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The Queer Outcasts: Three Decades of Queer-Coded Characters in Mainstream Animation

Bakalářská diplomová práce

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Anotace

Zavedení cenzury v rané produkci hollywoodských studií vedlo ke stereotypizaci zakázaných témat. Metoda queer coding (queer kódování) se stala vzorem pro explicitní reprezentaci LGBTQ+ postav na obrazovkách a její vliv stále přetrvává v tradiční mainstreamové animované produkci. Tato bakalářská diplomová práce analyzuje vývoj užívání metody queer coding v Malé mořské víle (1989), Příběhu žraloka (2004) a v nejnovějším snímku Luca (2021). Jejím cílem je ukázat, že i přes vývoj role dané „zakódované" postavy, od antagonisty po hlavního hrdinu, všechny zůstávají na okraji své dané společnosti.

Abstract

The enforcement of censorship in early Hollywood production resulted in the stereotypical depiction of what has been banished from the screen. The practice of queer coding has paved the path for queer characters onto the screen and still has a heavy impact on the traditional environment of mainstream animated production. This thesis aims to demonstrate the evolution of queer coding in *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Shark Tale* (2004), and *Luca* (2021), showcasing how while the spotlight given to each queer-coded character increases, they all remain outcasts in some way or another.

Declaration

I hereby declare that the thesis titled **The Queer Outcasts: Three Decades of Queer-Coded Characters in Mainstream Animation** that I have submitted for assessment is entirely my original work, and that no part of it has been taken from the work of others unless explicitly cited and acknowledged within the text of my thesis.

Brno May 15, 2022 ....

Tamara Svobodová

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1 Introduction

As Eva Chlumská claims in her essay "I Wish That I Could Be Part of the Real World: Gender and Otherness in The Little Mermaid", "Although sexuality in fairy tales is suppressed, it is always implicitly present." (37). While heteronormative love is frequently overtly expressed in animated production, and for many storylines is the central value, the same cannot be applied to the sexualities on the queer spectrum. The depiction of heterosexual love is, generally, not only accepted but also expected, and glorified. Although queer characters have yet to make their debut in the mainstream animated production, it does not mean they do not exist.

The utilization of censorship in the early twentieth century impacted the future of the movie industry, including animated production. Since they could not explicitly include queer characters in the narratives, the creators have found ways to rely on the subtext of the story by employing stereotypical attributes that are easily discernible for the audience to fit the character with its implicitly given queer role. This phenomenon is called 'queer coding'.

To this day queer coding is used in conservative environments to maintain a neutral stance in the rapidly progressing world. For corporate animation productions such as Disney, Pixar, or DreamWorks studios, that means protecting their reputation and preserving the audience that is already used to their traditional content. Despite the portrayal of queer-coded animated characters undergoing an evident transformation, some of the patterns remain in function to this day.

With a focus on three animated movies released by Disney, DreamWorks, and Pixar studios during the last thirty years, this thesis pursues how, and if, the way the queer-coded characters of the chosen primary sources have been introduced to the audience evolved. In particular, the analyses discuss the following queer-coded characters: Ursula from *The Little Mermaid* (1989), Lenny from *Shark Tale* (2004), and Luca with Alberto from the most recently released movie *Luca* (2021).

The evolution of a depiction of queer characters and queer romance in the three chosen movies is apparent in the role of the analyzed characters and their behavior, however, the stance towards them persists through the years. Ursula is the extravagant villain of the story in *The Little Mermaid* and was created with the picture of the drag performer in mind. Lenny portrays the ridiculed homosexual that brings comic relief to *Shark Tale*. Moving thirty years onward since the release of *The Little Mermaid*, the audience can see almost, but not quite, an openly queer romance between the protagonists of *Luca* on their screens, that try to fit in a hostile community.

Thus, despite the evident shifts in how these three distinct characters can be read as queer-coded, one aspect of their stories remains the same, and that is the fact that the otherness of all of them is closely tied with being the ultimate outcasts in their own environments.

An important factor of queer coding in an early animated production is the direct influence of queer creators. Even though they could not explicitly depict queerness on the screen, their contribution to the work is a known fact, and they effectively brought queerness to the narratives. Sean Griffin, a former queer employee

at the Walt Disney studios, remarks on Disney's influence on queer community in his book *Tinker Belles and Evil Queens: The Walt Disney Company From The Inside Out*: "Disney was helping individuals to define their identity as part of the gay community and . . . various Disney texts worked as a factor in the understanding of their sexuality" (xii) disproving Disney's connection with solely family and children audience.

Besides the importance of Disney to the LGBTQ+ community, Griffin also highlights in his book the influence the queer creators had on the actual movies. For instance, Howard Ashman, an openly homosexual lyricist, and creator who worked on three Disney movies, including *The Little Mermaid*, was inherently biased by his own life experience, thus "show[ing] us his world through his lyrics and his storytelling" (*Howard* 1:23:25–30).

After defining the relevant terminology, that is necessary for the comprehension of the topic discussed in this thesis and describing the roots and evolution of both queer coding and queer baiting, the upcoming analyses examine the means through which these characters are considered presumably as queer. Apart from appearance and mannerisms, the queer context is hinted at in specific scenarios, such as 'coming out' or struggles with acceptance and assimilation. Additionally, the thesis demonstrates how the characters are assigned with the potential stock character that fits their role in the story, correlating with the stock characters provided in the theory of the broad history of queer coding, reaching into the 1930s, or with a trope that applies to the course of their narrative. Those are the stock characters of the 'sissy villain', the 'camp gay', and the 'bury your gays' trope.

The final part of the thesis uses the preceding analyses to compare the characters. It recognizes that they are similar by being outcasted, but also acknowledges the shift from a stereotypical portrayal to more authentic instances that can be more relatable to a queer reader. Thus, it suggests that queer coding is used to allure the queer audience, or rather the audience interested in queerness, without losing the traditional one, which is called 'queer baiting'.

2 Terminology and the History of Queer Coding

First, it is important to highlight the most pertinent terminology regarding the topic of this thesis to fully comprehend what will be further examined in the individual analyses of the chosen movies. Besides the occurrence of heteronormativity in animated production, and the phenomenon of queer baiting, the most substantial is to introduce the phenomenon that queer coding is. To further analyze the employment of this practice in the chosen primary sources it is necessary to consider its relevance, how far do its origins reach into the history of the movie industry in general, and also its history connected with animated production specifically.

2.1 LGBTQ+ and Queer

The most well-known version of the acronym, LGBT, developed over the years into many forms, with the longest still regularly used being LGBTQ+, including Q, which people interpret as either standing for questioning or queer. The word 'queer', which Oxford Learner's Dictionary still recognizes as "odd" or "unusual" was for many decades in the twentieth century used as a derogatory term for people who are part of the LGBTQ+ community to ridicule them and separate them from heteronormative society. That changed in the 1990s when the LGBTQ+ community reclaimed the term and queer earned its non-pejorative meaning. A person who uses queer to describe their sexual or gender identity defines themselves as anything but strictly cisgender

heterosexual[1]. For instance, people who define themselves as non-binary or gender fluid might use the term 'genderqueer'. Identifying as queer allows people to come out without the pressure of having to find an exact label.

Moreover, the term helps to "to problematize the simple straight-gay binary" (Benshoff and Griffin 5), which reinforces the erasure of the existence of many other sexualities such as bisexuality, asexuality, demisexuality, and more. For the purposes of this thesis, both the LGBTQ+ acronym and the term *queer* will be used, with queer being the preferred one, as it includes everyone that it needs to, regarding the interest of the topic this thesis focuses on and with respect to all who identify differently than cisgender heterosexuals.

2.2   Heteronormativity in Animated Movies

The term 'heteronormativity' was coined by queer theorist, Michael Warner in 1991, who wanted "to illuminate the privileging of heterosexuality in social relations, which relegates sexual minorities to a marginal status position" (Robinson 1). Heteronormativity is an omnipresent system within the dominant society that distinctly prioritizes heterosexuality. Its presence is conspicuous beyond sexual and romantic relationships in spheres of everyday life, such as career, education, legislation, or media, and, of course, including animated movies aimed at young children. According to Martin and Kazyak: "[Heteronormativity's] pervasiveness

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[1] Cisgender heterosexual is someone whose personal identity (gender) correlates with the sex that has been assigned to them at birth ('cisgender') and at the same time is attracted both emotionally and sexually exclusively to people of the opposite sex to themselves ('heterosexual').

makes it difficult for people to imagine other ways of life" (316). This has to do with the lack of representation in the media, that especially for a younger audience constitute a significant source of notion about life and relationships. With the prevalence of portrayal of heteronormative narratives, the target audience of animated movies creates patterns of concepts about life that are absent of queer versions, since they do not see them included enough in the real-life or rather, fairytale-like scenarios designed for them.

Despite heteronormativity being commonly mentioned next to words like mundane and ordinary, the portrayal of hetero-romantic relationships, or suggestions of ones, in animated production preaches quite the opposite of what heteronormativity stands for. Animated movies glorify hetero romance by surrounding pivotal love embraced moments with "[f]ireflies, butterflies, sunsets, wind, and the beauty and power of nature often provide the setting for—and a link to the naturalness of—hetero-romantic love" (Martin and Kazyak 325) and puts hetero-romantic love on the pedestal. Such as portrayed in *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), when the main characters break a spell with a kiss in a forest with the sunbeam directed at them, surrounded by sparks of magic, or when a parade of fireworks accompanies the kiss between Aladdin and Princess Jasmine in *Aladdin* (1992). The level of heteronormativity's impact is increased even more by this practice, and it proves that "its encompassing pervasiveness lends it its power" (Martin and Kazyak 333).

Thus, with the underrepresentation of the LGBTQ+ community and enforcement of strict heteronormativity in the vast majority of mainstream animation,

children are recipients of an obvious message being sent to them steadily from such an early stage of life: this is how life and relationships should look like. The inclusion of heteronormativity in the narratives aimed at children audience will be discussed more, in concrete examples, later in the analyses of *The Little Mermaid* and *Shark Tale*.

2.3   Queer Coding and the Hays Code

When creators use traits that the audience associates with the LGBTQ+ community to hint at characters' queerness without explicitly making them queer, this is what is known as 'queer coding'. The ascribed attributes are usually stereotypical and in practice this often "meant making a male character overly effeminate or by representing a female character as masculine" (Benshoff and Griffin 9). Nonetheless, the producers eventually fabricated many other molds that quickly became popular for fitting the queer characters. Nowadays, especially after many years of using this strategy, there are many less stereotypical ways of coding characters as queer, therefore their presence is more disputable, and the media leave space for self-interpretation since "all films might be potentially queer if read from a queer viewing position—that is to say, one that challenges dominant assumptions about gender and sexuality" (Benshoff and Griffin 10).

From the start of the twentieth century, the movie industry in the United States faced a wave of criticism from the public since the content of the movies was by some people deemed immoral and inappropriate, and the main concern was from the beginning concerned with the effect this relatively new media has on children. The

consensus, as Orrin Cocks, a member of the National Board of Censorship suggested, was that while "[t]he intimate and intricate problems of life may be presented [in the movies] quite satisfactorily to the adult but may be dangerous to the unformed mind of a child" (627).

The Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) association adopted the Motion Picture Production code initially in 1930 to regulate the content of movies in the form of self-censorship to avoid direct penalization from the courts and compliance with many censorship bills (Hunt). Official enforcement came in 1934, when William Hays, the first head of the MPPDA, established the Production Code Administration (PCA) that supervised the adherence of the code, as all the members of the MPPDA had to submit their movies for approval (Black 167). Even though William Hays was not the one who construed the code, his name is the one most associated with it, hence its more widely known name: The Hays Code.

The men behind the curtain of the Hays Code were Catholic publisher Martin Quigley and Jesuit priest Father Daniel A. Lord. The code was organized as a set of guidelines established by the industry that dictated what was or was not acceptable to put onto the screen, that consequently influenced how those immoralities forbade by the code will be depicted. As follows, the code extends into details, stating rules prohibiting acts ranging from approval of crime to display of animal cruelty to rape. Nonetheless, despite the document's extensiveness, some of the rules were more implied rather than distinctly set. Hence by restraining "sex perversion or any

inference to it" (Motion Picture Association of America 7), the authors implicitly included the prohibition of homosexuality, which put its portrayal off-limits.

The implementation of the Motion Picture Production Code resulted in the development of specific stock characters and tropes that allowed the creators to invade the guidelines. A stock character is similar to an archetype and labels a character with stereotypical looks or behavior for their role, thus making it recognizable for the viewer to assign the given role to the character without any necessary further explanation. Meanwhile, a trope rather describes a situation the characters frequently appear in through reoccurring themes that are, similarly to the stock characters, universally recognized and help the viewer understand the creator's intentions more effortlessly. Eventually, these stock characters and tropes became the general prototype for the future queer representation on the screen.

One of the first stock characters that were at the birth of queer coding is the 'sissy' otherwise known as the 'pansy' or 'camp gay'. In the early code era, the primary goal behind such practice was a comic relief on behalf of depicting gay man as "a flowery, fussy, effeminate soul given to limp wrists and mincing steps" (Benshoff and Griffin 24). While presenting in a feminine way is by no means wrong, the ubiquity of sissy characters resulted in many people generalizing the appearances and mannerisms of gay men. One early example of a sissy character on screen is the character Guthrie played by Franklin Pangborn in *My Man is Godfrey* (1936) who was famous for bringing multiple sissy characters to life. Even in more recent production,

this strategy is used to depict explicitly gay men, such as Will and Jack from the TV series *Will and Grace* (1998–2019).

An exception to portraying explicitly queer characters was in the case it was ensured they would be punished for their sinful behavior, with the trope being called 'bury your gays', which caused a much higher rate of queer characters being dead by the end of a movie than the heterosexual ones. Openly gay characters met with unfortunate fates can be seen in the movie *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) where the forbidden love affair of two men, who meet each year, is after years ended when one of them dies. This trope is sometimes also called the 'dead lesbian syndrome' as, for example, in the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) TV series, where long-run side character Willow is in an open romantic relationship with another female character Tara, who eventually ends up murdered. Even in cases where the fate was not lethal, somehow the queer characters seemingly could not have their happy ever afters, which sent a clear message of queer people not deserving one, and it eliminated the concept of safe space for queer people within the society.

As demonstrated in the famous documentary *The Celluloid Closet* (1995), in the 1980s came a shift when "homosexuals in movies had changed from victims to victimizers" (1:13:31–36). This was not however the first time this has occurred. Even in the 1940s, some filmmakers of war movies noticed "that the Production Code Administration would allow intimations of 'sex perversion' if they were used to characterize the enemy" (Benshoff and Griffin 35). The stock character of the 'sissy villain', otherwise known as the 'sadist', was frequently portrayed as hypersexual or

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promiscuous. The release of the movie *The Cruising* (1980) started a long-run era for sissy villains. Even the villain of the Bond movie *Skyfall* (2012) implicitly suggested his liking in Bond. Furthermore, an even more recent picture *I Care a Lot* (2021), released on Netflix, depicts a couple of queer women cooperating as they commit insurance fraud on elderly people.

The sissy character type prevails in other sub-tropes as, for instance, the stereotypical 'gay best friend'. The effeminate fashionista advisor of his female friends is present in many movies and series such as *Sex and the City* (1998–2005). Finally, the trope of the 'sycophantic servant' alias the helper exhibiting almost a fanatic obsession with their 'master' can be seen in the movie adaptation of *Rebecca* (1940), where her former maid Mrs. Danvers seems to have Rebecca's old bedroom as a shrine to worship her deceased mistress. Another famous representation of this trope is in the adult animated series *The Simpsons* (1989–present), where the greedy old magnate Mr. Burns is exceedingly adored by his assistant Mrs. Smithers, who also happens to be a sissy character. With time the queer stock characters multiplied and overlapped, and thus many other tropes were developed while remaining their stereotypical core which kept hindering the authentic, diverse, queer representation on screen.

The representation of queerness on screen was at its dawn before the administration of the code. In 1930, the movie *Morocco* casually depicted Marlene Dietrich in a tuxedo sharing a kiss with another woman. Even before that, the now so-called *The Gay Brothers* silent short film from 1895 displayed behavior that the contemporary viewer reads as queer, nonetheless back in the late nineteenth century,

it was acceptable as long as the male characters confirmed conventional gender roles since that also created the possibility of the characters being heterosexuals "celebrating homosocial bounds" (Benshoff and Griffin 22).

Therefore, the likelihood of a different trajectory of the evolution of the depiction of queer characters in media had not the Hays Code intervened might be only disputed. Despite the initial thought behind queer coding being a way of smuggling queer representation on the mainstream screen being a power move, to not entirely omit queer people from the media, trails of the stereotypical tropes in contemporary fiction have a continuing effect on how the audience perceives queer people. Since being swamped with repeating patterns, some people might come to the conclusion that "they 'know' [queer people], when in fact what they know is only the stereotype" (Benshoff and Griffin 15) and thus limit their awareness of the diversity among queers.

The influence of the code eventually started to decline, and it was officially substituted in 1968 with the Motion Picture Association film rating system (MPA). This association is active to this day it assesses the suitability for specific audiences. They determine whether a movie is, for example, for a general audience (G-rated) or restricted for minors (R-rated) according to the level of explicitness of the movie.

2.4   Examples of Queer Coding in Animation

Despite the era of censorship being history, the long reign of the Hays Code opened the door for maintaining some of its practices in areas, such as animated production is, that

are still hesitant to depict more explicit content. The utilized tropes were not exclusive to live-action movies, and they also left their prints in the animated production.

As for animated production in relation to the Hays Code, it seemed to have earned an upper hand in bypassing some of the enhanced rules. For instance, the first signs of queer coding in children's animation and what can be considered the first potential queer character can be seen in Looney Toons' *Bugs Bunny* (1940). Despite the code being on high Bugs Bunny "cross-dressed regularly as a part of his shtick"[2] (Benshoff and Griffin 34).

The period between 1989 and 1999 is unofficially called 'The Disney Renaissance' as in that time some of Walt Disney Studio's most eminent aminated movies, such as *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *The Lion King* (1994), *Pocahontas* (1995), *Hercules* (1997) and more, had been brought to life. What those movies have particularly in common are the queer-coded villainous characters. All Jaffar, Scar and Governor Ratcliff, and Hades are prime examples of 'sissy villains' in animated movies. These villains were most of the time flamboyant and generally effeminate and they became the blueprint for future villainous characters. However, as Jeanna Kadlec says in her article "Deconstructing Disney: Queer Coding and Masculinity in Pocahontas": "If queerness is consistently coded a certain way, it has something to do with how Disney wants power to function

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[2] When a person cross-dresses, they wear a type of clothing originally intended for the opposite sex. This is similar to the practice of 'drag', although not the same. While in drag, the male performers, known as 'drag queens', use flamboyant women's clothes to perform in, cross-dressing is used to express one's gender identity.

— who can wield it and, how." A few of their successors are, for example, HIM from the TV series *The Powerpuff Girls* (1998), a villain with a squeaky voice, tall boots, blushing cheeks, and mischievous smirk (see figure 1), whose menacing femininity opposed the one of his girl victims. More recent antagonist King Candy from *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) also revived the flamboyant sissy villain in the 2010s (see figure 2). When he is called to be a big fan of pink, living in a lurid candy pink palace, he stresses the color is "obviously salmon" (*Wreck-it Ralph* 38:06–07).

Figure 1, Queer-coded HIM, still from *the* episode "Electric Buttercup" (2016) (6:01)

Figure 2, Queer-coded King Candy in his palace, still from Wreck-It Ralph (37:59)

What also significantly defines the movies from the Disney Renaissance era is the work and influence of the lyricist Howard Ashman, who is the author of some of Disney's greatest musical hits and who also happened to be an openly homosexual creator who died from AIDS in 1991. One of the examples of his influence is, for instance, present in "The Mob Song" from *Beauty and the Beast*, which according to Ashman's then-partner, Bill Lauch, depicts the stigma around AIDS, which Ashman battled at that time (*Howard* 1:24:12–23). Similarly, in *Aladdin,* "Jaffar's Song" is presumably supposed to mirror Ashman's deteriorating health (*Howard* 1:22:55). Ashman's other songs with arguably queer subtexts will be analyzed later in the analysis of *The Little Mermaid*, along with his involvement in the creative process concerning Ursula.

Despite the focus being on what is implicit, it is worth pointing out the breakthrough of portraying the first-ever explicitly gay animated character Mitch in *ParaNorman* (2012). Mitch is only a supporting character, and his queerness is not uncovered until the very last part of the movie when he mentions he has a boyfriend.

That might have been a shock factor for the viewer as Mitch is portrayed as a 'jock', a great sports enthusiast. One of *ParaNorman*'s creators, an openly gay writer Chris Butler, mentioned that he finds it crucial to create G-rated content where he goes beyond the limits of what is accepted by the audience ("Why *ParaNorman* Featured the First Gay Character in an Animated Film").

As the utilization of queer coding evolves with time, its strategy shifts away from mostly depicting the most obvious stereotypes to more specific aspects of the possible experience a queer individual might have, it matters more who is watching the movie. For example, there are disputes around the character of Elsa from *Frozen* (2013). While some people who have projected their experience into the movie perceive Elsa as asexual for the lack of romantic plot in both so far released movies, others disagree and read Elsa as simply pursuing to find herself or not being interested in romance at that time. Furthermore, the protagonist of *Brave* (2012), princess Merida, is also not keen to find love, despises princess-like manners, and considering her interest in hobbies such as archery, she is perceived as a 'tomboy', and thus by some as queer, such as Adam Markovitz points out in an *Entertainment Weekly* article, that these traits are enough to assume her potential queerness.

In terms of live-action adaptations of Disney's beloved stories, the creators seem to be more willing to suggest queerness, and some of them even explicitly do so. In the live-action adaptation of *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) LeFou remains Gaston's faithful 'sycophantic servant' and in the final scene even happens to share a dance with a man, which received criticism and some countries, such as Russia or Kuwait, banned

the screening. While still focusing on the younger audience, the live actions seem to dare more and be aware of the interest of adult viewers who grew up with the original stories.

Online streaming services grew a vast audience over the past decade. The most famous one, Netflix, managed to release many of its own series and movies and does not hesitate to include many diverse characters. *Centaurworld* (2021) is an animated series including three confirmed queer characters. The show had much success among queer audience for its uniqueness, diversity, and emphasis on queerness as something regular.

Another show that gained popularity among the queer audience is *She-Ra and the Princess of Power,* released in 2018 on Netflix in collaboration with DreamWorks Animation as the reboot of *She-Ra: The Princess of Power* (1985). The reboot was written by a queer creator, Noelle Stevenson, who included the character Double Trouble who defines as nonbinary and uses they and them pronouns and depicted same-sex parents. Netflix does not focus on a specific part of the audience age-wise, and by having less history than other long-running movie studios, streaming services are spared the burden of established tradition. If anything, they focus mainly on the general audience, and thus, also, their animated production is more progressive.

2.5   Queer Baiting

Another phenomenon whose practice has become more recognized by the general public in recent years is 'queer baiting'. It is not a strategy that counters or improves the features of queer coding. In fact, queer baiting can be perceived as a form of queer

coding, one that is often regarded as more harmful to the queer community. These two phenomena might look similar and in more contemporary production, it becomes more difficult to draw a clear line between them, and the intentions do not have to be evident. Unlike queer coding, queer baiting simultaneously entices the queer community and its allies with the prospect of queer representation in the media without ever acknowledging it. The trailer for a movie might hint at a possible queer relationship that will never become official in the final cut. This approach means to appeal to the queer audience and their allies and simultaneously retain the audience that insists on the conservative content. In other words, it enables profiting from the LGBTQ+ community and maintaining a hetero-centric stance.

One of the most famous examples of queer baiting appeared on the long-running TV series *Supernatural* (2005–2020). The hinted romance started with the introduction of the character Castiel in season four when after multiple potential hints that he is attracted to the main character Dean, fans began 'shipping' them together. When after fifteen years of broadcasting, the series has come to an end, Castiel declared his love to Dean, making their romance canonical, only to be killed off within seconds after his confession, with the 'bury your gays' trope. This made the queer baiting in this show one of the longest running ones in TV history. Another well-known example of queer baiting that left its fandom puzzled is the friendship between Sherlock Holmes and his companion John Watson in the modern adaptation of Arthur Conan Doyle's books, the TV series *Sherlock* (2010–present).

Queer baiting can be often understood as a response to the feedback of a dissatisfied audience that expects to see more diversity in media. The creators claim representation in retrospective despite having not made it canonical in their original work. They might claim to be trying to comply with a widely dissatisfied audience by improving on the lack of representation. An example of the former was when the creators of the *Killing Eve* (2018–2022) TV series felled compelled to change the narrative and explicitly display queer attraction between the two main female lead characters after the public alleged queer baiting in the first two seasons. This strategy is condescending and harmful towards queer community more than the total omission of explicit queer representation. It implies that the creators care more about the increase in popularity than the queer community itself.

Nonetheless, there is no notion of impulse for improvement that could be applied to the narratives in mainstream animation. Recent examples of accusations of queer baiting in mainstream animation are, for example, the vague queer representation in *Frozen* (2014), where one can see "[a]n apparently gay couple running a shop" (Blodgett and Salter 142), which the director unclearly addressed by saying that they "know what [they] made, but at the same time [he] feel[s] like once [they] hand the film over, it belongs to the world. (…) just let the fans talk. [He] think[s] it's up to them" (Mackenzie qtd. in Blodgett and Salter 142). Same-sex relationships are also hinted at in both *Finding Dory* (2016) and *Zootopia* (2016) with discreetly implying queer female relationships in the background of the main plot. Ultimately, it

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can be said that there are animated movies that seem to try to incorporate more diverse characters, but they do it in a way that is hardly recognizable.

Although the question of profit is mentioned a lot in connection with queer baiting, when it comes to animation aimed at children, the problem of this strategy is focused more on "an ongoing power struggle over representation and a fear of losing 'straight' dollars" (Blodgett and Salter 145). A case that sparked controversy in early 2022 was when Disney Studios faced backlash when the CEO Bob Chapek remained silent on Florida's House Bill 1557 (2022), widely known as the 'Don't Say Gay' bill, which restricts any conversation about LGBTQ+ topics with children up to third grade. Later a letter from LGBTQ+ creators of Pixar was obtained by journalist Judd Legum on *Twitter*, and it said: "We at Pixar have personally witnessed beautiful stories, full of diverse characters, come back from Disney corporate reviews shaved down to crumbs of what they once were. Nearly every moment of overtly gay affection is cut at Disney's behest" ("A Statement to Leadership from the LGBTQIA+ Employees of Pixar & Their Allies"). Disney officials eventually condemned the bill, saying that Disney is "dedicated to standing up for the rights and safety of LGBTQ+ members of the Disney family, as well as the LGBTQ+ community in Florida and across the country" ("Statement From The Walt Disney Company on Signing Of Florida Legislation").

3 Ursula, The Drag Queen

Disney's version of the mermaid story is an adaptation of the classic Danish fairy tale written by Hans Christian Andersen, *Den lille havfrue* (The Little Mermaid), published in 1837. Nowadays, many people believe Andersen was a homosexual (Griffin 144). Sean Griffin mentions in his publication *Tinker Belles and Evil Queens: The Walt Disney Company From The Inside Out* that "the story of a sad and isolated mermaid who cannot have the human male she loves added importance to gay male readers" (144) since some of them interpret the story as a reflection on the hardship of being a homosexual during the nineteenth century and relate to it.

The mermaid's story was also adapted by Oscar Wilde, who was incarcerated for homosexuality, as "The Fisherman and His Soul" released in 1910. Andersen's original fairy tale was then used as a foundation and modified through Disneyfication[3] into the contained version people are most familiar with today, which is why this adaptation can also be regarded in connection with the queer culture.

Released in 1989, *The Little Mermaid* was the head canon of the Disney Renaissance era which is famous for bringing several queer-coded villains onto the screen. Ursula is not an exception as she happens to fit the stock character of the 'sissy villain', which makes her one of the first queer-coded villains in modern mainstream animation. Above all, the main plot presents a pattern already well-known to the spectator of animated fairy tales, where "heterosexual love defeats evil" (Chlumská

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[3] Disneyfication is a commercial process that appropriates given material into a safe form having values similar to the Walt Disney brand ("Disneyfication").

34). The evil of this story is Ursula, the malicious sea witch. After all, "She's a demon. She's a monster" (*The Little Mermaid* 38:30–32). She is the corrupter of young heteronormative love, and it is her queerness that links her with her wicked demeanor.

The tale of *The Little Mermaid* revolves around princess Ariel, a mermaid that lives in the undersea palace ruled by her father, King Triton. Ariel has always been intrigued by the life on the land and human inventions, and after an encounter with Prince Eric, she wishes to experience life as a human and pursue Eric. In seeking a solution, she approaches Ursula, the sea witch, who was once banished from the palace by King Triton, "because of her bad nature" (Chlumská 42).

Despite Ursula's notoriety, Ariel makes a deal with her, and in exchange for human legs, Ariel must give up her voice to Ursula and make Prince Eric fall in love with her in three days. Ursula desires one-sided profit from her transactions, and she plans to trick Ariel so she can overthrow Triton's throne. In the end, Ursula tries to wreck Ariel's efforts, and she disguises herself as a human female and casts a spell on Eric so that he cannot fall in love with Ariel due to the bargain. Eventually, love defeats evil as Ursula's vicious plan is revealed. She is vanquished and Ariel may remain a human and marry prince Eric.

3.1   Ursula as Divine

Many years after *The Little Mermaid* was published, the creators and directors who brought Ursula onto the screen revealed that her appearance was directly inspired by the drag queen Divine (Anderson) (see figure 3). Moreover, the final decision was

between multiple proposals, and it was, in fact, the openly gay lyricist Howard Ashman who suggested the final design to resemble the cult drag queen (*Howard* 50:58). Harris Glenn Milstead, an actor, and performer was widely known later in the twentieth century for impersonating Divine on the stage. Thus, although "[m]ost (if not all) young children would have had no knowledge of Divine; many adults seemed to make the connection [between her and Ursula]" (Griffin 146).

Figure 3, Comparison of Ursula and the drag queen Divine, "Divine as Ursula" (FalseDisposition)

One of Ursula's most distinct features is her makeup which resembles the entirety of the iconic makeup look of a 'campy' drag performer where camp means highlighting "the love of the exaggerated" (Sontag), with her high-arched eyebrows, vivid eyeshadows, and bold-colored sharp lip liner. Nonetheless, the inspiration is not conspicuous solely in Ursula's glamorous makeup and her figure. Ursula is overall the embodiment of "fabulous campy creation" (Maslin). Everything about her is exaggerated, besides her makeup and appearance – her gestures and overall behavior

are very sensual and flamboyant. She is aware of her voluptuous body and boasts about it as she wiggles her figure in her skin-tight black gown while reminding Ariel to "not underestimate the importance of body language!" (*The Little Mermaid* 43:17–43:23) as she pushes her into pursuing prince Eric.

Nonetheless, Ursula's femininity is exaggerated to the point where it "represents dangerous, sexually aggressive and mature femininity" (Chlumská 40) and for that reason balances on the edge of being perceived as almost masculine, as queer-coded female villains tend to be through simple gender-bending. The inspiration drawn from an actual drag queen is underscored by Ursula being voiced by Pat Carroll, whose deeper tone of voice reminds of a more manly voice and therefore accentuates Ursula's masculinity.

This inspiration creates a clear-cut connection between *The Little Mermaid* and the LGBTQ+ community as drag is nowadays most frequently, but not exclusively, associated with cisgender homosexual men.[4] *The Little Mermaid* has thus drawn a large audience of queer people and gave them a character to cherish and, for some of them, a character to represent themselves in the mainstream animation.

3.2   The Counterparts

To put an emphasis on Ursula's more masculine nature, her traits and behavior, as well as her looks, are portrayed like one would imagine the exact opposite of what Ariel

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[4] Drag also played a big part in many prominent protests in the 1960s gay rights movements. For instance, a gay rights activist, and a drag queen Marsha P. Johnson is considered one of the eminent figures in the Stonewall uprising in 1969. (Chan)

represents. Since Ursula is "the counterpart of Ariel" (Chlumská 42), it clears the way for compliance with the binaries of what is claimed to be good or bad, but at the same time, of what is considered a feminine or masculine expression. Hence the way these performances are introduced alters the perception of what these gender expressions represent.

Compared to her predecessors in animated production, Ariel is more daring and wittier by having the courage to stand up to her father. Nevertheless, she is still depicted as a delicate, shy, and innocent creature that emanates the right amount of femininity. Ariel's voice is angelic and feathery, and it is also one of the crucial elements of the story as her voice is the only thing that Eric remembers about her and thus the one thing Ursula discharges her of since in her voice lays her power. With her looks and behavior, Ariel conforms to the anticipated conception of a heroine in a heteronormative environment. In addition, hair length, in many cases, serves as a tool for stereotypically supposing sexuality upon someone, as many people imagine a 'butch' woman with a shortcut under the term 'lesbian'. Therefore, the contrast between Ariel's thick, long mane of fire-red hair and Ursula having a short untamed hairstyle, tailors Ursula as Ariel's queer opponent.

At some points in the story, both Ariel and Ursula are depicted as occupied with their appearances. Whereas Ariel accentuates her natural beauty and merely combs her hair, Ursula, on the other hand, is embracing her extravagant visage and scrutinizes it in the mirror. Ariel is sufficient with human legs to assimilate on the land. Despite having some difficulties understanding how the world above the surface works, she

fits right in. When Ursula decides to emerge outside from the depths of the ocean, acquiring her human form to intervene in Ariel's courting, Ursula's eyes remain a purple-colored reminder of her maliciousness. Regardless of her powers, Ursula is not able to hide her true nature and not even her real appearance, as she sees her reflection when she looks in the mirror (see figure 4).

Figure 4, Ursula seeing her reflection in the mirror, still from The Little Mermaid (1:06:53)

3.3   "Poor Unfortunate Souls"

Ursula's solo song "Poor Unfortunate Souls" accompanies the pivotal moment of Ariel signing the deal with Ursula to trade her voice for human legs. The lyrics prove Ursula disguises her misleading and mischievous intentions as being helpful to "the unfortunate merfolk" (*The Little Mermaid* 40:08–11) who seek help in her power. Through persuasive wordplay, Ursula woos them into impossible contracts, which position her into having the fate of her 'customers' completely in her hands. Chlumská claims in her essay that this conduct is to perceive the antagonist as a "queer sexual

[predator]" (43). Despite Ursula's primary target being overthrowing Triton's reign and taking his place, she is indulged in the idea of owning "pretty little daughter['s]" (*The Little Mermaid* 11:32–36) soul as a trophy in her already extensive collection and, in a sense, Ursula is "seduc[ing] a young woman to the 'dark side'" (Griffin 254).

Ashman's remark featured in the documentary *Howard* (2018) about his life and work sheds a light on his intention to incorporate "more puns and more sophisticated kind of humor" (51:46–49) into the lyrics of "Poor Unfortunate Souls". As the aforementioned "importance of body language" (*The Little Mermaid* 43:18–23) suggests, Ursula's expressions and her ability to use them cunningly are almost breaching the established policy of Disney being an institution producing exclusively family-friendly content. Her comments are tailored for an adult audience to notice them, rather than adding value for a child spectator. In "Poor Unfortunate Souls", Ursula claims: "they weren't kidding when they called [her], well, a witch" (*The Little Mermaid* 40:22–25) with an intended pun on the word 'witch' rhyming with the slur 'bitch'.

Furthermore, when Ariel refers to her father, King Triton, as 'daddy' there is no other implication beyond the word's meaning. On the other hand, when Ursula utters: "We wouldn't want to miss old Daddy's celebration, now, would we?" (11:05–10), she puts such an emphasis on the word 'daddy' that clearly suggests sexual connotation.[5]

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[5] The sexualized connotation of the term 'daddy' dates to the late seventeenth century when sexual workers used it to refer to their bosses and elderly customers. Nonetheless, the word became the most acquainted with sexual undertone in the twentieth century and has its own implication of usage in the LGBTQ+ community itself. (Kibbe)

3.4   "Part of Your World"

As previously mentioned, *The Little Mermaid* gained significant popularity within the LGBTQ+ community. However, it was not only due to Ursula. There are other moments of queer implications in the movie as a whole. At the very beginning of the movie, the tone of fear and uncertainty of the unknown that is hidden in the undersea world is set when the fishermen at Prince Eric's boat acquaint him with the superstition about the existence of merpeople: "Down in the depths of the ocean they live!" (01:59–2:02). They are doubtful and fearful of the unknown and call it "nautical nonsense" (*The Little Mermaid* 01:54–56). The fear of the unknown and different remotely resembles aspects of homophobia.

Ariel is seeking an adventure in the unknown world, where she does not fit in but envies tremendously to belong. The song that expresses her desire to venture into a different world, "Part of Your World", is the 'wish song', that Ashman has written for the story and a few others in the Disney Renaissance era. Even though certain wish songs have already been apparent in Disney movies before, in his take on them, Ashman emphasized the "desire to specifically escape from the dull, conservative parochial values of the everyday" (Griffin 149). The song can be interpreted in many ways, but given the known background of the author, it invites to impose a metaphor of queer people having trouble assimilating into the heteronormative world. This connection becomes more obvious when the story comes to an end where Ursula's villainy is history, Ariel with Eric, at last, have their wedding, and "Part of Your World" is playing in the background, closing the scene with a giant rainbow and the ringing of

last of the last words: "I can be / Part of your world" (*The Little Mermaid* 1:17:54–

1:18:04).

4 Lenny, The Camp Gay

DreamWorks Animation released *Shark Tale* in 2004 as their first fully computer-animated picture. Similarly, to other DreamWorks productions from that period, like *Shrek* (2001), *Shark Tale* works as sort of a patchwork of a plethora of references to many classic movies, such as *Jaws* (1975), *Titanic* (1997) or *The Godfather* (1972). Drawing inspiration from *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Sopranos* (1999) resulted in strong criticism of the stereotypical portrayal of Italians as participants in the mafia business. Nonetheless, such problems are less likely to be noticed by the target audience. The same goes for the hidden meaning of queerness with the side character shark Lenny who is unconventionally depicted as a benign vegetarian.

Shark Tale is, as is common in animation, an allegory about good and evil. On one side, there is a mafia group of sharks, orcas, and octopuses being notorious for threatening the metropole of Southside Reef. On the other, is the rest of the fish including the protagonist of the story, Oscar, a small fish stuck in a rut as a tongue-scrubber at whale wash, who, despite being indebted to his boss Sykes, keeps dreaming of a rich life on the top of the reef.

The boundary of goodness versus evilness is blurred when it comes to shark Lenny, a younger son of Don Lino, the kingpin of the mafia clan. Lenny is struggling with fitting into his role as a cold-blooded killer shark. In an unfortunate turn of events, because of his debts, Oscar is left tied looking like bait, and Lenny's older brother Frankie, in an attempt to show Lenny, what proper sharks do, is killed by an anchor while he tries to kill Oscar. Due to a misunderstanding, Oscar seizes the chance and

proclaims himself to be the one who killed Frankie and gaining overnight fame Oscar is unjustly called the 'The Sharkslayer'.

Feeling guilt over his brother's death, Lenny befriends Oscar and secretly lives with him and avoids Don Lino. In order to maintain Oscar's new image together they stage a scene where Oscar kills Lenny in front of the whole Southside Reef. The rumors about Sharkslayer travel to Don Lino, who wants to take revenge on Oscar for the deaths of his sons. Neither Oscar nor Lenny manages to deceive everyone for a long, and eventually, they are forced to confront reality. Finally, Oscar comes clean about Frankie's death and even persuades Don Lino to respect the different way of Lenny's life.

4.1   Sebastian, The Whale-Washing Dolphin

Although Lenny is written as a side character, his struggle with his lifestyle not meeting the expectations of how a shark should behave accounts for a crucial and highly discussed narrative of the story. From the first seconds, Lenny is introduced as having unusual manners for a shark. Even the opening scene puts Lenny's true nature in contrast with the dramatic soundtrack from *Jaws* playing in the background as Lenny mentions it "gives him the creeps" (02:11–12). Unlike the rest of the sharks, Lenny has a soft, high-pitched voice and talks in diminutive language. For example, when he addresses a worm as a "little buddy" (01:30), remarking he will release him "in a jiffy" (01:38). Lenny does not want to hide his more feminine and gentle behavior and swings his tail and wiggles as he sits on a bar chair, resembling a stereotypical portrayal of homosexual men in the media (*see figure 5).* The rest of Don Lino's gang

seems to be entirely aware of Lenny behaving differently, as they note he is "special" (10:32) in a sarcastic tone. However, as he is the son of their leader, they are reluctant to acknowledge it.

Figure 5, Lenny sitting on a chair, still from Shark Tale (11:12)

As Lugo-Lugo and Bloodsworth-Lugo state in their essay "'Look Out New World, Here We Come'?": "While the issue of Lenny's sexuality is left open in *Shark Tale*, parallels between stereotypical representations of gay men and characteristics displayed by Lenny are played on throughout the film" (173). Those characteristics are, apart from Lenny's mannerism, represented with a stronger emphasis, particularly on the portrayal of his not shark-like eating habits. The way Lenny's vegetarianism is debated in the movie thus creates another reference to homosexuality. Especially, since it is established, that he is not vegetarian by choice but because he becomes nauseous as soon as he merely licks a living being.

Don Lino is far away from coming to terms with this fact. Together with his older brother Frankie, Don Lino tries to force Lenny into being as they think he should be.

Don Lino pushes him to eat shrimp in a restaurant, and at first, Lenny tries to make excuses about being on a diet, so he does not have to tell them that he is a vegetarian. When Lenny eventually causes a scene and frees all the shrimps, Don Lino is embarrassed and orders Frankie to "show him the ropes" (20:42–43) since Lenny must "learn how to be a shark, whether he like[s] it or not" (*Shark Tale* 20:48–50). Therefore, Lenny's position in the narrative can be read as queer-coded, since his vegetarianism puts him in vulnerable situations. He is forced to suppress his nature and is threatened when given the ultimatum that if he does not conform to the expected norm, he is not welcomed at home anymore. These are all common reactions among unaccepting parents of queer people.

Furthermore, Lenny even dresses up as a dolphin at one point in the story. When he wears the dolphin costume, including painting himself blue, he uses it to camouflage the fact that he is a shark in front of the other fish and to keep hiding from his father and his henchmen. Nonetheless, Lenny develops a whole new personality for this new ensemble, which he names Sebastian, the whale-washing dolphin (*see figure 6*). As Lugo-Lugo and Bloodsworth-Lugo assert, "This 'dress up' evokes both the fondness for uniformed men within gay male culture (…) as well as the more general relationship between gay men and drag" (173). Therefore, although Lenny is not exactly cross-dressing when clothing like Sebastian, it brings him comfort since he can finally behave in a way that comes naturally to him.

Figure 6, Lenny as Sebastian, the whale-washing dolphin, still from Shark Tale (1:01:16)

The choice of a dolphin, specifically, is also worth mentioning as dolphins are, in this scenario, perceived as "peaceful, sensitive creatures" (Froehlich). When his identity is revealed in front of the whole gang who is in shock, his father is clearly ashamed of him, exclaiming: "Are you kidding me? Are you out of your mind? Do you have any idea how this looks?" (1:12:01–04), alluding to the betrayal of associating with Frankie's alleged murderer, but also Lenny's choice of disguise. Since dolphins are perceived as frailer than sharks, for Don Lino this again confirms Lenny's weakness.

4.2   Not Belonging

Lenny does not fit in the environment his father represents. He is anything but the typical gang member, a typical shark longing for blood, which "makes him the odd fish out" (Froehlich), and he is constantly being reminded of it. On top of that, he is always being compared to his older brother Frankie, who is exactly how their father wishes them to be: "He's a killer. (…) He does what he's supposed to do" (*Shark Tale* 18:27–

30). Don Lino is embarrassed about Lenny's behavior and makes it apparent when he says to him: "when you look weak, it makes me weak" (*Shark Tale* 00:18:39–41). The metaphor of queer youth facing their families with their identity is also present in the way Lenny faces the ultimatum. He either must learn to be a proper killer, or else he should not "bother coming home" (*Shark Tale* 28:14–17).

Following the unfortunate death of Frankie, Lenny does not return to his father because he knows Don Lino will never accept him the way he did Frankie. Despite changing his surroundings, he nevertheless encounters other difficulties. Considering he is a shark, Lenny cannot easily establish a new life in the city of Southside Reef either. The inhabitants see sharks as a threat, and even Oscar was initially careful when encountering Lenny before he found out he is 'different'. There seems to be no place for him to freely be who he wants to be without being challenged or ridiculed. Finally, when Don Lino declares at the end that he loves Lenny, "no matter what [he] eat[s] or how [he] dress[es]" (1:16:56–58), it works as the climax of the character arc, underlining how big of an importance Lenny's struggles with his place in the world play in the narrative.

4.3 'Coming Out'

Lenny's vegetarianism can certainly be understood as a metaphor for queerness. Lenny is different and must hide it to be accepted anywhere. He is reluctant to confide in Oscar because he is worried about his reaction. When he finally proclaims that "[he's] a vegetarian" (*Shark Tale* 47:48), he seems ashamed and prefers hiding his face rather than being confronted with Oscar's response. Same as Lenny's feelings can be

read as the frustration of queer people experience when coming out to somebody, the choice of words of his confession appears as the duplicate of "I'm gay."

Oscar's initial reaction to Lenny coming out to him is altogether what Lenny dreaded. He seems at first amused by Lenny being a vegetarian and belittles Lenny's struggles. Lenny is distressed and responds with the following: "You're the first fish I ever told. I'm so tired of keeping it all a secret. And my dad...he'll never accept me for who I am" (48:04–08). This line demonstrates the amount of burden Lenny carried with him for a long time without having an ally to confide in.

Although Oscar consoles Lenny about his anxieties, his reaction to Lenny's affectionate demeanor is tactfully settling friendship rules to avoid any of Lenny's "snuggly[ing], buggly[ing]" (*Shark Tale* 46:15). Accordingly, "Oscar thereby distances himself from any 'abnormal' closeness between the two male characters (or two men in general) and designates such closeness as 'icky'" (Lugo-Lugo and Bloodsworth-Lugo 173). Thus, when Oscar explicitly dissociates himself from Lenny's fond behavior towards him, it ostracizes Lenny's conduct. Furthermore, when later in the story Oscar tries to persuade Lenny into helping him preserve his image as the Sharkslayer, Oscar does not hesitate to use Lenny's vulnerability against him in a form of an insult when he addresses him as a "veggie boy" (*Shark Tale* 53:07) in an offensive way.

4.4   Gratuitous Heterosexuality

Compared to the typical storyline of fairy tales, love is not the central motive of *Shark Tale*. The main message of this animated movie is that money does not equal happiness and that you do not have to fit in the mold but make the mold fit instead. Nevertheless,

the story includes a love triangle between the protagonist Oscar, his longtime friend Angie, and Oscar's new suitor Lola. Lola is presented from the start "as a gold-digging, sexually charged vixen" (Froehlich). She is introduced while trying to seduce Oscar as she overhears, that he can win a bet on a race, while the lyrics of the song "Gold Digger": "She's dangerous, super-bad / Better watch out / She'll take your cash / She's a gold-digger" (*Shark Tale* 22:09–14) play in the background. The two female fish, Angie, and Lola are written as each other's competitors over Oscar's love, where Lola is the provocative one and Angie is "the kind of woman with which a man should eventually settle down" (Lugo-Lugo and Bloodsworth-Lugo 172), and of course, Oscar eventually does.

Shark Tale thus contributes to the collection of gratuitous "incorporation of [hetero]sexuality into the narratives of the films when the basic messages could have been served without it" (Lugo-Lugo and Bloodsworth-Lugo 173). Even though it is Angie who opens Oscar's eyes to his senseless chase after fame and wealth, the same could have been achieved if she remained only his friend, since, without the subplot of Oscar's love interests, the rest of the story is sufficient and works regardless.

In addition, Oscar is forcefully portrayed as a hypermasculine pretentious alfa male with two potential love interests. He is, as Lenny refers to him, the "Casanova" (59:30) and the "lover boy" (59:34). While pretending to be the Sharkslayer, Oscar presents himself as a very masculine, courageous, and tough male, particularly in contrast to Lenny, who is quite the opposite and continually asserted as weak

throughout the story. With the emphasis on Oscar's strong masculine expression, Lenny's otherness is highlighted as they both try to find their place in the world.

5 Luca and Alberto, The Buried Gays

The most recent picture out of the three discussed in this thesis is *Luca* (2021), released by Pixar, which was, at that time, already owned by Disney. The movie can already be considered quite progressive as it portrays a person with a disability without defining them by their disability and as it mentions separated parents. Additionally, regardless of the plot focusing on the power of friendship rather than love, its undeniable reflection on the struggles with otherness lends a hand to a queer reading of the story "as an allegory of assimilation" (Willmore).

What is different here, as opposed to the previously analyzed movies, is that the discourse about *Luca* more frequently mentions the term queer baiting than queer coding. Whereas the director of *Luca* Enrico Casarosa said any queer metaphors were completely unintentional (Sandwell), many queer viewers and allies of the LGBTQ+ community felt differently even after just seeing the trailer of the movie. Swiftly, they interpreted the narrative as a queer one when they recognized that it contained "the journey of self-discovery" (Sandwell) and the struggles that queer community faces when trying to assimilate into society or when they confront their family about their sexuality. However, by "denying that [the queer] reading has any validity [the creators are] risk[ing] doing harm to the queer community who already live these darker experiences" (Collington) and for once felt represented in an animated movie.

Similarly to *The Little Mermaid*, *Luca* tells a story of a sea creature, Luca, who is fascinated by what is above the surface of the sea. He dreams of the freedom of exploring the outer world. Luca is introduced as a bashful young sea monster who,

despite being curious, is obedient to his cautious parents until he encounters Alberto, another sea creature, who is the other way around. He is courageous and emerges to the surface regularly. Suddenly, a whole new world full of possibilities is opened to Luca. He discovers that his body trades membrane flippers, tail, and scales for the body of a human when he becomes dry, so he and Alberto can enjoy human activities, such as riding their handmade Vespa motor scooter on an abandoned island.

When Luca's parents find out about his recent expeditions onto the land, they want to send him away because they see his trips as hazardous, and they want to prevent them from happening again. To avoid being punished, Luca runs away with Alberto to a nearby Italian village of Portorosso where they soon realize the people are obsessed with fishing and rewards are offered for catching a sea monster. Sea monsters are seen as fable creatures by many. For this reason, Luca and Alberto carefully blend among the locals, befriend young girl Giulia, and join her in her training for the annual Portorosso Cup triathlon to make money for buying a Vespa motor scooter Luca and Alberto dreamed of having so they could travel the world together.

While Luca is elated with having the chance to see the world through human eyes, Alberto shortly becomes jealous of the bond Luca and Giulia develop and he uncovers his own real identity to Giulia to show Luca she is like the rest, scared of them. Luca betrays Alberto and pretends to be shocked, hurting Alberto's feelings. Finally, when it starts to rain during the actual race, Alberto comes back to apologize and saves Luca with an umbrella, but both of them are revealed as sea monsters to the whole

village. After initially frightened looks, the villagers accept them, and Luca eventually leaves to study at school in Genoa, leaving Alberto behind to live with Giulia's father.

5.1 The Gay Role Model

To Luca, Alberto symbolizes everything he desires. He is free of the restraints of careful parents; he is fearless and knows much of the human world. Judging by their looks, the ages of Luca and Alberto are fairly similar. Therefore, it is for the experience that Luca perceives Alberto as his role model. When they meet for the first time, Luca addresses Alberto as "sir" (09:52), implying Luca's respect and admiration towards Alberto. After all, it is Alberto who finally prompts Luca to try and go above the surface and shows him how to walk or shake hands. He also introduces Luca to Vespa, a motor scooter that turns out to be the thing that drives them to pursue their dream of freely traveling the world together. He simply introduces Luca to the newness that comes with the human world since Alberto considers himself to be an expert on it.

For these reasons, Alberto, in a way, represents the mentor figure in Luca's life. Although mentors tend to be older than their apprentices, it is his experience that makes him Luca's role model, a figure frequently essential in the life of queer youth person as they navigate through the novelties of obstacles they meet on their way to self-discovery, and Luca's path for self-discovery was paved by Alberto's lived, though limited experience. Alberto pushes Luca out of his comfort zone and motivates him to overcome his fears about the unknown. Having no other advocate for pursuing his dreams, Luca trusts Alberto, quite literally with his life, when driving down the steep hill on their own-built replica of the Vespa.

Admiring him, Luca even starts to imitate Alberto, as one does with their idol. He does what Alberto tells him to do while assuring him that "[Luca] just gotta follow [his] lead" (*Luca* 28:48–50). If Alberto jumps above the surface while swimming towards Portorosso, so does curious Luca; if Alberto yells the phrase they caught from humans: "What's wrong with you *stupido*?" (*Luca* 28:42–43) at passer-byes, so does Luca. In a sequence of scenes where they enjoy the adventures alone on the abandoned island, Luca is depicted mimicking Alberto's signature pyramid hairstyle (*see figure 7*), which essentially demonstrates the intensity of their relatively new bond, which is by some presumed to be the portrayal of the first instances of queerness in the early life of a queer child. As a queer reviewee from the *YouTube* channel AreTheyGay mentions in his reaction video to *Luca*, "Alberto helps Luca discover a side of himself he didn't know he had. He's helping him overcome internalized self-hatred in a way" (11:43–51).

Figure 7, Luca (left) imitating Alberto (right), still from Luca (19:37)

5.2   The Chosen Family

A prevalent theme in the story of the young fugitives is the founding of a new or substitute family. After learning about Luca's recent visits to the dry land, his parents decide to send Luca live with his uncle in the depths of the sea. In this world, the fear felt by humans towards the mythical sea monsters is reciprocated by the sea creatures themselves. Therefore, Luca's parents only mean to protect him. Luca wants the exact opposite. Now that he has had the experience of what possibilities the outer world offers, he wants to see more, so he seeks refuge in Alberto. Together they further find shelter in Portorosso, more precisely at the house of their new human friend Giulia, a fellow outsider, who comes for the holidays to Portorosso to see her father Massimo, a fisherman obsessed with catching a sea monster, and for years she unsuccessfully aims to win the annual Portorosso Cup race.

Giulia defends them against the local bully Ercole, she provides them with shelter and food, and most importantly, she does not judge them after she discovers who they really are, despite her initial internal fears. For various reasons, for many queer people, the chosen family substitutes or complements the biological one. The family of origin they have had might not accept them, they might even evict them, or the queer individual lacks the support system, usually provided by the immediate family, which is needed as guidance through life. Usually, this chosen family consists of the closest friends as people prioritize and "emphasize friendship over blood and legal ties" (Hull and Ortyl).

From the beginning, Luca envies Alberto's freedom. It is only towards the end of the story when the viewer learns the reality of Alberto's father abandoning him since Alberto is "old enough to be on [his] own" (*Luca* 1:08:22–23) already. Thus, even though it was Luca who needed help to escape, it is Alberto who truly gets a new family out of it. When he slowly settles in Portorosso with Luca, Giulia's father, Massimo, gradually starts to care for him. After Alberto leaves, anxious about Luca's betrayal, Massimo seems to be concerned for him and looks for him. The bond Alberto and Massimo have formed even deepens when Alberto stays with him after Luca leaves for school with Giulia.

A further look at how their newfound relationship further developed is offered in the adjacent short movie called *Ciao, Alberto* (2021). It captures how Alberto struggles with feeling guilty about his father's abandonment, which he subsequentially projects onto his new bond with Massimo. Following an accident where Alberto burns Massimo's fishing boat, Alberto expects Massimo to force him to move out of his house. Nonetheless, when they get to have a heart-to-heart conversation, Alberto in heat addresses Massimo as "dad" (*Ciao, Alberto* 4:37). Massimo is touched by this moment and they share a loving embrace. Alberto blames the way he is for being abandoned by his biological father since he is "the kid that ruins everything" (*Luca* 01:08:44–46). By reassuring him Massimo brings a sense of stability to his life. Because of that, and the level of reciprocal closeness they have reached Massimo now represents the father figure in Alberto's life.

The inclusion of the subtopic of the chosen family is significant for the queer portrayal because of the reason why exactly Luca and Alberto need one. Luca's parents want to send him "[a]way from everything [he] love[s]" (*Luca* 37:01–02), including Alberto. Massimo represents the new family environment Alberto needs after living for a long time in despair on his own, abandoned by his father, and left with the guilt of not being good enough for him, just as he is.

5.3   Assimilation versus Getaway

Notwithstanding their human appearance, Luca and Alberto occur to be oppressed by the local bully. Ercole, the potential antagonist of the movie, is hateful towards everyone, especially Giulia, as he defeats her every year in the Portorosso Cup and constantly ridicules her for it. When Luca and Alberto arrive in the village, Ercole instantly grows suspicious of them, claiming "[they are] hiding something" (*Luca* 57:35–36). During an encounter occurring in a dark alley at night, Ercole and his sidekicks confront Luca and Alberto, attempting to scare them away, since "[n]obody wants [them there], idioti!" (*Luca* 58:12–14). It reaches a point when to protect Luca, Alberto gets punched in his stomach by Ercole while being pinned to the wall by Ercole's companions. Apart from minding they are not local and that they are, in fact, different than others, Ercole's intentions remain vague.

This scene demonstrates the hatred aimed at the members of the LGBTQ+ community, which can escalate into violent attacks. Similar acts of violence have been previously depicted in many other movies, such as *Defying Gravity* (1997) where a homosexual college student is brutally attacked by fraternity boys. Therefore, in *Luca*,

Ercole represents the oppressor and the frustration that comes with the assimilation of the minorities, sexual ones or not, into society.

Luca is ready to adapt his life to fit into the human world. He is intrigued by Giulia's life; he wants to study at school with her. He is willing to keep masquerading his real identity in order to blend in. On the other hand, Alberto is not keen to maintain this lifestyle. He discourages Luca from leaving for school, insisting Luca will never belong. Alberto warns Luca about what "is gonna happen when they see [his] fish face" (*Luca* 57:20–21). Meaning that the reality is that they will always remain the monsters anywhere they go. Alberto grows dependent on the exclusive friendship he created with Luca. He wants to travel the world on Vespa with him, just as they fantasized on the island, "to live on [their] own. (…) [They] don't need anybody" (*Luca* 57:07–13).

The portrayal of their conflicted approach towards the challenges of being the minority might suggest the choices between assimilation or liberation that many queer individuals faced in the past, and some might still confront to this day. Oppression is inherently connected with queer history. Whether the community is oppressed by the homophobic public, or on a personal level, by resentful family or restrictive religion. Hence the decision between adjustment at the expanse of suppressing one's identity or leaving else, since "[f]or many, the gay world was reduced to a setting where they shared an affliction" (D'Emilio 53).

When the friendship Luca and Alberto struck is disrupted by Giulia's presence, Alberto immediately takes skeptical stance toward her and sees her as a threat to his and Luca's bond. Up till their arrival in the village of Portorosso, Alberto was the one

for Luca to look up to. Even though Alberto's knowledge about humans is scarce, for Luca he was the one who knew everything. Nonetheless, his place is now assumed by Giulia and Alberto struggles to deal with her influence on Luca. Alberto shows moments of jealousy every time he witnesses Giulia and Luca becoming closer and bonding over their mutual passion, education. He perceives their newfound friendship as jeopardizing his own with Luca. Although jealousy is not exclusive to romantic relationships, this can be read as an implication that Alberto and Luca might have developed something stronger than just a friendship bond.

5.4   The Reveal and Acceptance

There are several moments in the story of *Luca* where the sea creatures reveal their authentic, monster-like features. Each of them is delivered under different circumstances receiving distinct reactions, adding another value to the narrative. When Alberto reveals himself in anger in front of Giulia, she is terrified, screaming: "Don't hurt us!" (1:04:20–21). Although when moments later, she realizes that Luca is also a sea monster, the fear is directly replaced by concern about the safety of her new friends. A concern about what the villagers could do if they found out about them.

During the Portorosso Cup race, when Luca must choose to either stay sheltered from the rain or finish the race exposed to everyone, Alberto dramatically runs to rescue him with an umbrella. Afterward, Ercole shoves Alberto to the ground, revealing him, this time to an entire audience of on-lookers. To save him, Luca reveals himself too, picking Alberto up on his bike and, in a way, sacrificing himself for him. Despite the pouring rain, the scene represents the momentous instant of romantic affection in

many other love-centered animated stories for children, where "heterosexuality is glorified" (Martin and Kazyak 333). The significance of the similar moment in *Luca* is emphasized by slow-motion when Luca reaches for Alberto's hand to pick him up onto the bicycle, accompanied by soft, dramatic, and victorious music.

Escaping the deadly harpoons of greedy Ercole, Luca and Alberto make it to the finish line together, and thanks to Massimo, who the second he recognizes them immediately sees no threat, they are ensured safety and declared the winners of the race. This moment of acceptance is not significant solely to Luca and Alberto. After the villagers finally accept them, an elderly pair of females put down their umbrella with a sense of relief, revealing they have been living as sea monsters in pretending in the human world. They have been hiding like this assumingly for a long time, but only now they are encouraged by the town's reaction and the boys' bravery, to show who they truly are (*see figure 8*). The revealed pair being, coincidentally or not, two women contributes to the queer reading, but it does not define it. More importantly, their relief and the decision to 'come out' is what draws attention to the relevance of acceptance of the minority in the narrative. As Luca's grandmother says, "[s]ome people, they'll never accept [Luca]. But some will. And he seems to know how to find the good ones" (*Luca* 01:20:12–21).

Figure 8, pair of female sea monsters revealing themselves, still from Luca (1:19:20)

5.5   Happy Ever Never

Neither the small, abandoned island nor Portorosso is enough for Luca and Alberto. They dreamed of buying the Vespa motor scooter, and the ultimate goal for them was to travel the world *together*, as only then "[they] can be free" (*Luca* 37:05–06). Considering that, the story ends on a bitter-sweet note.

Being accepted by the majority is the uplifting part of the end of the story. Luca's family and Giulia's father have dinner together on the land. Alberto has found himself a new family, Luca has reconciled with his parents, and he can go to study with Giulia in Genoa, miles away from Alberto. Instead of using the money from winning the race to buy the Vespa, Alberto sacrifices their dreams and hopes to surprise Luca by paying for his education. Considering the profound friendship they have been building throughout the whole story, it can be said that their fate represents a restrained version of the 'bury your gays' trope. They might eventually be content as individuals,

each having what they desired, but they have to separate to pursue those goals. Regarding the main plot of the movie, their friendship is far from 'happy ever after'.

In addition, the circumstances of their farewells demonstrate how heartbroken they are about their separation. They say their final goodbyes at the train station when it is again pouring rain, and Luca learns he is leaving together with Giulia but without Alberto. Luca's reaction is that "[he] can't do it without [Alberto]" (01:22:57–58), followed by tears rushing to their eyes and a long embrace. In the very last seconds, they hold each other's hands until they no longer can, and Luca vanishes in a tunnel, heading to Genoa (see figure 9).

Figure 9, Luca and Alberto saying farewells, still from Luca (1:23:43)

Their parting resembles the 'train station goodbye' trope, which depicts the farewells of mostly heterosexual and often ill-fated lovers at the train station upon the departure of one of them. This trope is featured in multiple heteronormative romantic plots of movies such as the classic *Since you went away* (1944). More recently it was depicted in *Call me by your name* (2017), a story of the summer romance of two young

men in northern Italy. This movie has been compared to *Luca* many times since they are both featuring two main male characters, forming some kind of relationship on the sunny Italian riviera. Some people perceive *Luca* as the child-friendly, platonic version of *Call me by your name* because of the undeniable "shared qualities" (Surrey).

6 Progressing or Stuck in Time?

6.1 The Ever-Going Outcasts

An ongoing theme among all the queer-coded characters from the three discussed movies is that they all remain the outcasts in their environments, regardless of the thirty years separating the oldest movie and the most recent one released. In *The Little Mermaid*, Ursula emphasizes she has been banished from King Triton's kingdom; thus, despite being generally ostracized as the villain of the story, she is, on top of that, rejected from a smaller circle of society, specifically for "her bad nature" (Chlumská 42). Lenny from *Shark Tale* is also generally feared as a shark, but more importantly, he is rejected by his family. Similarly, in *Luca*, Alberto is rejected by his father and Luca also struggles with acceptance by his parents. Additionally, they are also dreaded as a whole species, oppressed by most of the human race. The discussed queer-coded characters gradually upgrade their roles in the story. They develop throughout the thesis from a villain to a side character, and finally to protagonists, while they all remain the outcasts, in some way or another.

All of them handle this situation by replacing the missing company with a new one. Instead of accommodating themselves to fit in the certain group or society that somehow rejects their personality, lifestyle, or dreams, they find a new one, the 'chosen family'. This element is primarily apparent in the narrative of *Luca*, as both Alberto and Luca seek acceptance. Furthermore, in *The Little Mermaid*, Ursula is portrayed as secluded but getting some help in her evil plans from her minions, two pet moray eels, who seem to be the only ones occupying her presence, making her less of a lonely

creature. For Lenny, the substitute of a figure offering support is Oscar, the protagonist of the story, who, in addition to that, is the one who ensures him the eventual acceptance by Lenny's father. Therefore, all of them have found their own allies to support them in withstanding the obstacles in their storylines.

Regardless of all the analyzed characters somehow fitting the form of an outcast, the way how exactly these characters are queer-coded has nevertheless developed. Queer coding is usually described as using attributes that are stereotypically employed to describe the members of the LGBTQ+ community in the media. However, the means of coding character queer do not have to be necessarily stereotypical. It is difficult to determine whether Ursula is portrayed stereotypically since she is openly inspired by the drag culture. Nevertheless, considering the period of the Disney Renaissance, it was most certainly typical for Disney to queer code the *villains* of their stories, in particular at the time of the release.

The difference is more apparently conspicuous when comparing *Shark Tale* and *Luca*. Lenny's behavior and mannerisms are depicted as those stereotypically used for the portrayal of homosexual men, and they are at the same time ridiculed and belittled. Whereas in *Luca,* the audience detected the portrayal of more authentic real-life experiences of the queer youth, rather than the depiction of solely queer-coded characters. Much as the shift towards more accurate potential representation is welcomed, it makes the queer coding less stereotypical, thus harder to get recognized by an average viewer who, without the enlightenment of such experiences, might see these portrayals as subtler or not present at all. On the other hand, while this kind of

portrayal makes it furtherer away from being overt to some, those who seek representation see it as a step toward witnessing explicitly queer characters in mainstream animation.

6.2   Self-Interpretation

While the influence of a queer author is known and apparent, in the process of creating the character of Ursula as the impersonation of drag queen Divine, when it comes to the movie *Luca*, the director Enrico Casarosa has contrarily debunked any accusation of queer baiting and proclaimed any readings of the story as a metaphor for queerness as inadvertent (Clair). However, when artists release their works into the world, it is not entirely on them anymore to decide how people will perceive the piece of art and what meaning it will eventually hold to them, "[t]hat can open the door for unintended queer readings of any work, but once it reaches its audience, it's out of the creators' hands" (Collington). The interpretation of art heavily depends on a personal stance towards a rendered topic or one's individual background, since any gained knowledge and each lived experience allows one to perceive a situation from a different angle, with different pair of glasses.

Queer coding leaves plenty of space for self-interpretation and projecting one's personal biases, especially with the type of depiction seen in *Luca*. The creators claim the goal "was to make a story about friendship and for the sea monsters to be an allegory for being a general outsider" (Clair), hence all children who are different and do not fit in among others. While the theme of the outsider is discernible in the storyline, with even Giulia herself calling them the "underdogs (…) kids who are

different" (*Luca* 33:12–15), some people have connected the dots and found the metaphor applicable to the troubles that come with fitting in as queer young, or even an adult.

7 Conclusion

With queer coding still being in use more than fifty years after the withdrawal of the Motion Picture Production Code, creators of animated movies seem to still employ this strategy in their work to avoid an explicit representation of queer community when it comes to children's audience. The history of queer coding in animation dates back to the 1940s and the way it is utilized on screen has not come a long way towards ground-breaking progress.

The first part of the thesis provided the crucial terminology for comprehending the discussed issues. Besides terminology, it had focused on the history of queer coding, starting with the impact that the implementation of the Motion Picture Production Code in Hollywood had on the movie industry and specifically the animated production. The theoretical part also highlighted the multiple types of stock characters and tropes that have been developed as a result of years of coding characters as queer, and that are later applied to the analyzed characters.

The theory part was followed by analyses of each of the chosen movies. The first one was the analysis of Ursula from *The Little Mermaid* (1989), whose direct connection to drag culture, given the inspiration by the cult drag queen Divine, makes her the queer-coded antagonist, fitting the stock character of 'sissy villain'. Ursula's queerness is apparent in both her bodily and personal expressions, and her outcome was heavily impacted by the influence of openly homosexual creator Howard Ashman, who contributed to Ursula's final appearance resembling Divine, but also with the lyrics of her camp song "Poor Unfortunate Souls", which with its wittiness and maturity

underline Ursula's aggressive femininity, as well as the lyrics of the main soundtrack "Part of Your World", which is the 'wish song', that is often interpreted as a queer metaphor for assimilation.

The next analysis focused on the character of Lenny from DreamWorks' *Shark Tale* (2004), which portrays a benign shark with effeminate mannerisms who is also a vegetarian. Not only do the challenges Lenny has to face resemble the hardship a queer person experiences when being ridiculed and belittled for their differences, but also the way he decides to confess about his lifestyle resembles a 'coming out' when he finds an ally in his new fish-friend Oscar, who helps Lenny to gain respect from his father.

The following chapter analyzed the movie *Luca* (2021), which follows the close friendship of two sea monster boys, Luca and Alberto, who face the dangers of the unwelcoming human town to make enough money to travel the world together. Luca is busy forming a new friendship with the human girl Giulia, while Alberto starts to get jealous of her, and in dispute with Luca, he reveals his own true identity to her. When they eventually reconcile as they are forced to 'come out' to the whole village, they are surprisingly accepted by the majority. This analysis demonstrated that the queerness in *Luca* is carried throughout the whole narrative, rather than placed solely upon the characters. Their adventures represent the struggles of the queer community to fit in, making the narrative a metaphor for the assimilation of the minorities. Additionally, the new 'allies' Luca and Alberto found among humans perform as their new 'chosen family'.

The final chapter discussed the results of the findings, claiming the similarity of the characters in preserving the role of the 'outcasts', and all having to substitute the lack of support they are getting as a result of their otherness. Additionally, it considered the significance of self-interpretation, which allows the viewer of media to perceive movies accordingly to their personal experience and stance towards the given topic.

The thorough analyses of Ursula, Lenny, and Luca with Alberto present proofs of queer coding occurring in all three movies, with each being released in a different decade. Despite each picture providing the character with a different role, the status of the 'outcast' is present in all of them. While Ursula is the villain of the story that is ostracized by the undersea kingdom because of her otherness and evil nature, Lenny, the main side character, is dismissed by his father for being a vegetarian, overtly expressing behavior stereotypical for the portrayal of homosexual men. Luca and Alberto are the protagonists of the story, and they are mainly confronted with the degradation by the majority as they are having difficulties assimilating among humans while being the dreaded sea monsters.

In conclusion, despite ongoing similarities that appeared in all three analyzed movies, the mainstream animation seems to be heading into feature where queer representation in children movies might be an option that is not outrageous and daring, but that widens the possibilities of the narrative and introduces a diverse world to children, that waits for them outside of the screen.

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