



THE DARTMOUTH FILM SOCIETY
PRESENTS A TRIBUTE TO

PIXAR ANIMATION STUDIOS

HOPKINS CENTER | DARTMOUTH COLLEGE | OCTOBER 13, 2013



Photo courtesy of Disney Pixar

PIXAR ANIMATION STUDIOS

I was seven years old when *Toy Story* hit the theaters—and still young enough to entertain doubts that my toys did not have a life of their own. Although I had already encountered this idea in books like *The Velveteen Rabbit*, *Corduroy* and *Winnie-the-Pooh*, Pixar's version blew me away with its meticulously detailed world that anticipated all of my questions about the life of a toy. Looking back as an adult, I suppose this is why it left such a lasting impression: the eye-popping visuals had a depth of field and stunning, lifelike elements completely different from the animated movies I knew.

Technologically, this was obviously true. In 1979, Lucasfilm's Computer

Graphics Division began developing state-of-the-art computer technology: digital sound and picture editing, a digital film printer and more advanced computer graphics. Steve Jobs famously purchased this division in 1986 and established "Pixar" as an independent company. John Lasseter's directorial debut, *Luxo Jr.* (starring the lamp that is now their logo), was completed later that year and became the first CGI-animated short to be nominated for an Oscar. *Red's Dream* followed in 1987, and *Tin Toy* (1988) became the first wholly computer-animated film to receive an Academy Award. In 1991, recognizing the potential of this technology, Disney (flush with their traditional cel-made *Little Mermaid* and *Beauty*

and the Beast) announced their intention to partner with Pixar on a computer-animated feature: *Toy Story*. Pixar's latest film, *Monsters University*, has taken CGI to a new level—Sulley, in all of his blue-furred, blustering glory, is a wonder to behold.

But even more revolutionary than the advancement in computer animation was Pixar's approach to storytelling. In a recent TED talk, filmmaker Andrew Stanton recounted some rocky moments in the beginning of *Toy Story's* creation:

"[Disney] privately got advice from a famous lyricist who I won't name, and he faxed them some suggestions. And we got a hold of that fax and the fax said, there should be songs, there should be an "I want" song, there should be a "happy village" song, there should be a love story, and there should be a villain. And thank goodness we were just too young, rebellious, and contrarian, at the time; that just gave us more determination to prove that you could build a better story."

What does he mean by a "better story?"

Pixar's films—and indeed, most fairy tales—are preoccupied with identity formation. Bruno Bettelheim, in his book *The Uses of Enchantment*, writes: "The fairy tales' concern is not useful information about the external world, but the inner process taking place in an individual." Bettelheim identifies this "inner process" as puberty, and fairy tales like *Snow White* and *The Little Mermaid* suggest that puberty and the identity struggle attached to it can be solved with true love/marriage.

But Pixar recognizes identity formation as a lifelong project, not one that ends with puberty, adulthood, or marriage. *Brave*, Pixar's first film with a female central character, seems to be a direct rebuttal to the classic fairy tale formula. Merida struggles with both loving and disappointing her mother, and marriage is not necessary to achieve that goal. Rather than treating self discovery as a means to winning the right spouse, Pixar films treat it as a rather excellent end in itself.

For example, *Toy Story* teaches us to balance the two major components of self-esteem. Woody, whose self-esteem is entirely dependent on Andy's opinion of him, is at one extreme; Buzz, whose self-esteem relies on meeting his own unreasonable expectations for himself, is at the other. Through their friendship, they learn that a healthy understanding of self worth is a combination of accepting yourself (even when you fall short of your goals) and having positive relationships with others (without defining your value by others' opinion of you).

Cultivating self-esteem is a lifelong puzzle—so naturally this theme would not be exhausted in five, or even fourteen movies. The fact that Pixar grounds this lesson in characters who are specific and have modern thoughts, rather than archetypes going through symbolic trials, makes it feel even more accessible. As much as I like the film, *Sleeping Beauty* is not a story I can relate to as a modern human being. But Buzz and Woody, Mike and Sulley—these characters feel more lifelike, more human, because their struggles are simultaneously deep and extremely relevant to all ages.

"Perhaps I should leave the 'great' to other people. For now I'm OK just being OK." Mike Wazowski, *Monsters University*

"Wonder is honest, it's completely innocent, it can't be artificially evoked. For me, there's no greater ability than the gift of another human being giving you that feeling, to hold them still, just for a brief moment in their day and have them surrender to wonder."

Andrew Stanton, director of *Finding Nemo*, Wall•E

I grew up—correction, I am still growing up—with the Pixar films, but it wasn't until I became a mom that I started thinking seriously about the impact they would have on young children. My son is four years old, which I've discovered is too young for some Disney films (try explaining the gender dynamics in *Mulan* to a preschooler sometime) but is not too young for most Pixar movies. Films offer an excellent opportunity to explore trust and friendship, to analyze how characters learn from their mistakes, and especially to discuss the antagonists, whose "wrongdoing" comes not from some innate evil (as with most cartoon villains), but from very understandable emotional circumstances. These "lessons" are most effective when we are less conscious that they are being taught.

Pixar films escape accusations of being didactic because of the wonder they create—but they also excel at balancing lessons with humor. Pixar has changed the flavor of family cinema by taking a leap of faith when it comes to adult humor especially—jokes which are more substantial than a pop-culture reference and which tease at adult quirks or anxieties. The sharks' 12-step meeting in *Finding Nemo* is hilarious (and not just funny) because it takes its time. The joke stretches for the length of a scene instead of just one line, and so adults in the audience can appreciate the clever idea from multiple angles. Likewise, characters such as *Toy Story's* Hamm, a technology junkie and a quiet expert on everything, and Roz from *Monsters Inc.*,

who is "always watching," fit adult types that resemble real people we know.

Some of the humor is, of course, universal. Who can resist the appeal of Mater from *Cars*, voiced by Larry the Cable Guy? Who isn't amused by all the talking dogs in *Up* ("SQUIRREL!")? Who can keep it together while Dory tries to speak 'whale'? This physical comedy is eternal and breaks down all age boundaries.

I never tire of the Pixar films. Any parent can tell you how important this quality is for family cinema. I saw *Monsters University* three times in the theater with my son, and each time I was thrilled to identify some new Monster-adaptation of college life that Pixar totally nailed. The artistic brilliance and the complexity of the worlds on display (in visual and conceptual design) are entirely captivating for adults as well as children. Dan Scanlon, director of *Monsters University* and long-time laborer in Pixar's story department, says, "I think initially we always sort of make these movies for ourselves and keep our own families in mind as the gauge." And maybe that's the secret: Pixar doesn't tell stories in a vacuum. These stories are written for real people—for the writers themselves, for you and me, for their kids and ours.

– Johanna R Evans, '10

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TRIBUTE PROGRAM

INTRODUCTION

Bill Pence,
Director of Film, Hopkins Center

COMPILATION

With representation from
Pixar's feature films

PRESENTATION OF THE DARTMOUTH FILM AWARD

A DISCUSSION WITH DIRECTOR DAN SCANLON AND PRODUCER KORI RAE

With Johanna Evans,
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MONSTROUS SURPRISES

To be announced

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- 2013 *Monsters University*

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- 1988 *Tin Toy*
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