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# Walt's Art History: Late Style, Digital Aesthetics and the 'Disney Baroque'

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**Abstract**
This article examines the critical and cultural framing of the Walt Disney Studio's cel- and computer-animated feature films according to an enduring art-historical narrative. It traces the critical evolution and historical periodization of Disney animation from the 1930s and 1940s to the post-millennial period, arguing that the studio has often been understood according to 'early, middle and late' phases of production that are typically held as both complementary and in tension with each other. Supported by the well-established art-history vernacular that has defined discrete Disney eras, this article then argues for post-2012 Disney Feature Animation as an example of the studio's 'late style' – a later phase not of transgression or alienation, but one that adheres to a more positivist mode that signals pleasurable formal dissidence, confident deformation, and artistic creativity. This article subsequently advances the term 'Disney Baroque' to describe such playful transformations of digital aesthetics and effects present across the studio's nine features released between *Wreck-It Ralph* (Rich Moore, 2012) and *Encanto* (Jared Bush and Byron Howard, 2021), its longest run of computer-animated films. By sharpening contemporary Disney's connections to the ahistorical or atemporal logic of Baroque theatricality, this article identifies how contemporary Disney animation engineers spectacular moments of upheaval that rest on specific Neo-Baroque qualities (concealment, illusionism, representationalism, polycentricism, seriality, the labyrinthine) in ways that further contribute to an understanding of Disney's own internal history and critical periodicity.

**Keywords**
aesthetics, Baroque, CGI, computer animation, digital technology, history, Hollywood, style, Walt Disney

## Introduction

European art history has provided an increasingly valuable critical language for qualifying how new media technologies have signalled profound changes in our social, cultural, political, and aesthetic experiences. This has included repeated references to the formal eloquence of the Baroque

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to describe the visual pleasures and modes of spectatorial address made by a contemporary Hollywood cinema heavily reliant upon the exhibitionism of digital aesthetics (Cubitt, 2004, 2009; Klein, 2004; Ndalianis, 2004, 2005, 2008). Exploiting the Baroque's historical mobility, Norman M Klein (2004: 6) has argued that today's 'global media and special effects' repurpose for the Information Age a pervasive Baroque grammar originally operational between 1550 and 1780, which has since been powerfully reincarnated through art and culture's 'history of techno-illusions'. These 'scripted' visual and theatrical effects (from 1955 onwards) are, for Klein, examples of the 'Electronic Baroque', a term that pulls in contemporary cinema's effects imagery together with architecture, sculpture, pageants, panoramas, circuses, theme parks, Las Vegas casinos, videogames and 21st-century art installations as multimedia Baroque instruments of illusion that deliver a rhetorical entertainment experience based on the codes of 16th- and 17th-century art. Digital Visual Effects (VFX) – as a pervasive example of 'Electronic Baroque' culture – offer particularly self-conscious moments of magic that delight in the reflexivity of surface play and *trompe-l'œil* imagery (p. 15). This modern phase of the electronic or 'digitized' 'Neo-Baroque' is, for Sean Cubitt (2009: 50), equally 'characterized by excess, by spectacle, and by the elaboration of decoration to the point where it takes over from the structural principle to become the characteristic formal property of cultural production'. These qualities of display have certainly made a language of the Baroque well suited to the allowances in visual style made by digital technology, whose presence within popular Hollywood film is often marked by a virtuosic flamboyancy that reprises the historical Baroque's investment in an excess and disruption of presentation.

Neo-Baroque aesthetics have, however, found another home in recent digital animation produced by the Walt Disney Studio and a cycle of nine computer-animated feature films that have marked the studio's longest unbroken engagement with computer graphics. This article argues that the consecutive features *Wreck-It Ralph* (Rich Moore, 2012), *Frozen* (Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee, 2013), *Big Hero 6* (Don Hall and Chris Williams, 2014), *Zootopia* (Byron Howard and Rich Moore, 2016), *Moana* (Ron Clements and John Musker, 2016), *Ralph Breaks the Internet* (Phil Johnston and Rich Moore, 2018), *Frozen II* (Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee, 2019), *Raya and the Last Dragon* (Don Hall and Carlos López Estrada, 2021) and *Encanto* (Jared Bush and Byron Howard, 2021) collectively graph a distinct phase of the studio's animated films that can be understood as the 'Disney Baroque'. Empowered by a defining alliance with digital technologies, contemporary Disney Feature Animation exhibits many of the same Neo-Baroque folds found across contemporary media and moving image cultures. As René Wellek (1946: 77) argues in his discussion of the literary Baroque and its synonym rococo (an excessively ornamental style that marked Baroque's final expression), 'Every style has its rococo: a late, florid, decadent stage.' The stylistic and thematic differences of post-2012 Disney animation certainly mark a playful transformation of digital technologies, raising to a higher pitch of emphasis themes of concealment, illusion, disturbance and 'the cultural aspect of representationalism' that historically structures Baroque, and now Neo-Baroque, aesthetics (Egginton, 2009: 107).

Supported by the digital's heightened levels of pristine visual illusionism, this phase of Disney Feature Animation ultimately brings with it an opportunity to think through the more irregular (*barroco*) shapes of the studio's 'late' style, exploring how these nine feature films engineer moments of upheaval that rest upon specific (Neo-)Baroque poetics. In doing so, this article fully acknowledges the implications of such an approach, and what it means to centre European art history as a dominant critical paradigm even in the discussion of popular animation produced within the industrial parameters of Hollywood. The limitations of Eurocentric canons and forms of knowledge production within the historiography of art are, of course, vital for understanding the specific political histories of Baroque art as reflective of international colonial power(s). The 'Disney Baroque' label applied throughout this article therefore recognizes a

global – and colonial – understanding of the Baroque and its non-European and non-Western 'extensions' (Ndalianis, 2004: 14), including the circulating influences between Europe and regions as diverse as the South Americas and Asia to the Portuguese colonies in India. In this way, this article also accepts how art history remains predominantly Eurocentric in its approaches, justifiably in need of cultural and intellectual decolonization to re-engage with the Baroque's own historical, socio-political, and cultural geographies, *and* prevent the further denial of minority communities via more rigorous structural interventions.

## Disney, the artist

During *Frozen*'s early musical number 'For the First Time in Forever' that precedes reclusive Elsa's public coronation as Queen of Arendelle, her estranged sibling Anna seeks solace in the images of European art. Bursting euphorically into the castle's portrait hall, she playfully curtsies to the painted figures depicted in a reinterpretation of *The Peasant Dance* (c. 1569) by Netherlandish Renaissance artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder, gazes longingly at the male hero from Auguste Serrure's rococo *The Picnic* from the late-1800s, and undertakes a joyous Andalusian dance amid the crowds of John Singer Sargent's *El Jaleo* (c. 1882). Among these numerous cross-media encounters, Anna even jumps in front of Jean-Honoré Fragonard's painting *The Swing* (c. 1767), a late-Baroque oil on canvas that was also the visual inspiration for the painterly rococo style of Disney's previous feature *Tangled* (Nathan Greno and Byron Howard, 2010). The inspiration of Classical art upon Disney's animated films has, of course, been widespread since the 1930s and 1940s, including the influence of late-Romantic artist Ludwig Richter and the 19th-century graphic prints of Gustave Doré on *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (David Hand, 1937), the 14th-century *trecento* style of brothers Herman, Jean, and Paul Limbourg reimagined in *Sleeping Beauty* (Clyde Geronimi, 1959), and the Romanticist landscapes that define the organic beauty of Belle's 'provincial life' in *Beauty and the Beast* (Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise, 1991) (Allan, 1999; Solomon, 2010).[1] However, the pointed citation of Fragonard's best-known work in *Frozen* reflexively aligns the flattened style and 'comedy of illusions' central to neo-Classical art (Wellek, 1946: 112) with Disney's pristine three-dimensional computer graphics, thereby visualizing the collision of popular animation with Classical art that has often guided critical and cultural explorations into Disney's animated features. Indeed, beyond their contribution to Disney's internal history and critical periodicity, the 'Neo-Baroque' qualities that this article argues are writ large across post-2012 Disney provide an opportunity – taken up in these early stages – to re-examine the durable art-historical narrative of Disney Feature Animation that has been used to critically identify homogeneous relations between the studio's feature films.

Published in the summer of 1939 soon after the release of *Snow White*, French painter, illustrator and muralist Jean Charlot was one of the first writers to examine traditional animation techniques within the context of Classical and Fine Art composition. Charlot's enthusiastic appraisal of Disney animation, contained within the pages of the *American Scholar* magazine, was the culmination of eight invited lectures that he had given at the studio the previous year addressing Disney's animators and draughtsmen to discuss systems of representation and the expressiveness of their art. It was in these lectures – finally published in the late-1990s, some 20 years after his death – that Charlot first encouraged Disney employees to 'consider themselves to be modern muralists, projecting great designs not on a wall but a movie screen' (Denney, 1999: 143).

Charlot's admiration for the skills and ideals in graphic representation held by Disney animators continued into print, indicating how his own training in 'perspective, draftsmanship, chiaroscuro, and composition' had found a parallel in Disney's popular art (1939: 142). Among his multiple references to Seurat, Cézanne, Rembrandt, Monet, Titian, Poussin, Uccello, Léger, Gleizes and Gris, he provocatively compared the Sistine Chapel to Donald Duck, Mickey Mouse to Michelangelo,

*Snow White*'s Doc to Raphael's Virgin and the short *Mickey's Band Concert* (Wilfred Jackson and Walt Disney, 1935) to the 'three-dimensional reality' of English painter William Hogarth (Charlot, 1939: 260–270). If earlier gag-oriented cartoons had been defined by 'primitive' and 'archaic' backgrounds marked by a 'severity' of black and/on white style, then for Charlot it was the unprecedented detail of light and colour found in the proportions, movements and illusions of Disney animation that heralded a development in the medium's aesthetic priorities. *Snow White*'s imaginative representations fully reflected animation's newfound capabilities for 'photographic rendering', and he triumphantly concluded that 'We had already seen the seven dwarfs, emerging from their cave into the sunset, shed their flat Gothic livery for the contrasting light and shade of the High Renaissance!' (1939: 269).

A valuable record of the 'thinking of accomplished and articulate fine artists' (Denney, 1999: 141–142) into the animated medium, Charlot's commentary manifests a striking intellectual collaboration between fine and popular art, a space where art history mixes with modern mass media, and where the craft and structures of pictorial space find a home within industrial cartoon production. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, it was certainly not uncommon to encounter reverence towards Disney's cel-animated features via connections to a dominant fine art paradigm. Much of this praise emanated from intellectual circles and an intelligentsia of critics, academics, and artists increasingly drawn to the cartoon as an entertainment form (and Walt himself as a figure of culture). Janet Wasko (2001: 119) acknowledges that 'a host of art critics sung the praises of "Disney, the Artist," comparing him to da Vinci, Michelangelo, Brueghel, Rembrandt and Picasso'. The *Literary Digest* also reported in 1931, for example, that 'Mickey Mouse is really the Columbus of a new world of motion-picture expression, according to a number of "highbrow" European critics' that included a body of French aesthetes, and writers across England, Germany, and Hungary (Anon, 1931: 19). In a later article for *The New Republic* playfully titled 'Leonardo da Disney', political cartoonist David Low (1942) described Disney 'not as a draftsman but as an artist . . . the most significant figure in graphic art since Leonardo'. But it was not just the 'Old Masters of Western traditions . . . being evoked most frequently' (Neuman, 1999: 250) in the critical reception of 1930s Disney animation, but the modernists too, as the studio's formal style seemed to successfully bridge realistic art of the 19th century with the encroaching modernism of the 20th. Chief among Disney's proponents was Dorothy Grafly, who in 1933 compared Disney with Cézanne and, later, Picasso in perfecting animation as a 'pure art form' alongside his deft handling of composition and line (Grafly, 1933: 337–338, also paired Disney with the rival Fleischer studio to celebrate a new art that transcended the 'limitations of paint'). A few years later, in a review of Pinocchio (Ben Sharpsteen and Hamilton Luske, 1940), Indiana-born art critic CJ Bulliet (1940: 13) similarly celebrated how 'The difference between Disney's lines and . . . the "abstractions" of our "pewee Picassos" is that Disney's "abstracts" definitely function – have something significant to do, and do it.'

These passionate framings of Disney's performance spaces and perspectives, colours and lines, through Western traditions of visual representation certainly reproduce the familiar appreciation of 'lowbrow culture . . . in terms of high culture' (Smoodin, 1992: 133). Kristin Thompson (1980: 112) points to a longstanding tradition among animation critics who 'treat the animated film as an important form . . . by comparing certain films with other, culturally accepted art forms'. The fine art vocabulary routinely applied to Disney's popular animated cartoons in the 1930s ultimately confirms the fundamental historicity of any contemporary media, whose story of the 'new' is often told backwards through the 'old' to understand their formal style as cultural objects. The turn to the established arts within early animation discourse equally embodies the push–pull relationship between Classical art principles and industrial/aesthetic modernity that underwrites not just Disney's animation, but can be found threaded throughout the studio's multimedia enterprise.

Steven Watts (1997: 41) would label this tension as ‘sentimental modernism’, which has allowed Disney to continually blend ‘comforting tradition and challenging innovation’ across numerous ancillary media, and leisure and consumer products. Yet such a collision between highbrow and lowbrow cultural activity – and the securing of Disney within the crosshairs of this intersection – also rehearses a teleological narrative of evolution common to the historical analysis of (pop) cultural production, whereby ‘early forms [are] always leading to more perfect ones’ (Smoodin, 1992: 138). Such narratives of progress involve the inevitable tracing of a ‘direct line’ from chaotic and unsystematic ingenuity to a more regularized formal sophistication, an historical trajectory that is supported by the continuing interplay between prosperous ‘Golden Eras’ and ulterior periods of ‘stasis’. Or, as one newspaper reporter warned when production cels and artwork from *Snow White* were exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum in New York during 1939, historians may ‘soon be dividing Disney’s work into early, middle, and late periods’ (cited in Neuman, 1999: 251).

The couching of Disney animation in a prevailing art history nomenclature via the ‘conventional triad’ of ‘early, middle, and late’ acknowledges the assumption that new work develops the old, but is also vocal in identifying the kind of discrete chronological structuring that typically ‘holds art in a tight grip’ (Steele, 2003: 12). Thanks to British film critic and curator Iris Barry at the Museum of Modern Art, who had ‘developed an art-historical narrative of animation’ (Mikulak, 1997: 57) when including commercial cartoons as part of MoMA’s film programme during the 1930s and 1940s, Disney’s cel animation quickly became implicated in an ‘art-historical lineage . . . aided by its production artwork in traditional fine arts media such as drawing and painting’ (p. 68). Yet, little would Barry – or the anonymous reviewer of the (1939) *Snow White* exhibition – know that a methodological tendency towards art-historical periodization would become such a mainstay of subsequent critical work into Disney’s animated cartoons. Like Barry, Charlot (1939) himself had been open to such historical materialism in almost immediately fixing Disney within art history’s grasp. He suggested that animation’s ‘plastic language’ had begun to follow a ‘graphic drawn by the history of art’, managing relatively quickly to become a ‘microcosm of style complete within itself’ by refining ‘primitive, classic, baroque and decadent styles which painting took centuries to investigate’ (1939: 268). Disney’s cel- (and now computer-) animated features have since been shaped to fit a similar rise and fall across ‘early, middle, and late’ phases of production, with a multitude of interdisciplinary studies into the studio organizing Disney history into consecutive stages or evolutionary phases, rather than approaching the studio’s animated features as more contested and dispersed.

The division of the Disney studio’s (to date) 61 feature films has resulted in the framing of discrete sequences and cycles of films as both rivals and partners according to moments of representational uniformity, industrial turmoil, creative stagnancy, formulaic upheaval, and seismic technological change. Disney Studies has, for example, often claimed for an artistically ambitious ‘early’ period known as Classic Disney, strongly galvanized by the highbrow fine-art paradigms that circulated among numerous accounts of Disney animation in the 1930s and 1940s. The contribution of Disney to animation has been understood largely in relation to this ‘early’ period of industrial and aesthetic stability, in which the studio’s commitment to a fidelity of representation reached its apogee as it made the move from short, silent cartoons to feature-length cel-animated work. With animation increasingly acknowledged as a form of 20th-century art – and with the studio’s drawings and production art gaining the focused attention of art historians, museums, and galleries – it was Disney who ‘consolidated this prestige, moving the animated film into the contemporary era and effectively reconciling Fine art, a sense of classicism and a model of traditional American folk culture’ (Wells, 2012: 236). The 19 animated features released between *Snow White* and *The Jungle Book* (Wolfgang Reitherman, 1967) solidified Disney’s position as the yardstick of

animated representation through its pursuit of pictorial illusionism, yielding a standardized set of stylistic assumptions that coalesced into a formulaic set of graphic tendencies.

Disney's 'early' period of pictorial Classicism was 'classic' insofar as it not only secured the industrial and economic viability of animation in Hollywood's Golden Age but set the artistic standards of the studio's own 'hyper-realist' (Wells, 1998) sensibilities for the medium, sharing with similar periods across art and culture a desire for perfection in illusionist composition. Discussing the influence of 19th-century European art upon Disney animation, Robin Allan (1999: 286) argues that 'The Disney artists admired the Pre-Raphaelites, whose detailing of the natural world in turn influenced the preciseness of the Disney artists.' Allan further notes how the 'visual density' of Disney's musical feature *Fantasia* (James Algar et al., 1940) was rooted in its 'layered textures of Art Deco, Art Nouveau and nineteenth-century academic art' (1999: 275). From Charles Blanc-Gatti and the Artistes Musicalistes to the modernist geometry of filmmaker and painter Oskar Fischinger, *Fantasia*'s myriad of visual influences has often provided the blueprint for Disney's highly 'European' flavour, if not the contribution of European art to popular Hollywood animation more broadly. Kathleen Coyne Kelly (2012: 199) similarly argues the pictorial representations of medieval landscapes in both *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty* (Clyde Geronimi, 1959) register '"just like" the green world of the illuminated manuscript or tapestry – whether produced in the Middle Ages or imitated by later artists such as the pre-Raphaelites'. The influential Victorian-era reform movement of painters fully embraced mimesis and the imitation of nature as their credo, drawing on the sublime new emotionalism of the Romanticism that countered the social art of the Enlightenment. For John Canemaker (2017), however, it was the influence of Italian Renaissance perspective and its 'visual communication techniques' on Disney animators (including the impact of Florentine Gothic/Proto-Renaissance painter Giotto di Bondone on Disney sketch artist Albert Hunter) which reflected how the compositions, lines, and colours of European art fully secured the stylistic qualities of Disney's own 'Classical' hyper-realism.

Criticisms levelled at the Disney studio's 'illusion of life' credentials are often anchored to their hyper-realist 'reduction' of the animated medium as a graphic art, which replaced the expressive for the imitative by diverting animation's allegedly pre-determined route towards the fantastic, abstract, experimental, and non-mimetic. This is despite a fervent counter claim that 'there is a logic to the privileging of realism in animation', particularly in Disney's reworking of the 'real world' through a 'discursive system' that pulled in Classical painting together with 'storybook illustrations, medieval tapestries, and illuminated manuscripts' (Kelly, 2012: 200). However, Disney's prevailing hyper-realism is not the misrepresentation of creativity through the obviating of animation's fundamental 'magic', but a carefully composed set of formal principles that would become the default language for commercial US animation throughout the 20th century. The transcribing of reality restores – rather than revolts against – animation's potential as a simulacrum and allows equal consideration of the medium's complexity of representation. Classical structures of realism are therefore not an unimaginative path of least resistance, but an overwhelmingly exact and precise undertaking that, due to Disney's sophisticated explorations into the animated medium as a technology of representation throughout the 20th century, would continually define hyper-realism as an industrial and aesthetic act of technical expertise, virtuosity, and dexterity.

## 'Late' Disney?

Since this foundational Golden Age period, the subsequent peaks and troughs of Disney animation have settled comfortably into the kinds of 'early, middle, and late' eras that were predicted in the 1930s as Disney's inevitable future. In fact, the studio's dominant Classicism preceded what Amy M Davis (2006) would even term the 'Middle Years' (1967–1987), in which Disney's increasingly

strained animation division came under new management following Walt's death in December 1966. The emergence of the Disney 'Renaissance' era (1989–1999) – also credited among Disney scholars as the 'Second Golden Age', or the 'Eisner era' to identify the contribution of Chief Executive Officer Michael Eisner to the company's shift in creative direction – did much to consign these 'Middle Years' to a fleeting moment of 'stasis' prior to the next period of 'Golden Era' accomplishment. The cultural understanding of the post-1989 Disney Renaissance was that it represented yet another period of formulaic stability 20 years after the end of Disney's first, one rooted not just in a discourse of *revival* and *renewal*, but of a *return* to the canonical hyper-realist register of 1930s and 1940s Classicism. Succeeding phases of Disney Feature Animation have similarly been understood through the imaginary of a Disney formula devised largely in relation to the 'early' Classical period, which in turn has brought to the surface more deep-rooted questions about Disney's self-management of its brand image. For example, Chris Pallant (2011: 111–125) suggests the highly contrarian and exploratory 'Neo-Disney' (1999–2004) phase that fell immediately after the Renaissance, in which the studio trialled a cycle of highly ambitious cel-animated films characterized by both their disparities to each other *and* their differences to the Disney formula. This period was followed by a post-2005 era of 'Digital Disney' (Holliday, 2019; Pallant, 2011), in which cel-animated technique gave way to computer graphics as the studio entered an increasingly competitive Hollywood animation market. The boundaries demarcating the phases of Disney Feature Animation are, of course, not meant to be taken as absolute or definitive. Many fan communities have extended the Neo-Disney phase to include the computer-animated films *Chicken Little* (Mark Dindal, 2005), *Meet the Robinsons* (Stephen Anderson, 2007), and *Bolt* (Chris Williams and Byron Howard, 2008), defining this broader 1999–2009 era as 'Disney's Post-Renaissance', 'Disney's Second Dark Age', or 'Disney's Experimental Era'. Recent developments within Disney scholarship have only added further descriptions as a way of staking out specific periods of the studio's cel-/computer-animated feature films through the language of cultural production (Classic, Renaissance, Revisionist, Renewal, Reboot) (Mollet, 2020). A glance at both popular and critical accounts of Disney periodicity – including a recent 'Disney film history' produced by the British Film Institute (Determan, 2021) – therefore keeps the following overlapping designations, thresholds, and intervals in sight to reinforce the studio's evolutive teleology:

1937–1967: Classic Disney

1937–1942: The Golden Age

1937–1959: The Classic Era

1943–1949: The Wartime Era/Package Era

1950–1967: The Silver Age/Restoration Age

1967–1987: Middle Years

1970–1988: The Dark Age

1970–1977: The Bronze Era

1989–1995: Second Golden Age/Eisner Era

1989–1999: The Renaissance Era

1999–2005: Neo-Disney

1999–2009: Post-Renaissance/Second Dark Age/Disney's Experimental Era

2005–present: Digital Disney

2007–2018: The Revisionist Era

2009–2013: The Renewal Era

2014–2017: The Reboot Era

2009–present: The Revival Era

This mapping and re-mapping of Disney Feature Animation according to a discourse of ‘early, middle and late’ – alongside the broader questions of periodization that remain fundamental to art-historical work – sharpens the presence of what Edward Said (2006: 4) termed the ‘chronology of discovery’ common to the study of history and culture. Within his humanistic analysis of how temporality marshalls the conditions of creativity, Said’s conclusions drawn around ‘late style’ usefully outline a repeating trajectory underlying the order or science of history and culture, involving consecutive stages of *innovation* (origin, intention, method), *consolidation* (reproduction, continuity, coherence), and *deviation* (revision, retrospection, resolution). These diachronic categories mirror those set out by Henri Focillon in *The Life of Forms in Art* (1992[1934]: 52), which similarly outline the four stages or ‘successive states’ through which cultural forms pass: ‘the experimental age, the classic age, the age of refinement, [and] the baroque age’. First published in 1934, Focillon’s schema of cultural change is less biological than Said’s focus on maturity and decline, though the French art historian’s identification of the Baroque as a concluding phase that ‘abandoned or denatured the principle of intimate propriety’ (1992[1934]: 58) matches the connection between lateness and the Baroque’s standard deviation. Early style can have both positive and negative connotations, presaging ‘derivativeness, imitation, [and] underdeveloped technique’ just as much as ‘freshness, precocious inventiveness, impetuosity, and energy’ (Hutcheon and Hutcheon, 2016: 55). The period of Classic Disney (what Pallant, 2011: 35–53, has since termed ‘Disney-Formalism’) certainly marked an early phase of intensified creativity and aesthetic innovation for the studio, a captivating moment of origin that began the Disney ‘project’ in ways not fully attributable to the studio’s earlier short film series.

The next ‘human episode’ or ‘second great problematic’ governing culture – what Said (2006: 5) terms the ‘exfoliation from a beginning’ – is that of the Middle Years/Disney Renaissance. When taken together, these two phases collectively represent a battleground on which wars of industrial and aesthetic continuity were fought, particularly following Walt’s death in the late 1960s. In the studio’s quest for stability and coherency, the Middle Years came to embody a short-lived deviation ultimately realigned by a Renaissance that repackaged successful past form. Beginning with *The Little Mermaid* (Ron Clements and John Musker, 1989) and running until the October 1999 release of *Tarzan* (Chris Buck and Kevin Lima, 1999), the Disney Renaissance has been solidified as a 10-year period in which the meticulous simplicity and pictorial form of Classical representation re-emerged as a reminder of longstanding, if briefly forgotten, graphic tradition.

The final stage in this ‘overall assumed pattern of human life’ (Said, 2006: 4) is that of ‘late style’, a concept drawn by Said from Theodor Adorno’s (1937) account of Beethoven’s late music veined with qualities of alienation, separation and distance. It is in this ‘late style’ where Said encounters an active ‘going *against*’ or pleasurable sense of contradiction, dissidence, and liberation, giving rise to works ‘that reflect a special maturity, a new spirit of reconciliation and serenity’ (Said, 2006: 5–7). A challenge to cohesion and relation, the lateness of style becomes the consequence of illuminating differences and discovering discontinuities within cultural formation and, as such, has been used to intervene into cycles of Disney animation before. Stefan Kanfer (1997: 193) talks of *The Jungle Book* as ‘the last full-length cartoon to be supervised by Walt Disney,

[which] displayed all the attributes and faults of his late style'. Here, 'late style' explicitly connotes the transition from Classic to Middle phases of Disney's animated production, marking the closing years of a coherent style in decline (embodied by Walt's waning artistic influence) and the drive away from predetermined narrative and aesthetic templates. As Adorno himself put it, 'In the history of art, late works are the catastrophes' (cited in Said, 2006: 12).

This article suggests, however, the evolution and emergence of another creative 'late style' within contemporary Disney rooted in the endings and beginnings of periods, one that ties in the cessation of hand-drawn techniques with the comparable rise of digital technology in Hollywood, including the industrial and aesthetic integration of computer graphics into Disney's cel-animated production. The 'Disney Baroque' is advanced here to recall the durable art history narrative of Disney Feature Animation, while also suggesting broader connections between the studio's contemporary feature films and the pleasurable Baroque dissidence familiar to 'late' styles. Far from being rooted in the superfluity, bankruptcy, and exhaustion of such unruly lateness, Disney's 'late style' involves an altogether more pleasurable convolution or confident deformation, achieved via an 'almost youthful energy that attests to an apotheosis of artistic creativity and power' (Said, 2006: 7).

The consecutive computer-animated features *Wreck-It Ralph*, *Frozen*, *Big Hero 6*, *Zootopia*, *Moana*, *Ralph Breaks the Internet*, *Frozen II*, *Raya and the Last Dragon*, and *Encanto* have certainly been understood as taking Disney into yet another period of industrial stability, creative prosperity, and artistic growth, thanks largely to their box office performance and critical acclaim, and supported by the company's behind-the-scenes $7.4 billion acquisition of Pixar Animation Studios in 2006 (and, later, its $4 billion purchase of Marvel in 2009 and 21st Century Fox in 2019 for $52.4 billion). Heralding Disney's 'richer, more complex stories', Aisha Harris (2016) argues that 'In the years since the uber-feminist *Frozen*, Disney has entered into its third golden age, one in which progressivism and a commitment to inclusion are not only powerful artistic decisions but profitable business ones.'[2] The restoration of terms such as 'Third Golden Age', 'Neo-Renaissance', and 'Revival' among the Hollywood trade press (and several online discussion forums) to describe post-2012 Disney Feature Animation seems designed to claim a return to the production methods, ideological uniformity, and stylistic principles of the Classic era. Yet this recourse to a Golden Era vernacular ultimately relegates the studio's earlier run of computer-animated features (*Chicken Little*, *Meet the Robinsons*, *Bolt*) to the past and – separated by the release of cel-animated features *The Princess and the Frog* (Ron Clements and John Musker, 2009) and *Winnie the Pooh* (Stephen J Anderson and Don Hall, 2011) – points instead to the specific commercial and critical resurgence of Disney over the last decade, solidified by the international success of fairy-tale feature *Frozen*.

Embodying what *Time*'s Richard Corliss (2014) noted in his review of *Big Hero 6* as Disney's 'latest Renaissance', the nine features released between 2012 and 2021 certainly seem to articulate the pleasurable dissidence and manipulation of convention central to the limits, incompatibilities, and fractures of late styles. Said (2006: 12) speaks of a clear challenge when examining lateness that rests on 'trying to say what holds the works together, gives them unity, makes them more than just a collection of fragments'. Constituted by two fairy-tale Princess features set in a mythical kingdom, two buddy comedies that take place inside a videogame, an anthropomorphic police film allegorizing racial politics in the era of Donald J Trump, a superhero comic book adaptation that combines US and Japanese national histories, an adventure musical rooted in Polynesian mythology and two fantasies inspired by Southeast Asian and Colombian culture, the heterogeneity of post-2012 Disney animation suggests a deviancy that makes it tricky to locate narrative or stylistic commonalities. Whereas five of the preceding six Disney features (between *Chicken Little* in 2005 and *Winnie the Pooh* in 2011) were based on pre-existing texts, only four of the nine post-2012 films are adapted from earlier sources (*Frozen*/*Frozen II* on The Snow Queen; *Big Hero 6* on the

Marvel comic book; and *Moana* on the Maui trickster figure). *Wreck-It Ralph*, *Zootopia*, *Ralph Breaks the Internet*, *Raya and the Last Dragon* and *Encanto* are all original stories, while two (*Frozen II*, *Ralph Breaks the Internet*) are sequels, though many are located within a broader transmedia network of affiliated media products (short films, television series). Only four of these nine features are also musicals (*Frozen*, *Moana*, *Frozen II*, *Encanto*), just two more than in the highly divergent Neo-Disney era.[3] There are several striking design elements too. Combining Eastern and Western influences, Shiyoon Kim's character design in *Big Hero 6* and the film's merging of San Francisco and Tokyo architecture (to create 'San Fransokyo') recalls Disney's *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* (Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise, 2001), an adaptation of Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues under the Sea* inspired by the flattened graphic depictions of comic book artist Mike Mignola. Labelled by Disney's animators as the hybrid 'Disnola' style, Mignola's designs for *Atlantis: The Lost Empire*, in turn, recall British caricaturist Gerald Scarfe's work on the earlier *Hercules* (Ron Clements and John Musker, 1997) as conceptual character artist, his contributions resulting in a similarly 'untypical' hybrid film that appeared as 'half-Scarfe, half-Disney' (Wells, 2002: 145).

The Baroque seems generative for understanding not just something of the stylistic and narrative heterogeneity that marks out Disney's 'later' computer-animated films, but also the hybridity, tone, affect, spectacle, and spatial formations present across such a diverse grouping (including their connections to other computer-animated films, see Holliday, 2018). Carrying connotations of rhizomatic labyrinths and multidimensional spaces, freedom of motion, self-conscious excess, intertextuality, interconnectedness, and seriality, the Baroque as a term ultimately feels appropriate for the scale and extravagance of *Wreck-It Ralph*'s sprawling videogame environment, the transcultural San Fransokyo in *Big Hero 6* dressed all in futuristic neon, and the ornate displays of the sea, ice and water droplets in *Moana*, the *Frozen* films, and *Raya and the Last Dragon* that recall the water tricks (*giochi d'acqua*) central to the ornamental garden culture of Baroque Italy where water was 'directed, divided, turned, driven, intercepted, and made to rise or fall' by 16th- and 17th-century fountain engineers (*fontanieri*) (Tchikine, 2010: 57).

However, the designation of the Baroque as a descriptor for films and stories that explicitly foreground the heritage and experiences of non-European people of colour (from Polynesia in *Moana* and Japan in *Big Hero 6* to Southeast Asia and Latin America in *Raya and the Last Dragon* and *Encanto*, respectively) seems to risk a methodological return to the prevailing Eurocentrism of art history. Yet the ongoing 'critique and redefinition' of the Baroque from its origins within post-Renaissance European art and literature has challenged its identity as a 'Eurocentric concept' (Salgado, 1999: 316). The Baroque's historical movement through Spanish and Portuguese empires (including the Iberian Peninsula) up until the early 1800s are, of course, all necessary reminders of exploitative colonial projects and their narratives of conquest. But they are equally indicators of the style's recontextualization via regional/local artists and traditions during the colonial period, which quickly complicated the Baroque's 'visible allegiance to a metropolitan school or style'. Indeed, Salgado has argued that 'hybrid refigurations' were a defining note in the colonial subject's ability for 'cultural resistance and survival', as the transplanting of European conventions into 'colonial areas' created vibrant ethnic mixtures achieved through the 'surreptitious insertion or grafting of the "denied" cultural elements' supposedly disavowed or displaced by the incoming 'European high styles' (p. 317). Though a result of the 'painful and incongruous overlapping of foreign and native morphologies in conflict' – a conflict stylistically played out in *Big Hero 6*'s pulsating combinatory aesthetic – the same conditions of indigenous transfer, labour and subjugation all importantly contributed to the (Latin American) Baroque's de-centred artistic style and transcultural hybridization, if not its politics of dissent, counterhegemony, and reclamation.

To speak of Baroque sensibilities in the context of Disney Feature Animation, then, is not simply to identify a specific period in the 'later' history of arts and cultures unassailably tethered to

Europe's 'high styles'. Rather, it is to recognize a term that has been appropriately liberated from historical and geographical specificity, and – through following its damaging colonial genealogies – made always already mobile in its relevance to a range of artistic and cultural phenomena. Angela Ndalianis (2005: 86) argues 'the baroque is not merely a specific period situated within the seventeenth century (its traditional, temporal home)', but rather operates paradigmatically as 'a formal quality that crosses the boundaries of historical periodisation'. Such atemporal conditions suggest precisely why an enduring dimension of the Baroque – the turn to 'self-reflexivity, virtuosity, theatricality, spectacle, display' (Ndalianis, 2008: 269–270) – might explain its recent application to hypermediatized digital spectacle within popular Hollywood cinema. Post-2012 Disney Feature Animation can therefore be understood as simply one of contemporary media culture's many 'Neo-Baroques' in its 'late style' of revision and retrospection, a space that fully engages with both the optical displays central to the national–historical Baroque's attitudes towards illusionism *and* the Neo-Baroque sensibilities increasingly attached to new media technologies.

## The 'Disney Baroque'

*Wreck-It Ralph* is the first feature of the 'Disney Baroque'. The film confronts the imperfect instability and surface of digital aesthetics head-on through the practice of 'glitching', a technological fault that conventionally marks the error of digital culture and computer-mediated communication. Videogame character Vanellope von Schweetz is a computer-animated avatar who struggles with the disruptive, destabilizing forces that build her ontology as a technological illusion. Her glitching body – passed off by the character as a form of 'pixlexia' – is a fundamental affliction that interferes with her working life as a media artefact, while marking her out against the immaculate visual illusionism of her cartoon contemporaries (avatars in the fictional game-within-a-film Sugar Rush). Noël Carroll (1988: 297) observes how the anti-illusionist polemic in Modern art theory was an antidote to the Classical illusory properties of 'rubrics such as "verisimilitude", "imitation", "mimesis", "simulacra", [and] "copies"'. Vanellope is 'modern' insofar as she sunk in a transformative 'reductivist program', stripping computer graphics down to their 'basic ingredients' by disclosing the technological parameters of the virtual representation. With her identity in unstable recession at the level of algorithm and code, *Wreck-It Ralph*'s Vanellope functions as a 'reminder of the imperfect, noisy, lossy nature of the machine . . . [that] counters our contemporary digital culture's positivistic faith in technology as providing order' (Hainge, 2013: 129). Vanellope is a formal and chaotic agitation that substitutes the invisibility of the digital's photorealist register by reflexively drawing attention to its ontology as a technological façade.

It is in this discourse of fault and failure, malfunction and mishap, that the glitch ultimately becomes a gesture of the Baroque. Michael Betancourt (2017: 58) argues that:

> the demonstrative excess of production as glitch becomes a baroque eruption, beyond simply interrupting the productive flow, it can assume the character of the decorative wasted production, a position that moves the glitch beyond the scope of allowed functions with capitalism.

The indeterminacy of the Baroque is realized in the Italian term *statuino*, a 17th-century neologism that 'evokes the idea of a glitch marring the perfection toward which artists should strive in inventing or executing a painting, a drawing, or even a print . . . [It] discloses the inner oscillations and contradictions at the core of the Baroque aesthetics of perfection' (Pericolo, 2015: 863). The digital achievements of the glitching Vanellope in *Wreck-It Ralph* operate self-conscious moments of 'scripted' illusion, which fall under Klein's 'Electronic Baroque' that encompasses popular VFX technologies. Vanellope is therefore a Baroque embellishment registered in the film

as a technological rupture or disturbance, a transgressive, transformative unruly force that expresses the question of identity, belonging and dissatisfaction with pre-programmed roles. Indeed, Vanellope engenders the changing relationships between the individual and the digital world, something sharpened in the sequel *Ralph Breaks the Internet* where Vanellope's intrusion into another game (the battle royale-style 'Slaughter Race') destabilizes the entire virtual space. A computer virus replicates Vanellope's glitch (her biggest insecurity), triggering a server reboot that collapses the computer graphics all around her. Sitting within the Electronic Baroque's modern armoury of 'techno-illusions' that evoke the artifice of the Baroque theatre, *Wreck-It Ralph* similarly delights in the glory of the hoax provided by new digital animation. As Klein (2004: 51) argues, 'similar to Perspective Awry in the Baroque, a glitch . . . reveals the apparatus of filmmaking. It is a reveal.' Vanellope's appearance in *Wreck-It Ralph* signifies a breach in the final three-dimensional computer rendering, a moment that offers a shift in perception whereby hyperrealist 'classicism' has momentarily gone 'awry'.

What *Wreck-It Ralph* also establishes through Vanellope is the preoccupation across the 'Disney Baroque' with themes of concealment, illusion, and disturbance that support the Baroque's investment in 'the cultural aspect of representationalism' (Egginton, 2009: 107). Just as the Baroque reacted to Renaissance Classicism by marking a 'decisive shift away from representationalist and correspondence art, paintings, architecture, or sculpture that aim to model reality as faithfully as possible' (Glazier, 2020: 163), Disney has begun to fully embrace an altogether more reflexive understanding of digital illusionism. The post-2012 cycle of secret or 'twist' villains, including King Candy/Turbo (*Wreck-It Ralph*), Assistant Mayor Dawn Bellwether (*Zootopia*), Robert Callaghan (*Big Hero 6*), and Te Fiti (*Moana*), are not openly signposted as hostile through character design and performance, but are instead revealed as duplicitous as part of the narrative's reflexive violation of expectancy. *Frozen*'s utilization of this trope carries particular weight in this respect. A film that re-conjures a relatively stable Princess narrative formula, *Frozen*, is again structured by multiple themes of show and tell. Hidden from the kingdom of Arendelle since childhood, Elsa's powers of hydrokinesis, telekinesis, and magic are veiled from her sister Anna. Yet the later reveal of 'charming' Prince Hans as duplicitous – rather than as Anna's true love interest – marks a reflexive handling of villainous disclosure that obtains its impact through his visual coding in line with traditions of Classical Disney Prince heroism. The Baroque 'may be regarded as the logical continuation and extension of High Renaissance art, with conscious accentuation and "deformation" of the regular stock of techniques' (Daniells, 1946: 117). In the case of *Frozen*, it is Prince Hans's revelation that becomes a gesture of the Baroque, as he represents a conscious 'deformation' and deviation from the narrative security of the formula as a way of accenting the stakes of his deception.

These playful engagements with modes of concealment and masquerade function as 'part of a Baroque cover-up' (Klein, 2004: 4) that reflect a certain Baroque attitude towards the pleasures of masking and the fantasy of disguise. Andrés Pérez-Simón even situates *Moana*'s unusual approach to truth and legitimacy – embodied in its musical number 'Shiny' sung by Tamatoa the crab about the crustacean's decorative shell – alongside writer William Egginton's (2009: 144) work on Neo-Baroque aesthetic traditions and 'the relation of appearances to the world they ostensibly represent'. Whereas Renaissance-era Disney features had emphasized a rhetoric of authenticity (Aladdin's truth as a 'diamond in the rough'; Simba's destiny as the 'true King' of Pride Rock in *The Lion King*, Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff, 1994), *Moana* represents 'a peculiar case in the trajectory of the Walt Disney Studios' because it fully embraces the superficiality and artificiality of appearances (Pérez-Simón, 2009: 79). Alongside the celebration of the 'glitching' Vanellope in *Wreck-It Ralph*, Tamatoa's song valorizes excess theatricality and surface in the mise-en-scène. Such values can be tied back to the Baroque's broader 'experimentation' with a form of

representation that 'always seems to have its cards face-up . . . thereby showing its object of art through a particular way of hiding it' (Glazier, 2020: 163). *Moana* thus rests, for Pérez-Simón (2009: 74–80), on a longer history of Baroque aesthetics, specifically in how – like the unstable and technologized Vanellope – the film becomes a 'rupture' that 'brings us back to baroque conceptualizations of the *persona*, the mask'. Alongside the literally 'masked' villains King Candy, Robert Callaghan, and Te Ka who each hide behind ulterior identities and false physiognomies, the playful treatment of disclosure in *Moana* helps to immediately identify the kinds of anti-illusionist qualities operating across the 'Disney Baroque'.

The splendour, multiplicity, complexity and fragmentation fundamental to the Baroque additionally find an analogue in the achievements of computer-generated imagery. It is hard to imagine Elsa's ornate icy sculptures in the two *Frozen* films, the polymorphous microbots in *Big Hero 6* (self-governing robots whose machinic versatility allows them to build into intricate spatial formations), the shapeshifting amorphous Druun and beams of light that emanate from the dragon pearl to envelop Kumandra in *Raya and the Last Dragon*, or the luscious jacaranda and bougainvillea flowers that envelop the magical house 'casita' of *Encanto*, without the possibilities of computer graphics. Framed by the contemporary era of the electronic Baroque and its moments of digitally-mediated spectacle, Cubitt (2004: 228) further describes a particular form of Neo-Baroque virtual camerawork charged with heightened 'vectorial movement' that results in a decorative structuring of screen space. Charlot's writing in the late 1930s had already rooted the Baroque firmly within the possibilities of camera mobility, noting that 'baroque minds – a Greco, a Magnasco, a Daumier – who worked in a static medium but were haunted by dynamics, would have welcomed cinematography' (1939: 268). Given animation's essential 'special' effect is that of movement, Klein (2004: 248) even defines animation itself as the very 'art of turning Baroque *trompe-l'œil* or anamorphosis into moving images'. Yet Charlot (1939: 261) claimed that, unlike the 'rigid line of the classic', it was 'the baroque masters [who] go furthest into movement – use turmoil as a rule of composition'. Throughout the 'Disney Baroque', the presence of digitally-assisted staging techniques exploit the affective qualities of perspective and orientation, which craft a particular kind of encounter with computer-animated space. The magic and martial arts narrative of *Raya and the Last Dragon* provides the backdrop for elaborate sequences inviting audiences to marvel at the depth, dimension, and detail of the digitally-composed shot (particularly in the kinetic escape through the bustling city of Talon and, later, during Raya's final confrontation with the Druun), while *Big Hero 6* climaxes with a digital long take that networks together the heroic protagonists as they run, fly, skate, jump, and glide across San Fransokyo's hybrid architecture. In *Frozen 2*, the swooping camera similarly serves a connective role, moving through the virtual geography to mark the transition from the opening prologue to present day Arendelle. Finding Queen Elsa on the castle's balcony, the camera follows the serendipitous journey of an autumn leaf to introduce sister Anna, the apparatus seemingly victim to an unseen gravitational pull guiding its flamboyancy of movement.

Just as Baroque forms 'tend to invade space in every direction' (Focillon, 1992[1934]: 58), the virtual camera of the 'Disney Baroque' is often no longer motivated by the agency of characters. Rather it navigates animated space that is now open and limitless, immediately a-centred with no clear foreground or background planes of action. As a physicalized gesture of Baroque perspective 'gone awry' (against the Classical's 'closed' systems), the virtual camera's dizzying rotations around the three-dimensional space approximate the spatial effects of Disney's multiplane apparatus of the late 1930s, a device widely celebrated as a Baroque invention that formally registered the volumetric depth of the animated environment. However, such techniques of vectorial mobility intensify with the studio's introduction of CG imagery and processes during the Renaissance (including its adoption of the digital ink-and-paint Computer Animation Production System and

Deep Canvas software). Indeed, the progressive integration of digital VFX into Disney Feature Animation throughout the 1980s and 1990s provided Baroque embellishment, offering moments of intrusive 'turmoil' that formally disrupted the 'line of the classic' through a pleasurable deformation to create art that is '*in*, but oddly *apart* from the present' (Said, 2006: 24).

During the signature digital VFX scene of *Beauty and the Beast* – a dance between Belle and the Beast that takes place in a gold-encrusted castle ballroom – the spectators' excessive (re)positioning within the fictional world provides a signal to this ulterior ontological and visual order. The virtual camera suddenly shifts from its grounded position and ascends from the marbled floor, up towards the golden chandelier to take in the fresco painted on the ballroom's ceiling. Although this *trompe-l'œil* painting simulates the extension of space, it is the camera's weightlessness and upward mobility that equally mirror the very 'illusion of flight' common to the *quadratura* of perspectival Baroque ceiling artwork (Ndalianis, 2004: 90–91). The expressive placing of the camera in this sequence certainly affords close-ups of the High-Baroque interior of the castle, moving the spectator in and out of the digitally-animated environment. But, in providing such a privileged vantage point from which to take in its detailed recesses, arches, and columns, *Beauty and the Beast* ultimately offers spectators a Neo-Baroque experience of a Baroque animated space.

The digital aesthetics of verticality and profusion inform the Baroque's fascination with polycentricism and seriality, which fit under the metaphor of the labyrinth. Supported by the monumentality of the virtual camera, the 'Disney Baroque' offers films steeped in an intensified understanding of the boundaries and distance of illusionistic virtual space. As Focillon (1992[1934]: 67) states, the baroque discloses '"The system of the series" – a system composed of discontinuous elements sharply outlined, strongly rhythmical . . . [that] eventually becomes the "system of the labyrinth"'. *Ralph Breaks the Internet* perhaps best embodies these Baroque qualities of labyrinthicity, set not just inside the world of a videogame but within the World Wide Web. Both the computer game and internet are cultural emblems of a certain Neo-Baroque multiplicity, polycentricism, and multilinearity (Ndalianis, 2004: 27). As a serial form, the cyberspaces of the internet are visualized in *Ralph Breaks the Internet* through its rhizomatic exploration of pop culture iconography, as Ralph and Vanellope traverse communication lines, internet brands, big data companies (Amazon, eBay, Google), social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter), media images, and intellectual properties (IP) (Pixar, Marvel) that vein its digital utopia of creators and licensers. The Baroque's propensity for seriality via the 'copy' is further found in the copy–paste affliction that impacts Ralph, who 'breaks the internet' by becoming a multiplicative computer virus during the film's climax. Evoking both the swarm of pixels that builds his virtual ontology (and perhaps the reproductive serial logic of Hollywood's franchise mentality), the variant Ralphs come together like the cascading microbots from *Big Hero 6*, or the sentient flor de mayo and sundew flowers conjured into shapes by the magical Isabella Madrigal in *Encanto*, to cumulatively construct a monstrous agglomeration that towers over the network of digital media content.

At opposing ends of the 'Disney Baroque', both *Wreck-It Ralph* and *Ralph Breaks the Internet* are reflective of an emergent brand-synergy cinema in their intensified intertextual strategies and narrativization of rampant entertainment infrastructures. Their heightened media literacy and accumulation of pop cultural artefacts positions them alongside several digitally-animated features (and live-action films with extensive digital VFX) released since the start of the 'Disney Baroque' era that share a varied investment in the labyrinthine qualities of the contemporary entertainment industry based on the visual pleasure of IP crossovers: *The Lego Movie* (Phil Lord and Christopher Miller, 2014), *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (Bob Persichetti, Peter Ramsey and Rodney Rothman 2018), *Ready Player One* (Steven Spielberg, 2018), *Space Jam: A New Legacy* (Malcolm D Lee, 2021), *Tom & Jerry* (Tim Story, 2021), *Free Guy* (Shawn Levy, 2021), and *Chip 'n Dale: Rescue Rangers* (Akiva Schaffer, 2022). Amid *Ralph Breaks the Internet*'s own serial-like motions

and reiterative polycentric mobility (including Ralph's excessive multiplication of his own image), one sequence featuring Vanellope is particularly standout. Chased through Disney's vast media catalogue, the skilled videogame racer encounters multiple Disney princesses from the studio's animated history. Playing out Disney's status as a multimedia conglomerate and vexed industrial relationship with Pixar (with Moana and Anna admitting they 'cannot understand' the Scottish Princess Merida from *Brave*, Mark Andrews and Brenda Chapman, 2012, as she is 'from other studio'), the scene draws its comedy from Disney's retrospective engagement with its past media products as much as playfully acknowledging its own branded repetitions.

A partial return to Classicism in its intertextual citation of canonical Princesses, this sequence functions as a reiterative manoeuvre informed by the earlier 'Mannerist' sensibility that marked the studio's first cycle of computer-animated features. A phase that bridged the classical antiquity of the Renaissance with the Baroque, the 'Mannerist' comedy of anti-illusionism identified in *Chicken Little*, *Bolt*, and *Meet the Robinsons* (Holliday, 2018: 205–223) becomes fully realized in the 'Disney Baroque' as the next stage in Disney's (art) history. As EBO Borgerhoff (1953: 326) puts it, 'Mannerism is expressive deviation from the norm; baroque is the return to the norm, *but* with some of the emotional color of mannerism carried along and assimilated'. *Ralph Breaks the Internet*'s 'colouring' of its Classical register with its treatment of the Disney Princesses is closer to a Baroque return rather than a Mannerist deviation, reinventing several of its cel-animated characters (Snow White, Cinderella, Aurora, Ariel, Belle, Jasmine, Pocahontas, Mulan, Tiana) in three-dimensional computer graphics while migrating others (Rapunzel, Anna, Elsa, Merida, Moana) from other films as part of its multimedia crossover (a similar moment of intertextuality occurs in *Zootopia*, which includes a sequence featuring pirate home media copies of the 'Disney Baroque' films *Wreck-It Ralph*, *Big Hero 6*, *Moana*, and *Frozen 2* being sold as the anthropomorphized titles Wreck-It Rhino, Pig Hero 6, Meowana, and Floatzen 2). For Ndalianis (2004: 88), the Neo-Baroque emerges 'when citation becomes an instrument for rewriting the past', just as reiterative structures and modes of transfiguration are defining notes in Said's late style. In both *Zootopia* and *Ralph Breaks the Internet*, the explicit allusion to Disney's own media catalogue 'opens out' rather than 'closes down' as part of its expanding polycentricism and acts of Baroque remediation. As with the concealment and disguise of Hans in *Frozen*, the outcome is an intertextual labyrinth where Disney animation has begun to fold emphatically back on itself.

## Conclusion

The transhistorical logic of the Baroque has allowed the Neo-Baroque to take root in several economic, political, cultural, and technological transformations, counting the conglomerate entertainment industry and its economic neoliberal capitalist structures, postmodernist multimedia entertainment enterprises, and globalized information age among its increasingly tentacular reach. Whereas, in the 17th century, 'the emergence of capitalism and mass production was an integral cultural backdrop to the development of baroque form' (Ndalianis, 2004: 26), its re-emergence within contemporary media culture marks the meeting point between technology and globalization, giving rise to an industrial context of expansion and transgression in an era of media conglomeration. For the internal periodicity of Disney Feature Animation, however, the Baroque serves a more moderate role, preserving the studio's longstanding critical and cultural relationship to art history, while situating the decorative application of digital-imaging technologies across its 'later' computer-animated features firmly within the current mediascape of divergence and differentiation. Contemporary Hollywood remains an increasingly Baroque industrial system rooted in multiplicative and modular structures of storytelling (sequels, serials, spin-offs, reboots, remakes), and

marked by a growing willingness to embrace the convoluted narrative potential for forking paths, convergent timelines, and overlapping fictional universes and multiverses. Such commercial imperatives and management strategies are 'paradigmatic of the directions that contemporary entertainment media have taken' (Ndalianis, 2004: 23), yet equally disclose how a vocabulary drawn from the Baroque persists in helping to understand cinema's elaborate technological flourishes and moves to excess. Beyond their commercial profitability and sustained critical repute, then, the nine computer-animated films released by Disney between *Wreck-It Ralph* and *Encanto* marked something different and more discordant, and in turn functioned as standard bearers of Hollywood's market forces driven by an economically successful Neo-Baroque mode of address. However, the mixed critical responses to Disney's 61st and latest animated feature film – the original computer-animated science-fiction adventure *Strange World* (Don Hall, 2022) – alongside its poor box office performance that, at the time of writing, is predicted to lose the studio almost $150 million (McLintock, 2022; Rubin, 2022) – hints at the possible arrival of yet another period of 'stasis' for Disney's animation division, if not early evidence of certain creative departures from the Baroque-influenced style developed and refined across the preceding decade. While it is ultimately too soon to plot the future of Disney Feature Animation (especially given the behind-the-scenes return of CEO Bob Iger in November 2022 to replace Bob Chapek, the continued expansion of Disney Plus as a streaming platform, and Hollywood's broader industrial adjustment to the 'post-pandemic' period), as anthropomorphic majordomo Cogsworth describes in *Beauty and the Beast* during his tour of the 'minimalist rococo design' of the Beast's castle, 'if it's not Baroque, don't fix it!'

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## Notes

1. The Metropolitan Museum of Art's recent 'Inspiring Walt Disney: The Animation of French Decorative Arts' exhibit that ran between December 2021 and March 2022 in New York charted the influence of European visual culture (particularly French art and literature, but also tapestries and furniture) upon Disney's animated films and the design of its theme parks. The curatorial notes identified the exhibition's intention to bring together 'what may seem two very different worlds: the finest Rococo decorative works of art created for a small European elite and 20th-century animated films made for an international public' (Anon, 2021: 5). In April 2022, the exhibition transferred from the Metropolitan Museum of Art to the Wallace Museum in London.
2. Alongside the rejuvenation of Disney's animated division (and rehabilitation of the studio's working culture), seven of the nine films produced in this post-2012 era have been nominated for Academy Awards in the Best Animated Feature category, with *Frozen*, *Big Hero 6*, *Zootopia*, and *Encanto* all victorious.
3. *Encanto*'s soundtrack that incorporates *salsa*, *bambuco*, *mapalé*, *joropo*, *cumbia*, and *reggaeton* genres also features the *madrigal* style of musical arrangement, a polyphonic vocal composition popular during the Renaissance and early Baroque eras in Europe (the intergenerational family of *Encanto* are even named La Familia Madrigal).

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