A NEW CULTURAL AWARENESS IN DREAMWORKS' *SHREK*

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Abstract

DreamWorks missions is to "tell stories about dreams and the journeys unconventional heroes take to make them come true" (the DreamWorks Animation LLC n.d.). In other words, it uses its authority and influence to offer its audience an unexpected experience, where beliefs and principles are moulded in order to adapt to the surrounding culture and values. Although there are voices that condemn certain film studios for employing a particular set of features within its narratives that emphasise the stereotypes mass media tried so hard to resolve, one may notice the emergence of movies or fairy tales that display a gradual change or shift from the previous pieces of animated films we have been accustomed to. The DreamWorks' film Shrek, chosen as corpus for this study, intends to provide a different perspective, a caricature of the traditionally-animated films, all deftly masked by comical, fictional elements.

Keywords: *mass media, stereotype, Otherness, feminism, non-normative body*

INTRODUCTION

Imagology "studies the origin and functions of characteristics of other countries and peoples, as expressed textually, particularly in the way in which they are presented in works of literature, plays, poems, travel books and essays" (Beller and Leerssen, 2007: 7). Working with Beller's argument, it might be said that imagology offers proof that national stereotypes are initially and successfully created and disseminated in the field of literary representation. Thus, literature, as well as more recent fictional-narrative media such as cinema, turns into an 'authorized' genre that perpetuates stereotypes, because it relies on the assumption that readers, or viewers, often suspend disbelief when becoming involved with any forms of fiction.

Therefore, the actual materialization of imagology as a critical study can only take place once people discard their "belief in the 'realness' of national characters as explanatory models", since they are constructed upon personal suppositions and not on strict observation (21). Unavoidable gaps in the rendering of the characteristics and traits of a national character as a cultural stereotype appear as a consequence of the explicit or less explicit traces of subjectivity. However, this subjectivity should not be ignored or explained, but taken into account, for imagology considers the attributes concerning a particular nation as textual tropes, and not as accurate, provable data. For Leerssen, imagological discourse becomes "imaginated discourse", which offers an explanation of cultural difference, by singling out a given nation as 'different', on the one hand, and, on the other, by offering 'typical' characteristics of and collective-psychological motivation for the national features (28).

In this respect, cultural difference has come to be studied in terms of attitudes and perceptions. For that reason, imagologists are particularly interested in understanding the dynamics between hetero-images, namely the images which characterize the Stranger, and self-images or auto-images, identified as those which illustrate one's own private identity. Both spected, that which is represented, and spectant, that which is representing, stand for literary conventions not for social realities.

One may say that Aristotle's theory represents the core of all philosophical discussions regarding image and representation. It is Aristotle who suggests that all images undergo a process of coding and decoding in one's mind or soul, the result being an internalized image 'exposed' to subjectivity. Consequently, these mental images create in their turn a cultural 'reality' expressed through one's limited perception and understanding. It is on the observation of Others and the comparison to oneself that cultural representations emerge.

In literary criticism, it is argued that an image of the other is language about the other in that they are both made up of signifying units which acquire meaning in a particular context. The discourse of the other is caught up between the real and the fictional, as the author makes use of various elements that are partly reproductions of its referents, while other features are the simple result of his subjective understanding of the world. In consequence, writing about the other may prove to be an oversimplified, deformed, stereotypical process reduced to the identification of certain permanent features, such as employing particular/ individual notions in a generalized/ collective context, opposing cultures on a scale of values, or using adjectival epithets which denote the essential traits.

Being constantly influenced by judgement and feelings, and thus evoking a distorted reality, the image should also be seen in a larger cultural context. Although image studies do not place considerable interest in the various degrees of faithfulness between the image and the reality it describes, they do focus on the cultural and social function of the image. As the result of social perception, the image needs to be analysed in relation to the culture that produced and influenced it.

But what is the connection between culture and representation? In *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Stuart Hall argues that language, seen not only as the language that one speaks, or writes, but also that of images, sound, gestures and clothes, is the most important medium that sustains the representation of ideas and feelings at the level of culture. Being a "representational system", language facilitates the dialogue between people, allowing them to create and interpret the world in similar ways, based on their shared understanding of signs and symbols. (1997: 1) Meaning occurs due to the shared abstract maps which members of a culture have in common. Being constantly shaped by personal or social interactions, meaning is tied up with the understanding of our own identity, of who we are. Meaning is constructed through two systems of representation. One corresponds to the mental representation of concepts without which one could not decode the world, and the other involves language as the second system through which the shared conceptual map is translated.

However, meaning has no 'life' of its own, just like concepts have no fixed or true meaning, until it has been represented. Thus, representation is one of the most important aspects of the communicating process, where meaning is produced and shared with members of a culture through the use of signs. In short, representation is the connection between language and ideas or feelings, by which one is able to refer to or interpret the real or imaginary world.

The present study attempts to analyse the language of DreamWorks' animated movie, Shrek (2001), in order to see how the media not only constructs identity, but also becomes a means of expressing it, leaving the impression that anything can be possible, that perfection can be achieved.

It is because of the film's heterogeneous matter of expression, translated by its hundreds of shots, interweaved with phonetic sound, written materials, and music, that it grows to be a precise medium for conveying thoughts, feelings and social conventions.

THE CASE OF *SHREK*

Premiered at the 2001 Cannes Film Festival, the American computer-animated film *Shrek* earned $484 million worldwide, becoming the fourth highest-grossing film of 2001. Widely praised by critics, *Shrek* won the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature, BAFTA's Best Adapted Screenplay and received six award nominations from the British Academy of Film and Television Arts. Its success was mainly brought forward by the strong ideas and vivid, humorous images that portray individuality, the acceptance of cultural difference and unmasking the pervasive stereotypes the world has tried so hard to dismantle.

The blockbuster DreamWorks film, *Shrek* is the story of a terrifying green ogre who lives in a swamp. When the evil Lord Farquaad exiles all the fairy tale creatures into the woods, Shrek finds himself forced to set off on a quest and rescue princess Fiona for the ruler of Duloc in order to get his land back.

Based on William Steig's smart-kids' story, *Shrek* departs from the classic fairy tale narrative, where the hero and his noble steed rescue the princess from a dragon-guarded tower, only to be deconstructed at every step: the valiant knight is an Ogre, the stallion is replaced by a talking donkey, the terrifying, fire-breathing dragon just needs love, and the cursed princess permanently transforms into an Ogre. In view of the fact that *Shrek* is constructed as a fairy tale, preserving the themes of the hero and the damsel in distress, the quest, talking animals, mask/disguise or transformation, just to name a few, it should be emphasized that the film also provides the audience with introductory examples meant to ease the understanding of societal norms, gender roles and stereotypes, just like a fairy tale.

If we are to consider that most fairy tales portray unrealistic and stereotyped representations that force the reader to identify himself with these typecast gender roles from an early age, *Shrek* proposes a new approach, one that aims at a social and cultural critique about social exclusion. The producers of this movie attempt to tackle social and cultural issues in a constructive way, showing that there is an alternative to stereotyping and marginalization. By making substantial use of humour and explicit references to other texts, Shrek perfectly challenges inequalities, social norms and the way in which the Stranger/Other is perceived by society, at the same time celebrating cultural difference.

The film begins like a traditional fairy tale with the image of a fairy tale story book, recalling the first shots of many Disney films:

> Once upon a time, there was a lovely princess. But she had an enchantment upon her of a fearful sort which could only be broken by love's first kiss. She was locked away in a castle guarded by a terrible fire-breathing dragon. Many brave knights had attempted to free her from this dreadful prison, but none prevailed. She waited in the dragon's keep, in the highest room of the tallest tower, for her true love, and true love's first kiss (Shrek, 2001, 00:00:46 – 00:01:25).

Nevertheless, this typical fairy tale opening scene is where Shrek's resemblance to a fairy tale ends. As the pages turn, an offscreen narrator tells the tale, before a large green hand suddenly tears a page from the book in laughter, revealing the narrator as the main character, Shrek: "yeah, like that's ever gonna happen. What a load of …" before being cut off by the sound of a flush, leading the audience to believe that he had used the page as toilet paper (00:01:26 – 00:01:30). However, the torn page may very well stand for the desire to rewrite (his)story by exposing the problematics of gender, identity and body.

As the film presents itself as an anti-fairy tale, the perspective it puts forth is one that clashes against social norms. Although the producers depict Shrek as proud, independent and content character, he is nevertheless seen as the Other from the very beginning: washing his body with mud instead of soap, squeezing a bug and using its contents to brush his teeth, savouring a meal and a martini in his comfortable, isolated cottage. His secluded swamp, surrounded by "Keep Out" and "Beware the Ogre" signs, stands for his social exclusion. Moreover, by putting the signs himself, Shrek emphasizes his acceptance of being an unwanted outcast and thus distances himself from society. The film's narrative plays upon the principle of *differentiation* (when the Other is described as different), the main character assuming his role of Other, that of a frightening and dangerous creature, a stereotyped image affirmed by the dominant culture:

> **VILLAGER**
>
> Do you know what that thing can do to you? […] it'll grind your bones for his bread!
>
> **SHREK**
>
> Yes, well, actually, that would be a giant. Now, Ogres, oh they're much worse. They'll make a suit from your freshly peeled skin. [...] They'll shave your liver. Squeeze the jelly from your eyes! Actually, it's quite good on toast.
>
> **VILLAGER**
>
> Back beast, back! I warn you! (00:04:05 – 00:04:29).

Shrek's encounter with the townspeople who came to kill him but, instead, freeze in place, staring at him, may be read through Garland-Thomson's theory, according to which "staring is the effort to make

sense of the inexplicable, to craft a narrative of recognition from incoherence" (2005). In other words, the stare results from the encounter between the members of the master culture and the Other, the monsters depicted as captivating and disturbing at the same time, an image that compels people to be unable to look away. On the one hand, the reaction of the villagers outlines their inability to differentiate between giants and ogres, both being stereotyped as they are associated with the figure of the monster, a non-normative body. On the other hand, they reinforce the idea that monstrosity is a socially constructed perception, a condition that is based purely on aesthetics. In this respect, Shrek defines himself through the image of the others, forming a visual identity from the response of those around him, from the stares, words and their attitude.

Although Shrek gracefully accepts his social position, his humour underlines the problematizing process of otherization: Shrek is an Ogre, an inhumanly large monster who is recognisable in fairy tales as a source of fear. He is rejected by society from the same reason all the magical creatures are exiled from the Kingdom of Farquaad: their identity is otherized and they do not fit into the "perfect world" Lord Farquaad wishes to create. Individuals who are not in perfect harmony with social or gender norms are excluded from society and exist on its margins. Society's outsiders, like Pinocchio, Big Bad Wolf, Humpty Dumpty, Muffin Man, Little Red Riding Hood, Three Little Pigs, Three Blind Mice, Gingerbread Man, Magic Mirror, witches and fairies, are merely traditional fairy tale creatures and their presence is not by accident. As fairy tales are stories read to children in order to teach them moral lessons, they became an important element in forming the identity of their readers. Thus, through the deliberate use of intertextual references, the producers of *Shrek* import aspects from our reality into the diegetic, animated world in order to convey meaning. By making substantial use of explicit references to other texts, particularly children ones, a striking contrast is created between the childhood innocence represented by the fairy tale characters enacting the references and the social critique that transpires. As a result, Shrek proves to be pervasively double-coded, its multiple layers adding depth and meaning and, at the same time, exposing the subjectivity of the text. Through humour, intertextuality and parody, *Shrek* attempts to deconstruct the idea that, in fairy tales, characters are stereotyped by the task that is assigned to them, as if they are suitable to perform just a particular role in society.

If Shrek is initially portrayed as a carefree, optimistic character who accepts his seclusion from society with pride, his adventures cast light on his continuous anguish. His quest to save the princess is only a pretext for the search of one's identity, during which Shrek reveals emotions that, not only, attribute human characteristics to an otherwise dehumanized 'creature', but they also influence the audience into feeling sympathetic towards him. "As an ogre, Shrek's assignment is to be ugly, evil, and scary, and he largely fulfils this mission with his super-sized, green body, bulbous nose, and protruding ears" (Fowkes, 2010, 117-118). Yet, appearance may be deceitful. Shrek is aware that he is just playing an imposed role and that, underneath all those "onion layers", he is actually a nice guy whose feelings are hurt every time he is rejected for his physical appearance:

> **DONKEY**
>
> What's your problem Shrek? What do you have against the whole world, anyway?
>
> **SHREK**
>
> I'm not the one with the problem. It's the world that seems to have a problem with me. People take one look at me and go "Arrrgh! Help! Run! A big stupid ugly ogre!" They judge me before they even know me. That's why I'm better off alone (Shrek, 2001, 00:27:33; 00:47:55 – 00:48:20).

Although his non-normative body prevents him from being accepted by society, he experiences a process of acculturation as he tries to 'adopt' the image and discourse of the Spectant. Shrek's ambition to integrate is demonstrated by his imitation of their dress code and the fundamental human customs, manners and etiquette (he brushes his teeth, uses the toilet, sits at a dinner table and eats with a fork and a knife). In Bhabha's terms, Shrek's action indicates a form of mimicry, in an attempt to proclaim sameness; but, in fact, all he does is enact difference, allowing the Spectant's power to assert itself. The fact that Shrek is aware that he plays by the rules of the humans and that he accepts it as a given serve as emphasis for the authority of the Spectant over the Spected and for the minimising of his individuality.

While Shrek becomes what Bhabha calls a 'mimic man', for he struggles to produce what humans do naturally, his marginalization is not as perceptible as that of the other fairy tale creatures who remain unnamed throughout the entire narrative (nevertheless, the audience is fully aware of their identity). This category is almost imperceptible for they are described as a group with no individual traits, no voice, and consequently no right to think. Even if they might not even be considered actual characters in this narrative, for they do not act, they are symbols of the peripheral, vulnerable Other. On the one hand, their presence simply reinforces the idea that stereotypes diminish one's value and, on the other, the unnamed fairy tales creatures invite the adult viewer to decode the role and meaning of the characters who they grew up with.

However, the film does not focus its criticism solely on fairy tales. Shrek features many unflattering references to Disney's classics considered to be racist and sexist. Fiona, like most Disney princesses, is assigned a specific role, that of the virtuous beauty who passively awaits to be rescued by a valiant knight. Locked in the highest tower (a must-have element), her only desire seems to be the overrated true love's kiss. Much to her disappointment, she is saved by the 'Other' who is far from the image of the famous knight in shining armour: Shrek does not act in a courtly way, he did not slay the dragon and, most importantly, he fails to deliver the awaited kiss.

The fairy tale formula is further disrupted when the audience understands that Fiona too distances herself from her prescribed role. If she initially fits the princess-like pattern, with her nice-looking features, tiny waist, flowing dress, the narrative gradually reveals the image of a reinterpreted princess who turns into an ogre every night when the sun goes down. This modernising plot twist sheds light on numerous aspects – the beauty and the beast model, gender stereotyping and the marriage contract, just to name a few.

The love story between Shrek and Fiona is definitely not an innovative element, as many fairy tales and Disney films previously paired a beautiful woman and a monster. In *Beauty and the Beast*, the monstruous male character is redeemed by Belle's pure, unconditional love and is turned back into the attractive prince he once was. Not only does true love reverse the curse, but the character regains his initial physical appearance. This is not the case with DreamWorks's couple where the producers decided to shift the roles: it is no longer the male character who is turned into a monster, but the leading female one. As Fiona confesses to Donkey, she has been cursed to turn into an ogre every night and only the kiss from her true love can give her proper form back. Nevertheless, the viewers soon learn that Fiona, just like Shrek, is permanently assigned a non-normative body and her beautiful, princess-like form shall not be 'restored'.

> 'By night one way, by day another. This shall be the norm, until you find true love's first kiss and then take love's true form.' […] It's a spell. When I was a little girl, a witch cast a spell on me. Every night I become this, this horrible, ugly beast! I was placed in a tower to await the day my true love would rescue me. That's why I have to marry Lord Farquaad tomorrow before the sun sets and he sees me like this (01:03:00 – 01:03:37).

If Fiona is, at the beginning of the film, uncomfortable and displeased by her monstrous form, she learns to embrace it once she realizes that Shrek loves her regardless of her physical appearance. While her acceptance was meant to send a positive message to all women viewers, one cannot overlook that Fiona too is 'otherized': she is isolated in a tower by her own parents, she hides her ogre form even from Shrek and cannot trust any man should ever want to marry her – "I can't just marry whoever I want. Take a good look at me, Donkey. I mean, really, who can ever love a beast so hideous and ugly? 'Princess' and 'ugly' don't go together" (01:04:45 – 01: 04:57). Her torment is closely linked to the destructive relationship women have with their bodies. Fiona becomes a symbol for the stereotypes women have always faced: not only princesses were represented as an aesthetic ideal, but modern, present-day women pursue the same unrealistic, unattainable image promoted by society as they are "trapped in the confines of the structured definition of what beauty should comprise" (Weissman, 1999: 24).

Bringing into discussion the way women perceive their bodies, one should also highlight the close connection to the male image of female beauty, as men are often seen as one of the most important reason women wish to be desirable and beautiful. Revolving around the concept of the male gaze,

women are mere images exposed to the commanding gaze of the spectator, a role assumed, most often than not, by a male. Thus, women feel that they should always 'shape' and 'improve' their physical appearance so as to fit into the ideals promoted by men.

> It is the expected role of the man to assume the controlling position in society, and demonstrate the continuous production of the male gaze. It is of crucial importance how a woman appears to a man, and the appreciation of herself is granted only by her acceptance from the dominant male. She now begins to graciously stand in the light of the eyes of men, and allow their watchful glance to measure and calculate her worth (20).

The notion of the male gaze corresponds in many ways to the way in which the Spectant perceives and represents the Spected. In other words, the hetero-images that characterize the Other seen through the Spectant's lens mirror the image of women filtered by men. In this respect, Fiona's conflicting relationship with her body may be understood as a result of the male gaze, on the one hand, which dictates the accepted, patriarchal model, and the cultural and social norm, according to which any nonconformity or 'digression' from the ideal standard is considered monstrous and brings about discrimination. A case in point would be the final scene of the movie, when Fiona turns into an ogre during the wedding ceremony with Lord Farquaad and her 'new' acquired form scandalizes everyone, including her soon-to-be husband, Lord Farquaad: "It's disgusting! Guards! Guards! I order you to get *that* out of my sight! Now! Get them! Get them both! […] And as for you, my wife, I'll have you locked back in that tower for the rest of your days!" (Shrek, 2001, 01:18:36 – 01:19:16; emphasis added). The future king of Duloc not only finds Fiona's new appearance repulsive, but she is degraded by being associated to a creature and threatened to be once again locked in a tower for her non-normative body.

Another example of the male gaze, once again enacted by Lord Farquaad, is the (pre)selection of his bride-to-be. With a fairy-tale touch, the famous magic mirror displays a short presentation clip of the unmarried princesses who appear to be at the lord's disposal.

> **FARQUAAD**
>
> Mirror, mirror on the wall. Is this not the most perfect kingdom of them all?
>
> **MIRROR**
>
> Well, technically you're not a king. […] What I mean is you're not a king yet. But you can become one. All you have to do is marry a princess.
>
> **FARQUAAD**
>
> Go on.
>
> **MIRROR**
>
> So, just sit back and relax, my lord, because it's time for you to meet today's eligible bachelorettes. And here they are! Bachelorette number one is a mentally abused shut-in from a kingdom far, far away. She likes sushi and hot tubbing anytime. Her hobbies include cooking and cleaning for her two evil sisters. Please welcome Cinderella. Bachelorette number two is a cape-wearing girl from the land of fancy. Although she lives with seven other men, she's not easy. Just kiss her dead, frozen lips and find out what a live wire she is. Come on. Give it up for Snow White! And last, but certainly not last, bachelorette number three is a fiery redhead from a dragon-guarded castle surrounded by hot boiling lava! But don't let that cool you off. She's a loaded pistol who likes pina coladas and getting caught in the rain. Yours for the rescuing, Princess Fiona! So will it be bachelorette number one, bachelorette number two or bachelorette number three?
>
> **[…] FARQUAAD**
>
> Three? One? Three? […] Okay, okay, uh, number three!
>
> **MIRROR**
>
> Lord Farquaad, you've chosen Princess Fiona (00:18:22 – 00:20:11).

The fairy tale heroines are paraded by and for the male characters as mere objects, goods ready for exploitation. Completely silenced, they are here only to please men and carry out their predefined roles, without having an opinion on the matter. Their description is also enlightening through the use of sexual connotations – "she's not easy", "a live wire" and "loaded pistol", the princess being, thus, reduced to representations of carnality, seductiveness and even to the embodiment of emotionally or psychologically damaged individuals ("mentally abused") who are forced to accept an arranged marriage, among other things.

CONCLUSIONS

Computer-animated films such as *Shrek* may be considered to challenge the fairy tale pattern by revealing the flaws and contradictions of the mechanisms of society. The present paper attempted to expose the many incongruities present in any community that *Shrek* obliquely depicts in its humorous, entertaining narrative. *Shrek* suggests the need for a new social order, for a more tolerant community in which any individual may be accepted and recognised as part of the established, without being marginalised for being different. As critics claimed, "one of the most apparently radical aspects of Shrek is its rejection of the discourse of beauty found in fairytales", but the oppressive discourse of beauty applies to both masculine and feminine characters, even if "Fiona's ugliness would appear to be the most liberatingly subversive feature of the film [as she] is 'allowed' to be ugly" (Takolander and McCooey, 2005: 11). The producers of *Shrek* send a positive message to viewers that beauty and Otherness should not be assessed according to society's distorted expectations, but acknowledged as an indication of our own individuality and charm.

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