed by other professionals who worked in this environment. Notoriously, Brenda Chapman, acclaimed writer and director, shared that she felt her vision was compromised by the studio's restrictions on what they deemed appealing or not, when designing the characters for *Brave*:

Even the director doesn't get the final say. Oftentimes the studio heads will override them, you know. What's hard is the marketing aspect of it; they feel like they know what will sell and what won't. And yes, they do have some of that as expertise, but oftentimes that can get in the way of an original idea, an original approach, an original concept that might sell, but you don't get a chance to try it out.

She goes on explaining the details she felt were overridden by studio execs who didn't allow for her vision to truly come to fruition.

The queen in *Brave*... She was a larger woman. I wasn't going to make her obese or anything like that, but she was just going to be thicker... but no, no, no, she had to be slimmed down. So that was very frustrating for me. In a lot of the marketing things for Merida, they cinched in her waist and made her look a little sexier and gave her the 'bedroom eyes'. And so that was also very frustrating. But, you know, in the film, she was closer to what I was hoping for. I wanted her to be more muscular, more... thick, than a lot of the Disney princesses were.

I also didn't want her to have the giant eyes. You know the ratio for female characters: the eyes are huge and yes, it is appealing – there's a reason we like babies, because their eyes are so much, you know, and all of that. But female characters are not babies. It's trying to find the

latitude to be able to experiment, to design and see what will appeal without going with the typical tropes, you know, the stereotypes.

The issue that Chapman addresses here is the simultaneous infantilization and sexualization of female characters in animated feature films—a pattern evident in their visual design. One common example is the exaggerated eye-to-head ratio, which Chapman critiques and which is often described in research as the “baby face effect” (Isbister, 2022). This design strategy is frequently used to convey innocence and youthfulness, eliciting a protective response from the viewer. However, it also tends to diminish the character’s perceived authority, competence, and sense of responsibility. Heller also recalls encountering similar discussions during the development of female characters, highlighting how widespread and normalized these design conventions have become within industry practices:

I’ve seen that, sometimes, features are going to be asked to make them smoother, make them softer, that kind of thing I’ve heard a lot with female characters. The main thing that really really bothered me was a while back on *Spies in Disguise*. It was one of the female characters – Marcy – she works for the CIA. They had to put her in high heels, and I said to the directors ‘I understand what you’re going for, like the more Bond kind of vibe, right? So, I understand it but I’m just telling you that I would never wear high heels if I’m basically running’. (...) I felt like it wasn’t even her personality. But I mean it wasn’t my movie. So, they do it. I did push though.

Curiously, Miller-Zarneke also mentioned the high heels – a common design feature of adult female characters in animated movies (and cinema in general):

The hetero male mentality has a certain aesthetic that might be more appealing to it. The eyelashes and the high heels – those are stereotypical things that attractive women would wear. It’s fascinating to me to see some people coming around to the idea that the high heels aren’t always useful. Having perfectly styled hair is not that important.

Practitioners highlighted a persistent bias in the design of female characters, one that prioritizes their attractiveness to a presumed male audience over exploring alternative forms of appeal. This bias reinforces existing inequalities in character design practices, where male and female characters are subject to different aesthetic standards. For example, Chapman acknowledges that the female characters in *Brave* still adhere to traditional design conventions—rounded, soft faces with delicate features that align with conventional notions of beauty. In contrast, the male characters in the film are heavily caricatured, featuring exaggerated and often unappealing traits used primarily for comedic effect. This disparity underscores the limited range of representation afforded to female characters and reflects broader industry pressures. Chapman attributes these constraints to the studio environment, where creative decisions are often shaped by capitalist imperatives—animation being a costly and profit-driven industry ultimately answerable to shareholders:

I admit Merida and Eleanor both had the round face, you know, and they did sort of fit into that mold. It's this line you walk trying to find the appeal of a character and the character. There just seems to be more wiggle room when you do male characters than there are for female characters. So, I would love to try to push those boundaries a bit and see what you get. And I feel like independent films get to do that, short films get to do that, and independent short films get to do that. It's just hard when the studios... that it's a business and so they want a sure thing, they want to make sure that it will sell and it won't push an audience away because the main character isn't appealing to look at. So it's a business. And there's the conundrum.

Taylor Moll, Visual Effects Supervisor for animated feature films, also underscored the prevailing business-driven mindset within the animation industry, expressing an understanding of the producers' role as financial backers. While some may indeed value animation as an artistic endeavor, the primary motivation behind their investment is often economic. Animated films are treated as strategic business ventures aimed at generating profit, which leads investors, producers, and studios to favor established, market-tested formulas in an effort to minimize financial risk. As Moll succinctly

explains: “If you’re spending \$40 million on a project, you need to know you’re gonna make that money back. That’s business.”

The sentiments expressed by Chapman regarding the limitations imposed by commercial studio environments were echoed by several Portuguese animation directors we interviewed—particularly those working within independent production contexts. These directors, operating outside the demands of large studios and shareholder expectations, expressed a strong appreciation for the creative freedom that independence affords. Acclaimed directing duo Xá (Alexandra Ramires) and Laura Gonçalves, who have collaborated on numerous short animated films and are part of BAP, a small animation studio based in Porto, emphasized how this freedom allows for more authentic and experimental storytelling. As Xá noted:

Well, I think what’s frustrating in the mainstream, from the perspective of someone who creates, is when you’re working and you feel like you have a noose around your neck, in the sense that you have to please the greatest number of people. And then you lose a good part of your creativity, your willingness to experiment, your ability to take risks. So, from the perspective of someone who creates, if I were told that it was mainstream, I would immediately be scared.

Laura Gonçalves reinforced this perspective, stating: “We make the films the way we like them, we never try to please anyone, which is also something that’s really great about short animation. You don’t have a client to please.” Their reflections highlight how the absence of commercial pressures in independent animation creates space for more personal, bold, and experimental approaches to character design and storytelling.

Nuno Beato, another acclaimed Portuguese director and CEO of Sardinha em Lata (an animation studio based in Lisbon), has experience in both producing and directing short films and television series. He recently made his debut as a feature film director with *My Grandfather’s Demons* (2022). When asked about the character design in his film, which features a female protagonist named Rosa, he explained that he didn’t want to make the character too appealing in order to delay the audience’s connection with her, as the character had a lot of work to do on herself:

I tried to make the character not too cute. She has that huge nose, which confuses the audience, making it difficult for them to connect with the character right at the start of the film. They only warm up to her as the film progresses. I thought that was interesting; I wanted to create a character who wasn't too pretty, someone who created a bit of distance initially, and only as the film went on would the audience get closer to her. Because, after all, I didn't want the Disney princess.

Sara Naves, an experienced animator and now the director of her own short film, also shared that she wasn't concerned with making Alma, the protagonist of *Alma's Condition* (2024), beautiful. Her background as an animator led her to focus more on the movement and the possibilities of animating such a character:

I'm not interested in making her identifiable with more commercial forms, precisely. I wanted to create a design that was a bit different. I don't care if she's very pretty, for example, that's not a concern of mine. I care that she is dynamic aesthetically, interesting, with a distinct silhouette... She'll constantly be transforming. But it has to be a design that favors her movement and posture, not necessarily to make her look pretty. I'm not particularly concerned with her being cute, although I think there's a natural tendency, right? So this is an active effort that people have to make—trying to do something we consider unattractive. Our tendency is to try to make things right, as if beautiful corresponds to what is right and correct. What even is beauty, by the way? We could be here for hours. The concept of beauty is constantly changing.

Even though Portuguese directors work in a different environment than North American industry veterans like Chapman, Heller, or Miller-Zarneke, their approach demonstrates that it is possible to create work that resonates with audiences while exploring less conventional designs for female protagonists. This notion challenges the traditional emphasis on physical beauty as a central aspect of character appeal. As Heller notes, creating a successful animated film can be difficult, particularly when the speed at which an audience can read and understand a character is an important factor:

In real life, we have people that are amazing just by having a specific personality or aura that makes them appealing and interesting. The problem comes when you're making an animated movie — it's short, and you have to create this very quickly, find the shortcuts. That could be one of the difficulties as well.

This sentiment echoes the idea that while physical appeal can be a shortcut to audience connection, deeper, more meaningful character traits are also worth exploring.

On a more optimistic note, Miller-Zarneke believes she's observing a shift in the industry, a growing trend toward designing characters based on internal qualities, not just external beauty, a shift that may provide more opportunities for diverse representations:

I'm pleased to see that there are more female lead characters coming down the pipeline now than ever before. And that they seem to be more balanced, less about physical appeal and more about inner strength and vision, and, you know, the things that you look for in a hero. It's nice to see it moving in that direction.

However, the industry still faces challenges in terms of cultural understanding and representation. As Nadia Ruiz, sociologist and co-founder and CEO of the Spanish animation studio La Tribu, puts it:

To me, it's more about culture, how they understand womanhood, how they understand women, how they understand feminism. I feel so underrepresented in all the fucking stories, you know, even as an Asperger, you have super cliché and stereotypical models. When America tells a story, to me it has no new answers. It's very, very, very closed and clear. It's like a factory line.

Ruiz's frustration points to a deeper issue in the storytelling process — that the representation of women, particularly those with underrepresented identities or experiences, remains largely confined to stereotypes. The challenge, then, is not only to break free from aesthetic conventions but also to ensure that diverse narratives and perspectives are given space to flourish. This lack of variety directly impacts the

audience's ability to identify with the characters on screen, particularly for viewers who seldom see their own experiences or identities reflected in mainstream animation, as Ruiz mentioned.

When discussing their ability to identify with protagonists in animated movies, most interviewees expressed that the character's gender was not particularly important to them—as long as the story felt authentic. João Lima Moura, Art Director and Visual Development Artist, shared how the role played by Tiana in *The Princess and the Frog* deeply resonated with him:

I like her role as a working woman, someone who doesn't want things handed to her on a silver platter and who goes on a huge adventure, but also has moments of deep vulnerability and needs help... I don't know, I think it's a beautiful story, and it's a realistic one—it feels more human. Not just for women, but also for men, for everyone. I really identified with the story, and I think that's what good representation in a film looks like to me. When you go see an animated film, whether you're a boy or a girl, a Black girl, a white boy, Asian—whatever it may be—it still makes sense through empathy, because you see yourself in it. And I think that's the power of animation: to see something completely different from your own world and still be able to relate to it. And that's incredibly powerful and a really beautiful message, and I think the world really, really, really needs more of that.

Heller also shared that she identified with Peter Pan (*Peter Pan*, 1953), not only because he is a fun and compelling character, but also due to the lack of captivating female characters in the film with whom she could connect or look up to.

When I was a kid I watched *Peter Pan* and I loved Peter Pan, but I was mad about it, and I didn't understand why this was the case that the only girl that was in that film was the one that was always cleaning and sewing the clothes, and she couldn't fly, she couldn't do anything that was fun. I thought that was so not cool, and I remember this was weird to me and

I could not understand why was she not able to do it. And I was like, I don't care, I made a decision... then I thought 'Can I be Peter Pan?', because I'm not a boy but I made the decision for myself, I remember that. 'I can be Peter Pan, I'm Peter Pan. I don't care. I don't identify with Wendy.' But I had this thought process and I spoke to my mom about it. I think my parents were really great with that too, to help me get to that conclusion, but I do remember I struggled a little bit with it. And it's funny because it's just a cartoon, right? But as you said, it affects you. Like can I be Peter Pan or is that not possible?

Beato shared a similar experience when discussing his decision to center his feature film, *My Grandfather's Demons* (2022), around a female character and how he identified with the character's struggle to fit in, while Emma De Swaef reflected on the power of identifying with a character of the opposite gender, which she often does in her own work. De Swaef emphasized the creative freedom and emotional distance that such characters can offer, allowing creators to explore deeply personal ideas while maintaining a sense of protection. Other interviewees echoed this sentiment, noting how working through a character who feels slightly removed from their own identity can create space for vulnerability and honest storytelling. There is something profoundly powerful in identifying with characters who are not exactly like us, yet who reflect aspects of the human experience we are navigating or striving toward.

This idea was reinforced by several interviewees, who pointed out that even when they do not personally belong to the minority group represented on screen, they can still empathize with the character's emotions and experiences. Feelings of exclusion, misunderstanding, loneliness, or displacement are universal. When these emotions are portrayed authentically, they allow viewers to connect across lines of gender, race, or background, revealing the true power of animated storytelling.

Nevertheless, some interviewees expressed the persistent sentiment that many stories are still not being told. Artists like Ruiz shared how they continue to feel underrepresented in contemporary animated feature films, attributing this absence to a

lack of empathy from studio decision-makers—particularly male executives—who struggle to relate to narratives outside of their own lived experiences. This perspective was reinforced by Miller-Zarneke, who recounted how the protagonist of *Chicken Little* (2005) was originally written as a female chick—a detail that aligns with the title itself—but was later changed to a male character at the behest of male studio executives, none of whom were involved in the creative process. Brenda Chapman echoed this concern, attributing the lack of diverse stories to the continued dominance of men in key leadership positions within the industry:

Because men are still running all the studios and all the stuff. They're running everything and, you know, I don't hate men. I'm married to one! Wonderful man! But I just feel like so many men are running the industry, and they're telling stories that they relate to. So the women are getting sidestepped. I just feel like we have to keep trying. And that's why when I get stories - I have nothing against little boys and stories of little boys - but I'm sure there's a guy that's gonna be happy to do that. I just need to try to focus. And I haven't done a lot, I'll be honest, I haven't had a lot of opportunities since *Brave* to do that. But I keep trying, you know?

The frustration expressed in Chapman's words was present in many other women practitioners interviewed for this study. Several shared a growing sense of fatigue and disillusionment, describing the experience of working in an industry where they often feel as though they are swimming against a current that continues to resist and marginalize their contributions.

Several interviewees agreed that, in order to tell compelling stories that fully represent the spectrum of human emotion and experience, we need, not only talented people, but diverse voices and minds working on production teams. Most interviewees pointed out lack of diversity within production teams and studio executives as what they thought was a major stress point to bring forth new stories. They shared two main insights: that people are often hired based on their connections and recommendations (which may lead to *like-hiring-like* and a homogenization of the production teams) and the

discomfort that was felt within the creative working environment if the interviewee identified as a woman or a sexual, ethnic or cultural minority within the team. Heller points out that diversity could be the leading factor in creating rich stories:

Definitely to have more of a balanced... and not only women, I think to have people from other cultures and also people from other backgrounds, sometimes there's people that have maybe just a different experience, that allow seeing things from different angles. And I think that is more rich, it makes it in some ways also more interesting because you don't go in the same direction, but you are actually hearing other things that are really interesting.

Interviewees also shared how important it is to bring in people that really know about the themes, cultures or experiences being represented in each movie they're working on. Both Beato and Chapman talked about how they felt the need to include people whose life and cultural experience would allow them to bring authenticity to the stories they are telling. In Beato's case, he shared how when they decided that the story would be more compelling if it was told through the point of view of a female character, they had to find a writing partner with that lived experience:

The truth is this story was growing, and it was two men writing about a woman (laughs)—myself and Possidónio Cachapa. So later on, we felt it was important to bring in a female screenwriter as well, to provide that perspective, because it was important to have someone looking at the project through that lens and with a slightly different vision. When we looked for another screenwriter, it was Cristina Pinheiro in this case, and her more feminine perspective was very important to us. One of the first things we asked of her was this: 'Look at this script, as a woman, putting yourself in Rosa's shoes'.

No matter how much we try to write a story by putting ourselves in someone else's place—and in directing, just like actors, that's our job, so we're used to it, in a way—but of course, it's incredibly valuable to listen, and to listen to someone with lived experience.

While Chapman talked about the project she is developing she shared her concerns about faithfully and authentically representing a culture that is different from hers:

I need to bring in, I think, more of the Asian community, the Chinese community, to sort of give me what they think would be okay, and see if I can find a different approach, a different look, but through the right lens. I think that's where I'm at. I can do Caucasian as much as I want. I can bend and pull and push, but I don't feel I have the right to do that with another community. I truly don't want to offend. I just want to create a fun character to watch and to enjoy, but, you know, just have to be careful. I'd also like more people of that culture to work on the film as well, you know, to actually be part of it and not just be a consultant, but also I'd love to get some designers in and to be a part of that.

While some directors are highly attuned to the benefits of assembling diverse teams that bring authenticity to the storytelling process, many interviewees expressed feelings of isolation or marginalization, often stemming from being part of a minority within their production teams.

For example, Charlotte Hutchinson, Art Director at Illumination Studios Paris, shared that over the past ten years, she has been virtually the only woman working in the feature film art department at the studio—one of the largest and most successful animation studios in Europe. This was confirmed by other interviewees who had worked at Illumination. She recalled the arrival of the first woman to join the storyboard team, with whom she quickly formed a close friendship. Their bond was shaped by a shared sense of isolation in a predominantly male environment, fostering a sense of solidarity and mutual support that brought a much-needed sense of sisterhood to the workplace.

Several interviewees emphasized the importance of cultivating a safe and creatively supportive work environment, and shared their thoughts on how such an atmosphere might be achieved. The interviewees described factors that contributed to feeling out of

place or uncomfortable in their work environments. A recurring issue was the sense of isolation experienced by those who did not align with the dominant workplace culture. Language was another significant barrier—while English was typically the shared working language, many noted that conversations would often revert to the local or native language of the majority when discussions became more informal or emotionally charged, excluding those who did not speak it fluently. Additionally, some interviewees reported being exposed to inappropriate remarks or so-called “locker-room talk,” where humor was used in ways that alienated or unsettled colleagues, often without the speaker realizing the discomfort they were causing. These experiences, though sometimes subtle or unintended, collectively contribute to work environments that feel less inclusive and psychologically safe.

Shelley Graf, an experienced Interactive Media Generalist at Wētā FX, also shared her views on what constitutes a safe and welcoming workplace—particularly from her perspective as a trans woman:

Honestly, there's two points: honesty and willingness to change. Like those two are absolutely paramount. Honesty is the first one. Like, be very clear that you want the people you supervise or you work with to be honest with you. If they're hurt, you need to know. Like if you hurt them or if someone else hurt them, you need to know. You need to be able to have those conversations. You need to encourage them from the get go, and that's probably the most important. The second part that goes together with that hand in hand very, very clearly is you need to be willing to change if somebody criticizes you. If somebody tells you, ‘listen what you just said hurt me’, you need to be honestly willing to take that and then to better yourself.

In terms of the workplace that I've worked with, for example, they're very, very good. I have a lot of very open and honest conversations with the people that I'm working with there, and it's been an absolute pleasure to have such a wonderful crew of people that I can bring up issues with and that, like, support me and have my back and honestly

just want me to feel good and feel represented and feel accepted for who
I am and not question not put me down.

A sense of safety and ease is fundamental for fostering a collaborative and creative work environment. Chapman, for instance, spoke about the value of strong leadership—highlighting the need for directors to genuinely listen to their trusted teams and thoughtfully consider the ideas contributed by team members. She underscored the significance of providing constructive, respectful feedback: acknowledging the courage it takes to share one’s creative vision, recognizing what is working in a proposal before addressing what could be improved, and clearly explaining the reasoning behind one’s critiques. This approach, she argued, not only fosters mutual understanding and artistic growth but also strengthens collaboration within the team.

When studios create structures that genuinely support different identities and ways of working, it becomes easier for diverse individuals to come together, collaborate, and thrive. However, the experiences shared by interviewees regarding their work environments varied greatly—especially in light of the widespread shift to remote and hybrid models following the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. For many, this meant never fully experiencing an in-studio culture, instead working from home, which introduced both advantages and drawbacks. Flexibility, comfort, lower costs, and access to international teams were widely appreciated, but interviewees also noted the loss of spontaneous conversations, peer learning moments, and opportunities for building professional relationships.

Cultural differences also played a significant role in shaping work experiences. For example, several Brazilian interviewees mentioned a degree of culture shock when collaborating with North American or European teams, where communication styles tended to be more reserved and less spontaneous than what they were accustomed to in Brazil. This highlights the need for workplaces to be culturally adaptive and inclusive—not only in terms of policies but also in everyday interactions. Animation supervisor Cindy Shaw, reflecting on her experience as a Brazilian professional now based in Vancouver, Canada, offered valuable insight into how some studios are actively addressing diversity and inclusion across multiple dimensions:

The first thing is that... it's very different to talk about this here and in Brazil—not because of social or moral issues, but simply because here there are more people working in the industry. So that ends up influencing how teams are formed. I can't say that in Brazil there's less acceptance of women—I've always had many opportunities, personally, right? But here I feel like I see more women working in the industry. And I feel that, at least at Wildbrain, there's a real concern with providing opportunities not just for women, actually, but for anyone, regardless of gender or background. So I feel like they don't focus too much on the gender binary. It's not like, 'Oh, let's make a program just for women.' It's more like diversity as a whole. And I think it's healthier to approach it that way, as a whole, because here in Vancouver, at least, people are much more open about their sexuality, they express themselves more. So you meet a lot of people who are trans, a lot of non-binary people here. Now I feel like there's also a movement of neurodivergent people trying to implement changes in the studio. In that sense, I feel like it's one step at a time. These groups are trying—not even to gain space, but simply not to feel oppressed in the space they're already working in.

While many interviewees expressed optimism about the progress being made toward more inclusive and adaptable work environments, and emphasized the importance of diversity within production teams as a means of enriching storytelling in animated feature films, others offered a more critical or pessimistic perspective. These differing views reflect an ongoing tension within the industry: the desire for change on the ground level versus the influence of decision-makers at the top. Hutchinson, for instance, questioned the real impact of team diversity if the people in charge—namely producers and studio heads—do not recognize or prioritize the need for better representation. From her point of view, no matter how diverse or inclusive a production team may be, meaningful change is unlikely if those controlling the creative direction remain indifferent to the representational issues being perpetuated by their projects. She also observed that those in positions of power often resist change simply because they do not

perceive the current system as problematic: “it’s just not a problem.” She explains, “[producers] don’t see really why [they have] to change, because this movie has worked since forever – this type of movie with ‘Dad’ making all decisions for the family. They believe it is what the audience wants to see.” At Illumination, as in many other major studios, the goal is to produce films that appeal to the broadest possible audience—works that avoid offending or challenging viewers across lines of creed, religion, political ideology, or gender identity. However, despite this aim for universality, the studios often cater primarily to US audiences due to the size and profitability of that market. The challenge, as many interviewees suggested, is that the U.S. is itself a diverse society with widely differing values and expectations. Yet, rather than engaging with that complexity, studios often default to safe, established formulas, avoiding narratives that might be perceived as too progressive or provocative. However, as Graf reminds us, sometimes meaningful storytelling requires the willingness to take risks—even if it means making some people uncomfortable:

You know the saying ‘don’t worry about making nobody hate your thing, worry about making somebody love it’? I think this is very, very true. Like, if you want to make something that nobody hates or nobody dislikes, you will make something that’s extremely mediocre, right? Because you’re trying to not offend anybody, you’re trying to find the perfect middle ground for everybody to agree on, but nobody will be passionate about it. So what you really should do is to worry about making somebody love it. And if somebody loves it, somebody’s going to hate it too, because then it is divisive. But if somebody loves it, you’ll have made something worthwhile.

This idea—that challenging audiences can be essential to progress—was also echoed by Hutchinson, who recalled attending a preview screening of an animated film and finding its gender dynamics troubling. She described the story as overtly patriarchal, with the female character entirely submissive to the male lead’s decisions. Although the film’s director acknowledged her concerns, no test audience members raised similar issues, leading the producer to casually dismiss the critique. Hutchinson attributed this lack of reaction to audience habituation: “The public is very used to the patriarchal...

Disney now does a lot of effort. But most of the stories is, like, a dad and a mom and two kids and the mom is at home and dad is working.” For her, meaningful change would only come if a film publicly failed and provoked backlash—but, as she stressed, “for the public to be more informed, we have to give them something—some better stuff.”

In light of these reflections, some creators recognize the deep responsibility that comes with shaping cultural narratives through film. Beato articulated this sense of duty, emphasizing the importance of intentionality and substance in creative work:

Making films is a form of communication. We currently live in a world where communication is flooded with noise, so I believe it is increasingly important to produce content that brings added value. To me, communicating through cinema is something I approach with a sense of responsibility. In animation, we spend a long time developing our projects and our films, so it’s important to truly believe in what we are trying to say. I also think it’s crucial to feel that what we’re saying offers something valuable to others, and not just a barrage of information without meaning. Regardless of genre—whether it’s a comedy, a drama, or anything else—it should carry a constructive element, something that contributes to society. We often work with public funding, or at least partially with public funding, and I believe that brings with it a responsibility to help educate audiences—to offer messages and information that enrich, and to create content I myself must believe in.

I think it’s up to us, as storytellers, to find ways to shift this paradigm and make inclusivity feel natural. Right now, things often feel forced because we’re still struggling to approach them differently. We’ve spent many years telling stories centered on white men, and moving away from that framework doesn’t come easily. As a white man myself, I believe it’s essential to make a conscious effort to find solutions that allow us to broaden our perspectives.

These reflections, gathered from professionals with diverse roles and experiences, offer crucial insight into the current state of the animation industry and reinforce the importance of inclusive practices, thoughtful storytelling, and intentional design—central concerns that inform the remainder of this thesis.

4.3. Interpreting Industry Perspectives

This section offered a unique perspective into the opinions and experiences of professionals working within the animation industry. Through interviews and firsthand accounts, it captures the voices of those directly involved in the creation of animated content, providing invaluable insights into the internal dynamics of production, the challenges faced by studios and artists, and the opportunities for improvement in terms of representation. By integrating these perspectives, we aim to bridge the gap between academic research and industry practice, encouraging a more collaborative approach to addressing the systemic issues surrounding female character design and representation in animation.

These interviews allowed us to explore several key themes that contextualize the current state of animated feature film production and shed light on the creative processes behind the representations we observed in the movies in our sample.

One of the recurring themes in the conversations was a persistent gender imbalance in the visual design of characters, particularly in the concept of “appeal”. Practitioners widely acknowledged that character design serves as a tool not only to engage audiences but also to reflect cultural values and situate characters within their story worlds. However, female characters were found to be disproportionately burdened with gendered signifiers—often an excess of visual cues designed to emphasize their femininity—while male characters were more likely to be designed with what could be considered neutral or “default” traits. This disparity underscores how visual conventions in animation continue to perpetuate traditional gender norms, privileging physical beauty and conventional femininity in female representation. Many of the professionals interviewed noted that the concept of “appeal” in character design often boils down to beauty, particularly in the case of female characters, a notion heavily influenced by the Disney legacy. The term “appeal,” while commonly used, was rarely

defined with clarity. Still, it was often used as a euphemism for beauty when discussing female characters. This tendency reveals a gendered bias in the industry, suggesting that female characters need to be beautiful to be considered appealing, while male characters are granted more diverse forms of appeal, not tied to traditional standards of beauty. As a result, these conventions often limit the diversity and complexity of female characters, reducing them to familiar, market-friendly designs.

The interviews also cemented the idea that independent professionals and smaller animation studios are continually challenging industry norms. Creators working outside the commercial pressures of large studios emphasized the creative freedom that independence affords. Independent directors and animators highlighted their commitment to designing characters whose visual traits serve the emotional and narrative core of their stories, rather than merely conforming to conventional standards of beauty. These practitioners spoke about a conscious effort to resist the impulse to idealize or beautify female characters, favoring instead unique silhouettes, expressive movement, and narrative-driven design choices. Their approach illustrates a deliberate push against mainstream industry standards, demonstrating that animation can resonate emotionally with audiences even when it breaks free from the constraints of traditional appeal. These independent creators revealed that, in their context, there is more room for experimentation and authenticity, allowing for more complex and diverse representations of female characters. This marks a shift in the animation landscape, where the emphasis is moving away from external beauty and toward internal strength, personality, and narrative function. While commercial studios are often driven by the need to produce marketable characters with universal appeal, these independent voices show that emotional resonance and originality can be achieved through non-normative aesthetics, ultimately broadening the possibilities for female representation in animation.

The interviews revealed a complex and nuanced relationship between personal identification with animated characters and the broader concept of representation in storytelling. A significant pattern emerged in which many interviewees emphasized that gender was not the primary factor influencing their connection to protagonists, but

rather the authenticity of the character's story. For instance, interviewees connected with certain characters, not because of gender, but because of the character's relatable qualities— e.g. their work ethic, vulnerability, human complexity. The common identification of interviewees with opposite-sex characters, often due to the absence of compelling and interesting female characters, underscores how the lack of representation in animation prompts viewers, especially young girls, to find ways to connect with characters outside their gender.

Similarly, other interviewees reflected on how they connected with characters of the opposite gender, often finding creative and emotional freedom in doing so. This perspective supports the idea that the true power of storytelling lies in the universal emotions shared across gender, race, and background, allowing viewers to empathize with characters despite differences in identity.

However, a key issue raised was the persistent lack of representation, particularly from minority groups. Many interviewees expressed frustration at the underrepresentation of diverse voices in animated films, blaming the predominantly male and homogenized leadership in the industry. This concern highlights how male executives often make decisions based on their own experiences, resulting in stories that fail to fully reflect diverse perspectives. The interviews reveal that despite the growing desire for more inclusive storytelling, the industry remains dominated by leadership that lacks empathy for diverse experiences. This highlights the systemic barriers that limit the types of stories being told, which contributes to the argument that true change in animation requires a shift in both creative and leadership structures.

The interviews also highlighted the critical role of diversity in animation storytelling, with a strong consensus that diverse teams lead to richer, more authentic narratives. However, interviewees identified significant barriers to diversity, particularly within studio leadership and production teams. Many pointed out that hiring practices often favor individuals with connections, possibly perpetuating a lack of diversity and limiting the range of perspectives brought into the creative process. Despite the recognized value of diverse viewpoints, some interviewees shared experiences of feeling marginalized in

homogeneous environments, emphasizing the importance of inclusive, supportive work cultures that foster collaboration and psychological safety.

Several participants stressed that leadership plays a key role in creating inclusive environments by actively listening to team members and encouraging open communication. While there is a growing push for diversity within some areas of the industry, challenges persist, particularly when executive decision-makers remain resistant to change or when commercial pressures hinder efforts to include diverse voices. Despite these challenges, interviewees agreed on the need for greater cultural sensitivity and a commitment to authenticity in representation, with many suggesting that true change requires a shift in both industry practices and attitudes toward inclusion.

Overall, the findings underscore the ongoing struggle between the desire for inclusive storytelling and the existing power structures that resist change. While progress is being made, meaningful diversity in animation storytelling will require a continued effort to diversify both the creative teams and the leadership that guides them, alongside a commitment to authenticity and cultural sensitivity in the narratives produced.

Finally, it is also worth mentioning how the capitalist motivations underpinning the animation industry emerged as a particularly divisive point of discussion. The commercial imperative to prioritize profitability often dictates creative decisions, limiting the potential for authentic and diverse storytelling. However, the case of Pixar Animation Studios demonstrates that change is possible when studios enact clear policies and internal directives that prioritize inclusive storytelling and the nurturing of diverse talent. When such values are embedded in the studio's mission, it becomes easier for individuals to safely voice their ideas and contribute to a more equitable creative process. While major studios may face structural and financial barriers to implementing such reforms, smaller or independent studios are often in a better position to adopt these principles from the outset, setting a new standard for the industry.

For meaningful change to occur, individuals must first be equipped with the knowledge and critical awareness needed to act within corporate structures. Only then can they champion new narratives, advocate for diverse and nuanced representation, and contribute to a more equitable and sustainable future for animation.

5. RESEARCH OUTPUTS

This chapter details the various research outputs generated by this project. It explains the methods used to disseminate and communicate the findings across different contexts, reflecting on how these experiences influenced the research process, helped to validate the relevance of the research theme, and allowed for testing of initial interpretations against the critical feedback of academic peers. The constructive input from these audiences also ensured that the research remained grounded in current academic and professional discourse. Additionally, the engagement and interest from these audiences served as a motivating force, reaffirming the importance of the study's objectives and encouraging further exploration of its themes. We found that the presentation of the project in its various stages was important to understand its relevance amongst students, the academic community, and animation professionals alike. This helped to validate the project as it was evolving, as we listened to feedback and reactions from the audience in each sharing experience.

The project's outputs included presentations at academic and industry events, school talks, published papers, and the organization of a one-day event.

5.1. Research Dissemination

This section examines the various avenues through which the research was shared and discussed, spanning educational outreach, academic forums, professional industry settings, and press and media. Each mode of dissemination served distinct purposes—whether to inspire younger audiences, contribute to scholarly debate, foster dialogue within professional communities, or engage the wider public. Collectively, these activities reflect the project’s iterative and dialogic nature, where feedback and exchange informed its ongoing development and underscored its relevance across diverse contexts.

5.1.1. Engaging Young Audiences through School Outreach

Sharing this research project while it was still ongoing proved to be an invaluable practice for several reasons. Engaging with students allowed us to gather crucial feedback that helped refine the work, particularly in terms of how to articulate ideas and clarify complex concepts. These interactions not only honed the researcher’s ability to communicate more effectively but also provided insights into which areas resonated most with younger audiences. Their responses offered a unique perspective, revealing how attuned they were to the themes explored in this project, while highlighting any gaps or aspects of the contemporary zeitgeist that might have been overlooked. By involving a different generation in the research process, we were able to gauge their interest and ensure that the work remained relevant and impactful.

The first presentation happened on September 29, 2022, at the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Porto, after an invitation by Professor Susana Barreto to do a session during her Visual Devices class (Figure 92), with students from the Master in Image Design. After presenting this project’s proposal, we did a short exercise with the students, where we grouped and discussed film frames, according to the students’ interpretation of the images. Every image showed at least one character from the movies

in our sample and the students were asked to group them under themes, such as ‘beauty’, ‘mother’, ‘hair’, ‘antagonism’, ‘friendship’, and ‘freedom’. The students would organize the images while they discussed possible meanings conveyed by each film frame. The dialogue focused on subjects such as color, facial expression, character posing, composition, acting, and design features of each image. Near the end, the students attempted to create a web, where the images could fall under more than one theme, creating new relationships between the images and the words. This was an explorative exercise, meant to capture the students’ ideas about the imagery surrounding popular and contemporary feature film animation.



Figure 92 – Pictures taken during Professor Susana Barreto’s class, where the researcher had the opportunity to share a brief presentation about the themes of this research project, followed by an engaging practical exercise that asked for the collaboration of the students. FBAUP, September 29, 2022.

There were five more presentations made in similar contexts.

On October 13, 2022, at the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Porto, we presented the project during Professor Vítor Almeida's class on Visual Narrative (Figure 93), with students from the bachelor's degree in Communication Design and the bachelor's degree in Fine Arts. The students showed interest in the research topic, and we noticed how attached they were to concepts related to older Disney movies, but not so much attuned to the current state of popular animated feature films.



Figure 93 – Pictures taken during Professor Vítor Almeida's class, where the researcher had the opportunity to share a brief presentation about the themes of this research project. FBAUP, October 13, 2022.

The two sessions that followed had a specialized audience, in the sense that the students attending the classes were animation students. On February 8, 2023, we presented the project – now with more consolidated data – to the students of the master's degree in Illustration and Animation, at Polytechnic Institute of Cávado and Ave, in Barcelos. On February 15, 2023, we took the same presentation to a Seminar's class, after an invitation from Professor Cátia Peres, for the students of the bachelor's degree in Moving Image, at the Escola Superior de Educação e Comunicação at the University of Algarve, in Faro. Both experiences were very similar; because the students were animation students, they were very knowledgeable about contemporary animation. They asked very interesting questions regarding certain design trends, showing their concerns. There was a feeling that the younger generation is much more aware of social injustices and is more sensible to matters of representation. The students

offered deep insights into how they felt about the images they usually saw in the context of popular animated feature films and commented on how they'd like to spread awareness and contribute to changing the industry for the better.

Lastly, we presented the research project in three different stages of development, in three consecutive years, to students of Professor Heitor Alvelos' class on Visual Culture, with students from the bachelor's degree in Communication Design, at the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Porto. The first session was on March 24, 2023, the second session was on September 25, 2023, and the third session was on 12th of November, 2024. When we presented the research project and its findings, we found the students to be highly aware of social injustices and issues of representation in the media. They demonstrated a critical approach to the content they consume and affirmed the continued relevance of our research. Their feedback was insightful, providing numerous suggestions for further development, and their curiosity and thoughtful questions underscored their interest and the importance of further exploration in these areas.

5.1.2. Contributing to Scholarly Dialogue at Academic Conferences

Presenting sections of this PhD research at academic conferences has been vital for several reasons. It provided essential training in communication, helping to hone the researcher's ability to synthesize complex ideas into clear, concise presentations. This experience has also enhanced the researcher's skills in articulating big ideas effectively in brief speeches, a crucial aspect of academic discourse. Additionally, presenting this work has helped establish the researcher's reputation as a specialist in the field of character design research and representation in the context of popular and contemporary animated feature films.

Sections of the work being developed were presented at the following conferences:

- July 8-9, 2023 – publication and presentation of the paper *Where are the Women? An Overview of Female Representation in Popular*

*Contemporary Animation Feature Films*⁴¹ at CONFIA – International Conference in Illustration and Animation, in Caldas da Rainha.

- October 18-19, 2023 – publication and presentation of the paper *Domee Shi's Turning Red as Feminist Hope for Feature Animation*⁴² at Tercer Congreso Internacional Mujeres Creadoras: Dibujo, diseño y acción, in Seville.
- March 22-23, 2024 – presentation of an exploratory analysis of the design of magic-wielding female characters, titled *Grotesque and Ancient Women – Design of the Female Shaman Character in Contemporary Feature Film Animation*⁴³, at the Ink and Motion #2 re[volution], at the Catholic University of Porto, Portugal.
- June 27, 2024 – presentation of the paper *The mentor archetype: Female character design trends in contemporary feature film animation*⁴⁴, at Design Research Society conference, in a hybrid format, happening in Boston, MA, USA.
- July 19, 2024 – presentation of a scientific poster⁴⁵ about the PhD project, at the 1st RUN-EU Research Symposium, in Polytechnique Institute of Cávado and Ave, Barcelos, Portugal.
- June 26, 2025 – publication and presentation of the paper *Muscles and Sharp Weapons: Design Trends in Female Warrior Characters in Mainstream Animated Feature Films (2020–2021)*⁴⁶ at CONFIA – International Conference in Illustration and Animation, in Vila do Conde.

⁴¹ https://confia.ipca.pt/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/confia_2023_proceedings.pdf

⁴² https://url-shortener.me/c/Turning_Red

⁴³ https://url-shortener.me/c/Grotesque_and_Ancient_Women

⁴⁴ <https://doi.org/10.21606/drs.2024.1009>

⁴⁵ https://url-shortener.me/c/Sisterhood_Project_Poster_RUNEU

⁴⁶ https://url-shortener.me/c/Muscles_and_Sharp_Weapons

These academic conferences allowed us to test ideas and data interpretations in a critical academic environment, cross-referencing the findings with other researchers and thinkers in the field of animation and design. This exchange led to new readings and ideas, such as, for example, exploring different interpretations of the shaman archetype, re-signified as the witch archetype in animation. The recognition and feedback from academic peers not only validated the research but also provided fresh perspectives that have enriched this project.



Figure 94 – Pictures taken during Confia 2023: on the left, group photo with the organizing team and participants; on the right, the researcher presenting a paper related to this thesis and the rest of the panel. Caldas da Rainha, July 8-9, 2023.

Parts of the project were also shared in other academic events, which have fostered collaboration with fellow researchers and strengthened the researcher's connection with the broader university and PhD community.

On May 19, 2023, this research project was presented in the final round of the scientific communication competition 3-Minute Thesis⁴⁷ (Figure 95), at the University of Porto. The challenge of communicating a complex and nuanced thesis project in just three minutes, without visual aid, proved to be very rewarding, allowing the researcher to hone their communication skills and to practice their public speech skills in a

⁴⁷ "The U.Porto 3MT® is an academic competition for doctoral research students developed and patented by the University of Queensland (UQ) that challenges Ph.D. students to explain, to a non-specialist audience, the importance and significance of their research, in just 3 minutes, and using no more than a single PowerPoint slide as an aid." <https://www.up.pt/3mt/en/>

different setting. It was a great opportunity to learn more about oral discourse, scientific communication, and engage with doctoral students from other faculties of the University of Porto.

On July 10, 2023, we had the opportunity to share parts of the research project on a RUN-EU⁴⁸ initiative. This was a Short Advanced Programme (SAP) – Research Challenge, at Polytechnic Institute of Cávado and Ave, in Barcelos, in partnership with the Technological University of the Shannon, in Ireland. The SAP took place in Barcelos, Portugal, and our contribution to the programme consisted of presenting our research project, with a focus on sharing and explaining the research methods employed in design and animation research.



Figure 95 – Pictures from the U.Porto 3MT®, at the Reitoria da Universidade do Porto, where the researcher presented this project in only three minutes, without visual support, except for the image being projected. Porto, May 19, 2023.

Lastly, between September 20 and 29, 2023, we were part of the organizing team for the UD23 | Actions and Reflections on Design Research (Figure 96), an event organized by the Research Institute for Design, Media, and Culture (ID+) and the PhD in Design

⁴⁸ Regional University Network – European University is an alliance of eight like-minded higher education institutions drawn from all regions of Europe. It was established in 2020 under the European Universities Initiative. Together, they're creating a regional development-oriented European University that embodies the values of sustainability, multiculturalism, and inclusiveness in all its work. <https://run-eu.eu/>

course, from University of Porto and University of Aveiro, in collaboration with Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences of the University of Porto and UPTEC – Science and Technology Park of University of Porto. We participated in this event’s exhibition of scientific posters – Scientific Posters of the PhD in Design Course (UP / UA / ID+). The organizing team also launched a book, titled *Posters of a Doctorate. PhD Design 2016-2023+*, that comprised a vast assortment of posters from the PhD in Design course, including one about this research project⁴⁹.



Figure 96 – Pictures of the scientific poster exhibition, during UD23, at the Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Porto. September 20 and 29, 2023.

5.1.3. Fostering Professional Exchange in Industry Settings

Presenting the project at industry events offered a unique opportunity to bridge the gap between academic research and practical application within the animation industry. These interactions allowed us to gauge the real-world implications of this research and to ensure that the findings were relevant to industry practitioners. The positive reactions and engagement from professionals in the field provided confidence in the study’s practical value and underscored the importance of addressing gender representation in animated media. Moreover, the feedback from industry professionals offered pragmatic insights that enriched the research, highlighting areas for further investigation and helping to refine the study’s focus to better align with industry practices and challenges.

⁴⁹ DOI: [10.13140/RG.2.2.22143.73121](https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.22143.73121)

On a more personal level, it provided invaluable networking opportunities, allowing the researcher to connect with professionals and gather new contacts for potential interviews and future work connections.

Overall, presenting at industry events facilitated meaningful connections and provided critical industry perspectives that were integral to the development and impact of this research.



Figure 97 – Pictures from the symposium “Perspectives on Portuguese Animation – Alexandra Ramires and Laura Gonçalves”, at Cinanima, Espinho, Portugal. November 11, 2022.

On November 11, 2022, the researcher was invited to be a guest speaker at the symposium Perspectives on Portuguese Animation (Figure 97), commissioned by Professor Cátia Peres, alongside Professor Marina Estela Graça and animation director Camila Kater, for the animation Cinanima, in Espinho, Portugal. The symposium reflected on several aspects of the works of acclaimed Portuguese animation directors Alexandra Ramires and Laura Gonçalves, from BAP Studios. Our contribution to the scientific discourse focused on the female character designs presented in the short films of the two directors. We had the opportunity to interview them beforehand, and later published an article on the symposium’s printed publication⁵⁰. The symposium was open for the community of festival goers and allowed for the interesting intersection of

⁵⁰ The full article can be found here: <https://cinanima.pt/publicacoes-olhares/>.

academic and professional discourse, reflecting on practices specific to Portuguese independent animation.

On April 18, 2023, we were selected to present our research's preliminary findings at the Tribe Talks segment, during THU Career Camp Spring Edition⁵¹, promoted by Trojan Horse Was A Unicorn (THU), and supported by MasterCard and Wacom. Career Camp is a “a free online event that gives industry professionals from all over the world access to jobs, mentorships, portfolio reviews and more”, which allowed us to share our insights with industry professionals and gauge its possible real-world impact in the animation industry. The short presentation was so well-received by the participants, that the THU team reached out and invited us to present another section of this research in the next Career Camp. Our presentation on the Fall Edition of the online event (Figure 98) happened on November 9, 2023, where we shared some preliminary findings on design trends that were identified in female characters in our sample, according to their narrative archetype. Both presentations are available to watch on-demand, on the THU's event website.

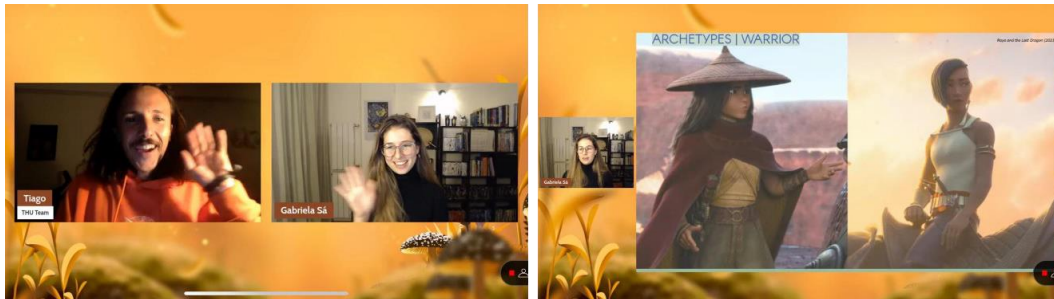


Figure 98 – Screenshots from the presentation at THU Career Camp Fall Edition, where the researcher explored the relationship between character design and narrative archetypes. April 18, 2023.

⁵¹ <https://www.trojan-unicorn.com/village/spaces/25-career-camp-2023-spring-edition>
<https://www.trojan-unicorn.com/career-camps/career-camp-2023-fall-edition>

Lastly, we were invited again to participate in the animation festival Cinanima, this time with a training course for teachers. So, on November 16, 2023, we conducted a workshop focused on character design tropes and stereotypes, with practical character design exercises, that involved collage and drawing. It was an excellent opportunity to share this research's findings with teachers from different levels of education, who could then take the knowledge and apply it in the context of their classes.

5.1.4. Amplifying Research Impact through Media and Press

As part of the research dissemination strategy, the researcher was interviewed by journalist Tiago Ramalho for Público, one of Portugal's largest and most reputable newspapers. The article⁵², which focused on the findings of the contextualizing study conducted at the outset of this project, was featured on the cover of the Sunday edition in both print and online formats on November 10, 2024. The full article is included in Annex A.

This media coverage not only underscored the societal relevance of the project but also demonstrated its potential impact beyond academic circles. By bringing the themes of this thesis to a broader readership, the article fostered public engagement and highlighted the research's resonance with contemporary cultural and creative discourses. This experience further reinforced the importance of connecting academic research with public dialogue, affirming the applicability and value of the findings within a wider societal context.

In addition, the researcher distributed a press release to various media outlets specializing in cinema, animation, the arts, and society, aiming to extend the project's reach to an international audience beyond academia.

⁵² <https://url-shortener.me/c/Publico>

In conclusion, these diverse presentation opportunities collectively enhanced the research process by providing multiple platforms for testing and refining ideas. The feedback and suggestions received were instrumental in shaping the direction of the study, ensuring that it was both academically rigorous and practically relevant. By actively seeking out input from both academic and industry communities, the research benefited from a broader perspective, allowing for a more nuanced and comprehensive analysis of the issues at hand. Ultimately, these experiences not only validated the study's significance but also contributed to the development of a well-rounded research project.

5.2. CONFIA Weekend Event

One of the most impactful outputs of this research project was the organization of a day of discussions about inclusion, diversity, and representation in animation, illustration, and video games, in association with CONFIA – International Conference on Illustration and Animation, held on July 6, 2024, at the Polytechnique Institute of Cávado and Ave, in Barcelos.

The mission of this event was to promote inclusion and diversity in the digital entertainment industry (animation, video games, illustration, VFX), to encourage the establishment and growth of the digital entertainment industry in Portugal, while equipping young artists with practical tools that promote their entry into the industry, as well as knowledge that facilitates navigation in the professional world.



Figure 99 – Pictures taken during the Confia Weekend Event, at Polytechnique Institute of Cávado and Ave. Barcelos, July 6, 2024.

We had seven esteemed speakers, from different areas of the digital entertainment industry: Raquel Costa (artist, author, and illustrator), Marta Macedo (3D character artist for videogames and animation), Inês Coimbra (3D generalist and prop artist), Sara Batista (software engineer in R&D for animation and VFX), Carolina Bonzinho (short-film animation director and educator), Inês Costa (researcher and multidisciplinary artist and animator), and Lola Ramos (animation artist and researcher).

The guests discussed topics related, but not limited to:

- Preparing young artists for entry into the professional world, taking into consideration that historically marginalized groups do not have as much access to important information related to starting a professional life;
- Raising awareness of the collective responsibility in creating and promoting safe, equal, and diverse environments in the professional context of the digital entertainment industry;
- Raising awareness of the collective responsibility in creating digital entertainment content that reflects values of inclusion, diversity, eco-consciousness, and respect for others.

The event was targeted at young artists at the beginning of their careers (undergraduate and master's students), artists who want to deepen their knowledge about the event's themes, and professionals interested in contributing to a more inclusive and diverse industry.

This event fostered valuable networking opportunities for both students and professionals, allowing them to connect, share insights, ask questions, and exchange contact information, thereby facilitating ongoing communication and potential future collaborations. These interactions have the potential to serve as the foundation for building a community of local talent.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This final chapter brings together the main findings and reflections from the research. It begins with a summary of the project's aims and key insights, followed by a discussion of its limitations and concluding with recommendations for future research in the fields of animation, character design, and gender representation in media.

6.1. Summary

This research investigates the representation of female characters in contemporary animated feature films, with a particular focus on how character design communicates and reinforces narrative archetypes. It is guided by three central questions:

- What is the current state of female character representation in 21st-century popular animated films?
- How does character design contribute to the portrayal and reinforcement of narrative archetypes?
- What correlations exist between design patterns and characters' narrative roles?

To address these questions, the study integrates three complementary components: quantitative data collection, interpretative analysis of character designs, and insights from industry professionals. Together, these approaches offer a comprehensive understanding of how gender representation is constructed and conveyed through design in animated films.

The findings contribute to ongoing academic conversations in animation, film, gender, and design studies, while also offering relevant insights for practitioners and the animation industry. By filling existing knowledge gaps and highlighting current design practices, this research provides an updated perspective on the visual construction of female characters in contemporary animation.

This summary outlines the project's key findings, situates them within the broader scholarly and industry context, and highlights their relevance to current animation production practices.

6.1.1. Current Data on Women in the Animation Industry

One of the primary goals of this research was to present updated data on some key metrics of representation related to the representation of women in the animation industry. The results of our contextualizing study, which analyzed data from 260 movies, and the case study focusing on feature films produced by Pixar Animation Studios, revealed the continued state of underrepresentation of women in the animation feature film industry.

Previous reports on the animation industry have shown the unequal distribution of roles between male and female practitioners, where despite the reported increase in female practitioners in the industry over the last few years, women are still underrepresented, especially in senior positions and among the ranks of directors.

Through our quantitative study, we could ascertain that, out of a total of 268 different names of credited directors, 247 (92.2%) were men and only 21 (7.8%) were women. When looking at how many times each director's name appeared – since many people directed more than one movie - we saw that most women directors, 15 of them (71.4%), had only one credit, meaning they directed only one movie in the timespan considered for this research. Still, 6 women (28.6%) had two credits, meaning they had directed two movies. Also, there were only 4 occurrences in which there was a woman directing a movie solo: Jennifer Yuh Nelson in *Kung Fu Panda 2* (2011), Naoko Yamada in *A Silent Voice* (2016), Nora Twomey in *The Breadwinner* (2017) and Domee Shi in *Turning Red* (2022). In every other occurrence, women were paired with one or more male directing partners.

The majority of men directors, 175 of them (70.9%), also had only one credit; 35 of them (14.2%) directed two movies; 22 (8.9%) directed three movies; 9 (3.6%) directed four movies; 3 (1.2%) directed five movies; 2 (0.8%) directed six movies and there was 1 (0.4%) who had directed seven movies – Carlos Saldanha directed *Ice Age* (2002), *Robots* (2005), *Ice Age: The Meltdown* (2006), *Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs* (2009), *Rio* (2011), *Rio 2* (2014) and *Ferdinand* (2017). There were 136 movies that had a single male director; the rest of the occurrences (124) presented a team of directors, most often

all-male, as there were only 21 movies that included a woman in partnership with other male directors. So, when we take into consideration the number of repeated occurrences on the names of the directors – i.e., the number of movies each director participated in – we realize that the discrepancy of representation is even bigger: in a total of 409 director credits, only 27 (6.6%) are attributed to women.

When looking at the case study on Pixar Animation Studios, we found a similar trend of underrepresentation of women in key positions within the production teams. Within the time frame of our research, the studio released 26 feature films, starting with *Toy Story* (1995) and ending with *Lightyear* (2022). On average, from 1995 to 2019, only 16.81% of the key credits in the movies' pages are women. This means that, up to 2020, there wasn't any movie production that had more than 10 women in key positions.

Observing the timeline, we see there's a small increase in the number of women credited in 2012, the year *Brave* was released. This was Pixar's first movie to be directed by a woman and to have a female protagonist. This film also has the highest percentage of women credited (28.57%) in the movies' pages, until 2012. We can ascribe this small increase to the director being a woman and the narrative being female-led. We only see a significant increase in women credited in the movies released in, and after, 2020. On average, between 2020 and 2022, 38.66% of the people credited were women – it more than doubled from previous years. It is also important to note that *Turning Red* is the movie with the most women credited and the one whose data is closer to gender parity, where women comprise 47.17% of the credits for key positions in the production team.

We strongly believe these improvements are closely related to events that occurred around 2018, during the height of the #MeToo movement. In that same year, John Lasseter, then CCO at Pixar Animation Studios, was let go from his role after being accused of inappropriate behavior in the workplace (Keegan, 2021), and was succeeded by veteran animator and director Pete Docter. When Docter accepted the role of CCO, committed to being an ally to underrepresented groups within the studio, he and Pixar president Jim Morris “formalized the creative advisory teams that had been running the studio during Lasseter's sabbatical, with a commitment to keep them 50 percent female and diversified in terms of age, race and ethnicity” (Keegan, 2021). This structural

change and the commitment from higher-ups to foster inclusivity and equality within the studio may have propelled the evolution toward more gender-balanced teams.

Our research cemented new data that is on trend with previous studies, revealing the ongoing lack of prominent women in the feature film animation industry.

Previous research has also demonstrated that female characters remain underrepresented in animated media, particularly as protagonists in feature films. Our findings confirm that this disparity persists. Within our sample of 260 films, we found that 201 movies (77.3%) feature male protagonists, 54 movies (20.8%) feature female protagonists, and 6 movies (1.9%) have multiple protagonists of both genders.

In addition to protagonist representation, we analyzed how these films perform on the Bechdel test. We determined that 120 films (46.2%) fail the test, 54 (20.8%) barely pass, 81 (31.2%) unquestionably pass, and 5 (1.9%) contain no dialogue (rendering the test inapplicable). Among films with female protagonists, 43 out of 53 (81.1%) pass the test, while 6 (11.3%) barely pass, 3 (5.7%) fail, and 1 (1.9%) has no dialogue. In contrast, among films with male protagonists, 116 out of 201 (57.7%) fail, 47 (23.4%) barely pass, 34 (16.9%) pass, and 4 (2%) contain no dialogue.

These findings indicate not only that female protagonists are significantly outnumbered by their male counterparts but also that female characters speak less frequently and engage in fewer conversations with each other compared to male characters.

The data presented in this thesis underscores the ongoing gender imbalance within the animation industry and highlights the pressing need to diversify both leadership and other members within creative teams. Achieving more equitable and representative storytelling depends not only on recognizing these disparities but also on actively addressing them. The persistence of these issues affirms the continued relevance and urgency of discussions surrounding equality and diversity in media—especially in animation, where representation plays a formative role in shaping cultural narratives.

However, this progress is now under threat. The current political climate has led to the rollback of many diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, with corporations increasingly retreating from these commitments. This backlash represents a significant setback to the strides made over the past two decades and should be understood as a broader assault on the movement toward equality. In this context, the need to advocate for inclusive practices in animation is not just timely—it is essential.

6.1.2. Trends in Female Archetypal Character Design

Another one of our goals was to investigate the previously under-explored relationship between narrative archetypes and character design in feature film animation. By examining how these archetypes influenced the portrayal of womanhood and girlhood, the study offered a novel analytical framework for understanding character representation. This approach not only enriches the academic discourse on media studies and gender but also provides practical insights for creators aiming to develop more nuanced and diverse female characters for the context of animated feature films and other media.

Our analysis revealed a strong connection between the narrative and archetypal roles that characters embody, and the way they are visually designed. This suggests that narrative archetypes remain highly prominent in contemporary animated feature films, often serving as effective tools to convey story meaning quickly and efficiently. The visual design of a character plays a crucial role in reinforcing these narrative intentions. Through this analysis, we were able to identify recurring trends and patterns in the representation of female characters, thereby shedding light on design practices that may contribute to biased or limiting portrayals.

To conduct the design analysis of female characters embodying certain well-known narrative archetypes in animated feature films, we gathered a sample of 31 relevant movies. These movies adhered to quality and popularity criteria, as well as female representation metrics that would make the analysis possible. We chose five narrative archetypes that were embodied by female characters in these animated feature films: Mentors, Witches, Warriors, Lovers, and Rebels.

The analysis revealed that each archetype tended to exhibit distinct design characteristics that supported the identification of a character as an embodiment of a specific narrative and archetypal role. This suggests that character design plays a crucial role in communicating universal concepts such as archetypes, with certain visual cues functioning as readily recognizable signals that help audiences understand a character's role within the narrative.

Mentor characters were frequently associated with old age, conveyed through visual markers such as sagging skin, wrinkles, and wider, squarish silhouettes. Their age was often further emphasized through the use of gaudy accessories, which were typically absent in the designs of younger characters. Witches and Shamans relied heavily on caricature, often featuring exaggerated traits and deviations from conventional beauty standards. These designs served to visually communicate the fear and power associated with their roles. Warrior characters consistently displayed visual elements that emphasized their readiness to fight and protect, most commonly represented through the presence of sharp weapons or pronounced musculature. These figures were often designed to appear physically strong and potentially dangerous, going beyond mere athleticism. Lover characters, by contrast, were typically depicted as young, innocent, and traditionally feminine, with delicate facial features, dresses, and long hair. All Rebel characters in the sample shared the use of red as a recurring visual motif, and most were portrayed as teenagers, visually embodying themes of resistance and youth.

However, not all characters conformed neatly to the expected visual codes of their archetypes. Some Mentors, for instance, were younger adults rather than wise elders, creating a greater sense of proximity and relatability to the protagonists they guided. This was often reinforced by visual similarities between the Mentor and the protagonist's designs. While Witches and Shamans were generally designed to be unattractive, other characters with similar narrative functions—such as powerful female figures labeled as sorceresses or goddesses—were instead rendered as conventionally beautiful. Warrior characters also demonstrated complexity and contrast within their

designs. For example, Luisa's imposing, muscular frame suggested strength and menace, yet her narrative also emphasized emotional vulnerability and gentleness. Conversely, Mebh, though her design is rounded, small and arguably cute, proved to be fierce and dangerous. Within the Lover category, Eep challenged traditional expectations through her more androgynous design, which incorporated traits typically coded as masculine. While most Rebels were teenagers, Ponyo stood out as a much younger child character who nonetheless defied imposed expectations, reinforcing her archetypal role through behavior rather than age.

Throughout the visual analysis of female character designs, several recurring themes emerged that speak to broader cultural narratives and representational practices in animation. One major area of inquiry was the depiction of age in female bodies—particularly how old age is visually encoded through features such as white hair, and how age can afford characters a greater sense of authenticity and freedom in their self-expression. We also examined the notion of femininity as a form of performance, especially in older characters, and how beauty is frequently equated with moral goodness, perpetuating the association between specific visual traits and ethical values. Another pattern observed was the tendency to represent female power through visually "unappealing" features, often linking strength and authority with a departure from conventional attractiveness. The analysis also explored how love and desirability are frequently tied to physical beauty and socially constructed ideals of femininity. Surprisingly, the prevalence of dresses as a staple of female character design was notable, even among otherwise subversive or unconventional characters. Lastly, we found that female protagonists coded as Middle Eastern and Asian were often positioned within the Rebel archetype, suggesting a complex interplay between ethnicity and culture, narrative role, and visual coding. These thematic observations offer valuable insight into how gender, power, age, and cultural identity continue to shape character design in animated feature films.

Our analysis also revealed clear signs that high-quality, thoughtful content is being produced within the field of animated feature films. Many of the characters studied offer compelling, diverse, and multidimensional representations of femininity—some of which defy conventional expectations and stereotypes. These characters transcend simplistic tropes and serve as exciting, meaningful role models for both young and older audiences. The 31 films selected for in-depth analysis, in particular, presented numerous female characters whose visual design reinforced their narrative complexity and subversive potential. However, when considering the broader sample of 260 films with which this thesis started, it becomes evident that progress across the industry is neither consistent nor linear. While some creators and studios are actively engaging with more progressive and imaginative portrayals, others continue to rely on more traditional, limited approaches. While progress hasn't been linear—and interesting and complex female characters certainly exist in older films—it's encouraging to see a growing number of recent productions featuring female characters with greater creativity, narrative depth, and visual originality.

Nevertheless, persistent patterns remain in the design of main female characters, where beauty and cuteness continue to dominate. The appeal of these characters often hinges on visual markers of innocence, delicacy, softness, and physical attractiveness. Rarely did we encounter female protagonists whose design challenged these traditional notions of appeal in any significant way. In contrast, greater creative freedom appears to be afforded to secondary characters. These supporting roles often allow for more experimentation in visual style, humor, caricature, and exaggeration, resulting in designs that are more daring, unconventional, and even subversive. This contrast suggests a lingering hesitation within mainstream animation to stray too far from normative beauty standards when it comes to central female characters, despite clear evidence that more innovative and resonant representations are not only possible, but also increasingly well-received.

By uncovering these design practices and narrative patterns, this research highlights how specific creative choices can reinforce limiting assumptions about gender roles and contribute to broader societal biases. Such critical analysis is crucial for promoting a more equitable and inclusive media landscape, one that supports the development of

content reflecting the full diversity of human experience and offering more authentic, representative models for all audiences.

6.1.3. Insights from Interviewing Animation Industry Professionals

Lastly, this project offers a unique perspective into the opinions and experiences of professionals working within the animation industry. Through interviews and firsthand accounts, it captures the voices of those directly involved in the creation of animated content, providing invaluable insights into the internal dynamics of production, the challenges faced by studios and artists, and the opportunities for improvement in terms of representation. By integrating these perspectives, the study bridges the gap between academic research and industry practice, encouraging a more collaborative approach to addressing the systemic issues surrounding female character design and representation in animation.

These interviews allowed us to explore several key themes that contextualize the current state of animated feature film production and shed light on the creative processes behind the representations we observed in the movies in our sample.

One of the recurring themes in the conversations was a persistent gender imbalance in the visual design of characters, particularly in the concept of “appeal”. Practitioners widely acknowledged that character design serves as a tool not only to engage audiences but also to reflect cultural values and situate characters within their story worlds. However, female characters were found to be disproportionately burdened with gendered signifiers—often an excess of visual cues designed to emphasize their femininity—while male characters were more likely to be designed with what could be considered neutral or “default” traits. This disparity underscores how visual conventions in animation continue to perpetuate traditional gender norms, privileging physical beauty and conventional femininity in female representation. Many of the professionals interviewed noted that the concept of “appeal” in character design often boils down to beauty, particularly in the case of female characters, a notion heavily influenced by the Disney legacy. The term “appeal,” while commonly used, was rarely

defined with clarity. Still, it was often used as a euphemism for beauty when discussing female characters. This tendency reveals a gendered bias in the industry, suggesting that female characters need to be beautiful to be considered appealing, while male characters are granted more diverse forms of appeal, not tied to traditional standards of beauty. As a result, these conventions often limit the diversity and complexity of female characters, reducing them to familiar, market-friendly designs.

The interviews also cemented the idea that independent professionals and smaller animation studios are continually challenging industry norms. Creators working outside the commercial pressures of large studios emphasized the creative freedom that independence affords. Independent directors and animators highlighted their commitment to designing characters whose visual traits serve the emotional and narrative core of their stories, rather than merely conforming to conventional standards of beauty. These practitioners spoke about a conscious effort to resist the impulse to idealize or beautify female characters, favoring instead unique silhouettes, expressive movement, and narrative-driven design choices. Their approach illustrates a deliberate push against mainstream industry standards, demonstrating that animation can resonate emotionally with audiences even when it breaks free from the constraints of traditional appeal. These independent creators revealed that, in their context, there is more room for experimentation and authenticity, allowing for more complex and diverse representations of female characters. This marks a shift in the animation landscape, where the emphasis is moving away from external beauty and toward internal strength, personality, and narrative function. While commercial studios are often driven by the need to produce marketable characters with universal appeal, these independent voices show that emotional resonance and originality can be achieved through non-normative aesthetics, ultimately broadening the possibilities for female representation in animation.

The interviews revealed a complex and nuanced relationship between personal identification with animated characters and the broader concept of representation in storytelling. A significant pattern emerged in which many interviewees emphasized that gender was not the primary factor influencing their connection to protagonists, but

rather the authenticity of the character's story. For instance, interviewees connected with certain characters, not because of gender, but because of the character's relatable qualities— e.g. their work ethic, vulnerability, human complexity. The common identification of interviewees with opposite-sex characters, often due to the absence of compelling and interesting female characters, underscores how the lack of representation in animation prompts viewers, especially young girls, to find ways to connect with characters outside their gender.

Similarly, other interviewees reflected on how they connected with characters of the opposite gender, often finding creative and emotional freedom in doing so. This perspective supports the idea that the true power of storytelling lies in the universal emotions shared across gender, race, and background, allowing viewers to empathize with characters despite differences in identity.

However, a key issue raised was the persistent lack of representation, particularly from minority groups. Many interviewees expressed frustration at the underrepresentation of diverse voices in animated films, blaming the predominantly male and homogenized leadership in the industry. This concern highlights how male executives often make decisions based on their own experiences, resulting in stories that fail to fully reflect diverse perspectives. The interviews reveal that despite the growing desire for more inclusive storytelling, the industry remains dominated by leadership that lacks empathy for diverse experiences. This highlights the systemic barriers that limit the types of stories being told, which contributes to the argument that true change in animation requires a shift in both creative and leadership structures.

The interviews also highlighted the critical role of diversity in animation storytelling, with a strong consensus that diverse teams lead to richer, more authentic narratives. However, interviewees identified significant barriers to diversity, particularly within studio leadership and production teams. Many pointed out that hiring practices often favor individuals with connections, possibly perpetuating a lack of diversity and limiting the range of perspectives brought into the creative process. Despite the recognized value of diverse viewpoints, some interviewees shared experiences of feeling marginalized in

homogeneous environments, emphasizing the importance of inclusive, supportive work cultures that foster collaboration and psychological safety.

Several participants stressed that leadership plays a key role in creating inclusive environments by actively listening to team members and encouraging open communication. While there is a growing push for diversity within some areas of the industry, challenges persist, particularly when executive decision-makers remain resistant to change or when commercial pressures hinder efforts to include diverse voices. Despite these challenges, interviewees agreed on the need for greater cultural sensitivity and a commitment to authenticity in representation, with many suggesting that true change requires a shift in both industry practices and attitudes toward inclusion.

Overall, the findings underscore the ongoing struggle between the desire for inclusive storytelling and the existing power structures that resist change. While progress is being made, meaningful diversity in animation storytelling will require a continued effort to diversify both the creative teams and the leadership that guides them, alongside a commitment to authenticity and cultural sensitivity in the narratives produced.

Finally, it is also worth mentioning how the capitalist motivations underpinning the animation industry emerged as a particularly divisive point of discussion. The commercial imperative to prioritize profitability often dictates creative decisions, limiting the potential for authentic and diverse storytelling. However, the case of Pixar Animation Studios demonstrates that change is possible when studios enact clear policies and internal directives that prioritize inclusive storytelling and the nurturing of diverse talent. When such values are embedded in the studio's mission, it becomes easier for individuals to safely voice their ideas and contribute to a more equitable creative process. While major studios may face structural and financial barriers to implementing such reforms, smaller or independent studios are often in a better position to adopt these principles from the outset, setting a new standard for the industry.

For meaningful change to occur, individuals must first be equipped with the knowledge and critical awareness needed to act within corporate structures. Only then

can they champion new narratives, advocate for diverse and nuanced representation, and contribute to a more equitable and sustainable future for animation.

Nevertheless, this evolving landscape faces a new and significant challenge: the increasing adoption of generative AI tools. The animation industry is currently undergoing a period of crisis, marked by widespread layoffs, bankruptcies, and the collapse of once-stable studios. The prevailing focus has shifted toward cost reduction and accelerated content production, often at the expense of creative integrity and thoughtful representation. In this environment, the role of the artist, the value of human insight, and the commitment to inclusive storytelling are at risk of being sidelined.

In sum, this study offers a timely and comprehensive examination of gender representation in contemporary animated feature films, with a particular focus on how character design intersects with narrative roles. By identifying recurring patterns, visual conventions, and underlying biases, it not only advances academic understanding of representational practices but also provides actionable insights for industry professionals. The findings contribute meaningfully to ongoing conversations about diversity and inclusion in media, highlighting the responsibility and potential of animation to shape cultural narratives. As such, we hope this research stands as a valuable resource for both scholars and practitioners committed to creating more equitable, nuanced, and compelling animated stories.

6.2. Constraints

As with any research project, this study has inherent limitations that may have influenced the results, the interpretation of those results, and the subsequent discussion. While every effort was made to ensure a rigorous and meaningful analysis, certain constraints—whether methodological, conceptual, or practical—must be acknowledged. Below, we outline the most significant limitations and their potential impact on the study’s findings.

6.2.1. Scope of the Study

One of the primary limitations of this research is its restricted scope. The study focused exclusively on feature films, excluding other formats such as short films, television series, or web-based animations, which may have provided additional insights into the relationship between character design and archetypes, as well as broadening the possibilities for representing female characters in animation. Furthermore, the sample was built based on specific selection criteria, prioritizing animated films with female protagonists that received a certain level of recognition (as measured by IMDb votes). This approach inherently excluded films that might have presented different representations, simply because they had male protagonists or fewer votes on IMDb.

Additionally, alternative selection methods—such as relying on box office revenue, critical acclaim, or award recognition—could have resulted in a different sample composition and, consequently, different findings. Similarly, using a different film database, such as Letterboxd, might have introduced films with a different audience profile, potentially altering the study’s conclusions. These factors highlight the necessity of considering how sample selection criteria shape research outcomes and the

importance of future studies expanding the scope to encompass a broader range of animated works.

Still regarding the scope of this study, another notable limitation is the exclusion of the Queen/Mother archetype from the visual analysis. This archetype is prevalent in animated narratives and encompasses rich and layered themes such as caregiving, sacrifice, authority, and control. Its symbolic and cultural complexity would have required a dedicated, in-depth analysis to do it justice. Given the existing scope and already considerable length of this thesis, incorporating a detailed study of the Queen/Mother archetype would have risked compromising the depth and clarity of the other analyses. This decision was not made due to a lack of relevance; on the contrary, the Queen/Mother archetype is a vital and underexamined figure in character design. Its omission was a conscious methodological choice, motivated by time constraints and the desire to maintain analytical focus—one that opens space for future research to explore this archetype more fully.

6.2.2. Cultural Perspective and Sample Representation

Another significant limitation of this study is that the data analyzed primarily reflect a Western filmmaking perspective, which may have influenced the results and their interpretation. As a researcher from Portugal, in Western Europe, my own cultural background and unconscious biases may have shaped the way I selected, analyzed, and discussed the films in the sample. While I have aimed for objectivity, it is important to acknowledge that different cultural perspectives might have led to alternative readings of the same material or highlighted aspects that I may have overlooked.

Additionally, the composition of the sample itself was largely centered on North American and Japanese productions, with a limited representation of films from other regions. Of the films analyzed, 16 were from the United States, 12 were from Japan, and only three were European productions. This imbalance means that the study may not fully capture the diversity of animated films produced worldwide, particularly those from regions with distinct storytelling traditions, artistic sensibilities, and cultural

narratives, such as Latin America, Africa, or other parts of Asia. A broader, more internationally diverse sample might have provided a richer and more nuanced understanding of the themes explored in this research.

6.2.3. Researcher Background and Interpretative Bias

Another limitation of this study stems from my own background and expertise. As an illustration and animation practitioner from Western Europe, my training and academic focus have primarily been within these fields. While this has provided me with valuable insights into character design, visual storytelling, and animation techniques, it may have also shaped my interpretations in ways that I am not fully aware of.

Additionally, my familiarity with and exposure to animation has been largely influenced by works from the United States and Japan, the dominant industries in the field. This may have introduced an unconscious bias in how I approached the analysis, as I am more accustomed to the conventions, themes, and storytelling techniques prevalent in these regions. Without extensive training in other cultural animation traditions, I may have overlooked nuances or alternative interpretations that a researcher from a different background or with expertise in other global animation industries might have identified.

While I have made efforts to remain objective and analytical, it is important to acknowledge that every researcher brings their own perspective to their work, and my interpretations are inevitably influenced by my own experiences and the cultural contexts I am most familiar with.

6.2.4. Influence of Evaluation Criteria and Interpretative Frameworks

The findings of this study were shaped by the specific criteria used to analyze and categorize the selected animated characters. The application of different evaluative frameworks or theoretical lenses might have led to alternative interpretations, potentially altering the way characters were grouped and the patterns that emerged from the analysis.

A key example of this is the interpretation of narrative archetypes. While this research relied on established frameworks for defining and identifying archetypal roles, archetypes themselves are fluid concepts that can be understood in multiple ways. Another researcher, using a different theoretical approach—such as a more culturally specific interpretation of archetypes or a framework focused on gender studies, mythology, or media reception—might have classified the characters differently or emphasized different aspects of their design and behavior. While the methodology used in this research was carefully considered, it is important to recognize that any framework inevitably highlights certain aspects while potentially overlooking others.

6.2.5. The Challenge of a Rapidly Changing Cultural and Industry Landscape

One of the inherent challenges of conducting research in media studies is the ever-evolving nature of the field. This research was conducted over several years, between 2021 and 2025, during which significant cultural, political, and technological shifts occurred. As a result, the research reflects a snapshot of a particular moment in time, but some of its conclusions may be influenced by an industry and social context that has already changed.

Over the course of this project, numerous developments reshaped both the animation industry and the broader cultural discourse surrounding film and media. The beginning of the research was marked by the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted production pipelines, audience behaviors, and theatrical distribution, accelerating the dominance of streaming platforms. The Hollywood writers' and actors' strikes, during 2023, highlighted industry-wide concerns regarding labor rights, residuals, and the impact of artificial intelligence on creative work. The political landscape also underwent major shifts, with the rise of far-right movements across the world, the start of Donald Trump's presidency in 2025, its effects on USAnian politics and cultural production, and ongoing debates over representation and inclusivity in media.

To illustrate the unpredictability of the animation industry at the time of this thesis's conclusion, the first trimester of 2025 alone saw several unexpected milestones. In

February, during Chinese New Year celebrations, *Ne Zha 2* (2025) surpassed *Inside Out 2* (2024) to become the highest-grossing animated film of all time, driven entirely by its extraordinary success (and, at that time, exclusive release) in its home country China, where it earned an estimated \$1.89 billion. Industry analysts project its final box office total to reach \$2.08 billion, placing it among the top five highest-grossing films in history (R. Lang, 2025). Before this, *Inside Out 2* was the highest-grossing animated feature with global box office earnings of \$1.69 billion, surpassing other record-breaking animated films such as *Frozen* (2013), *The Lion King* (2019), and *Frozen II* (2019), all of which had exceeded the \$1 billion mark (Nash Information Services, n.d.). Meanwhile, *Flow* (2024) emerged as a historic underdog at the 2025 Academy Awards, winning Best Animated Feature and setting multiple records. Directed by 30-year-old Gints Zilbalodis, *Flow* made history as the first fully European-produced and funded film to win the award, as well as being the first dialogue-free and the lowest-budget winner in the category's history, having been made for under \$4 million (Amidi, 2025).

Additionally, the way audiences engage with animated films has transformed. Platforms such as Letterboxd have gained influence, democratizing film criticism and amplifying new voices in the online discourse. YouTube has become a dominant force in shaping audience reception, with independent creators and amateur critics reaching massive audiences and often impacting the success or failure of films. These shifts highlight how film criticism, audience engagement, and industry trends are in constant flux, making it difficult to account for every emerging development within the scope of an academic project with a long research timeline.

While this study provides valuable insights into animated character design within a specific timeframe and context, future research will need to continually reassess these topics as the industry evolves and new voices and technologies shape the animation landscape.

6.3. Research Questions and Objectives Addressed

The following section reflects on the research questions and objectives established at the outset of this study. Each research question is revisited and answered in light of the findings, and the objectives are evaluated according to the contributions achieved. Together, these reflections clarify the scope, significance, and impact of the research.

6.3.1. Research Questions

This research was guided by three central questions:

- What is the current state of representation of female characters in popular animated feature films of the 21st century?
- What is the role of design in communicating and reinforcing character archetypes?
- What kind of correlation exists between character design patterns and the characters' narrative roles?

The findings indicate that female characters remain underrepresented compared to their male counterparts. Character design emerged as a crucial tool for conveying meaning: it can either subvert stereotypes by presenting progressive representations or reinforce conventional portrayals that perpetuate limiting gender roles. Biases were observed in recurring patterns, such as the persistent expectation for female characters to conform to dominant beauty standards. Nonetheless, empowering and complex female representations were also identified, suggesting the possibility to move towards more diverse, equitable, and positive portrayals in contemporary animation.

Design was also found to play a central role in the communication of archetypal identities. Recognizable motifs and recurring visual patterns allow audiences to quickly identify archetypes, while correlations emerged between specific design features and the characters' narrative and archetypal functions. Conventional use of these codes

facilitates rapid comprehension, whereas less conventional design choices – such as attributing masculine-coded traits to female characters – added greater depth and complexity. Thus, character design and narrative role operate in close interrelation, mutually reinforcing the archetypal identities that underpin animated storytelling.

6.3.2. Research Objectives and Achievements

These are the main objectives of this thesis and how we believe they were addressed in the course of the research project.

1. Contribute to a more just and egalitarian society.

This objective was pursued by fostering dialogue and raising awareness through verified data and critical analysis. Given the significant influence of media in shaping cultural perceptions, highlighting issues of gender representation in mainstream animation represents a crucial step toward improving industry practices and promoting equity.

2. Denounce the underrepresentation of female characters in mainstream animation of the 21st century.

Through the contextualizing study presented in this thesis, a comprehensive dataset was compiled that clearly evidences the persistent underrepresentation of female characters. This work provides a solid foundation for understanding the scope of the problem and underscores the urgency of achieving more equitable representation. Insights from interviews with animation professionals further reinforced this goal by highlighting industry perspectives on current limitations and the need for more inclusive practices.

3. Provide a mapping of the narrative archetypes embodied by female characters and their representations in mainstream animated feature films of the 21st century.

A set of specific narrative archetypes was identified and examined within the context of popular animated films. Their representations, when embodied by female characters, were analyzed in relation to character design. This analysis sheds light on how archetypal identities are visually conveyed and offers a valuable tool for creators, educators, and researchers.

4. Make available visual and infographic material that clarifies relevant data about the contemporary animation paradigm.

Although the creation of detailed infographics was not the central focus of this research, basic graphical materials were produced to illustrate the current state of female representation in animation, thereby supporting accessibility and comprehension of the data.

5. Foster critical thinking around gender representation in contemporary animated feature films.

This objective was achieved not only through the thesis itself but also through dissemination activities, including academic conferences, industry events, classroom discussions, publication in a national newspaper, and the organization of a dedicated event. These initiatives generated meaningful dialogue and fostered awareness and reflection on the representation of female characters in animation.

6. Contribute to the strengthening of inclusive and creative character design in animated feature films.

The analysis of female character design, supported by interviews with animation professionals, provided insights into common practices, current shortcomings, and the potential of design as a tool for progressive representation. By identifying both problematic trends and exemplary cases, the research offers inspiration for the development of richer, more complex, and more equitable character portrayals.

In summary, the research successfully addressed the guiding questions and achieved its principal objectives. By examining both the current state of female representation in animated feature films and the role of design in shaping archetypal and narrative identities, this study contributed new insights into the dynamics of gender and character design in contemporary animation. The findings highlight not only existing limitations and biases but also the potential for more inclusive and creative approaches. As such, the thesis offers both a critical reflection on current practices and a constructive foundation for future research and industry innovation.

6.4. Proposals for Future Research

Building upon the findings of this research, several promising avenues for future study emerge. These can be distinguished between directions that I intend to pursue personally and areas that may be explored by other researchers or in collaboration with external partners.

1. Exploring the Queen/Mother Archetype

A compelling direction for immediate follow-up research concerns the Queen/Mother archetype, which was deliberately excluded from this study due to its thematic complexity. Investigating how caregiving, authority, sacrifice, and control are embodied in the visual design of maternal figures in animation could provide new insights into gendered storytelling and archetypal symbolism. This line of inquiry is particularly relevant for understanding representations of motherhood, mother-daughter relationships, and the social and emotional impact these portrayals may have on diverse audiences. Building on the dataset created for this thesis, I intend to analyze the narrative and archetypal roles of characters embodying both the positive and negative versions of the Queen/Mother archetype within the existing movie pool, linking these roles to design practices. A relevant sample of female characters who embody this archetype has already been identified, offering a rich foundation for exploring how character design contributes to the discourse on motherhood and the construction of social meaning in animated feature films.

2. Continuing Industry Engagement and Qualitative Research

Ongoing collaboration and conversation with animation professionals will also be central to immediate follow-up work. Further qualitative research, including additional interviews and an expanded participant pool, will deepen understanding of design practices, studio workflows, and the evolving priorities of the animation industry. These

engagements also provide opportunities to strengthen professional networks and stay informed about current and emerging practices in character design. Although significant progress was made in engaging animation professionals, several opportunities remain. Scheduling conflicts prevented contact with some desired participants, and certain industry professionals were ultimately not reached, despite being willing and enthusiastic to contribute. Expanding the pool to include more male professionals would provide a more comprehensive perspective on the current state of the industry. Additionally, extending the network to underrepresented regions—such as Oceania, much of Asia, Africa, and South America—would further enhance the global relevance of future research.

3. Investigating the Narrative Role of Hair in Animated Female Characters

Another potential avenue for postdoctoral research involves examining the narrative and symbolic significance of hair in female characters. Preliminary observations indicate that hair often contributes meaningfully to character identity, transformation, and visual storytelling. This study would build upon the dataset compiled in this thesis, which contains numerous examples where hair plays a significant role in shaping a character's narrative arc. In addition, a comparative analysis could be conducted with male characters to explore how hair design similarly contributes to defining their narrative trajectories. Such a study would offer valuable insights into how visual elements communicate personality, agency, and story development across genders.

4. Comparative Study of Male Character Design

Expanding the research to include male characters could provide a more complete understanding of gendered archetypal representation in animation. A systematic analysis of male character design and archetypes, alongside the existing work on female characters, would offer a comparative perspective on how masculinity is visually constructed and interpreted. While this avenue may not be pursued directly by this researcher, it is particularly suited for other scholars or practitioners in design and animation, who could build on the methodology and research structure developed in

this study. Such work would be relevant both for academic research and for informing more inclusive design practices in the industry.

5. Audience Reception Studies

Future research could examine audience engagement with the archetypes and design patterns discussed in this thesis. Studying how diverse audiences interpret and emotionally respond to animated characters would contribute to a deeper understanding of the social and cultural impact of visual storytelling. This avenue is particularly suitable for collaboration with sociologists, psychologists, or media studies scholars.

6. Applied Research: Strengthening Industry-Academia Collaboration

From an applied perspective, several initiatives are planned to strengthen collaboration between academia and the animation industry. Building on the network established during this project, we aim to repeat and expand the Confia Weekend Event, in partnership with the Instituto Politécnico do Cávado e do Ave and the Confia organizing committee, improving the format to better connect young artists with industry professionals. A larger-scale networking event for Portuguese students and professionals in the digital entertainment industry is also envisioned, fostering knowledge-sharing, community-building, and collaborative opportunities. In addition, we plan to actively engage with practices promoted by fellow artists and studios to further support professional exchange and creative development. Complementing these initiatives, we are currently launching an online mentorship program in collaboration with animation director Diogo Costa, aimed at individuals developing short films and seeking to refine their animation skills.

6.5. Final Statement

In conclusion, this study illuminates the complex interplay between gender, narrative, and character design in contemporary animated feature films. Beyond addressing specific research questions and objectives, it situates female representation in animation within broader cultural and social contexts, highlighting both persistent limitations and emerging possibilities for more inclusive, nuanced portrayals. By combining quantitative analysis, qualitative assessment, and insights from industry professionals, the research offers a comprehensive perspective on current practices and their implications. Ultimately, this thesis contributes to a deeper understanding of how feature film animation can reflect, challenge, and shape societal norms, while providing a foundation for future research and creative practice that promotes equity, diversity, and innovation in character design.

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APPENDICES AND ANNEXES

Appendix A – Final List of Movies

Final list of 31 movies that adhered to the following criteria:

- have a runtime of over 40 minutes;
- be entirely animated, with no live-action scenes;
- released between January 1st 2001 and April 1st 2022;
- have more than 30.000 IMDb votes;
- have an IMDb rating of more than or equal to 7;
- have a Rotten Tomatoes score of more than or equal to 60%, both by the critics and by the general public;
- undoubtedly passes the Bechdel-Wallace Test;
- have a female-coded protagonist.

Title	Year	IMDb Votes (in thousands)	IMDb Score	MOJO Box Office Worldwide (USD)	Rotten Tomatoes Critics	Rotten Tomatoes Users	Gender of Protagonist	Bechde l Test
Spirited Away	2001	700	8.6	355,668,961	97%	96%	F	Yes
Lilo & Stitch	2002	178	7.3	273,144,151	86%	77%	M/F	Yes
The Cat Returns	2002	53	7.2	54,505,662	88%	82%	F	Yes
Tokyo Godfathers	2003	38	7.8	453,133	91%	91%	F	Yes
Howl's Moving Castle	2004	375	8.2	236,269,142	87%	93%	F	Yes
The Girl Who Leapt Through Time	2006	65	7.7	873,435	83%	90%	F	Yes
Persepolis	2007	93	8	22,783,978	96%	92%	F	Yes
Ponyo	2008	138	7.6	204,826,668	91%	83%	F	Yes

Coraline	2009	217	7.7	124,596,837	90%	73%	F	Yes
The Princess and the Frog	2009	138	7.1	267,045,765	85%	74%	F	Yes
Tangled	2010	437	7.8	592,462,816	89%	87%	F	Yes
The Secret World of Arrietty	2010	90	7.6	149,411,550	95%	85%	F	Yes
From Up on Poppy Hill	2011	42	7.4	61,487,846	86%	79%	F	Yes
Brave	2012	400	7.1	538,983,207	78%	75%	F	Yes
Wolf Children	2012	44	8.1	55,060,661	95%	92%	F	Yes
Frozen	2013	608	7.5	1,281,508,100	90%	85%	F	Yes
The Tale of the Princess Kaguya	2013	45	8	24,706,166	100%	90%	F	Yes

When Marnie Was There	2014	39	7.7	34,949,567	91%	88%	F	Yes
Inside Out	2015	682	8.2	858,848,019	98%	89%	F	Yes
The Little Prince	2015	61	7.7	97,571,250	93%	84%	F	Yes
Your Name.	2016	246	8.4	358,180,115	98%	94%	M/F	Yes
Finding Dory	2016	265	7.3	1,028,570,942	94%	84%	F	Yes
Moana	2016	317	7.6	644,136,488	95%	89%	F	Yes
Zootopia	2016	478	8	1,024,121,104	98%	92%	F	Yes
Abominable	2019	37	7	180,733,970	82%	95%	F	Yes
The Croods 2: A New Age	2020	40	7	215,905,815	77%	94%	F	Yes

Wolfwalkers	2020	30	8	1,266,570	99%	98%	F	Yes
Encanto	2021	175	7.3	251,664,150	91%	93%	F	Yes
Raya and the Last Dragon	2021	140	7.3	130,423,032	94%	97%	F	Yes
The Mitchells vs the Machines	2021	97	7.7	-	98%	88%	F	Yes
Turning Red	2022	61	7.1	8,643,727	95%	73%	F	Yes

Appendix B – List of Female Characters

For each of the 31 movies, we listed all the female-presenting characters that actively participate in the narrative, by speaking and interacting directly with the protagonist and other relevant characters.

We gathered the names of each female character and identified which ones embodied specific archetypes: Mentor, Shaman, Warrior, Lover, and Rebel.

Movie Title	Year	Character Name	Role	Archetype
<i>Spirited Away</i>	2001	Chihiro Ogino	Protagonist	
		Yūko Ogino		
		Yubaba	Antagonist	Magician
		Zeniba		Magician
		Lin		Mentor
<i>Lilo & Stitch</i>	2002	Lilo Pelekai	Protagonist	
		Nani Pelekai		
		Mertle Edmonds	Antagonist	
<i>The Cat Returns</i>	2002	Haru Yoshioka	Protagonist	
		Naoko Yoshioka		
		Hiromi		
<i>Tokyo Godfathers</i>	2003	Miyuki	Protagonist	
		Hana	Protagonist	
		Kiyoko Nurse		
		Kiyoko Baby		
		Sachiko	Antagonist	
<i>Howl's Moving Castle</i>	2004	Sophie Hatter	Protagonist	Lover
		Witch of the Waste	Antagonist	Magician
		Lettie Hatter		
		Madame Sulliman	Antagonist	
		Mrs. Hatter		
<i>The Girl Who Leapt Through Time</i>	2006	Makoto Konno	Protagonist	
		Miyuki Konno		
		Kazuko Yoshiyama		Mentor
		Yuri Hayakawa		
		Kaho Fujitani		
<i>Persepolis</i>	2007	Marjane	Protagonist	Rebel
		Mom		
		Grandmother		Mentor
		Nioucha		
		Frau Doktor Floss		
<i>Ponyo</i>	2008	Eve		
		Ponyo	Protagonist	Rebel
		Granmamare		Magician
		Lisa		

		Kumiko		
		Yoshie		
		Noriko		
		Toki		
<i>Coraline</i>	2009	Coraline Jones	Protagonist	
		Mel Jones		
		Other Mother	Antagonist	
		April Spink		
		Miriam Forcible		
		Mrs. Lovat		
<i>The Princess and the Frog</i>	2009	Tiana	Protagonist	Lover
		Charlotte La Bouff		
		Mama Odie		Magician
		Eudora		
<i>Tangled</i>	2010	Rapunzel	Protagonist	Lover
		Mother Gothel	Antagonist	
<i>The Secret World of Arrietty</i>	2010	Arrietty	Protagonist	
		Homily		
		Sadako Mako		
		Haru	Antagonist	
<i>From Up on Poppy Hill</i>	2011	Umi Matsuzaki	Protagonist	
		Sora Matsuzaki		
		Ryōko Matsuzaki		
		Hana Matsuzaki		
		Miki Hokuto		
		Sachiko Hirokōji		
		Saori Makimura		
<i>Brave</i>	2012	Tomoko		
		Merida	Protagonist	Rebel
		Queen Elinor		
<i>Wolf Children</i>	2012	The Witch		Magician
		Hana	Protagonist	
<i>Frozen</i>	2013	Yuki		
		Elsa	Protagonist	Magician
<i>The Tale of the Princess Kaguya</i>	2013	Anna		Lover
		Kaguya	Protagonist	Rebel
		Ona		

		Sagami		
		Menowarawa		
		Anna Sasaki	Protagonist	
		Marnie		Lover
		Yoriko Sasaki		
		Setsu Oiwa		
		Sayaka		
		Hisako		
		Nan		
		Twin Maids		
		Myoko		
		Mrs Kadoya		
		Nobuko Kadoya		
		Emily		
		Joy	Protagonist	
		Sadness		
		Riley		
		Jill		
		The Little Girl	Protagonist	
		The Mother		
		Dory	Protagonist	
		Destiny		
		Jenny		
		Moana	Protagonist	Rebel
		Gramma Tala		Mentor
		Sina		
		Mitsuha Miyamizu	Protagonist	
		Miki Okudera		
		Yotsuha Miyamizu		
		Sayaka Natori		
		Hitoha Miyamizu		Mentor
		Dr. Zara		
		Yi	Protagonist	Rebel
		Nai Nai		Mentor
		Mother		
		Eep	Protagonist	Lover
		Sandy		

		Ugga		
		Gran		Warrior
		Dawn		
		Hope		
<i>Wolfwalkers</i>	2020	Robyn Goodfellowe	Protagonist	
		Mebh MacTíre		Warrior
		Moll MacTíre		
<i>Encanto</i>	2021	Mirabel	Protagonist	
		Luísa		Warrior
		Isabela		
		Alma		
		Julieta		
		Pepa		
<i>Raya and the Last Dragon</i>	2021	Dolores		
		Raya	Protagonist	Warrior
		Namaari		Warrior
		Virana		
		Noi		
<i>The Mitchells vs the Machines</i>	2021	Sisu		
		Katie Mitchell	Protagonist	
		Linda Mitchell		
		Hailey Posey		
<i>Turning Red</i>	2022	Abbey Posey		
		Meilin Lee	Protagonist	Rebel
		Ming		
		Miriam		
		Priya		
		Abby		
		Grandmother		
		Chen		
		Ping		
		Helen		
		Lily		

Annex A – Press Coverage in Público

As part of the research dissemination strategy, the researcher was interviewed by journalist Tiago Ramalho for Público, one of Portugal's largest and most reputable newspapers. The article, which focused on the findings of the contextualizing study conducted at the outset of this project, was featured on the cover of the Sunday edition in both print and online formats on November 10, 2024.

Ciência e Ambiente Personagens femininas no cinema



Gabriela viu mais do mesmo em 260 filmes de animação: mulheres a menos

Tiago Ramalho

Se recordarmos os filmes de animação da nossa infância ou mesmo os mais recentes, que arrebata recordes de bilheteira, pode facilmente escapar-nos um problema. As personagens femininas escasseiam — e têm menor protagonismo — e são muito estereotipadas. Se analisarmos os filmes dos estúdios de animação no século XXI, as conclusões são elucidativas: entre os protagonistas dos filmes, 77% são masculinos.

“Desde os anos 1970 que se faz investigação em *cartoons* de televisão, em séries animadas e também em filmes. E os dados são continuamente os mesmos”, explica Gabriela Sá, autora desta análise a 260 filmes produzidos neste século (entre 2001 e 2022) e identificados na investigação para o seu doutoramento. “Mantêm-se sempre os mesmos tipos de relações de mulheres ou personagens femininas subrepresentadas e a maior parte das personagens são masculinas”, remata. A cientista e professora na Escola Superior de Design do Instituto Politécnico do Cávado e do Ave viu estes filmes e escrutinou-os para a sua tese de doutoramento, que será defendida na Universidade do Porto no próximo ano.

Se percorrermos a extensa filmografia deste século, podemos recordar filmes como *Brave*, *Divertida-Mente* ou *Encanto* a destoarem destes dados, oferecendo protagonismo às personagens femininas e uma visão

menos tradicional — sem terem necessariamente princesas, por exemplo. Mas se continuarmos à procura recordamos outros que reforçam o protagonismo masculino: *Ratatouille*, *Toy Story*, *A Procura de Nemo* ou *Coco*, por exemplo.

Não é propriamente uma surpresa, embora a sua quantificação para o século XXI permita traçar um retrato para o qual só tínhamos intuições. “A investigação existente já mostrava que há menos personagens femininas, têm menos protagonismo e são muito estereotipadas, além de serem mais novas e terem menos responsabilidades”, realça Gabriela Sá.

Entre os exemplos que a cientista portuguesa atira para a conversa, sobressai o filme *Encanto* — e não é por acaso. O protagonismo das personagens femininas e a desconstrução de uma série de dogmas do desenho das personagens ajuda a explicar a diferença que *Encanto* faz no cinema de animação. Por exemplo, o papel de matriarca da Abuela Madrigal e a sua representação como chefe da família e responsável pela riqueza de todos é incomum. A personagem principal do enredo, Mirabel, também é uma rapariga adolescente, algo também pouco habitual — geralmente, é uma personagem masculina.

Há ainda uma personagem mais notória neste desmoronar de ideias preconcebidas: a irmã mais velha da personagem principal, Luísa. O arquétipo de guerreira é aqui subvertido. “É uma personagem como nun-

ca apareceu no cinema de animação: muito musculada”, assinala Gabriela Sá. “Temos uma imagem feminina muito grande com muitos músculos que carrega montanhas, move casas e anda com burros às costas. Mas que também é muito vulnerável emocionalmente.”

A subversão de estereótipos é um dos truques para inverter as tendências do século XXI, identificadas na investigação de Gabriela Sá. Mesmo com este exemplo, em que o palco é dado às personagens femininas, continua a ser insuficiente. Basta pensar que, ao longo dos 22 anos de filmes analisados, em nenhum ano houve mais filmes com protagonistas femininos do que masculinos.

Realizadoras? Muito poucas

Se recuarmos à infância, seja qual for a idade, podemos fazer essa contabilidade. Entre os filmes que nos marcaram, quem são as personagens? Que papel está reservado às mulheres e meninas nesses guiões? Essas questões também surgiram na cabeça de Gabriela Sá, já na licenciatura, quando estudava Artes Plásticas na Faculdade de Belas-Artes da Universidade do Porto. Um professor desencadeou-lhe essas perguntas. “Pensei: ‘Realmente, passa-se aqui qualquer coisa com os filmes todos que influenciaram a minha infância’”, recorda.

Em qualquer filme de animação, podemos encontrar personagens masculinas com todas as formas e feitios. “Já as femininas são muito

Nem o cinema de animação escapa. As personagens femininas escasseiam, raramente são protagonistas e prevalecem estereótipos. “É mesmo muito preocupante”, diz a investigadora

mais o estereótipo de bonitas. São magras, com uma silhueta de ampolheta, formas mais redondinhas, olhos muito grandes e o efeito de *baby face* [cara de bebé], um efeito que cria empatia e faz com que pareça mais nova”, realça a professora do Instituto Politécnico do Cávado e do Ave.

“Para o bem e para o mal, se a animação precisa de fazer dinheiro, sobretudo no cinema *mainstream* [dito comercial], então existem certas fórmulas que funcionam”, frisa. Não admira assim que alguns dos criadores entrevistados pela investigadora para a sua tese de doutoramento tenham revelado preferir desenhar personagens masculinas “porque podiam fazer o que quisessem”.

Por exemplo, Brenda Chapman, que realizou *Brave*, admitiu que tentou dar rugas à mãe da personagem principal, mas o choque manteve-se com quem tomava as decisões finais. “E não a deixaram seguir em frente com isso”, conclui a portuguesa.

Outro exemplo dos vieses são as bruxas. “Têm tendência para ser mulheres que são renegadas da sociedade, são o que consideramos ser feio, porque têm defeitos físicos muito exagerados com rugas, narizes tortos e em gancho e com significantes femininos muito exagerados, como a maquilhagem exuberante ou bijuteria enorme”, diz. “Há ainda algum preconceito na representação daquilo que pode ser uma mulher que é muito poderosa e que ninguém consegue controlar o seu poder.”

A diversidade dentro das equipas também é um obstáculo a que haja uma maior diversidade nas narrativas e nos arquétipos das personagens. Se quem realiza, produz, escreve e desenha são homens, é mais improvável que as histórias possam reflectir narrativas diferentes sobre as mulheres. Algo que também não é novidade.

Por exemplo, em 2022, um estudo publicado na revista *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* sublinhava que as mulheres e os grupos étnicos minoritários (ou seja, pessoas que não são brancas) estavam sub-representados no panorama artístico norte-americano — numa análise que incluiu arte contemporânea, moda, cinema e música pop. O *Relatório sobre a Diversidade em Hollywood* da Universidade da Califórnia, publicado em 2023, acrescenta que filmes realizados por homens brancos tendem a ter elencos menos diversificados do que se forem realizados por mulheres ou pessoas de minorias étnicas.

Sobram motivos para justificar a necessidade de ter uma maior representação de várias pessoas, fenómenos e culturas no grande ecrã. Por um lado, isto contribui para a exposição a experiências de vida mais diversificadas, com as quais muitas pessoas poderão nunca ter lidado. Por outro lado, a falta de representação também tem sido associada a sentimentos de alienação, baixa auto-estima e falta de confiança, como resume uma



Dois dos filmes mais recomendados pela investigadora Gabriela Sá são *Turning Red* (em baixo) e *Encanto* (na página ao lado), onde os estereótipos das personagens femininas são desconstruídos



Muitas vezes as histórias postas de lado são as mais femininas, porque há este mito de que as mulheres não gastam dinheiro em cinema

Gabriela Sá
Investigadora

análise da produtora Paramount.

Para o cinema de animação, Gabriela Sá também tem números. Apenas quatro mulheres realizaram uma longa-metragem de animação a solo dentro da amostra de 260 filmes que a investigadora analisou: Jennifer Yuh Nelson (*Panda do Kung Fu 2*, 2011), Naoko Yamada (*A Voz do Silêncio*, 2016), Nora Twomey (*A Ganhadora*, 2017) e Domee Shi (*Turning Red*, 2022). Se contabilizarmos também as mulheres que realizaram em conjunto com homens, a percentagem nem atinge os dois dígitos. Entre os 268 nomes distintos de realizadores, 247 são homens e 21 mulheres. Ou seja, apenas 7,8% são realizadoras.

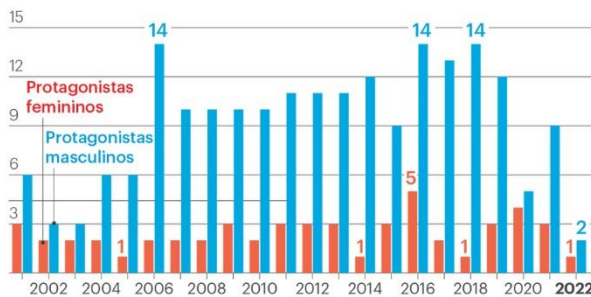
“É mesmo muito preocupante”, admite. “Temos alguns realizadores [homens] que, na minha amostra, aparecem dez ou 12 vezes como realizadores de filmes, muitas vezes a solo. E depois temos apenas quatro mulheres a realizar filmes a solo. O que é realmente inacreditável.”

As mulheres nem falam

Recuamos a 1985, quando uma tira de banda desenhada de Alison Bechdel se tornou uma medida interessante para analisar a participação das

Três em cada quatro filmes de animação são protagonizados por personagens masculinas

Durante o século XXI, nunca houve um ano em que se identificassem mais filmes com mulheres como personagens principais em vez de homens



Fonte: Gabriela Sá

PÚBLICO

mulheres nos filmes. No início, era uma piada. Depois, tornou-se mais sério. Na tira, duas amigas mulheres vão juntas ao cinema. Uma delas diz: “Tenho esta regra... Só vou ao cinema se satisfizer três requisitos mínimos. Primeiro, tem de haver pelo menos duas mulheres no filme que, segundo, falem entre si sobre, terceiro, alguma coisa sem ser um homem.” No final, percebem que ir ao cinema não é assim tão fácil.

Daqui surgiu o teste de Bechdel. Ou seja, a resposta à pergunta: há mulheres neste filme a falar entre si sobre algo que não um homem? Do humor, esta métrica passou a ser um teste de “serviços mínimos”. Não é, como nota Gabriela Sá, um selo de qualidade. “Há exemplos como o do *Big Hero 6*. Num Japão futurista, a história é ótima e o grupo de super-heróis deste filme tem duas raparigas. E há uma única fala entre elas. No filme todo, elas nunca participam na discussão, nem interagem”, explica.

Não sendo um teste que nos dá a visão completa, mostra pelo menos quantos filmes conseguem cumprir estes requisitos mínimos estruturados por Alison Bechdel há quase 40 anos. Entre os 260 filmes analisados,

pouco mais de metade (136 filmes) consegue passar estas estipulações mínimas.

“Quando se introduz mais uma mulher na equipa, os filmes passam mais o teste de Bechdel”, indica Gabriela Sá. Ao longo dos últimos anos, este teste tem tido melhores resultados, sobretudo a partir de 2015. Num estudo de caso, em que a investigadora portuguesa analisou especificamente 31 filmes dos estúdios de produção da Pixar (responsáveis por *Divertida-Mente*, *Soul*, *Coco*, *Carros* ou *Toy Story*), a presença feminina também se faz notar nos anos mais recentes. Entre 1995 e 2019, as mulheres só ocupam 17% das principais funções de produção. Entre 2019 e 2022, esse valor já atinge os 39%.

“Não há mal nenhum em criarmos todo o tipo de filmes. Mas há ainda uma disparidade muito grande”, sublinha Gabriela Sá. O exemplo mais contrário aos dados que apresentará na defesa do seu doutoramento será o filme *Turning Red*, em que uma adolescente de família asiática, filha de imigrantes, com um grupo de amigas muito diversificado conduz uma história centrada no feminino — da experiência de mulher à metáfora da menstruação da adolescente.

Gabriela Sá identifica-a como “esperança feminista”. “É uma esperança de que podemos fazer filmes com histórias diferentes e ter êxitos de bilheteira”, diz. “Muitas vezes, é esse o medo dos estúdios. Há algum receio das perdas financeiras, então apostam em histórias já comprovadas. E muitas vezes as histórias postas de lado são as mais femininas, porque há este mito de que as mulheres não gastam dinheiro em cinema, por exemplo”, ri-se.

A parca presença de mulheres nos filmes de animação continua a ser motivo de preocupação e é o cerne do doutoramento de Gabriela Sá, que, ainda assim, encara o futuro com um certo optimismo. “Já não há a expectativa da princesa com 14 anos que se vai casar, como na *Branca de Neve*”, atira. As princesas acabaram por perder espaço.



Faculdade de Belas Artes da Universidade do Porto, 2025