## "A Great Artist Can Come from Anywhere": Globalization in the Pixar Animated Feature

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**Abstract** This essay considers the historically changing meanings of nationalism in the American animated cartoon. Images of globalization in recent Disney/Pixar films imply a centrifugal (outward looking) approach to the world, in contrast to centripetal (inward looking) Hollywood Disney cartoons. Pinocchio (1940) cannibalizes European civilization for the purposes of the American movie-making machine. However, in recent Pixar films, the world draws out the Americans, giving testament to a very different world half a century later. Ratatouille (2007) concerns a rat named Remy who learns how to achieve his dream of running a restaurant, inspired by his idol Gusteau's book, Anyone Can Cook. The film's villain is Anton Ego, who at first laments Gusteau's populism, but is eventually won over by the relationship between the rat's cooking and his own mother's. Thus, Remy wins over the villainous critic, striking a blow not only for the accessibility of French cuisine, but also for popular cinema as an art form that transcends the tedium of angry (French) film critics. If Ratatouille is a centrifugal film about globalization, then it assaults not just the centripetal nature of Walt Disney, but Classical Hollywood Cinema more generally. Ratatouille articulates itself as a critic-proof film by reworking the shibboleth of great American cinema itself, Citizen Kane (1941). The television commercial that begins the animated film serves as a biographical obituary of Gusteau, whose death motivates the plot of the film. The reporter Thompson's quest for the truth about Charles Foster Kane results from the inadequacy of the opening newsreel. Conversely, Remy's quest to prove Gusteau correct in Ego's eyes, that anyone, from anywhere (a rat colony or the United States), can cook, results from profoundly transformed historical circumstances. Kane collects the artifacts of an almost dead Europe in his Xanadu, dving amidst its ruins. Remy thrives in a disinterred Europe, liberated by Gusteau's charisma, finally capable of reigniting the passion of the cadaverous Ego.

**Key words** Animation; Pixar Studios; Walt Disney; Globalization

Pixar's Finding Nemo (Andrew Stanton, 2003)—like much post-9/11 American cinema—is a film about the restoration of a traditional, active masculinity. Somewhere in the South Pacific, the shark villains chase Marlin (voiced by Albert Brooks), our fatherly fishy protagonist, through a minefield and a destroyed World War II submarine. The imagery here intertextually returns to two important American texts. The

first is a film; in the middle of Jaws (Steven Spielberg, 1975), fisherman and veteran Quint (Robert Shaw) explains why he will never put on a life preserver again. In a bravura ten-minute scene sequence, while waiting out the night before their assault on the killer shark can resume, he tells the story of having served on the U.S.S. Indianapo-



lis, a World War II U.S. navy vessel that was sunk by a Japanese submarine shortly after delivering the atomic bomb to its top-secret airbase in the South Pacific. Jaws presents itself as a post-Vietnam recuperation film, in which Chief Brody (Roy Schieder) blows up the shark after it has castrated Quint.



American audience members in the summer of 1975 were adrenalized into cheering as the shark sank, as if in retaliation for the longdelayed sinking of the Asian submarine, or in

vengeance for never having had similar closure in Vietnam. Finding Nemo shifts the political allegory of Jaws in the direction of identity politics, particularly fatherhood and masculinity. Marlin's detour through the remnants of a similarly destroyed submarine threatens to end his quest to find his captive son. However, the sharks are engaged in a twelve-step program to stop eating fish—"fish are friends not food"—thus ensuring the successful reunion of father and son, and disposing of any hint of conflict, either political or interspecies.

Because humans are presented as the vicious enemy, Finding Nemo is able to dovetail equally well with a literary intertext, Herman Melville's Moby-Dick (1851), a novel also about American masculinity, particularly as it pertains to Ahab's mad quest to avenge his castration. In both novel and cartoon, the fish win. Yet for Melville, this involves the white whale sinking the ship of state. For Finding Nemo, on the other hand, the fish unite together under the leadership of father and son to swim against the weight of a human trawler's boom, breaking it with their patriarchal will. The American fish in Finding Nemo do not fail to salvage their family; in Moby-Dick, nature enacts a terrible price upon the overreaching American Ahab, who long since abandoned both family and nation for personal vengeance.

This essay asserts that the globalized nexus of Finding Nemo—the United States, Japan, Vietnam, Australia, the South Pacific—is one of the principal markers of Pixar's difference from classical Disney films. In the foundational classical Hollywood animated features—Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937) and Pinocchio (1940)—European civilization is cannibalized by the American movie-making machine. Hollywood's adaptational grasp drags in the Old World cultural material to recast it in an American idiom. However, in the mid-period Pixar films—such as Finding Nemo and Ratatouille (Brad Bird, 2007), the world draws out the Americans, giving testament to a very different half century after the World War II-era Disney cartoons than what

came before.

The significance of this difference is the topic of this essay, which builds toward an understanding of these films as globalization allegories. Clearly the animated cartoon, invented as feature-length cinema by Walt Disney and whose legacy carries through to Pixar's eleven contemporary films, represents one of the most lucrative and artistically-compelling forms of modernity within global film distribution. In critical theory, the study of globalization as an aspect of modernity is most productively studied by Arjun Appadurai, whose concept of "global flows" extends beyond the traditional formulation of the diaspora to explain much of the social and cultural interchange occurring around the world, such as Pixar's and Disney's global film distribution. This essay poses the possibility that more than fish and references to Jaws and Moby-Dick are flowing in the Pacific currents represented in Finding Nemo. In what follows, I will analyze in depth a few specific mediascapes, as defined by Appadurai, as witnessed in Pixar's production of feature-length animated films as they allegorize globalization.

Pixar's film plots are overwritten by their thematic material, one important example of which is the film industry's role in global culture formation. For example, *Ratatouille* concerns a rat, Remy (voiced by Patton Oswalt), who learns how to achieve his dream of running a restaurant, inspired by his idol Gusteau's (voiced by Brad Garrett) book, *Anyone Can Cook*. The film's villain is Anton Ego (voiced by Peter O'toole), who at first laments Gusteau's populism, but is eventually won over by the relationship between the rat's cooking and his own mother's. Thus, Remy strikes a blow not only for the accessibility of French cuisine, but also for popular cinema as an art form that transcends the tedium of angry (French) film critics.

In post-colonial theory, particularly the work of Homi Bhabha, the hybrid subject is central to understanding the conflicted space of the Third World, caught between traditions and the modern West. In a post-colonial sense, Remy is an interspecies allegory for the hybrid subject. He is not at home in the rat colony, longing for contact with human cooking. However, once Remy gets to Gusteau's kitchen, he learns of his need for contact with the thriving community that he has left behind. This aggressive allegorical reading connecting post-colonial studies to popular Hollywood cinema is indeed part of the landscape of critical theory. In his wonderful study of *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939), Salman Rushdie forges a similar allegorical reading of that classical Hollywood film, seeing himself in Dorothy as she neither finds life in Kansas nor in Oz all that rewarding, replicating Rushdie's similarly conflicted feelings about living in India and London.

As a theoretical encounter, of course, I understand all too well that my approach to globalization via Pixar films is susceptible to critiques of cultural imperialism. Pixar authors its animated fairy tales from fecund Northern California, which then arrive in the Third World via global film distribution, doing great fiscal damage to local film production. Furthermore, I am not unaware of the symbolic material that undergirds the Pixar films. Linking Remy to Rushdie, it is of considerable significance that Remy is a rat, whose community of vermin eats garbage, metaphors not all that far afield from how the British imagined India in the nineteenth century. I do not offer this

analysis of Pixar and globalization as an apologist for Hollywood cinema. Pixar films are on the surface clearly nostalgic and conservative. And yet, they are simultaneously more complex than those labels indicate. Appadurai opens up space for a wider understanding of this issue: "Globalization does not necessarily or even frequently imply homogenization or Americanization, and to the extent that different societies appropriate the materials of modernity differently, there is still ample room for the deep study of specific geographies, histories, and languages" (17).

Furthermore, Appadurai argues that the global flows of culture consist of intricate relationships among politics and communication technologies. In Appadurai's terms, Pixar films are part of one specific "mediascape" among many, which produce their own intricate political effects, what he calls "ideoscapes" (35). Appadurai proposes that mediascapes "provide (especially in their television, film, and cassette forms) large and complex repertoires of images, narratives, and ethnoscapes to viewers throughout the world, in which the world of commodities and the world of news and politics are profoundly mixed" (35). All is not rosy in Pixar's globalization mediascape. Appadurai critiques what he calls "the fetishism of the consumer" in contemporary culture, arguing that "the consumer has been transformed through commodity flows (and the mediascapes, especially of advertising, that accompany them) into a sign... in the sense of a mask for the real seat of agency, which is not the consumer but the producer and the many forces that constitute production" (35). Pixar's Toy Story 2 (John Lasseter, 1999) participates in this logic, demonstrating that the global demand for commodities threatens our intrepid toy heroes. When Al (Wayne Knight), a corporate toy mogul, seeks Woody (Tom Hanks) to complete his set of vintage 1950s Western toys, he sells them at great profit to a Japanese businessman.

The other 1950s cowboy toys find their loyalties divided. Some see the benefit of remaining toys in the United States while others, as in the case of Stinky Pete (voiced by Kelsey Grammer), want to go to Japan to be admired in a toy museum rather than be abandoned by aging kids who will no longer play with them. The film ends with a climactic sequence in the belly of an international jetliner, as Woody and his friends attempt to return home, and not end up in a Japanese toy museum. In short, *Toy Story 2* engages Appadurai's ideoscape of the fetishism of the consumer wherein the characters debate the logic of themselves as commodity signs in a global economy. Clearly, like many Pixar films, *Toy Story 2* ends with a nostalgia for small-town American life, as Woody returns home to his child owner's bedroom. However, by invoking the possibility of other ways of being in the world, even the conservative mediascape of *Toy Story 2* offers contact with other ideoscapes.

Unlike *Toy Story 2*, Ratatouille defines a mediascape which is complexly internationalist from the onset. The first image of *Ratatouille* is of a television floating in the black void of space. On the screen is an image of the Earth, the beginning of a documentary about Gusteau's restaurant in Paris. The images of globalization that subtend *Ratatouille* offer a case study for the historically changing meanings of nationalism in the American animated cartoon. I will compare and contrast the centripetal aspects of national identity in classical Hollywood Disney cartoons with their centrifu-

gal counterparts in the Pixar films. The relationship between television and cooking dominates the first half of the film. In the forty-second teaser sequence before the opening credits, the documentary introduces us to Chef Gusteau's position in international cuisine. In voice-over, the television announcer enthuses, "Although each of the world's countries would like to dispute this fact, we French know the truth. The best food in the world is made in France. The best food in France is made in Paris. And the best food in Paris, some say, is made by Chef August Gusteau" (Ratatouille).





Imagistically, the television documentary is even more stunning in its global representations than its verbal rhetoric. Out of a black image after the Walt Disney castle and Pixar lamp logos, over which plays the tune to "La Marseillaise," an antiquated television with analog knobs and rabbit ear antennae appears floating in black space. On the television screen is a rotating globe floating incongruously in front of clouds and blue sky. In an odd rejoinder of the trip to the moon in Georges Melies' 1902 film, the television screen gets closer to us, eventually coming to fill up the image. As the Earth rotates, it reveals a huge version of the Eifel Tower standing atop a globe otherwise devoid of relief. This image is, of course, a parody of the RKO logo that began many classical Hollywood films about globalization, such as King Kong (1933)—about ripping happy apes away from their Third World homes and bringing them to New York City—and Citizen Kane (1941), a film about globalization in the sense that it ironically grapples with the foolishness of American isolationism, set on the precipice of the United States' entry into World War II. Whereas the RKO radio tower broadcast American film around the world, the Eifel Tower at the beginning of Ratatouille broadcasts the superiority of French cuisine.

The next image we see is Gusteau's restaurant in Paris. Its location seems to pastiche the Flat Iron Building in old New York City, a triangular building sitting in front of a busy intersection through which jot peppy little French Renaults. Next, we see a pile of cooking magazines featuring Gusteau on their covers. Oddly, these are not French magazines, but American ones, written in English, the last of which is *Bon Appétit*, which despite its French title, is an American magazine, published by Condé Nast, whose headquarters are in New York City and is famous for the urban cultural style of *The New Yorker* and its more general lifestyle magazine marketing strategy. For that matter, the announcer speaks to us in English, albeit with a French accent, but given the French government's attempts to preserve its native language, a significant detail in assessing Ratatouille's status as an American text.

While the film's language conveys a similarity with the centripetal nature of *Pinocchio*, other details indicate Ratatouille's centrifugal difference from classical Walt Disney films. Later in the film, Remy grabs Linguini's hair and controls him like a puppet as he cooks. In a montage sequence, they practice cooking together. The figure of the puppet of course conjures Ratatouille's relationship to *Pinocchio*. In the classic Disney film, the puppet works hard to become a real boy. In Ratatouille, the rat dreams of becoming a chef, whether a human one or not does not matter to him. *Pinocchio* represents the classical Disney take on globalization. Carlos Collodi's grim 1883 European tale—Pinocchio stomps to death the moralizing cricket about a third of the way into the novel—is imported into American culture for Disney's war-time purposes without concern for its original nineteenth century Italian context.

In these terms, the most significant passage in the film is when Lampwick takes Pinocchio to Pleasure Island. While there, they visit a model suburban home that is being systematically destroyed by the children. Inside, Lampwick lights a match across the face of DaVinci's famous painting, the Mona Lisa. Shortly afterward, Lampwick and Pinocchio are horrifyingly transformed into donkeys. After the process is completed, a worker rounds up the animals for work in the salt mines. "You've had your fun, now pay for it," is the gruff delivery of the moral by the jailer, cause enough for the haunting of many childhood dreams.

The depositing of the *Mona Lisa* in an American suburban home is of profound significance for tracing the World War II context of both *Pinocchio* and its live action doppelganger, *Citizen Kane*, *Bildungsroman* both. In these films, European civilization's destruction across the Atlantic is elided. Instead, the United States becomes a repository of its art, piled up and ill-treated. In Welles' film, Kane has collected European artwork, which remains boxed up at Xanadu. At film's end, we are privy to the second destruction of Europe. First came the Nazi plunder, from which Kane has apparently spared the artworks. Then comes the death of Kane, resulting in his possessions being burned in a giant oven, not dissimilar to the smoldering Europe that the film elides, with the exception of the remarkably ironic section featuring Kane's declaration that there will be no war in Europe because he has spoken directly to Hitler and Mussolini.

For its part, *Pinocchio* is less pessimistic about the future of civilization. By moralizing rather than ironizing as does *Citizen Kane*, Disney's film demonstrates that with the proper scolding, it might be possible to convert amoral puppets into "real" boys who grow up to be law abiding citizens, who might deserve their Disney-designed suburban model homes, in which they could have DaVinci paintings that would not serve as striking posts for matches.

Ratatouille conceives of Europe in very different terms than Citizen Kane and Pinocchio. Despite representing Paris in distinctly American terms, the film's ending proposes the projection of the rat (voiced by an American comedian) into the center of Parisian social life. When Ego is converted from foe to friend—he calls the rat, "the finest chef in France"—Remy is able to establish his idyllic French restaurant, La Ratatouille, an elegant bistro. The film ends with the American firmly ensconced in a now thriving contemporary Europe.



The question is, Why does Ratatouille begin with such an obsessive conflation between television and cooking? I believe the answer lies in the culture at Pixar. Like Orson Welles, the wunderkinds who have created the Pixar films, the most aesthetically and narratively accomplished animated feature-films since Walt Disney's in the 1930s, these are exceptionally young film artists. John Lasseter (director of the early Pixar features) and Brad Bird (director of Ratatouille and 2004's The Incredibles) are both 53 years old, whereas Andrew Stanton (director of 2003's Finding Nemo and 2008's Wall-e) is 45. Pete Docter, on the other hand, the director of 2001's Monsters, Inc. and 2009's Up, was born in 1968, making him an astonishingly young 42 years old. These are young men in the Hollywood film industry, in which it typically takes twenty-five years to build a successful career. Such career paths recall Disney himself, whose creation of the American feature-length animated film in 1937 was accomplished at age 36. Thus, when the biographical announcer at the beginning of Ratatouille announces Gusteau's upstart status, "He's the youngest chef ever to achieve a five star rating," this invokes Ratatouille's allegory of creativity. For Ratatouille is not only about art, the cooking of food, it is also about its reception. The critic Anton Ego is the most remarkable character in the film. On the one hand, it is an expected slap in the face to criticism. Many artists are annoyed by the frameworks critics use to dismantle their films. However, Ratatouille's representation of the critic is worth mining for more than its anti-intellectualism. Ego's transformation into a defender of Remy's cooking gets at the kind of world Pixar believes it is creating with its films, a more humane one. And they just might be correct about that.

Ratatouille is a self-reflexive film, one in which cooking is a stand-in for the creation of personally meaningful systems of meaning. The Pixar creators are all cinephiles, but some of their characters stand out as interrogating cinephilia more than others. Most recently, Carl Fredrickson's love of Muntz the movie star becomes Up's central preoccupation, as he comes to divest himself of the image, as Muntz in real life in South America tries to drop to his death a young boy scout off the side of his zeppelin.

In *Ratatouille*, cinephilia is much less negatively depicted. Remy literally stops in his tracks as he watches Gusteau cook on television. Like little boys who dream of

making cartoon movies, the rat falls in love with the televised image of Gusteau at the beginning of the film. Eight minutes into it, Remy and his brother sneak into an old lady's kitchen to find spices for their morsels of food. Throughout the entire scene, the television plays in the background. When Remy notices Gusteau, he walks forward on the counter to watch his idol. Gusteau delivers works of encouragement to his young apprentice: "You must be imaginative, strong-hearted. Your only limit is your soul. Anyone can cook, but only the fearless can be great." "Pure poetry," Remy enthuses.



However, Remy learns that with a bad review from Ego, the broken-hearted Gusteau has died. The restaurant has fallen from a rating of five starts to three, a system that also pertains to how films get evaluated in American film criticism. Clearly Pixar is aiming to make the animated equivalents of *Citizen Kane*, seeking the five stars ratings, but because they are animated features, some critics dismiss them as three star efforts, good enough for what they are, but indistinguishable frothe work aimed at children and their parents tagging along, as in, for example, *Shrek* and *Ice Age*.

The centrality of television continues as Linguini takes Remy back to his apartment thirty minutes into the film. Although he has a beautiful, expansive view over the Parisian cityscape, centering the Eifel Tower out his huge windows, Linguini suggests that his tiny apartment is livable because he has a couch and a TV. What's more, Linguini sleeps with the television on, tuned to a French romance movie. A man and a woman hold each other. She asks, "Is this a dream?" and he replies with smoldering passion in his voice, "The best kind of dream, one we can share," as clear a statement on the construction of Pixar's brand of animated magic as appears in any of the films. Because Gusteau is not the star of the television for the first time in the movie, Remy is not watching it. Instead, he gazes out the window, longing to make something of his life which transcends life in the rat colony. It is a quintessential Disney moment, akin to the "When You Wish Upon a Star" romanticism in *Pinocchio*.

At the film's climax, Ego comes to the restaurant to review Linguini's cooking. Tired of reading all of the hype about the restaurant, he asks the waiter, "Do you know what I'm craving? Perspective. You provide the food, I'll provide the perspective." The ghost of Gusteau comes to visit Remy, trapped in a human cage. "So, we have given up. Awaiting a future in frozen food products." Discouraged, Remy declares, "I'm sick of pretending." Unlike Hamlet's father, Gusteau is a ghost who impels him, not to destruction, but to better himself. Remy runs to the restaurant to keep it from failing. Why do you care about mean humans, inquires his brother.

"Because I am a cook," declares Remy, transcending the logic of speciation which tends to separate live-action Hollywood cinema from its anthropomorphic animated brethren. When the human chefs are about to kill the prodigal rat, Linguini intervenes to protect his friend, his "little chef," in a typical Pixar bit of Freudian fantasy, invoking but not pursuing the psychosexual overtones of this formulation. Remy's family of rats comes to help him save the restaurant. As they work, Remy barks orders at them, "Compose the salad like you were painting a picture," is his artistic advice.



Remy prepares an unusual dish for Ego's review, ratatouille, which Colette dismisses as a peasant dish. However, when Ego takes a bite of Remy's concoction, he has an out-of-body experience, flashing back to his childhood, when his mother made the dish for him. He drops his pen and eats ravenously. Again, a Freudian fantasy drives the plot forward. Remy and Linguini overcome their species differences, Remy cures the critic, aptly named Ego, via a return to childhood which produces a mature subjectivity in both the cook and his critic.

Remy narrates the story of the appearance of Ego's review. We watch the critic compose his missive in a huge gothic cathedral like room, typed on an ancient type-writer. Ego's review is a remarkable meta-commentary on the nature of criticism, deliciously performed by Peter O'toole:

In many ways, the work of a critic is easy. We risk very little, yet enjoy a position over those who offer up their work and their selves to our judgment. But, there are times when a critic truly risks something, and that is in the discovery and defense of the new. In the past, I have made no secret of my disdain for Chef Gusteau's famous motto, "Anyone can cook." But I realize, only now do I truly understand what he meant. Not everyone can become a great artist, but a great artist can come from anywhere. (Ratatouille)

Ego gives voice to some common assaults on criticism: it is petty, and far less creative than the worst of the artwork it engages. However, the missive also raises the positive function of criticism--its support for creativity--a sentiment that is rarely voiced by artists. Indeed, the ideas here are not radical, there is no claim that criticism is also an act of creativity that can be superior to the artworks engaged; nonetheless, the importance of criticism is at least entertained.

Furthermore, the passage allows us to shift attention from the animated film per se onto the very political history of cinema itself. For if *Ratatouille* is a centrifugal film about globalization, it assaults not just the centripetal nature of Walt Disney but classical Hollywood and international art cinema as well. *Ratatouille* articulates itself as a critic-proof film by reworking the shibboleth of great American cinema itself, *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941). The television commercial that begins the film serves as a biographical obituary of Gusteau, whose death motivates the plot of the film. Thompson's quest for the truth about Kane results from the inadequacy of the opening newsreel. Conversely, Remy's quest to prove Gusteau correct in Ego's eyes, that anyone, from anywhere (a rat colony or the United States), can cook, results from profoundly transformed historical circumstances. Charles Foster Kane collects the artifacts of an almost dead Europe in his Xanadu, dying amidst its ruins. For his part, Remy inexplicably begins his life in a disinterred Europe, but is liberated by Gusteau's charisma, and finally capable of reigniting the passion of the cadaverous European Ego.

As in cooking, as in cinema: Pixar's film transcends the moribund French cinema with its failed Godards, instead producing a film which charms both adults and children alike in its astute understanding that at the center of centripetal force lies isolation, abandonment, and destruction, while the outward propulsion of ideas leads toward a thriving global community.

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