

**CASE STUDY: SHREK - MAINSTREAMING THE MARGINAL (ANDREW ADAMSON & VICKY JENSEN, 2001)**

**Paul Wells**

DreamWorks SKG's *Shrek* (2001) became the first winner of the newly inaugurated Academy Award for Full-Length Feature Animation. In this, not merely did it defeat its main rival, Disney/PIXAR's *Monsters Inc.* (2001), but was responsible for the mainstreaming of previous marginalised aspects of animated film. Directed by Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jensen, *Shrek*, the story of an alienated, grotesque, green ogre (voiced by Mike Myers), who with the help of his wise-cracking sidekick, Donkey (John Lithgow), works both as a modern fairytale and a post-modern satire of Disney's story-telling techniques and ideological stances.

On the one hand, the new Academy Award can be viewed as a long overdue acknowledgement of the distinctiveness and quality of the animated feature in relation to its live-action counterpart; on the other it may be perceived as a ghetto-isation of the form, which once more refuses its achievement in regard to other Hollywood products. *Shrek* nevertheless represents a milestone in animated features because it brings together and legitimises both the subversive and the sentimental, drawing from some of the excesses of 'The All Sick and Twisted Festival', pioneered by Craig Decker and Mike Gribble, and the more radical work of Kricfalusi; and the archetypal and sentimental narratives created by the Disney Studio. The more taboo aspects – from 'Cracking one off' flatulence jokes to 'Dead Broad off the Table' lack-of-respect gags to the Snow White not being 'easy' despite the fact that she lives with seven men innuendo – all now familiar in the public imagination due to animated sit-coms, *The Simpsons* and *South Park* – are contained and reconciled by being played out by a green ogre. His swamp, the epitome of an organic environment and earthiness, embraces the vulgarity and carnivalesque aspects of fantasy creatures, while Lord Farquaad's castle is minimalist in decoration and pristine in construction, the embodiment of control. Indeed, Farquaad (allegedly modelled on Disney's CEO, Michael Eisner, and named with no small degree of ambiguity), presides over Duloc, a thinly veiled critique of the oppressiveness of Disney's theme parks.

This underpinning satire on Disney's representational strategies in fairytales – with hilarious gags on bluebirds, lying puppets, big-eared elephants and transforming beasts – is nevertheless reliant on Disney's tried and trusted model of the 'emotional journey', and the use of established archetypes. Shrek, the hero, Farquaad, the villain, Fiona, the victim, and Donkey, the investigator/partner, who helps to resolve problems, all correspond to an anticipated typology in fairytale story-telling, which resolves itself in a message-laden happy ending, promoting 'self-acceptance', and cautioning about the relativity of 'beauty'. While this is augmented by the contemporary spoofing of anything from *The Matrix*, *Blind Date* (*The Dating Game* in the USA), and *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, and what may prove to be anachronous pop songs which will eventually date the film, it is clear that sentiment – our sympathy for, and empathy with, Shrek – is at the heart of the story, and tempers its more subversive elements, which actually have their source in the more adult-oriented Warner Brothers cartoons of the 1930s and 1940s (see Wells 2002\*).

This is especially important because it is clear that much of the enduring success of animated film within popular culture is in the way in which 'character' transcends the film and becomes part of a social discourse. From Mickey Mouse to Woody and Buzz, this has ensured that animation has historical presence. In the case of Shrek, as it may be with Sully and Mike from *Monsters Inc.*, this may be as much about technical innovation as it is aesthetic and marketing acumen. Five years in the making, *Shrek* has some thirty-six detailed in-film locations; uses software which enhances the persuasiveness of facial movement and gesture; enhances and advances the materiality and volume of liquid substances; and crucially, creates physical forms through a layering process in the

construction of figures which echoes the skeletal/muscular/skin formation of human bodies, and essentially provokes movement from the 'inside out', thus making the anatomical processes all the more realistic. Shrek, fantasy ogre though he is, 'lives', and takes his place alongside Cruise, Crowe and Clooney as a 'film star', simultaneously mainstreaming animation's open and versatile vocabulary, story-telling engine and style.

\* Wells, P. (2002) 'Where the Mild Things Are', *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (NS), February, pp. 27-8.