RESEARCH ARTICLE

Men at the heart of mothering: finding mother in Finding Nemo

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(Received 22 April 2008; final version received 18 November 2008)

After years of perpetuating myths of the subservient, ever-cheerful woman (or killing a maternal figure off at the start of a movie), Disney explored new ground in its blockbuster, Finding Nemo. Building on previous Disney critique by Elizabeth Bell and others, I argue that this film provides an expanded notion of who ‘mother’ is and what ‘mothering’ means. Firstly, I provide a brief review of social ‘mothering’, summarizing maternal functions as discussed by various feminist scholars. Secondly, I create a typology that assists our understanding of how Disney traditionally defines mothering in its discourse. Using elements of this typology, I then explore the ways in which Marlin, the father in Nemo, is engaged in mothering. Finally, I discuss the potential impact on viewers of portraying men as mothers and what has occurred in Disney films post-Nemo with regards to images of mothering.

Keywords: rhetorical criticism; Disney; mothering; gender; family roles; media criticism

Well, a mother, a real mother
Is the most wonderful person in the world
She’s the angel voice that bids you goodnight
Kisses your cheek, whispers, ‘Sleep tight’ ...
The helping hand that guides you along
Whether you’re right, whether you’re wrong ...
Your mother and mine.
(‘Your Mother and Mine’, sung by Wendy, Peter Pan, 1953)

Crying: ‘I never knew my father!’
(Bruce the Shark, Finding Nemo, 2003)

Introduction

Women in Disney films (both animated and live action) are meticulously crafted and offered to the public; there is ‘nothing accidental or serendipitous’ (Bell 1995, p. 108) about their presentation. Although the characters are fictional, the part they play in the overall, and very real, cultural discourse is not. In Disney’s animated fare, male heroes have been sketched to amplify strength and bravery; they bulge with muscles, fight for honor, and win the girl. Female ‘heroines’ are drawn with delicate strokes of femininity and coquettishness; they have hourglass figures, flawless features and need their men.
Because Disney messages reach millions of households, it is not unreasonable to suggest, as various critical scholars do, that these sketches help create and perpetuate certain cultural problems, such as hypermasculinity and the emotional labor women exert to compensate for it (Jeffords 1995), women’s lack of voice (Henke et al. 1996), and the beauty myth (Bell 1995). There is in fact a plethora of critical scholarship ranging from explorations of Disney as corporate mogul (Fjellman 1992, Smoodin 1994) to cultural demigod (Zipes 1995, Giroux 1996).

With my research interests in feminist issues, especially representations of women and motherhood in the media, I join other critical scholars in periodically performing close readings of Disney texts. I have been particularly interested in their animated films, since they are widely distributed, financially successful and have significant cultural impact. To gain perspective on their impact, note that the following films were the highest-grossing films of their respective release years: Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937), Pinocchio (1940), Bambi (1942), Cinderella (1950), Peter Pan (1953), Lady and the Tramp (1955), The Jungle Book (1967), Aladdin (1992), The Lion King (1994) and Toy Story (1995) (Dirks 2008). Finding Nemo (2003) is listed as the 15th highest-grossing movie of all time and The Incredibles (2004) is listed as 40th (see The Numbers 2008).

However, after reviewing Disney animated feature films (those full-length animated films with theatrical releases not based on pre-existing television characters) of the last 10–15 years, I see indications that new space could emerge for growth and dialogue about traditional, gendered family roles. Specifically, I believe Disney film-makers have worked, at least sporadically, to distribute new messages about families and what it means to ‘mother’.

To borrow from Janice Radway (1991), this study is designed to delve into the connection between mothering and the culture that has given rise to it. I begin by offering a brief summary of feminist writings on what it means to engage in mothering. I then use that summary to explore “mothering” as defined within Disney’s animated discourse. Looking upon the catalog of Disney’s animated films, with the assistance of previous scholarship on the representation of women in Disney films, I note the longstanding patterns of messages about women, in general, and mothers, in particular, that serve as obvious examples of the cultural messages feminist scholars have long derided. Allowing Disney’s historical discourse to define what it means to engage in mothering in Disney films, I use that definition to analyze a primary male character in the blockbuster animated film, Finding Nemo. Through this analysis, I find evidence that Disney is, at least on occasion, willing to reconstruct its representation of mothering, not necessarily of what mothering means but of who can perform it.

Cultural ‘mothering’ through a feminist lens

Before proceeding to my analysis of Disney mothering, I offer the following clarification of terms. As would be imagined, years of feminist scholarship have provided us with numerous descriptions of what it means (physically, emotionally, culturally) to engage in American mothering, to perform ‘mother’. Both classic feminist writers like Rich (1976) and Friedan (1984) and contemporary scholars like Crittenden (2001) and Douglas and Michaels (2004) have written about the frustration and suffocation some women find in motherhood, the loss of mind and (sometimes) loss of life some women, upon believing their only option is to stay homebound with the children, experience mentally and physically. Historically, women have received repeated messages with a central theme that mothering is the most crucial social function a woman can perform.
And, reproduction alone is insufficient. Again, the message was (and is) loud and clear. If women do not engage in and embrace what some would call ‘intensive mothering’ – staying home full-time, investing hour after hour into extensive, hands-on interaction each day – they are to blame for social problems and can be assured that their children will end up, at best, not performing to their intellectual and creative capacities and, at worst, in real physical danger. As Douglas and Michaels (2005) note, decades of covert (and sometimes overt) messages targeted toward women position those who put themselves (read their career aspirations) ahead of their children as only doing so because ‘feminism ... con[ned] ... into abandoning their children’ (p. 82). In order for children to avoid being lost, abused, ill or murdered, women should instead embrace ‘“family values”, which means Dad should be the boss again and Mom should make family heirlooms out of the lint in the clothes dryer’ (p. 88).

In other words, to raise children as fully functioning members of a patriotic and capitalist society, women must wholeheartedly embrace the physical and emotional labor involved in childcare and domesticity. Jaggar (1989) points out, however, that requiring mothers to uphold the highest of moral, ethical and cultural standards – being the most pristine member of the family – then working to instill those beliefs and value systems in their children is quite draining. It positions mothers as solely responsible for living lives of selfless morality and working to pass along their solid system of morals and values to the rest of the family. This saintliness of mothers, also described by Ferguson (1989), is not only a draining impossibility for women, but it also ensures that women retain responsibility for raising good, moral citizens, and not much else.

And moral leadership is not the only debilitating task facing mothers. Caplan (1998) remarks that many women also find ‘chauffeuring the children ... taking them to doctors’ appointments, entertaining them and their friends, refereeing ... empathizing ... about their minor and major life tragedies’ (pp. 128–129) very wearing. As for fathering during the same cultural timeframe, Douglas and Michaels (2005) note that, well into the 1980s and 1990s, the images of fathering expanded beyond authoritative disciplinarian to include the jovial Cosby-like dad who laughed and listened but did not extend into equal co-parenting. As two late 1990s studies they cite indicate:

fathers spent, on average, about twenty minutes a day with their children ... [and out of] eleven different child-related tasks, such as buying them clothes, supervising baths, and so forth, 70 percent of fathers did not assume one single responsibility, 22 percent assumed one, and only 8 percent assumed two or, at the very most, three. (Douglas and Michaels 2005, p. 106)

This supports research shared by Crittenden (2001) indicating that ‘[e]ven when a wife earns more than half of the family income, the husband will typically contribute no more than 30 percent of the domestic services and child care’ (p. 24). Even in dual-earner households, women are still taking on more of the childcare functions; and, according to a press release from the US Census Bureau, there are still approximately 5.4 million women who list themselves as stay-at-home mothers (Bernstein 2004).

All of which is to say – in an incredibly summarized fashion considering the years and volumes of valuable feminist work – that Western cultural messages define mothering, not fathering or parenting, as the performance of nurture. Specifically, mothering is an all-consuming act of binding oneself to the everyday nurture of the physical, mental and emotional lives of children to the exclusion of that same nurture of oneself. I now want to take this notion of cultural ‘mothering’ with me to an analysis of Disney mothers to show how these definitions of mothering have historically been supported by and repeated through Disney discourse.
Mothering in Disney discourse

The repetitive denigration, even destruction, of women in general in Disney films has drawn significant fire from feminists for over 25 years. Sells (1995), in her vigorous critique of Disney messages about domesticity and the construction of women’s social roles, points to the conflicting messages Disney sends about agency through characters like Ariel in The Little Mermaid (1989), who pursues her dreams despite the potential for patriarchal punishment, yet forsakes her voice, her connection to other women, and her independence in order to do so. Extending this work, Henke et al. (1996) offer a feminist reading of five popular Disney cartoons spanning from Cinderella (1950) to Pocahontas (1995) and note potentially positive changes in the depictions of women and their abilities to find satisfaction and selfhood. They are quick to note, however, as are the scholars whose work they build on, that these changes are limited because they are accompanied by other problematic moves, such as downplaying colonial domination (Buescher and Ono 1996) and restricting women to mothering and teaching roles (Jeffords 1995, Murphy 1995, Hoerner 1996).

Other critiques of animated films have questioned the ways in which Disney animates women, criticizing the ‘somatexts’, or stories told by Disney women’s bodies. Using close analysis of all elements of the body – including its shape, coloring and movement on-screen – Bell notes that women in Disney are drawn differently depending on what age they are designed to represent, in a way that can be compared to the treatment of those same ages in other social discourse. Overwhelmingly, princesses and heroines in the Disney repertoire are youthful, pretty, white, and bourgeois: they literally glide through their (oftentimes servant-like) days with the grace of a ballet dancer. Middle-aged women are usually femme fatales, voluptuous and/or extravagantly costumed, dark, and full of pride; often depicted as reptilian, they are independent and strong-willed (and usually killed for it). Older women are gray (or, at least, understated in whites and pastels), wrinkled, primarily plump, and frumpily dressed; they seem to spend their time attending to the bodies around them and struggle with perpetual imbalance (read literally and figuratively). Repeatedly, Disney has drawn women in these limited ways, thus sending specific messages about women’s roles, bodies and family interaction to boys and girls around the globe who watch the films.

For my analysis of mothers in Disney films, I expand the analyses above by looking at more than just the somatexts of the mothers in Disney films, adding to that a description of the visual elements of the body and movements of the mothers. I also refer to contextual issues such as who they interact with and how, as well as other notable non-verbal and paralingual elements to get an overall idea of mothering in Disney’s animated films. Paying attention to the combination of words, visual and auditory elements offered by Disney provides a more encompassing definition of what ‘discourse’ means. I borrow this inclusive approach from Brummett (1994), who reminds us that rhetorical analyses of popular culture texts must include attention to non-verbal and narrative structure elements, and from Fairclough (1995), who emphasizes analysis of many rhetorical elements in order to determine as fully as possible ‘what sorts of social identities ... and what cultural values’ (p. 17) a message producer offers an audience.

Mothering in Disney’s animated feature films

The mothers in Disney’s animated stories are ... well, perhaps I should begin by saying what they are not. Within Disney’s narrative structure, mothers are usually killed early in the story or not allowed to exist in the first place. In film after animated film, traditional

When analyzing the mothers who are allowed to remain alive and active in Disney’s animated feature films, a pattern emerges. Mothers in the films appear to fit within (and across) the following categories: as animals (*Dumbo* [1941], *The AristoCats* [1970], *The Lion King* [1994], *Tarzan* [1999], *A Bug’s Life* [1998]); as anthropomorphized objects (*Beauty and the Beast* [1991], *Pocahontas* [1995]); as fragmented or fuzzy bodies (*Lady and the Tramp* [1955], *Toy Story* [1995] and *Toy Story 2* [1999]); and as women of color (*Mulan* [1998], *The Emperor’s New Groove* [2000]). For the purposes of analysis, I suggest a typology repeatedly in Disney’s animated fare: the animalistic mother; the anthropomorphic mother; the fragmented mother; and the ethnic mother. Because I am interested in the family in *Finding Nemo* (2003), which is not marked as anything other than white and Western (based on the voice-over dialects, our knowledge of the actors who perform those voices) and whose characters are drawn in full-body poses in magnificent detail, I will only detail here what I call the animalistic mother and anthropomorphic types, since they seem most relevant to the analysis at hand. An in-depth analysis of the typology is forthcoming. However, a cursory glance at two of the types is essential in order to understand how unique it is when a mothering figure steps outside the traditional Disney parameters.

**The animalistic mother**

Although there are certainly instances of animal mothers being killed in Disney films (*Bambi* [1942], perhaps, being the epitome), frequently animal mothers remain alive and well. In *The AristoCats* (1970), for example, the lead character, Duchess, is a mother with three kittens. Despite the fact that she is a single mother, she is portrayed as unable to negotiate her way through the world without the assistance of a streetwise alley cat who offers to help her find her way home. Duchess is drawn as a pampered and pure white housecat who has never spent time outdoors. She has focused her life exclusively on her children and the emotional wellbeing of her owner (the wealthy woman in whose house Duchess and her kittens reside). Duchess is intent on giving up her own desire for sexual love (via a relationship with the alley cat) in order to meet the needs of those around her. She moves softly and demurely, often putting her paw to her mouth while offering responses like ‘Goodness!’ . She is wealthy and well-bred, bejeweled, spotlessly white, and voiced by Zsa Zsa Gabor. In terms of ‘animal’ nature, she never exhibits the traits typically associated with animal protection of her young.

*Tarzan* (1999) offers us a somewhat different animal mother somatext in Kala, the mother gorilla. After Kala rescues Tarzan (his human mother was eaten by a tiger, who also ate Kala’s biological baby), she persuades her ‘husband’ to allow her to raise the human child. Her decision causes her to be somewhat ostracized by the other gorillas who do not see the inclusion of a human in their group as desirable (or, perhaps, they do not see
Kala’s independent actions as desirable). Kala, voiced by Glenn Close, embodies mothering in that she is always shown preparing food, cradling, grooming, and soothing Tarzan. Although she is drawn with muscles, strength, and a lack of Disney-fied batting eyelashes, she is certainly made smaller than the male gorilla and (other than one scene in which she stands up for her opinion) she frequently shrinks away (from the male gorilla, from the humans who come to the forest). Her face is also replete with emotional elements, including a furrowed brow whenever she is worried about Tarzan and his interaction with the gorillas and humans, and she openly discusses her emotions with Tarzan.

The anthropomorphic mother

By anthropomorphic here, I refer to those mothers represented by either non-living or non-animal objects. Two prime examples can be found in *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) and *Pocahontas* (1995). In *Beauty and the Beast*, Mrs Potts is a once-human-now-teapot mother who nurtures Belle, her son Chip, the Beast, and anyone else who needs it. Despite her makeup and long eyelashes (reminiscent of the implied youth and sexual potency of Duchess), Mrs Potts speaks with an older woman’s voice (that of Angela Lansbury) and, when she emerges from her enchanted spell later in the movie, is drawn in grandmotherly fashion, with a rotund shape, pursed lips, pudgy chin, and white hair. She remains entirely focused on ‘women’s work’ and continually voices concern that she is not being useful.

Similarly, in *Pocahontas* (1995), the anthropomorphic ‘mothering’ is performed by a grandmother, Grandmother Willow, who appears as a speaking face on a tree. This tree spirit is given a female name and voice, has excessive ‘wrinkles’, is in complete connection with nature (human and otherwise), and is positioned as having magical powers. Seemingly a wise being, she is visited for advice regularly by Pocahontas and is shown to have a short temper which flares at those who do not listen to her (she yells at the animals at one point to ‘be quiet!’ when she wants to speak).

Although there is considerable strength written into these two anthropomorphic somatexts, there is also immobility. Mrs Potts cannot leave her teapot body to become human without the assistance of her male master. Grandmother Willow, for reasons unknown, cannot uproot and leave her place in the forest. If anything, we might argue that these somatexts live to serve and are tightly constrained. The sole purpose of their bodies is to provide (nourishment, advice, even oxygen) for others. This interpretation echoes Bell’s findings of older women somatexts in Disney’s animations:

> The good Disney women produce, not children, but the perfected enactment of motherhood as fostering grandmotherhood … Removed from a ‘natural’ blood relationship to the child/heroin, their sacrifices are deemed even purer in their selflessness. Sacrifice and nurturing, lifted from the realm of necessity, become a matter of choice. (1995, p. 119)

Mothering in this type, in particular, is performed through the labor of older women.

To summarize mothering in the Disney repertoire, we can say the following. First, Disney mothers who remain as part of the story have historically been expected to focus on the nurture, protection and education of children. With minor exceptions, their bodies have been images of health and unobtrusiveness, with mixed messages about sexual potency and age. Disney characters engaged in mothering need not have given birth biologically to the children (they could be their grandmothers or adoptive mothers), but they have been required to be women and to desire an existence in/around the home. These somatexts appear as strong and confident while performing the mothering function, but not actively pursuing roles or activities outside of mothering. More than anything, mothering in Disney
discourse, as in the larger cultural discourse described above, has focused on performing the everyday caring for children – the grooming, the feeding and the protecting.

As stated earlier, I find it important in analyzing Disney mother types to expand the notion of somatexts by looking at the ways in which these characters are drawn and their performance of mothering. As Gatens (1999) suggests, ‘[b]y drawing attention to the context in which bodies move and recreate themselves, we also draw attention to the complex dialectic between bodies and their environments’ (p. 228). By noting the performance of Disney mothering holistically (bodily, vocally, in situ), we begin to see what ‘mothering’ involves in that discourse. As Gatens notes, the ‘difference does not have to do with biological “facts” so much as with the manner in which culture marks bodies and creates specific conditions in which they live and recreate themselves’ (pp. 230–231). In this way, she notes a significant connection between positive shifts in cultural discourse about women and real changes in the lives of women. I interpret this to mean that, regardless of things such as biological sex or age, bodies could get marked as ‘mother’ when they enact the ‘mothering’ cultural text, when they perform mother.

This belief is what guides me to draw attention to discursive shifts in Disney’s *Finding Nemo* (2003) that step outside Disney’s normal marking of ‘mother’ and into a potentially non-traditional direction in articulating family roles. Although adhering to some of their ‘old tricks’, in *Nemo* Disney offers new images and ideas about what mothering is and who performs it.

**Reading Nemo**

Disney’s highest-grossing box office release at that time also opens with the death of a mother. Like the other deceased mothers, Coral, the mother in *Finding Nemo* (2003), sports long eyelashes, pearly white teeth, and a home in an exclusive area of the reef (indicating a bourgeois existence). Although she is on-screen only briefly (as most of the murdered mothers are), we see her swimming around excitedly about the upcoming ‘birth’ of her offspring. As with the other mothers, she places her physical body in danger in her attempt to protect the children. However, unlike the other deceased Disney mothers, we never see Coral do what we have described as everyday mothering.

In her brief appearance on-screen, we only see Coral as wife, albeit an expectant one. There is nothing, however, to indicate that she is doing any more mothering than Marlin, the father. In terms of childrearing, they appear to begin on a fairly equal footing. Without belittling it in any way, I would like to set aside Coral’s death and proceed to position Marlin as the center of analysis for the remainder of this section. In doing so, I will detail the many ways Disney positions Marlin as enacting mothering. I will do this first by comparing Marlin to Disney fathers (with families in similar situations) then to Disney ‘mothering’ to show the ways in which I believe *Finding Nemo* paves the way for new images of mothering.

**Fathering motherless children**

At first glance, arguing that Marlin ‘mothers’ Nemo may seem an unnecessary analysis to perform. Of course Marlin will be parenting, one could argue . . . certainly fathering if not mothering, since he is the only living parent. However, looking historically at other families in Disney fare with dead/absent mothers, it is unusual for Disney to take this path. Revisiting some of the films mentioned above in which the story is premised on figurative or literal mother homicide, there is a formula for what fathers are to do when a mother dies:
not much. In *Snow White* and *Cinderella* (1937), the father is presumed alive (due to the existence of a stepmother in each story), but we see no interaction between father and daughter. In *Hunchback* (1996), there is no father mentioned; the orphaned Quasimodo is simply taken inside Notre Dame to live as a servant to the deacon. In *Lilo & Stitch* (2002) both mother and father are deceased. Tarzan’s biological parents were murdered by the tiger, but his adoptive father does not want any contact with him until he proves himself physically as an adult male. In *Brother Bear* (2003), both human parents are non-existent; there is also no father mentioned for the orphaned bear cub.

We are left, then, to look to those Disney films that retain a father in the absence of a mother: *Bambi* (1942), *Pinocchio* (1940), *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Atlantis* (1992), *Pocahontas* (1995) and *Chicken Little* (2005). Fathers in *Bambi*, *Pocahontas*, *The Little Mermaid* and *Atlantis* can all be described as regal, commanding, assertive if not aggressive, and physically distant. Pinocchio’s father is shown as completely inept at fathering, going so far as to set fire to his son. As for Belle’s father (*Beauty and the Beast*), he is scatterbrained, a ‘mad scientist’ who is clueless about their surroundings and is mothered by his daughter. Chicken Little’s father, a large-bodied man with a deep voice bedecked in shirt and tie, seems clueless as to how to interact with his son, refuses to listen to his son’s opinions and ideas, and instead directs him to ‘lay low’ and squelch his true feelings and ambitions. In one scene, he specifically says to his dead wife’s picture, ‘if you were here, you’d know what to do’, and in another when approached by his son to create ‘closure’ says ‘Closure? What closure? ... good talk son’ as he ruffles his ‘hair’ and quickly leaves the room. Near the climax of the movie, Chicken Little attempts to tell his father how to better parent him, to which his father responds, sighing: ‘You’re right ... your mother, she was always better at these things. But me ...’.

Looking at these father roles in Disney’s animated films, it quickly becomes obvious that Disney does not position fathers as capable of mothering (perhaps even parenting) in any real way. Using the parameters discovered above for what it means to mother in a Disney world and what it means to father, I suggest that, in *Finding Nemo*, Marlin is not only given an active parenting role, he is performing ‘mothering’.

Unlike animated fathers of Disney past, Nemo’s father Marlin engages in what Disney discourse (and other cultural texts mentioned above) call mothering. Initially, he appears as rather traditional and heteronormative. Marlin spends the first few minutes seeking verification from Coral about his ability to provide for his woman by ‘delivering’ a choice piece of property in which they can raise their children, thus demonstrating the very traditional role of breadwinner. Even before they are to be born, he begins to distance himself from his offspring by wanting them all to share names (there are hundreds of eggs), and he worries aloud to Coral that they will not like him (pointing to a perceived unnaturalness about his parenting). He also chases Coral through their house in a sexual way, drawing attention away from the children and toward him. This is representative of many real-life men who often feel they lack their female partner’s attention once children enter the relationship (see, for example, the research findings of Gatrell [2005]).

When Coral is suddenly threatened physically by a predator, Marlin tries to quietly coax her back into their home but, when the predator attacks, he charges to her rescue. He fails, unfortunately, and is knocked unconscious. After waking, grieving briefly at his own loss on the realization of her death, he sees one egg remaining that was not eaten by the predator. He immediately begins cradling and talking to the embryonic fish egg. Everything from this point forward indicates that Marlin chooses to embody mothering in the film.
When analyzing the somatexts, it is noticeable that Marlin and Coral shared the same body size and shape. Unlike Disney fathers of the past, Marlin is not larger or more muscular than Coral or any other adult female character in the film. In fact, his later traveling companion, the female Dory, is nearly twice Marlin’s body size. Marlin’s face is also not drawn to exhibit strength or regality (like King Triton in *The Little Mermaid* or the Great Prince in *Bambi*); instead, it is defined by a furrowed, worried brow. The skin over his eyes moves and rolls into intense emotional expressions. His voice is never baritone; instead, in talking with Coral, Nemo, or Dory, he either uses soothing, tender tones, frantic, anxiety-ridden rants, or high-pitched commands coupled with extensive gestures. He also uses phrases stereotypically attributed to mothers’ policing of children: ‘You take one more move, mister’; ‘You are in big trouble, young man’. Finally, unlike Dory he is repeatedly shown trembling, shrinking back in fear, and closing his eyes in the face of danger.

Spatially, he is rarely seen more than a body length away from Nemo (when they are on screen together) and regularly interacts with him physically. This is not to imply that fathers have never been seen to interact with children physically; however, culturally that interaction is often positioned as one of play, not nurture. Marlin’s tactile performance is reminiscent of many Disney mothers. Although he gives Nemo a high-five, tickles him, and races him, he also is shown cradling Nemo’s face in his fins, grooming him, holding his fin on the ‘streets’ of the reef, and so forth. As Gatrell (2005) describes, things such as getting children up for daycare or school, feeding, bathing, organization of the daily schedule, caring for sick children, emotional labor are ‘activities more traditionally associated with a mothering role’ (p. 141), not the fathering role.

Marlin’s actions, importantly, are in opposition to many other male figures in the movie. For example, we see a father seahorse slap his son’s head and a large blowfish slap a smaller fish’s head in response to what he just said or was about to say. We see much masculine ‘roughhousing’ between the male sharks and the male fish in the fish tank throughout the movie; Marlin, however, never engages in any of this.

Like those mothering before him, Marlin’s identity appears defined through his relationship with others. Obviously, the ways in which his identity is defined through his connection with Nemo is evident, as is his interreliant relationship with Dory. Yet, there are more intricate details we can draw on here. First, his language is indicative of someone who defines self through communality. Whether interacting with his son or with Dory, his speech is filled with inclusive terms like ‘we’ and ‘us’, as opposed to ‘I’ (‘We did it!’; ‘Now we know, don’t we, that we don’t want to touch these things again’).

I do want to draw attention to other potentially positive father roles in this movie as well. For example, although we rarely see them around their children, there is only one woman shown dropping her child off at school, whereas four men are shown presumably doing so. Additionally, Dude Crush, the father turtle, is shown engaging in child care, but unlike Marlin, his situation seems unique in that he apparently lives in a rather communal setting.

It is also important to note that, at the conclusion of the movie, Dory returns with Marlin and Nemo to their coral reef home. Yet, the interaction of the characters does not imply that a heteronormative relationship has evolved between them. This conclusion is supported by the following: Marlin is still shown as Nemo’s primary caregiver (at the movie’s end, Dory only returns from her meeting in time to see Nemo – whom she misnames – leave for school); Nemo only refers to Dory by her first name (not as Mom); the space between Dory and Marlin bodily does not decrease or get more intimate as the movie progresses; and, lastly but just as importantly, Dory is voiced by Ellen DeGeneres, who has become somewhat of an icon of American gay identity.
Finally, Marlin openly discusses his emotions and the emotions of others, thus privileging emotional interaction as an important and everyday element of life. Of particular interest is his apparent lack of need to hide his weaknesses and/or depression, which is not only the opposite of what Chicken Little’s father and, more recently, Mr Incredible in *The Incredibles* (2004) do, but is also still somewhat uncommon in real-life texts of men (see, for example, Real’s [1998] work on men and emotional secrecy). Instead, Marlin verbally articulates his shifting moods (‘I’m feeling happy, which is a big deal for me’), collapses in front of Dory in despair when stuck inside the whale, and openly acknowledges his fears and concerns.

For all intents and purposes, Marlin is engaged in mothering as articulated in previous Disney animated discourse. His somatext is one of health and unobtrusiveness, physically and emotionally engaged in the nurture and wellbeing of his child. In fact, he has much in common with the animalistic mothers mentioned above. Like Duchess he is willing to do whatever it takes to find his child; his somatic interactions reflect his discomfort in the world beyond his own front door. His cultured manners yield him little on the ‘roads’ he encounters in the ocean; his ‘please’ and ‘excuse me’ are often met with a yell or a huff by other sea creatures. He struggles with how best to survive out in the ‘blue’ until he encounters Dory who, like the street cat in *The AristoCats* (1970), helps Marlin negotiate his way through their encounters. When with Nemo, he is shown most frequently, like Kala, the gorilla mother in *Tarzan* (1999), grooming, educating, reprimanding and playing with his son. Also like Kala, Marlin stands up for his beliefs, yet often shrinks from other animals and prefers the safety of his home. As noted above, he embraces his emotions, openly dialogues about them, and displays numerous expressions – often based on lack of confidence and fear – on his face. Yet, Marlin simultaneously troubles and supports the mothering somatext in Disney films by being marked male. He nurtures the child he loves, defines himself (at least partially) through his relationship with the child, and focuses all his energy on instilling wisdom, knowledge and values in that child. He will bravely take whatever action necessary to protect his loved one(s), yet he appears to prefer his home over the large, unknown world.

**Conclusions**

Miller (2005) notes that we learn to parent through acquisition of ‘authoritative knowledge’ (positioned in her work primarily as medical expert knowledge). This cultural wisdom impacts how we view pregnancy, childbirth, mothering and fathering. I would argue that in contemporary society, media wields enough power as to merit authority status. As Fairclough (1995) notes, media influences culture and vice versa: ‘Language use – any text – is always simultaneously constitutive of (1) social identities, (2) social relations and (3) systems of knowledge and belief . . . That is, any text makes its own small contribution to shaping these aspects of society and culture’ (p. 309). Disney uses cultural messages about mothering to create its scripts and helps to create those messages in the culture. The scripts and somatexsts it creates, therefore, are worth attending to. Although we are not at the mercy of media messages, we certainly use tales like these as ‘starting points for cultural constructions of the feminine’ (Bell 1995, p. 120). Animated feature films marketed across the globe impact the lives of real adults and real children, making these films worthy of intense scrutiny and these questions worth asking.

In addition, the Disney corporation reaches into nearly every household in Western society, through television programs, films, products, webcasts, and so forth. The ‘knowledge’ they distribute, then, about what it means to be a father or mother is significant. I am heartened
to see them stepping outside their traditional discourse, even if momentarily, to demonstrate a male parent enacting what has long been deemed ‘mothering’. This may be the very shift that some pro-feminist men, such as May and Strikwerda (1996) are calling for in suggesting that contemporary fatherhood should be ‘ideally conceived in terms of nurturance’ (p. 194).

Although Bell (1995), Haas (1995) and Henke et al. (1996) all mention the number of mother deaths in Disney’s animated films, they only do so briefly within their larger analyses focused on other issues. Yet, the massive killing-off of Disney mothers is noteworthy and, I would argue, crucial to an understanding of the role of fathers in the films. In real families’ lives, Gatrell (2005) notes that when mothers are absent ‘fathers [are] obliged to take on some responsibility for childcare because there [is] no one else to do this’ (p. 140). Yet, historically in Disney films as indicated above, men have not done this. Marlin, however, does.

It is important at this point, of course, to ask why we need the absence of a mother in order for men to take on this role in Disney films. As Haas (1995) suggests, perhaps it is a metaphorical slaying, a blatant ‘cutting of the umbilical cord’ (p. 195). In other words, if by mother we mean one who is primarily responsible for nurturing and protecting the young (and for keeping them dependent), then mother-death leads to vulnerability of the children and, ultimately, independence. In that case, mothers should sacrifice everything – even their own healthy growth – for the lives of their children. Certainly, in *Nemo*, Marlin seems willing to play that role. Or, it could be merely a rhetorical tool used to generate conflict around which the story can revolve. Regardless of the impetus for it, the number of dead Disney mothers is troubling and worthy of attention and dialogue.

Perhaps it is fruitful to approach the Disney texts with both of these perspectives, however. Knowing that the killing of a parent in a narrative brings with it built-in tension and concern that can facilitate the action of a story, and keeping an eye open for what Disney brings into the story by eliminating our traditional notion of the mother body, we might end up with a more empowered reading of these Disney texts and hope for the future of mothering in Disney films. As Downey (1996) did in her feminist reading of *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), I suggest it is possible for this ‘elimination of mother’ to be interpreted positively.

If we insist that mothering be done by women, then we may be perpetuating the constraints on women so frequently reviled by feminist scholars. For example, many feminists note that the cultural insistence that women ‘mother’ expands the space between genders and greatly constrains women. As Keller (1995) explains:

As long as our earliest and most compelling experiences of merging have their origin in the mother–child relation, it appears to be inevitable that that experience will tend to be identified with ‘mother’, while delineation and separation are experienced as a negation of ‘mother’, as ‘not-mother’. (pp. 85–86)

It seems reasonable, then, to say that messages portraying men in the day-to-day care of children can and should be interpreted positively, regardless of what factors prompted the nurture. As soon as Nemo is born, Marlin is ‘mother’. Whereas Henke et al. (1996) note that in most Disney films the ‘mothering’ performed by the now-absent mother is taken over by the lead heroine, Marlin-as-man is given this role in *Nemo*. This seems to be the space we need in order to engage in a more positive interpretation. Although I recognize both the power in and limits of polysemic interpretations (Condit 1989, Cloud 1992, Ceccarelli 1998) and the impact of my own critical education as something that might push me toward a more empowered reading, I find sufficient rhetorical data (based on my reading of *Nemo* and other Disney mothers, coupled with feminist notions of what
‘mothering’ means) to justify this reading. I also note, as mentioned above, that other feminist scholars are finding ways to differently interpret Disney messaging.

A final note is in order about ‘mothering’, in its difference from ‘fathering’, ‘brothering’, and so forth in family-oriented films. In the same year that *Nemo* (2003) was released, we witnessed the release of two other films in which men were placed in charge of children: Disney’s *Brother Bear* (2003) and Eddie Murphy’s *Daddy Day Care* (2003). I point to these movies to make comparisons for three primary reasons: all three were in the top-grossing films of that year; all were targeted at families of the same demographic; and all represented roles served by men in families. Thurer (1994) notes the following about traditional messages of men and nurture:

> When nurturance is given out of love, inclination, or a sense of responsibility, the assumption persists that whatever form it takes ... the behavior expresses a woman’s biological nature.

> But when nurturing acts are performed by men, they are interpreted as extraordinary. (p. 287)

I argue that, in *Finding Nemo*, the nurture is positioned as natural, everyday. No one comments on it, including Marlin. In fact, there are many men shown engaging in the everyday care of children in *Nemo*. This, I think, is not the case in movies like *Brother Bear* or *Daddy Day Care*. In *Brother Bear*, the brother-as-nurturer is positioned as protective yet competitive, simultaneously annoying and being annoyed by the child, forced to take on the nurturing role unwillingly. When the brother opts, at the end of the movie, to take on the full-time responsibility of caring for the orphaned bear cub, it is positioned as a sacrifice (of his previous life), an honoring of duty. In *Daddy Day Care*, it is explicitly and implicitly noted that men (other than the one character noted as odd) do not naturally know how to care for children. The men in the movie who take on the daily mothering roles are completely clueless about the grooming, nourishing, educating and disciplining of children.

Ireland (1993) is worth quoting at length here about steps taken in modern relationships and the earnest striving toward parity of many couples today:

> This journeying relationship between a woman and man is a step away from the personal identity rigidly encased in the gender stereotypes. It is a step toward appreciating and learning about the fluidity and uniqueness of individual differences without the distortion of gender-specific lenses ... Coparenting couples are stepping outside the usual gender roles of woman as primary parent and man as primary provider. (p. 142)

Although this blurring of gendered family roles frequently occurs in same-sex relationships, Disney has always written from the heteronormative position. Yet, allowing Marlin to mother and not bringing Dory in as a stepmother paves the way for more blurring of family roles.

Acknowledging that Marlin’s performance of ‘mothering’ in *Finding Nemo* (2003) has the potential to make a positive impact on parenting parity and freedom to pursue mothering in new ways, I would further suggest that much could be gained if Disney chose to position a father engaged in significant ‘mothering’ or nurture while the mother is still alive and well and in the home.

Yet, unfortunately, Disney has opted not to since the release of *Nemo*. Although on the surface *The Incredibles* (2004) seems to offer a world of equality (all members of the family, for example, are superheroes with impressive strengths), in reality this film could be interpreted as a huge step backwards in terms of blurring or shifting societal family and gender norms. The father, Mr Incredible, is frustrated at his lack of success as an economic provider and his inability to utilize his masculine power to save the day. The mother, Mrs Incredible (aka Elastigirl), has become a stay-at-home mom who calls
her husband with reports on the status of unpacked boxes and baby baths and stretches herself thin taking care of the home and children.

Neither *Cars* (2006) nor *Wall-E* (2008) were structured as a parent/child narrative, both having ‘adult’ main characters. Interestingly, *Meet the Robinsons* (2007) was a story about a boy on a quest to find the mother who left him at an orphanage. The quest, however, is ultimately unsuccessful. In the final five minutes of the film we do meet a couple who adopt him, but we see very little of their interaction. The few moments of what we might call embodied mothering happen briefly at the beginning of the movie (by an African American woman who runs the orphanage) and, in an odd twist, later by his own daughter after he travels through time.

In *Ratatouille* (2007) we are again presented with a father–son–absent mother scenario. However, all of the main characters are positioned as adults. Additionally, the few scenes we are offered of father–son interaction focus on the son’s struggle to approach the world in his own way, free of his father’s control. In sum, none of the recent Disney animated feature films continue the brief venture outside of the Disney norm that *Nemo* offered.

Two movies are yet to be released, as of the time this article was written. *Bolt* (2008), a story about a dog attempting to save his young female cohort, does not appear to have much relevance to this particular analysis. *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) will be the first Disney animated film with an African American lead character (a young girl who lives in New Orleans in the Jazz Era). Little information is available to-date on this film, other than the fact that it is based on the fairy tale, *The Frog Prince*; therefore, it remains to be seen how Disney will structure gender and familial roles in this story.

Gatrell (2005) found in her interviews of modern couples that fathers often feel pressured by society, their peers, and sometimes their partners to remain focused on economic provision. Fathers self-report that they ‘suffered inflexibility, opprobrium, or disbelief when others realized that they were “in charge” of their own children’ (p. 137) if they were in partnerships (not divorced or widowed). Disney, as a cultural narrator with authority, has the power to facilitate new perspectives on men’s ‘mothering’ if they choose to. As Miller (2005) notes: ‘Becoming a mother … is always more than a biological event’ (p. 28). Perhaps men can do it, too.

**Notes**

1. Bell defines ‘somatexts’ as the texts (re)presented by the animated bodies of the characters in Disney films. These somatexts act as embodiments of mothering. As Bell describes it, Disney films ‘prescribe the characters of women … not [as] fixed texts, but … starting points for cultural constructions of the feminine … [T]hey have also captured performative enactments of gender and cultural codes for feminine sexuality and agency’ (1995, p. 120).

2. By traditional here, I refer to mainstream representations of motherhood, usually indicative of a biological mother/child relationship within a nuclear American family structure.

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