A project entitled

Anthropomorphic Animal Characters in Disney Animated Films:
The Representations and Impositions of Human Nature

Submitted by

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INTRODUCTION

As Walt Disney once said, "it all started by a mouse" – animals have often featured in the context of animation, either living in a human-dominated environment or interacting with one another with human traits within their own sphere. From the mid 20th century onwards, animated films produced and released by Walt Disney Pictures become increasingly popular and influential worldwide. It is not surprising to know that people of all ages have Disney "talking animal" characters as their favorites, some even see them as role models to look up to. People love these characters not only because they look adorable, but also because of their personal experience, charisma and likeable personalities presented in films. When animal characters possess the ability to talk, anthropomorphism is adopted as whether a species can speak "human language" is one of the most obvious indicators to differentiate humans from animals.

From *Bambi* which was officially released in 1942 to *Finding Dory* in 2016, anthropomorphic animal characters play a significant role in Disney productions. A fundamental statistical analysis is conducted – Walt Disney Animation Studio has produced a total number of 58 animated films and that of Pixar released through the Walt Disney Pictures banner is 21 up to this point. Among the 79 films, anthropomorphic animal characters appear in 27 of them as protagonists, antagonists or supporting characters (see appendix 1), which is approximately 34 percent. That is to say, anthropomorphic animal characters can be found in about one-third of Disney animated films, and there are 317 of them in total (see appendix 2).

Anthropomorphism comes naturally to human beings – it is the attribution of human characteristics to animals, it is commonplace, cross-cultural, species typical and almost irresistible (Eddy, Gallup & Povinelli, 1993). Using anthropomorphic animal characters to portray human nature has always been a commonly adopted narrative technique in Disney animated films, viewers perceived the world through the eyes of creatures in multiple domains of animal hierarchy – from ants and fish to extinct species of dinosaur to the accustomed repertoire of mammals. However, it is believed that more of humanity is being explored than animality. Concerning such phenomenon, this research project mainly aims to study animality, animal theory as well as human-animal relationships through the lens of animal and sociocultural studies, then apply these concepts to specific examples selected from the 27 Disney animated films. In the later parts of this research paper, sessions will be organized as follows: (1) Representations: Portrayals of Human Nature (2) Animal Stereotypes: Changes of the Choice of Animals Over Time (3) Perceptions: Possible Messages being Conveyed (4) Impositions: Exploring Human Values in Animal Life

REPRESENTATIONS: PORTRAYALS OF HUMAN NATURE

Before the ascription of human qualities to animals, the relationship of humans to the rest of species was clear-cut and straightforward – animals were brutal while people were not. Humans were blessed with emotions, rationality and language; animals only had instincts and habits (Wynne, 2007). According to the Oxford English Dictionary (1989), George Herbert Lewes was the first literary critic to extend the usage of anthropomorphism to animals in 1858. Since then, interpreting animals and their actions based on analogies to human nature has become a tendency. For millennia, connections between animals and humans have developed through work, companionship, sport or some other kinds of interactive activities which mainly take place in the natural environment. In the contemporary era, due to the influences of technological development, globalization and urbanization, the larger distance between humanity and the nature is believed to be one of the major factors which contributes to the increasing anthropomorphized representation of animals in animated films (Allan, 1999). As audience respond to films affectively, the use of anthropomorphism allows them to easily understand and connect to animal characters. Starting from *Bambi* (1942), anthropomorphizing animals has been a prominently used technique in Disney productions.

Over the years, other than being able to speak like humans, many different types of anthropomorphic animal characters are created as protagonists, antagonists and other supporting roles in representing human nature. By undergoing a thorough analysis, anthropomorphic character portrayal methods can be classified into 4 categories: (1) Adding human weaknesses (2) Combining chosen animals' special features to the associated human traits (3) Contrasting chosen animals' special features to the associated human traits (4) Adding traits that are unique to humans which animal characters are possible to be in more than one of the fours.

(1) Adding human weaknesses
Many people might think that adding human emotions to animal characters is one of the most observable anthropomorphic character portrayal methods commonly used in Disney productions, there are however too many grey areas in interpreting the differences between human and animal emotions and there is still no consensus among researchers.

Emotions are biological states associated with feelings, thoughts and behavioral responses (Schacter, Gilbert & Wegner, 2011). Concerning if any animals other than humans can feel emotions, Pythagoreans long ago believed that animals possessed the same range of emotions as humans (Coates, 1998). However, the majority is not convinced by such view because no one can tell what actually takes place in animals' mind. Once people thought emotions like empathy were unique to humans, but current research is beginning to provide evidence that this is not the case (Ekman, 1998). In fact, considerable common ground can be found when exploring human and non-human emotional territory – it is increasingly known animals have physiological responses that are analogous to human emotional responses (Beridge, 2001). Research in recent years provides compelling evidence that a range of emotions, including fear, joy, happiness, shame, embarrassment, resentment, jealousy, rage, anger, love, pleasure, compassion, respect, relief, disgust, sadness, despair, and grief can be observed in at least some animals (Bekoff, 2000).

Till now, regarding the differences in emotional processes and states in humans and animals, the debates are still very active among neuroscientists, physiologists, ethnologists and philosophers. Some proclaimed the major difference between animal emotions and that of humans' is that "animals do not have mixed emotions the way humans do" (Grandin & Johnson, 2004). Whether animal emotions are simpler and more straightforward, yet, cannot be ascertained without a mature scientific program to study them (de Waal, 2011).

Nonetheless, by adding species-specific qualities, human nature can still be obviously seen in animal characters. Apart from strengths, humans also have weaknesses, which are those personal, psychological, behavioral or physical aspects that are relevant to a person's functioning (Bandura & Locke, 2003). These human weaknesses can be either naturally existing in individuals or artificially created by others, such as self-doubt, self-blame, pride, vanity, wickedness and avoidance (Vertigans, 2015). Human weaknesses generally refer to a person's character or personality flaws, on the other hand, they are often thought to be the greatest area of opportunity. Thus, it is common to see Disney animal protagonists facing conflicts, experiencing trials or hardships, then overcoming them eventually in films.

Adding human weaknesses to anthropomorphic animal characters is seen to be a commonly used portrayal method among the four, especially in films with strong characterization, it makes characters more human. Simba, the protagonist in *The Lion King* (1994) is the most outstanding example – he was quite proud, adventurous and heroic, he also wished to become a ruler as mighty as his father, Mufasa someday as a cub. This inflated his ego, making him arrogant and boastful towards others such as his caretaker, Zazu and his uncle Scar, and additionally led to troublesome, tragic situations. Simba's personality takes a shift, becoming guilt-ridden and fearful as a young adult – a direct result of his father's death. As he believed his father's demise was ultimately his fault, Simba felt unworthy of ruling the kingdom, hinting at signs of self-blame, self-doubt and low self-esteem, in addition to becoming reluctant to ever face his past. While Prince John, the main antagonist in *Robin Hood* (1973) is another typical example, showing the wicked side of humans. In order to achieve his goal to become the richest individual in the country, Prince John kept finding ways to rob and swindle his people in the pursuit of wealth. He is a greedy, ruthless ruler who loves money more than anything else in the world, even more than his own life perhaps – while clinging to the edge of his bed chamber balcony as he was going to be sentenced to jail, he called on his guards to save his gold rather than himself. Everybody has their own set of weaknesses, it is understandable that people tend to find these anthropomorphic animal characters very relatable, or even see themselves in them.

(2) Combining chosen animals' special features to the associated human traits
Through taking animality into consideration when designing anthropomorphic animal characters, starting off with *Finding Nemo* (2003), the portrayal method of combining chosen animals' special features to the associated human traits is observed to be used more frequently in recent productions.

"Daddy's got you. I promise, I will never let anything happen to you, Nemo."
— Marlin

Marlin, the protagonist in *Finding Nemo* (2003) is a clownfish who lives inside a sea anemone in the Great Barrier Reef. He once had a mate, named Coral, who died in a barracuda attack, along with all but one of his children, whom he names Nemo. In the movie, Marlin was an overprotective dad to Nemo due to the traumatic experience of

losing the rest of his family, and not wanting the same thing to happen to his only surviving son. According to a study, published in *Hormones and Behavior* (2017), describes how male clownfish take the lead in nurturing their young, and suggests that the hormone isotocin, probably plays a role in turning clownfish brains toward fatherhood. While most male fish abandon their offspring, anemone-based species, including clownfish are primarily nurtured by their fathers. Male clownfish nip at their eggs to remove debris and fan the water above their nests to circulate oxygen-rich water. It can be deduced that choosing Marlin as Nemo's closest company is not a coincidence.

"This is me. I think it's apparent that I need to rethink my life a little bit. What's my problem? First of all, I'm a rat. Which means life is hard. And second, I have a highly developed sense of taste and smell." ― Remy

Remy, the protagonist in *Ratatouille* (2007), is a rat with a passion for food and dreams of being a professional chef. Possessing a very strong sense of smell and being able to deduce ingredients in food are his gifted abilities, which resemble the fact that rats in real life have a very sensitive sense of smell. When rats are born, they are almost completely blind. It takes them a week or so to fully develop their sight, and in that time, they heavily rely on their ability to smell. Scientists also believe that rats use their sense of smell to detect changes in the weather and the release of chemical pheromones (Wernecke & Fendt, 2015).

Several examples can also be found in *Zootopia* (2016) – Flash, the so-called fastest sloth working in the Department of Mammal Vehicles is a representative case of combining sloth's slowness of movement and the traits of a slow worker; Chief Bogo, a buffalo and the chief of the Zootopia Police Department, has a practice of wearing reading glasses when reading documents which echoes with real-life buffalo, having quite poor eyesight; Dr. Badger, a doctor who loves doing late night shifts, bears a similarity to the corresponding species behaviors – nocturnality, being active at night rather than during daytime.

(3) Contrasting chosen animals' special features to the associated human traits

Similarly, interesting observations can be made with respect to the rising trend of contrasting chosen animals' special features to the associated human traits in recent years, starting off with *Finding Nemo* (2003), too. More vivid, imaginative characters are created and presented to audience as a result.

"I am a nice shark, not a mindless eating machine. If I am to change this image, I must first change myself. Fish are friends, not food." ― Bruce

Bruce, a great white shark in *Finding Nemo* (2003), is the leader of the Fish-Friendly Sharks support group with the ultimate goal "to not eat fish". Yet, in reality, great white sharks are carnivorous and prey upon fish, including tuna, rays and other sharks (Oceana, 2006), which this creates a huge contrast between the animal character's motto and the species' animality.

"If you are what you eat, then I only want to eat the good stuff." ― Remy

Even though Remy is a rat, its pulse is gratifyingly human. He walks on two feet instead of four because he doesn't like the idea of his paws touching both the ground and the food he eats. He has a very negative attitude towards eating garbage, claiming that is unhealthy for rats and they should try to take the good food found in the kitchens and pantries of the humans. However, it is unfortunately true that urban rats do often eat leftovers. Some of them have even evolved to eat leftover fast food, *Science* (2017) reported.

In *Zootopia* (2016), an Indian elephant named Nangi, is a yoga instructor at The Mystic Spring Oasis. This is a demonstration of contrasting elephant's lumbering, back-and-forth movement and yogi's flexibility.

(4) Adding traits that are unique to humans

Adding traits that are unique to humans to anthropomorphic animal characters is recognized as a frequently used character portrayal methods in Disney animated films throughout the years. Not only is this technique used when animating main characters but also the supporting ones. Other than walking on two legs like the two pioneers – Baloo and King Louie in *The Jungle Book* (1967) do or wearing outfits like the White Rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland* (1951) does, many other human traits in these "talking animal" characters are notable. They include having human addictions, suffering from different kinds of phobia, having good knowledge of languages, involving in various human activities, practicing customs, and showing a sense of humor. Distinctive examples are as demonstrated below:

Figure 1. Dodo (left) and Absolem (right) smoking

"Whooo ... are ... you?" ― Absolem
This line is visualized as exhalations of smoke in the shapes of the letter "O", "R" and "U". Absolem is a caterpillar in *Alice in Wonderland* (1951) with a habit of smoking hookah, and in the same film a dodo named Dodo loves pipe smoking (*see figure 1*).

Bartholomew is an obese mouse in *The Great Mouse Detective* (1986). As an alcoholic (*see figure 2*), he was always seen drinking from a beer mug and became very disappointed whenever he ran out of alcohol. His favorite drink is champagne.

Figure 2. Drunk Bartholomew

It is not rare to see characters suffering from different kinds of phobia – Bernard, a superstitious mouse is the protagonist in *The Rescuers* (1977) and *The Rescuers Down Under* (1990). He suffers from triskaidekaphobia, which is a fear or avoidance of the number 13; While Arlo, a young Apatosaurus is the protagonist in *The Good Dinosaur* (2015). He suffers from pantophobia, which is a state of general anxiety that causes him to have an abnormal fear of everything including chickens.

Moreover, quite a number of animal characters have a good knowledge of one or even more languages. In *A Bug's Life* (1998), Flik, the protagonist, is considered to be a bilingual bug as he explained the safety instructions in both English and Spanish;
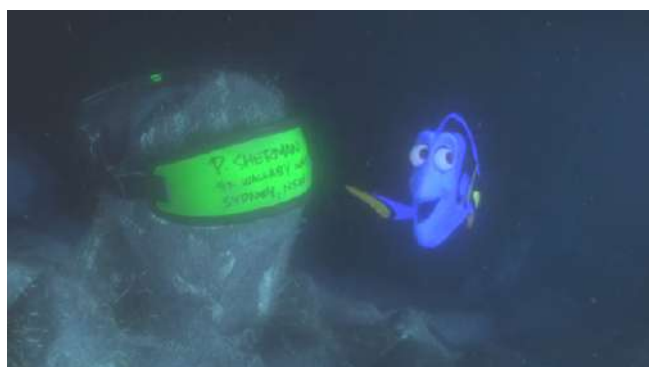
In *Finding Nemo* (2003), Dory, a regal blue tang, has the ability to read human language and writing as she could read address "P. Sherman, 42 Wallaby Way, Sydney" on the diver's goggles (*see figures 3*).

Figure 3. Dory reading the address

It is noticeable that Remy in *Ratatouille* (2007) and Mitten, a street cat in *Bolt* (2008) are also capable of understanding and reading the human language.

Human activities such as hobbies, recreation and education are no longer only owned by humans in Disney productions. Some animal characters, especially females, are very concerned about their appearance that they like to put on beauty products like eyeshadow, beauty powder and perfume. Rita in *Oliver and Company* (1988), Miss Bianca in *The Rescuers* (1977) and *The Rescuers Down Under* (1990) as well as Gizelle in *Zootopia* (2016) are the three representative examples (*see figure 4*).
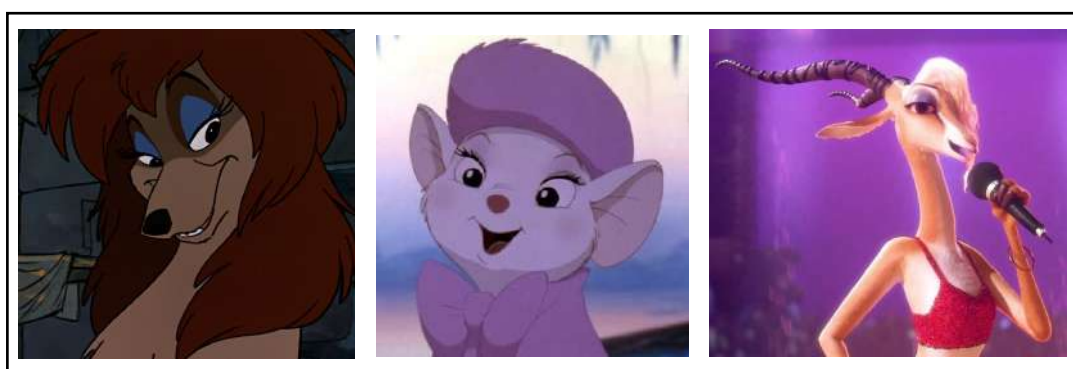

Figure 4. Rita, Miss Bianca and Gizelle wearing makeup (from left to right)

Some characters know ways to entertain themselves very well – playing music instruments, for instance. The alley cats are a jazz band in *The Aristocats* (1970), they make lively music together (*see figure 5*).

Figure 5. The alley cats playing music

In *Home on the Range* (2004), Buck, a horse enjoys playing tic-tac-toe with his best friend, Rusty, a dog together *(see figure 6).* This also indicates that they both have the ability to draw straight lines and simple symbols like humans do.

Figure 6. Buck (left) and Rusty (right) playing tic-tac-toe

"Well, Nemo. All new explorers must answer a science question." ― Mr. Ray

Education is important deep down the ocean, too. In *Finding Nemo* (2013), Nemo is a fish student who follows Mr. Ray to go on field trips and learns about science and the other creatures of the seabed *(see figure 7).*

Figure 7. Nemo (second from the left) attending school

Characters practicing popular customs in human societies is another absorbing use of anthropomorphic portrayal method. Koda, a young bear in *Brother Bear* (2003) suggests to pinky swear with Kenai. Signifying that the promise of being each other's company has been made. Buck Cluck in *Chicken Little* (2005) giving a thumbs up is another example *(see figure 8).*

Figure 8. Koda (left) and Kenai (right) making pinky promise & Buck Cluck giving a thumbs up

"I'm a clownfish…" ― Marlin
"Go on, tell us a joke!" ― Bruce

Having a good sense of humor makes characters even attractive. Bruce is a kind shark in *Finding Nemo* (2003) as mentioned previously. Other than that, he is a jokester, knowing how to make fun with words by asking Marlin, a clownfish to tell a joke.

Finally, it is worthwhile to mention that out of the 27 films with anthropomorphic animal characters, *A Bug's Life* (1998) is the first and the only one that Disney and Pixar have added a hilarious blooper to the end credits (see appendix 3). It was mostly of the "actors" forgetting their lines, making a mistake, or just being silly.

ANIMAL STEREOTYPES: CHANGES OF THE CHOICE OF ANIMAL OVER TIME

In Disney animated films, there is an observable tendency for some animals chosen as protagonists and some as villains. For instance, the dog, cat for the former and the crocodile, snake for the latter. As when people consider animals, they incline to think at the collective or species level, this naturally leads to perceiving the characteristics of animal groups as intrinsic and coherent entities (Medin & Atran, 2004). Taking species' observable characteristics and relatedness as references, a generalization from humans to animal agents through a process of induction is involved in anthropomorphism (Epley, Waytz & Cacioppo, 2007). When there are identifiable traits perceived to be repeatedly associated with certain anthropomorphic animal species, such cultural depiction is regarded as animal stereotypes (Sevillano & Fiske, 2016).

When anthropomorphizing animals, there are stereotypical traits that tend to be associated with particular species time after time. Often these are simply exaggerations of authentic animality of the species in question, as mentioned previously, while other times the stereotype is adopted from classical mythology, folklore or fables and disregards any observation-based judgment of that animal's behavior. Some anthropomorphic animal characters in Disney animated films are designed to follow these stereotypes "as is", whereas others are developed in contrasting ways to foil audience's expectations by challenging them. In any case, it is believed that such phenomena are more or less subject to the vagaries of historical changes, which the representation of animals might involve some specific socio-cultural or ideological factors related to the increasingly global development of the American cultural industry.

In the following paragraphs, statistical data will be presented and discussed alongside relevant subjects with the aim of addressing the matter of animal stereotypes in Disney productions from multiple perspectives. Sessions will be sorted in this manner: (1) Stereotypes in animal groups (2) Stereotypes in species (3) Changes made over time

(1) Stereotypes in animal groups

There are totally 26 animal protagonists in the 27 Disney films with anthropomorphic animal characters. Among the 26 leading characters, 20 of them are mammals which make up 77 percent, the largest percentage of the total, the rest of them are the groups of birds, fish and insects which compose 33 percent altogether (*see figure 9*).

A similar tendency can be noticed among the 285 supporting characters – the mammal group makes up 59 percent, which is more than half of the total. The rest of the groups are listed in descending order of numbers: birds, fish, insects, reptiles and invertebrates (*see figure 10*).

Based upon the data presented in the two pie charts, it is easy to recognize that animals belong to the mammal group are often chosen to be protagonists and supporting characters in films. As the second and the third biggest group, birds and fish usually appear to be supporting characters.

*Figure 9. Animal protagonists (sorted by animal groups)*
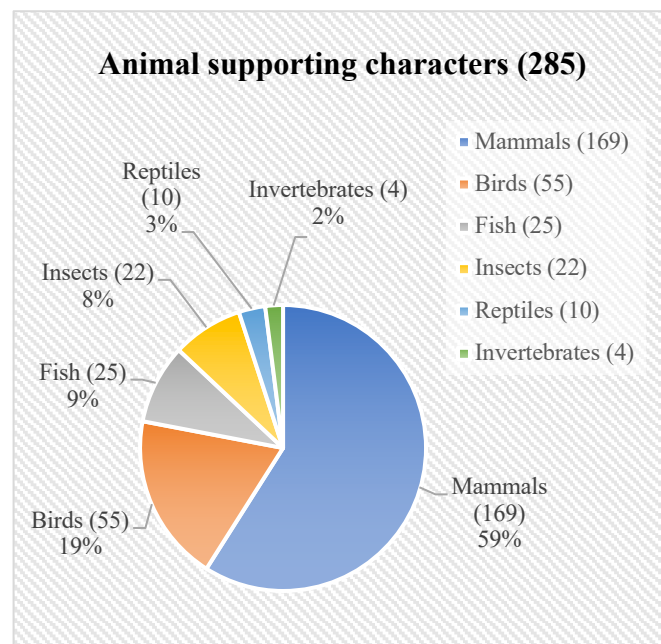
Figure 10. Animal supporting characters (sorted by animal groups)

On the contrary, groups like insects, reptiles and invertebrates make comparatively less appearances in Disney productions as a whole. Animals in the latter two groups even have never chosen to be protagonists as yet. Over the years, it can be inferred that The Walt Disney Company, a profit-making corporation has a solid preference for choosing mammals over other animal groups when producing films, and there must be some noteworthy reasons behind its well-thought-out decisions.

The inseparable relationship is one of the reasons. Being classified in the same animal group, humans and non-human mammals share a number of similarities in bodies, behaviors and minds (Kiley-Worthington, 2017). As "close relatives", it is an undeniable fact that non-human mammals carry great social and symbolic weight in human societies: mammals play an indispensable role in creating and sustaining human culture – they are the most popular among pets, with tens of millions of dogs, cats and other animals such as rabbits and mice kept by families worldwide (The Humane Society of the United States, 2019). Other than being involved in practical uses such as for food, work and transport, they further play a wide variety of roles as symbolic uses in art, literature, mythology, film, and religion. An interdependent, dynamic bond between humans and non-human mammals can be recognized despite changing times.

In addition to the close bond human and other mammals share, the corporation's choice of animal can be explained from the psychological perspective. Proposed by Edward O. Wilson (1984), the biophilia hypothesis suggests that humans possess an innate tendency to affiliate with nature and other forms of life. Furthermore, while refined through experience and culture, the hypothesis states that human preferences towards things in nature can be regarded as the product of biological evolution. For example, humans are generally attracted to baby mammal faces and find them appealing over other species. In other words, humans intrinsically find a set of infantile traits attractive (Borgi et al., 2014), which this leads to the concept of baby schema – a term refers to a set of facial features including large head and a round face, a high and protruding forehead, large eyes, and a small nose and mouth that commonly found both in human and mammal infants (Lorenz, 1943).
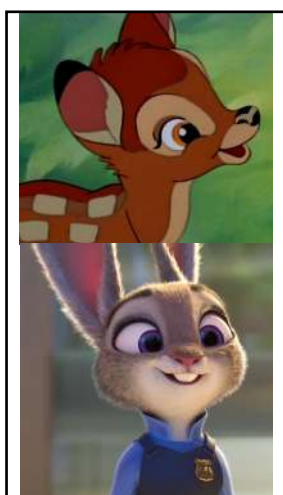
Take the first ever and the latest mammal protagonist – Bambi in *Bambi* (1942) and Judy Hopps in *Zootopia* (2016) as demonstrations, baby schema such as a high forehead, large eyes, a small nose and mouth can be observed that the illustration style remains similar after more than 70 years (*see figure 11*). Thus, it is strongly believed that Disney understands audience preference very well, it has taken socio-cultural and psychological perspectives into considerations when choosing animal protagonists over years, too. Choosing mammals as protagonists is one of the strategies to ensure profit, reasons revealed.

Figure 11. Portraits of the first and the latest mammal protagonists: Bambi (top) and Judy Hopps (bottom)

(2) Stereotypes in species
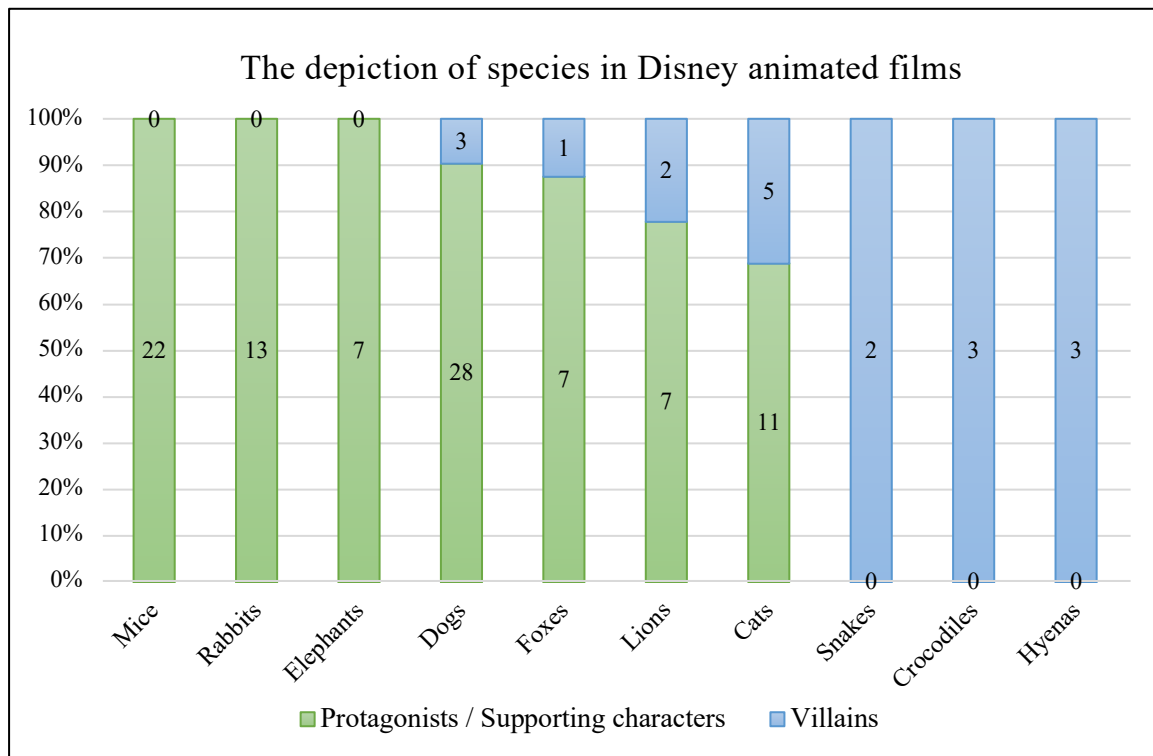
Figure 12. The depiction of species in Disney animated films

Concerning stereotypes in species in the 27 Disney animated films, a total of 10 prominent examples are selected to be examined in detail. The above percentage bar graph clearly indicates the depiction of each species: 22 anthropomorphic mouse, 13 rabbit and 7 elephant characters are characterized only as either protagonists or sidekicks; a few of the dog, fox, lion and cat characters are portrayed as villains, while more of them lean towards the other side. Contrastingly, all of the snake, crocodile and hyena characters appear to be villains. More concerning, however, is the villainization of particular species, perpetuating discrimination against them.

It is not surprising to acknowledge the phenomena of stereotyping in these particular species; they can be in fact regarded as promotion techniques adopted by corporations in order to make impacts to communities, societies and cultures, or as deep-rooted cultural traditions in human societies. As the same species as the mascot of The Walt Disney Company – Mickey Mouse, who is usually seen as a bodacious and honest hero, mice are depicted either neutrally or positively in the 7 films they featured in (see appendix 4). Especially from the 1950s – the evolution of Disney to the 1990s – the Disney Renaissance, mouse characters are observed to be frequently chosen.

Figure 13. Picture of a rabbit

It can be deduced that building, maintaining and strengthening the species' relatedness to a positive image is a key concern in film production and corporate management. Rabbit and elephant characters are always portrayed as good "guys" in Disney films, which such observation can be explained by the species' notable natural behavior, or the influences of dominant cultural traditions. The baby schema concept can be applied to describe rabbits' appearance, which the species' infantile traits affect cuteness perception in human (*see figure 13*). Thus, rabbits have become a common representation of cuteness. Characters appear as cute little rabbits are often seen in Disney films – Thumper in *Bambi* (1942) and Tagalong in *Robin Hood* (1973) are the examples. Besides, the popular expression "*scared as a rabbit*" is derived from rabbits' instinct of moving very quickly if threatened. This has resulted in the repeated appearance of scared, nervous rabbits in Disney's productions – White Rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland* (1951) is the quintessential example.

"Nonsense, Winifred, old girl. An elephant never forgets." — Hathi to his mate

From the folk-saying "*An elephant never forgets*" – the largest existing land animals, elephants are considered to be one of the most intelligent animals that manifest a wide variety of behaviors correlate to the processing of certain types of memory (O'Connell, 2007). They are frequently portrayed as unforgetting, gentle giants. It is also being influenced by Indian animal stories and fables like the *Panchatantra* in which elephants are depicted as noble and strong anthropomorphic characters. Colonel Hathi, the leader of a herd of Indian elephants in *The Jungle Book* (1967) is a classic example. The other species that only appear in Disney films as good "guys" are deer, pigs, bears, gorillas, chickens, horses and cows (see appendix 2).

While the two-sided depictions of dogs, foxes, lions and cats are believed to be influenced by the portrayal of these particular species in mainly Western and some of the Indian literature. As "man's best friend", dogs are commonly characterized as loyal, heroic characters in stories. Many dog characters having such personal qualities can be found in Disney films: Lady and Tramp in *Lady and the Tramp* (1955), Perdita and Pongo in *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* (1961), Cooper in *The Fox and the*

Figure 14. Picture of a Doberman pinscher (top) and Bulldog (bottom)

Hound (1981) and Bolt in *Bolt* (2018), for instance. Yet, certain dog breeds such as Bulldogs and Doberman pinschers are known for barking loudly to scare away trespassers (*see figure 14*), thus vicious dog characters can also be seen. Roscoe and DeSoto, two Dobermans in *Oliver and Company* (1988) are examples (*see figure 15*).

Figure 15. Picture of Roscoe (right) and Desoto (left)

In many fables and myths, foxes were portrayed as either wily, cunning or intelligent characters. The medieval West-European fables about Reynard the Fox are the best-known example for the former characterization. Surprisingly, as shown in *figure 12*, Disney chose more of the latter depiction of the species in its productions instead. Other than being intelligent, most fox characters are depicted as good and noble characters – Robin Hood in *Robin Hood* (1973), Tod in *The Fox and the Hound* (1981) and Nick Wilde in *Zootopia* (2016), as iconic illustrations.

Lions, the species with the assumed position at the "top" of the food chain, is often portrayed as the proud, brave or the royal ruler, protector of the other animals in a given territory. Such common supreme portrayals of lions are also greatly influenced by various historical, cultural and religious background – they are depicted as gods in several Asian and African cultures, including Maahes, an ancient Egyptian lion-headed god of war (Lurker, 1987). They are also portrayed as guardians in Ancient Egypt – sphinx, China – Chinese guardian lions and Europe – the Albani lion. In Disney films, likeliness can be seen from King Richard, the ruler of England in *Robin Hood* (1973); Mufasa and Simba, the successive kings of the Pride Lands in *The Lion King* (1994). As an apex due to its wide prey spectrum, on the other hand, lions are occasionally characterized as villainous, murderous characters – Scar in *The Lion King* (1994), for instance.

In the 27 Disney films, it can be noticed that cats as good "guys" usually being portrayed as any of the three representatives – the charming and clever cats like Thomas O'Malley in *The Aristocats* (1970); the beautiful and elegant cats like Thomas's mate, Duchless and stepdaughter, Marie and the cute kittens like Oliver in *Oliver and Company* (1988) and Thomas's stepsons, Berlioz and Toulouse. It is because of the species' famed aloofness, they are often correlated to the human qualities of being cool and smart. For the same reason, the popular portrayal of feminine feline is resulted. Regarding the representative of cute kittens, juvenile cats, the baby schema concept can once again be used. They also bear a strong resemblance to infantile traits (*see figure 16*). Conversely, cats are portrayed as evil, cunning or villainous characters sometimes. For example,

Figure 16. Picture of a kitten

Si and Am in *Lady and the Tramp* (1955) and Veteran Cat and Fat Cat in *Bolt* (2008). Aside from being relatively distant, it is believed that the species' negative depictions are somehow affected by the common portrayal of cunning and hypocritical cats in Indian animal fables (Vishnusharman, 200/2006).

Excluding bats and tigers which only appear once as villains respectively. So far, snakes, crocodiles and hyenas are the species that tied with negative connotations the most as presented in *figure 12*, which indicates the stigmatized images of these species are followed and adopted in Disney animated films – In Judeo-Christian religious traditions, the snake that deceives Adam and Eve into the first sin is Satan in disguise in the Book of Genesis; In many ancient myths like *The Bakunawa* (see appendix 5)*, The Lernaean Hydra* (see appendix 6), the monster-like snakes are considered to be causes of undesired consequences such as natural disasters or death. On top of being influenced by historical, cultural and religious factors, it is believed that humans' fear of these species is crucial for unfolding such phenomena. As either venomous or constrictors, snakes are feared by humans throughout history – some argue that being afraid of the species is embedded in humans' primate history (Coelho et al., 2019). Snakes are therefore being portrayed as evil and vicious characters – the stereotypical examples in Disney productions are Kaa in *The Jungle Book* (1967) and Sir Hiss in *Robin Hood* (1973).

Crocodiles, the large semiaquatic reptiles are very dangerous to humans, mainly due to their ability to strike before the people can react (Sideleau & Britton, 2012). It can be deduced that crocodiles often being casted as evil, cruel characters in stories is the way people express their emotional dislike toward the species. Captain Crocodile in *Robin Hood* (1973), Brutus and Nero in *The Rescuers* (1977) are the three Disney anthropomorphic crocodile villains.

"I'm surrounded by idiots." — Scar; referring to Shenzi, Banzai, and Ed

Lastly, in *The Lion King* (1994), Shenzi, Banzai and Ed – the three villainous hyenas are the henchmen of Scar, the antagonist. The trio is best known for their haunting laughter and ruthless sense of cunning. Hyenas are usually portrayed as bullies or downright villains – Traditional Western beliefs about the hyena can be traced back to the ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle's *Historia Animalium*, which described the species as a cowardly and potentially dangerous animal (Glickman, 1995). Since hyenas are scavengers, which led people to depict them as cowards who would rather take advantages from more successful predators than hunt their prey themselves. Interestingly, a hyena call bears an uncanny resemblance to a human laugh that explains the reason why the trio likes laughing so much (see appendix 7).

(3) Changes made over time

By overviewing the evolution of Disney animated films with anthropomorphic animal characters from the very first production to the latest one, two main changes can be observed: the widening spectrum of the choices of animal characters and the attempt to challenge the ingrained stereotypes of animals.
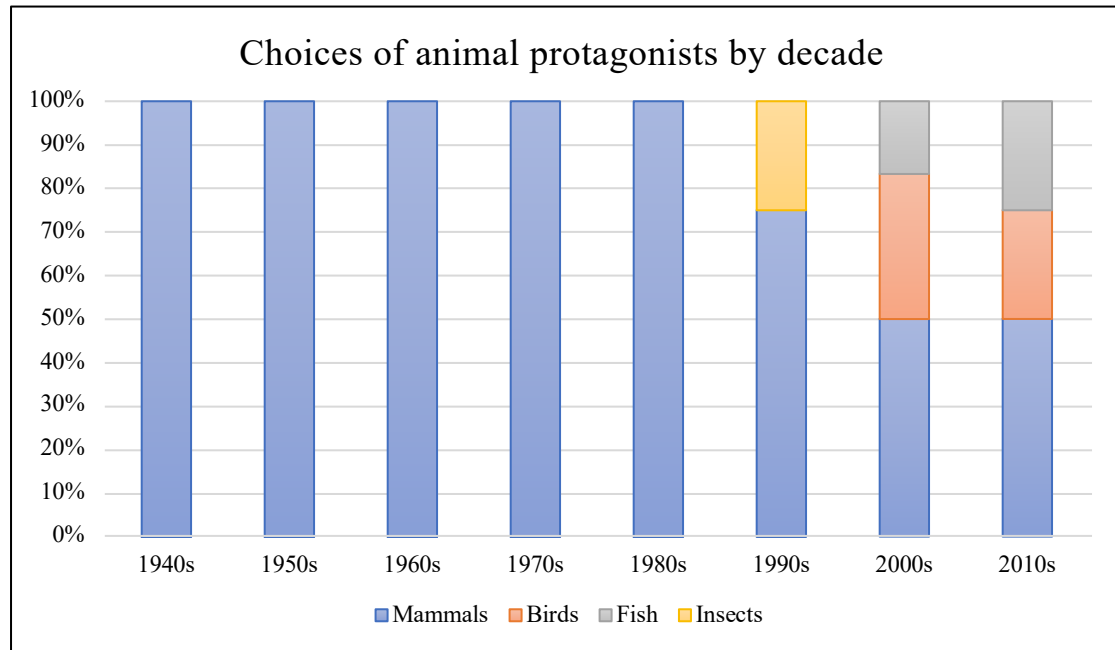

Figure 17. Choices of animal protagonist by decade (sorted by animal groups)

Protagonists from different animal groups are sorted by decade in the above figure. Starting from launching *A Bug's Life* in the 1990s, a wider spectrum of the choices of animal characters can be seen in the genre that mammals are no longer the only animal group to be selected as leading characters.

In Western society and increasingly around the world, culture draws from popular media, making it undoubtedly impactful in how people determine the value of ideas. In the era of increasing urbanization and technological orientation, people's relativeness with nature is declining globally. Indicating the fact that they are experiencing wild animals in storybooks and movies long before they encounter them in the nature, children's perception of animals has changed a lot over the past few decades (Winkler-Rhoadesa et al., 2010). One study revealed that children from countries including France and Portugal, were all more inclined to protect exotic species that they had seen in the media over local species (Ballouard, Brischoux & Bonnet, 2011). Strong bias towards a few charismatic species, representing 80.5% of survey responses, has proven the powerful uniform influence of the media.

In response to different kinds of criticism, Disney usually makes what they might see as a "safer", more advantageous and non-controversial decision when tackling questions related to animal stereotypes (Hermansson & Zepernick, 2019) – As an influential entity within social structures, it is inferred that one reason The Walt Disney Company is invested in a more diverse animal representation is because it wants to erase its own historical performance when it comes to the stigmatized depiction of animals. Additionally, it is possible that the corporation recognizes the benefit in engaging contemporary discourses related to animal narratives. Thus, the choices of protagonists have gradually progressed from solely species within mammals to that in the insect, bird and fish groups since the 1990s.

Disney's attempt to challenge the ingrained stereotypes of animals can also be noticed. *Zootopia*, the latest production in the genre released in 2016 paints a "civilized" world of mammals who seem to be more like humans than animals that even seeing a naked animal is a taboo. The film is constantly asking its characters to look past species stereotypes – take Nick Wilde, the fox protagonist's backstory as an example, as the only predator, he was ridiculed, brutally beaten and muzzled by the other prey scouts for being a fox in the division when he was young. From that moment onwards, Nick vowed to never expose his true vulnerability to anyone, resulting in the fox presenting himself as unreachable.

"If the world's only gonna see a fox as shifty and untrustworthy, there's no point in trying to be anything else." — Nick

By addressing the stereotypes to foxes from the species' perspective anthropomorphically, messages like stop using speciesist language or repeating hurtful assumptions were made loud and clear. Moreover, Bellwether, the sheep antagonist is the first female character to be a twist villain for the Disney Animated Canon. Choosing a sheep as the antagonist is a manner of fooling audience's preconceptions and responding to the ingrained stereotypes of animals at once, as the species is often portrayed as cuddly and innocent characters in literature. Bellwether being a villain can be considered to be a confrontation to the stereotypical idiom "wolf in sheep's clothing". Ironically, Bellwether and her assistant, Doug Ramses are the only two sheep villains in all the 27 Disney films, which is however believed to be not convincing enough when aiming to conquer such entrenched stereotype.
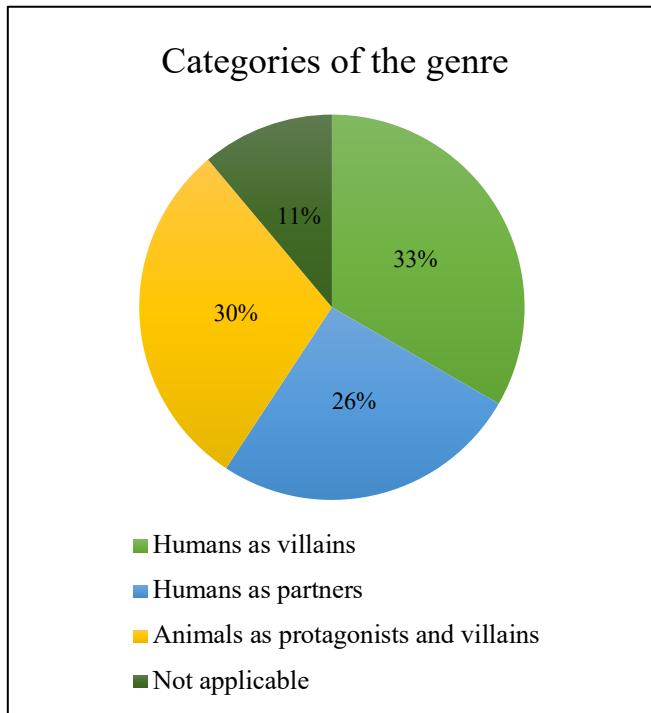
Figure 18. The 27 Disney animated films (sorted by categories)

"Humanity does not have a monopoly on personhood" – in Disney films, anthropomorphic animals are just as intelligent and sentient as humans are. They tell stories which certain messages are delivered to audience. From the 27 Disney animated films with anthropomorphic animal characters, three major categories can be classified – humans as villains, humans as partners and animals as protagonists and villains. In *figure 18*, the category "not applicable" refers to the three films in which animals appear only as sidekicks – *Alice in Wonderland* (1951), *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and *Aladdin* (1992). Based on the data presented in the pie chart, it can be seen that the three categories are close to averagely distributed. Thus, it can be argued that the significance of the respective possible messages being conveyed in films under the three categories are approximately the same.

Firstly, for films with humans as villains like *Bambi* (1942), *Finding Nemo* (2003) and *Finding Dory* (2016), personhood is seen from the animal protagonists' perspectives which provokes audience to step into their shoes and construct a sense of empathy especially for them. Most importantly, to reflect on the massive impacts of various human activities on wildlife. Looking back to the 1920s, the use of mammals grew massively with the starting point of intensive animal agriculture (Foer, 2009). Since then, media coverage of animal abuses spurs concern over animal welfare in Western countries (Adams & Larson, 2014). After *Bambi*'s release, books, documentaries, and media coverage of controversies surrounding humans' cruelty to animals continuously boost the animal rights and welfare movements in the State and Europe (Spira, 1985). It is common to find Disney animal characters holding a hatred for mankind due to reasons including being harmed, abandoned by them or being in captivity – Bambi, whose mother was killed by a hunter; Mittens, a declawed cat who

was abandoned by her owners; Sheren Khan, who was scared by both man's gun and man's fire in the past, sees humans as unforgiving, and soulless creatures who keep causing havoc on nature; Tank Gang, a group of fish that lives in a small fish tank and has escaping to the ocean as their ultimate goal are the noteworthy examples.

Figure 19. Dory swimming in a polluted ocean

In *Finding Dory* (2016), unlike other films, there has no "real villain". There is a scene where Marlin, Nemo and Dory swimming in a candy-colored part of the sea, but the closer they get to human territories, the murkier the water becomes. As the problems of water pollution and marine creatures in captivity are addressed (*see figure 19*), this implies that humans treat animals badly. Regrettably, people might misinterpret or simply neglect messages conveyed in films which leads to environmental consequences – in its prequel, *Finding Nemo* (2003), even though the message of not having fish as pets rings loud and clear, the film's use of clownfish prompted mass purchase of the fish breed as pets in the States (Jackson, 2003).

Secondly, for films with humans as partners like *The Jungle Book* (1967), *Tarzan* (1999) and *Brother Bear* (2003), the subjects of human-animal coexistence and relationships are emphasized. From the perspective of human-animal studies, the term "human-animal relationships" is defined as "the impressively variable forms of bonds, attachments, interactions and communications" between human and animals (Shapiro, 2008). Yet, some animal rights activists declare that there is a tension between the role of animals as humans' companions, and their existence as individuals with rights of their own (Plous, 1993). These relationships are hence considered to be complex and with limitations, they can be symbolic, fictional or factual, historical or contemporary, and beneficial or harmful to one or both parties (Freeman, Leane & Watt, 2011). In order to interpret human-animal relationships in a more precise way, films under this category can be further divided into two subgroups: humans as owners, and humans as family members or companions.

Figure 20. Pictures of Jenny and Oliver (top) and Penny and Bolt (bottom)

Oliver and Company (1988) and *Bolt* (2008) are the illustrations of films with humans as owners (*see figure 20*). Films under this subgroup usually highlight the interdependent relationship between pets and owners which is beneficial to both parties. Take the former film as a demonstration – Oliver, is the only kitten not being adopted among his fellows who longs for finding a home; Penny, a young girl who feels lonely because of her parents being away. After adopting Oliver, she gains happiness as she has a close company. Same to Oliver, he is so excited to have Jenny around that he always licks and jumps on her to show how much he loves her.

While *The Jungle Book* (1967) and *Tarzan* (1999) are the instances of films with humans as family members or companions (*see figure 20*). These relationships are more complicated than that of pets and owners, which they are beneficial and harmful at the same time to both parties. Take the former as an example, Mowgli is a man-cub who is found by a black panther, Bagheera. Being showered with love, Mowgli is then raised by a pack of wolves until he was 10 years old, and this is where the problem occurs – owing to the conflicts between man and wild animals. Finally,

Figure 21. Pictures of Raksha, Rama and Mowgli (top) and Kala and Tarzan (bottom)

surviving the life-threatening situation, Mowgli returns to the Man Village despite having a strong bond with his adoptive parents, Raksha and Rama. Such separation suggests that man and wild animals are hardly possible to form a single entity. Nonetheless, respecting animals in coexistence is trusted to be the most important message conveyed after all.

Thirdly, for films with animals as both protagonists and villains like *The Lion King* (1994), *A Bug's Life* (1998) and *Dinosaur* (2000), the depiction of human nature and humanity is reinforced to a greater extent compared to that of the other two categories. An alternative point of view is raised by Hermansson and Zepernick (2019), claiming that these films are actually the corporation's artful avoidance of engaging with ideologies related to race and ethnicity. In any case, films under this category bring the major argument of this research project "more of humanity is being explored than animality" to the table which more details will be discussed in the next session.

IMPOSITIONS: EXPLORING HUMAN VALUES IN ANIMAL LIFE

It is a widely held view that anthropomorphism corrodes an animal's naturalness even further because by definition animals become more personified – Ryan (2015) states that "animals as humans" is frequently based on undervaluing animality and inflating the importance of humanity. In many instances, anthropomorphic animals turn out to be too human. They are either stand-ins for human concerns, or they are primarily being used to confirm human worldview.

"Remember who you are. You are my son, and the one true king." ― Mufasa to Simba

Take the emotionally pungent film, *The Lion King* (1994) as an illustration, it is a film mainly about the battle between good and evil, family and moral values can also be seen. But the authenticity of animal nature is ignored or negated – a horde of hyenas are servants of a lion called Scar, the antagonist in the film. In fact, lions and hyenas do not work together, they are enemies and major competitors for prey in the wild (see appendix 8). Using animals as symbolic and metaphorical devices to disclose truth about the human psyche would create a falsely animalized human perspective which, because still deeply rooted in human experience, will in turn reveal a humanized view of animal life (Ryan, 2015).

Some other examples of underrating animal nature in the genre can be seen in *The Jungle Book* (1967), *Finding Nemo* (2003) and *Finding Dory* (2016) – King Louie, an orangutan who is the King of the Apes in an Indian jungle. In reality, however, orangutans do not inhabit India. The endangered species is only found in the rain forests of the Southeast Asian islands of Borneo and Sumatra (World Wildlife Fund, 2014). Perhaps Louie is meant to be a young adult male orangutan, if not, a mistake is spotted

Figure 22. A comparison of an orangutan and King Louie

in appearance – Louie lacks flanges on his face despite being male, which real life adult male orangutans have (*see figure 22*).

Nigel is a brown pelican, also known as Pelecanus occidentalis, who loves to spend hours in the dentist office window in Sydney, Australia. But in real life, the species' geographical distribution does not extend to Australia; they are found in the Americas instead. The pelican inhabits Australia is called Pelecanus conspicillatus, which is much larger in size and is white with black wing tips and a large pinkish beak in appearance (*see figure 23*). In *Finding Dory* (2016), the close emotional bond between Dory and her parents is heavily emphasized (*see figure 24*). According to the film's director, Dory is the only daughter in the family – in fact, regal blue tang "parents" swim off after spawning and never care about their offspring (Marine Aquarium Society of North America, 2016). This is the exact opposite of Disney's portrayal of the species.

Figure 23. A comparison of a brown pelican (left) and an Australian pelican (right)

Figure 24. Pictures of Dory and her parents

Even so, it can be seen that Disney has taken a naturalistic approach to the design and behaviors of animal characters that their movements and idiosyncrasies strongly resemble to the authentic species. In order to strive for realism, real-life animals were brought to Walt Disney Animation Studios and studied by animators (*see figure 25*).

Figure 25. Disney animators studying an actual lion

To bring the major argument into focus – carefully approached, nevertheless, many animal theorists argue that anthropomorphism has the potential to challenge human superiority and the rigid distinctions between human and animal experience (Daston & Mitman, 2005). In *The Emotional Lives of Animals* (2007), Marc Bekoff goes as far as saying that anthropomorphism is a "necessity" when trying to understand animal consciousness in a careful, empathetic and biocentric manner. Its elements in perception can reveal a world of resonances and resemblances, which catalyze a

sensibility towards not seeing distinct categories of beings ontologically but lighting up structural parallels between animals in "nature" and those in "culture" (Bennett, 2010). Thus, in the process of anthropomorphizing animals, the narcissism of humans in charge of the world – anthropocentrism can be countered. Viewed in this way anthropomorphism also begins to call into question the term itself. As Erica Fudge (2002) argues, anthropomorphism might be naming something which is not very human-centric unfairly. Animals might actually be are more like humans than they imagine, and such label depreciates and merely allows them to recognize this. Being aware of the possibility of the conceptualization of its own non-anthropomorphism, anthropomorphism can in fact work to narrow the gap between humans and animals.

Anyhow, film is an ideal form to consider the pitfalls and potential of anthropomorphism – for Simba, "he is a hero, he is a lion himself, but even more so, as he is "a man".". Does the imposition of human values deny Simba's animality? The answer seems to be quite obvious.

AFTERWORD

Baba Dioum once said, "In the end, we will conserve only what we love; we will love only what we understand, and we will understand only what we are taught.". In the era of global urbanization, media representations of animals are getting increasingly influential when the authentic ones are inaccessible. Furthermore, a number of studies have shown that children tend to glean information and generate assumptions about the world from films (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017). Even though animated films are primarily tools of profit and entertainment, it is media's duty to deliver unbiased information in society, particularly when it has profound influence on future generations. The Walt Disney Company is undoubtedly one of the most recognized companies in the world, known for producing entertainment experiences for people, especially children and families around the globe. If films teach young audience that animals are all unique and valuable, they are more likely to grow up as good stewards of the Earth, willing to respect, protect wildlife and appreciate the coexistence of humans and animals.

All in all, as a corporation all started by a mouse, Disney has further responsibility to promote the idea of conserving animals and their habitats through portraying animals precisely and favorably and more importantly, through avoiding villainizing particular species as a whole. The future development of Disney films in the genre is anticipated – *A Reptile's Life* perhaps.

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Appendices

1. The 27 Disney animated films with anthropomorphic animal characters

(*films produced by Walt Disney Animation Studio are labelled in green; that of Pixar's in blue)

1942	*Bambi*
1951	*Alice in Wonderland*
1955	*Lady and the Tramp*
1961	*One Hundred and One Dalmatians*
1967	*The Jungle Book*
1970	*The Aristocats*
1973	*Robin Hood*
1977	*The Rescuers*
1981	*The Fox and the Hound*
1986	*The Great Mouse Detective*
1988	*Oliver and Company*
1989	*The Little Mermaid*
1990	*The Rescuers Down Under*
1992	*Aladdin*
1994	*The Lion King*
1998	*A Bug's Life*
1999	*Tarzan*
2000	*Dinosaur*
2003	*Finding Nemo*
2003	*Brother Bear*
2004	*Home on the Range*
2005	*Chicken Little*
2007	*Ratatouille*
2008	*Bolt*
2015	*The Good Dinosaur*
2016	*Zootopia*
2016	*Finding Dory*

2. The 317 Disney anthropomorphic animal characters

(*sorted according to animal species/ group; villains are labelled in red)

Bambi	Faline	The Great Prince	Bambi's mother	Aunt Ena
Rutt	Tuke	Peter Moosebridge	Judy Hopps	Thumper
Mrs. Hare	Miss Bunny	White Rabbit	March Hare	Mother Rabbit
Sis	Skippy	Tagalong	Lucky Jack	Bonnie Hopps
Stu Hopps	Duchess	Thomas O'Malley	Oliver	The Cheshire Cat
Si	Am	Sergeant Tibbs	Marie	Berlioz
Toulouse	Scat Cat	Rufus	Felicia	Mittens
Veteran Cat	Fat Cat	Bernard	Miss Bianca	Basil of Baker Street

Dormouse	Roquefort	Sexton Mouse	Little Sister	Chairmouse
Ellie Mae	Luke	Bartholomew	David Q. Dawson	Hiram Flaversham
Olivia Flaversham	Mrs. Judson	Miss Kitty	Lady Mouse	The Mouse Queen
Jake	Baitmouse	Dr. Mouse	Mouse Forman	Mr. Busy
Lady	Tramp	Perdita	Pongo	Cooper
Bolt	Trusty	Jock	Toughy	Peg
Bull	Boris	Dachsie	Pedro	Dalmatian Puppies
Colonel	Napoleon	Lafayette	Otto	Chief

Georgette	Dodger	Einstein	Francis	Rita
Roscoe	Desoto	Tito	Rusty	Principal Fetchit
Dog Announcer	Captain	Frou-Frou	Buck	Patrick
Raksha	Rama	Akela	Sheriff of Nottingham	Gary
Baloo	Little John	Koda	Tug	Kaa
Sir Hiss	Colonel Hathi	Hathi, Jr.	Winifred	The Jungle Patrol
Tantor	Jerry Jumbeaux Jr.	Nangi	Robin Hood	Tod
Nick Wilde	Maid Marian	Vixey	Foxy Loxy	Finnick
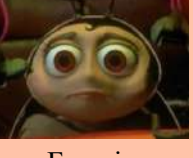
Gideon Grey	Amelia	Abigali Gabble	Uncle Waldo	Goosey Loosey
Chicken Little	Alan-A-Dale	Lady Kluck	Audrey	Buck Cluck
Mayor Turkey Lurkey	Friend Owl	The Dodo	Buzzie	Flaps
Ziggy	Dizzy	Trigger	Nutsy	Orville
Big Mama	Dinky	Boomer	Scuttle	Wilbur
Iago	Zazu	Nigel	Larry	Abby Mallard
Blake	Tom	Billy	Vinnie	Joey
Bobby	Saul	Captain Crocodile	Brutus	Nero
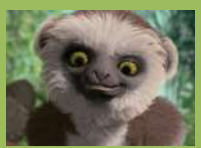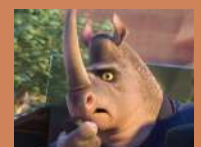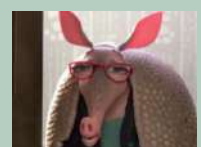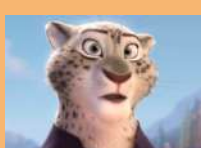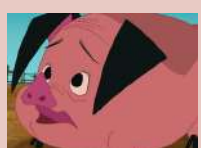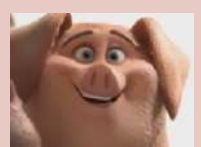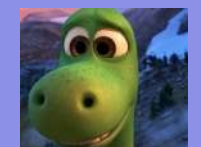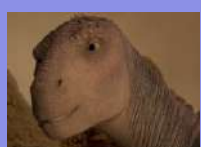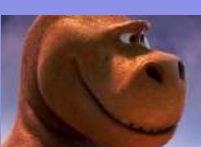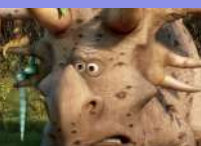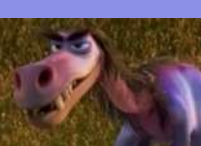
Simba	Prince John	Scar	King Richard	Nala
Mufasa	Sarabi	Sarafina	Mayor Lionheart	Remy
Ratigan	Django	Emile	Ratthew	Marlin
Dory	Flounder	Flotsam	Jetsam	Nemo
Mr. Ray	Sheldon	Gill	Peach	Bloat
Gurgle	Deb	Bubbles	Carol	Tad
Bruce	Anchor	Chum	Fish Out of Water	Destiny
Jenny	Charlie	Stan	Inez	Bailey

Shenzi	Banzai	Ed	Maggie	Mrs. Calloway
Grace	Barry	Bob	Yax	Bellwether
Mr. Woolensworth	Doug Ramses	Sharla	Gareth	Gazelle
Bucky Oryx-Antlerson	Pront Oryx-Antlerson	Mr. Big	Fru Fru	Flash
Priscilla	Junior the Buffalo	Chief Bogo	Mr. Manchas	Jaguar
Fluke	Rudder	Toby Turtle	Crush	Squirt
Pearl	Hank	Sebastian	Jacques	Friar Tuck
Dr. Badger	Porcupine	Morkubine Porcupine	Bill the Lizard	Frank

Flik	Princess Atta	Dot	The Queen	Mr. Soil
Dr. Flora	Thorny	Cornelius	Daisy	Hopper
Molt	Thumper	Tuck	Roll	P.T. Flea
Slim	Francis	Manny	Gypsy	Rosie
Dim	Absolem	Heimlich	Evinrude	Fidget
Flower	Bagheera	Shere Khan	Krebbs	Red
Timon	Rafiki	King Louie	Flunkey	Kerchak
Kala	Terk	Flynt	Mungo	Jeb

|				
Pilo	Yar	Zini	Suri	Rhino
Clawhauser	Mrs. Otterton	Duke Weaselton	Officer McHorn	Mrs. Dharma Armadillo
Drill Sergeant	Fabienne Growley	Officer Higgins	Pumba	Ollie
Runt of the Litter	Frantic Pig	Aladar	Arlo	Kron
Thunderclap	Neera	Bruton	Baylene	Eema
Butch	Nash	Ramsey	Poppa Henry	Momma Ida
Buck	Libby	Forrest Woodbush	Bubbha	Lurleane
Pervis	Earl			

3. *A Bug's Life* (1998) bloopers

Video link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5j1m2wwdcVA&t=193s
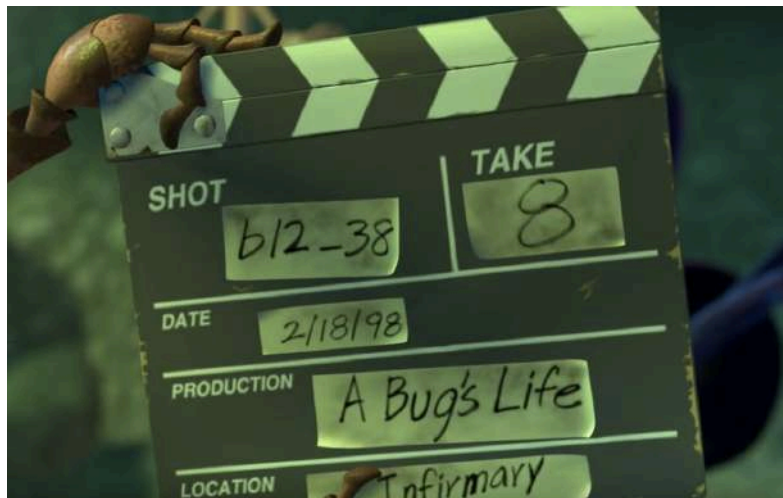
4. The 7 Disney animated films mice featured in

1	1951	*Alice in Wonderland*
2	1970	*The Aristocats*
3	1973	*Robin Hood*
4	1977	*The Rescuers*
5	1986	*The Great Mouse Detective*
6	1990	*The Rescuers Down Under*
7	2016	*Zootopia*

5. *The Bakunawa*

   *it is a sea serpent in Philippine mythology and is believed to be the cause of
   eclipses, earthquakes, rains, and wind.

6. *The Lernaean Hydra*

  *it is a serpentine water monster in Greek and Roman mythology, it was reputed to be an entrance to the Underworld. For every head chopped off, it would regrow two heads.

7. A hyena call (a laughing hyena sound)

 Video link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JRFsiJC1sPQ

8. Lion Attacked by Clan of Hyenas

Video link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a5V6gdu5ih8