

Nemo's Abyss: The Deferral of Undecidability

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Critiquing Ideological Representations

Like all forms of creative cultural production, animation must remain open to critical analysis, not least of all when it makes reference to the real world. It is from this perspective that I should like to discuss the Pixar production *Finding Nemo* (2003); to consider *Finding Nemo* in terms of what is (re)presented and also in terms of what is 'left out'.¹ Approaching the film in this way, it becomes possible to explain how *Finding Nemo's* idealised representation of the natural world assists in the protection and perpetuation of heteronormativity's dominance in the late modern West (which dominance also occurs in a range of traditional cultural contexts). To explain this term in Lauren Berlant et al's words, "By heteronormativity we mean the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent...but also privileged."² Remaining critical of what is privileged by way of its presence in *Finding Nemo*, I shall demonstrate how the film works to perpetuate the dominant voice of heteronormativity, and through the animation's omission of marine-biological information, effectively obscures a range of gender-minority voices, particularly those pertaining to gender-ambiguous subjectivities. In particular, this discussion concentrates on the absence in *Finding Nemo* of any mention of the fact that, being a clownfish, Nemo is a sequential hermaphrodite.

That a representation in an animated film is never exactly the same as reality, but instead is a construction of reality, is the very reason we may choose to examine the representation's cultural content. For the interrogation of cultural ideology is one use to which the representation may have been put. By exploring the assumptions, values, and beliefs that are conceivably communicated in a representation of the natural world, and by assessing their relationship to a material reality, steps may be made towards establishing a comparison between ideology and practice. Evident disparities and disjunctures between what is expected and what is being produced promote critical reflection.

Following Stuart Hall's point that 'representations' "are instruments of social power, requiring critical and activist examination," the analysis of representations seeks to interrogate their constitutive power hierarchies, those fore-grounded and/or obscured.³ One implication is that the critical analysis of cultural representations contributes to an implicitly political project. However to the extent

that 'ideology' can be taken to mean not only "action-oriented sets of beliefs" or "the process whereby social life is converted into natural reality", but also a "socially necessary illusion", this kind of critical analysis remains a necessary part of enriching cultural comprehension; one that confirms Visual Culture study's coherence with Cultural Studies overall.⁴

A critical strategy widely used in a range of fields, but most often associated with Derrida, is deconstruction. Here, binary oppositions are located in order to identify 'instruments of power' within a particular representation as an ideological construction. That is to say, so far as binary oppositions are governed by the 'either/or' distinction, identifying and articulating the conditions that cause one term to be privileged over the other is useful for the task of interrogating a representation's underlying ideological structure. Once this cultural 'ground' has been reached, a critique of that structure ensues, by way of subjecting representations to a series of questions such as "What power relationships can be noticed? What negative aspects of an ideology are being excluded as a way of helping to justify certain beliefs and actions? What people, classes, areas of life, experiences, are 'left out', or silenced? How are they 'left out' or 'silenced'?" To ask these questions of a cultural artefact such as an animation is to lay bare its capacity (if not the capacity of film makers themselves) to reproduce the ideas, values, and beliefs of a dominant culture in the cognitive spaces of a mass audience.

Clearly, there is a responsibility that extends to both the creation and the analysis of representations. As Mitchell points out, a "responsible representation" is "an ethical contract", which means that "the representor is 'responsible for' the truth of a representation and responsible *to* the audience or recipient of the representation...representation is a form, an act of taking responsibility."⁵ However, in view of the constructedness of representations, Mitchell acknowledges that:

A break or gap between responsibility and representation is not only a possibility, but a structural necessity for their mutual functioning, for their co-responsibility. Representation can, must be irresponsible; responsibility can, must be unrepresentable. The lie, the fiction, the false oath, the error, the failure of correspondence, the playful, irresponsible representation ... There would be no meaning to the notion of 'responsible representation' ... if representations were automatically responsible, if responsibilities could be confirmed, affirmed by representations alone.⁶

I must be careful, here, to clarify a couple of things. Firstly, it is important to remain aware that the implications that I shall be exploring have not necessarily been intended by Pixar in the context of *Finding Nemo*. Rather, leaving out certain details about the clownfish, whether for the purpose of maintaining narrative cohesion or for any other reason, results in an absence of information that

nevertheless contributes to the viewing audience's interpretation of the representation. This discussion is concerned with the implications of 'information gaps', particularly with respect to the way in which these absences make room for alternative readings and meanings. This clarification is important because if I were to say that Nemo was a misrepresentation of the clownfish, that would perhaps be tantamount to saying that the Disney character Dumbo, complete with ears for wings, misrepresents the elephant. Aware of a precarious line underfoot, I should say that in Nemo's case it is not an ability to do things that are impossible in real life that matters, but the omission of what he can do. What are the implications of the animation leaving out what he can do in reality? There is no suggestion that Nemo *cannot* change into a female; there is no explicit denial of his potential: we may take the animation as a snapshot of a greater life journey, at a later point in which he may well undergo his metamorphosis. Though there is no suggestion of denial, that there is no suggestion at all is a form of denial.

The matter of whether or not Nemo's sexual potential poses a challenge to the male/female binary opposition is a matter of theorising his undecidability. To deconstruct Nemo is to actively liberate his silenced gender identity from a cultural context of institutional and digital repression—to achieve a morality tale very different to that which has been plastic-packaged for the ease of passive and uncritical mass-consumption. Hermaphroditism is an uncommon human circumstance but it is nevertheless another feature of our diverse biological world. I shall discuss how *Finding Nemo* obscures the culture/nature relationship for the sake of entertainment (particularly the entertainment of children), and exemplifies the degree to which notions of what is natural are also cultural constructions.

Disclosing Nemo

To summarise, *Finding Nemo* is the story of a young male clownfish, Nemo. We are initially introduced to Marlin and his wife Coral, and their four hundred-plus fish eggs, all of whom are just settling into their new home, an anemone. The pair enjoy the thrill of the great ocean view, but little time passes before a barracuda attack leaves Marlin with nothing in the world except for a single surviving egg. Now a single parent, Marlin sees this last egg, and gently taking it up in his fins, says, "There, there, there. It's okay. Daddy's here. Daddy's got you. I promise I will never let anything happen to you, Nemo."

Marlin starts to display his over-protectiveness on Nemo's first day of school when, before setting out, Nemo gets caught in an anemone tube and needs to be helped free. Frantically Marlin checks Nemo over, telling him that he could postpone school for another five or six years if he wanted. Nemo protests, "Dad. You're not going to treat me like you did at the petting zoo are you?" Nemo's

budding independence is again shown when, on his first day of school, he goes to the 'drop-off' with his class (the edge to the deep-sea abyss—the indeterminable beyond the cultural norms of the fish community). Despite the pupils being urged to stay together, Nemo tempts fate by swimming out into the open sea. Nemo's subsequent capture prompts Marlin to commence a search and rescue mission. This leads him to Sydney where in the meantime Nemo's journey has led him to make some new underwater friends.

At the time of its release, *Finding Nemo* set a record for the highest grossing opening week, which saw it collect \$70US million at the box office. The "most successful animated film of all time in the United States,"⁷ *Finding Nemo* generated massive US demand for the availability of clownfish for purchase as children's pets—so much so, in fact, that it "also led to concerns in some countries about reef stocks being plundered, and the flow-on effects for the dive and tourism industries."⁸

Also of interest is the fact that Nemo is somewhat different from the other clownfish due to his being born with a slight birth defect—one deformed fin, which is small and weak as a result of his cracked egg after the barracuda attack. Marlin encourages Nemo to think positively of this defect: he tells his son that this is a "lucky fin." Perhaps this detail, in light of the film's popularity, signifies the value of understanding, and therefore responding on the level of everyday thinking and behaviour, to 'difference' as a personal strength; a signifier of a uniqueness in identity that transgresses the subject social positions attained through language, class, species, and age. Perhaps Nemo's birth defect appeals to any feelings of inadequacy that a viewing audience of children could experience, or could have experienced, on their first day at school—the potential social awkwardness that comes with leaving the family nest, and entering an educational institution where the daily timetable is structured according to government regulations, and social and economic objectives. Via his deformity, there is scope for the identification with him of the audience member here (the child or adult viewer), and yet he has a bodily difference (an embodied difference) that could threaten to rupture this identification. The small, colourful and naïve Nemo is the only known sequential hermaphrodite in the history of children's animation.

To explain what this term means—zoology recognises two main forms of hermaphroditism, one being simultaneous and the other sequential. Simultaneous hermaphrodites include animals such as earthworms, banana slugs and snails, which possess both male and female sexual organs at the same time. There are two kinds of sequential hermaphrodites: one being protogynous, and the other protandrous. Protogyny is where an animal starts life as a female and at some point in time changes into a male, whereas protandry is where an animal begins

life as a male but is capable of changing into a female, usually for reproductive purposes. Being a clownfish, Nemo falls into this latter sub-category. If Nemo is the dominant male among several male fish with one larger-sized reproductive female, he might, in the event of the female's absence or death, change into a female to take on the reproductive role. Unlike many species in the animal kingdom, including humans, where sex is either determined by biological circumstances or the outcome of an intricate chain of events (such as temperature levels, in the case of crocodile eggs), the sex of the clownfish is in part socially determined. His embodied difference makes him very unlike the child or adult audience member of the typical animated film.

Social determination occurs in human society, as well; for an individual's assumptions about what is normal and acceptable are often learned from cultural conventions. Perhaps such assumptions provide the support for a person's comprehension of the world so consistently that they function like a 'second nature'—assumptions can gain an air of inevitability when, in fact, their 'naturalness' is an illusion that belies their arbitrariness, their 'constructedness'.

By promoting *Finding Nemo* as a family film, Pixar draws children and adults alike into a subject social position marked by an established hegemony that contributes to the perpetuation of heteronormativity.

That heteronormativity is a dominant ideology in the modern world can be gathered from a simple glance across the official forms that identify us throughout the course of our lives, from the birth certificate to the passport and the countless other official documents. We are consistently given the choice of two boxes, one labelled 'F' for female and another labelled 'M' for male, and we are required to 'decide' which one to tick. But as Robert O. Keel explains, it is "[s]ociety, [and] not nature [that] forces us to believe there are only two sex categories and therefore define hermaphrodite as a pathology."⁹ Nemo's gender potential means that he is able to transgress gender norms (norms which are based on cultural conventions). To disclose Nemo's hermaphroditism might be to offer an unpalatable and unsettling challenge to these norms.

At this point, it is fitting to make mention of the notion of monosex—in brief only, given this article's overall concern with sexual difference. Monosex pertains to one sex, whether involving 'sexual attraction' to individuals of one sex or not, and is different to bisexuality.¹⁰ Sometimes used to describe same-sex sports teams, the term 'monosex' is also used in agricultural and marine-biological research whereby skewed sexual ratios enable researchers to "evaluate the culture performance of mono-sex and mixed-sex" species.¹¹ In their article, *The Culture Performance of Mono-sex and Mixed-sex Tilapia in Fertilized Ponds*, Muhammad Hafeez-ur-Rehman et al., found that "in monosex culture of tilapia, male tilapia

grew faster (1.12 times) than female and (1.32 times) mixed-sex culture. The females grew lesser than males but faster (1.17 times) than mixed-sex culture.”¹² Of particular interest, however, is another study in which mono-sex populations of female goldfish have been cultivated through a method of sex reversal whereby “young are fed an androgen to reverse females into apparent males.”¹³ As US Fishery Biologist, Jon G. Stanley explains, “Breeding YY males to normal XX females should give only XY male progeny. Sex reversal techniques have been used to produce monosex female fish....The resulting sex-reversed fish would be capable of siring all-female broods.”¹⁴ In Stanley’s review of the sex-reversal technique, he acknowledges that the resulting gynogenetic progeny can be used to test “the environmental effects of an exotic species on native flora and fauna without the possibility of naturalization.”¹⁵ Nothing to do with pathology, this manipulation of sexual difference plays an important role in the progress of a culture’s scientific knowledge. It is a thematically coherent example of sex as more than sexual, complicated in the natural world, subject to cultural demands, questions, and expectations. Monosex organisms, like hermaphrodites, challenge the ‘heteronormative’ ideology that is privileged in *Finding Nemo*. By helping us to show that the conditions of this privilege are limited, the notion of monosex goes some way to reinforcing Keel’s insight that while sex is a biological fact, gender is a social construct.

As a vehicle for the expression of cultural notions, computer animation, complete with its capacity to construct ideological representations of reality, has just as much capacity to re-present biological facts in a way that fulfils a cultural expectation about what is normal, natural, inevitable, and acceptable. Computer animation is liberating to the extent that it gives animators the opportunity to construct representations pixel by pixel. The computer animator has an immense amount of power over the final product, free from any unpredictable intrusions upon the frame that might, in traditional film, prove distinctly counter-productive. Animation companies such as Pixar, and even Attitude Studio, revel in digital technology’s emancipatory potential.¹⁶ It provides a selling point, as demonstrated by claims such as that *Finding Nemo*’s “breakthrough computer animation is the ultimate viewing experience.”¹⁷ The ability to construct a film pixel by pixel makes it seem unlikely that there is anything accidental about the omission of *Nemo*’s ‘true’ nature from the *Finding Nemo* narrative. While there is an element of freedom afforded by animation technology, this freedom surely rests solely in the hands of the film-makers. Given that Pixar is a world leader in animation, the so-called liberation is their own. It is also the freedom to invest their product with ideas of their choosing; the freedom to circulate these ideas to millions of people.

Ever since Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Walter Benjamin, among others, used the Frankfurt School of critical theory to wage a neo-Marxist war against propaganda, we have understood the way that the products of mass media are vehicles for ideology even when they are packaged as pure entertainment. In fact, being packaged as entertainment makes ideology a surreptitious force. By adhering to a dominant ideology, by avoiding critical engagement with this ideology, by refusing to challenge it, *Finding Nemo* serves to reinforce heteronormativity. It is in this sense that we might ask whether or not Pixar is, in part by drawing on the significant role of 'family' as a 'socialising agency', implicating consumers of *Finding Nemo* merchandise in market-approved systems of institutional repression directed at children.

To elaborate, the representation of families takes various manifestations in the film. For example, from very early on Dory becomes Marlin's female travelling companion, having taken on the search for Nemo, effectively as her own, despite the distancing that comes from her limited short-term memory. Nemo's time in the dentist's aquarium sees him functioning as part of a surrogate family of fish originating from various pet shops. On his first night there, these fish even chant and perform an initiation ritual that entails Nemo swimming through the "wind of fire" so as to enter into the "fraternal bonds of tankhood." In this context, a female starfish named Peach takes on a kind of mother role, while Gill functions as a stand-in father figure. In fact, following a dangerous confrontation with the inner workings of the water filter while trying to block it with a stone in order to assist in an escape plan, and while taking the sniffing Nemo under one of her limbs, Peach begs Gill, "Don't make him go back in there." Gill later says to the apologetic Nemo, "No. I'm the one who should be sorry. I was so ready to get out, so ready to taste that ocean, I was willing to put you in harm's way to get there. Nothing should be worth that. I'm sorry I couldn't get you get to your father, kid." So too do the turtles display close familial bonds. An adult turtle, a totally 'chilled out' character named Crush, stops Marlin from interfering in his son's experience of the Great Australian Current, saying "let us see what Squirt does flying solo." Marlin's over-protectiveness is contrasted with the longer leash that Crush permits.

Despite the lack of power and speed in which his deformed fin has resulted, Nemo's sense of self-empowerment reaches another level after hearing the pelican at the window informing the aquarium's occupants that Nemo's father is on his way, recounting Marlin's battles (by now exaggerated through repeated re-telling). Nemo suddenly decides to make a second attempt at blocking the water filter. Hearing of his father's courage, taking this as a signifier of masculinity, prompts him to engage his own courage and masculinity. It is a clear indication of such a trait being taught rather than being innate from birth.

The narrative is coloured throughout by dialogue and behaviours that are ideologically coherent with dominant human notions of gender identity. Nemo's hermaphroditism threatens to undermine these notions. As Giddens observes, "Powerful groups are able to control the dominant ideas circulating in a society so as to justify their own position."¹⁸ Because Nemo's real-life gender status places him in contention with the male/female binary opposition, he is an 'undecidable' that disrupts the presumed fixity of a conveniently classifiable sexual world – that goes some way to exposing either/or distinctions with respect to gender as both arbitrary and inherently unstable. Nemo's sexual potential "poison[s] the comforting sense that we inhabit a world governed by decidable categories."¹⁹

That hermaphroditism is not logically coherent with a heteronormative ideological structure means that Nemo's gender status finds him in contention with a range of assumptions that fit inside a strictly male/female binary paradigm. The presumed normality, naturalness and inevitability of the cultural assumptions that constitute heteronormativity, by contrast, frame Nemo's gender identity (which is neither inevitably male nor inevitably female) as an undesirable 'other'. It is very clear how this is dealt with in *Finding Nemo*. No acknowledgement of the clownfish's hermaphroditism is included in the film.

It may be argued that this omission finds Pixar contributing to the silencing and repression of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender/transsexual voices. This is despite the presence of Jacques, an effeminate French shrimp living in the dentist's aquarium. He, even if drawn somewhat outside of heteronormativity, nevertheless remains a fairly minor character whose non-confronting idiosyncrasy is overshadowed by the overarching ideological positions that are communicated via the dialogue and actions of the film's major characters.

It would seem that the film's character configuration actively works to 'animate' a repressive cultural force by ignoring what the clownfish is in a material reality; a voice in the natural world, the very presence of which both intimates the cultural constructedness of heteronormativity, and complicates attempts to ground heteronormative notions in assumptions about what is 'natural'. This is not to suggest we should confuse the biological limitations of humans with those of clownfish. Rather, it is to suggest that to impose human ideology onto a natural material reality is to run the risk of creating a false sense of inevitability and permanence with respect to that ideology.

Not only does the film omit Nemo's gender status but by making him and the other marine creatures essentially human in all but form, Pixar effectively removes the reality of the animal kingdom and replaces it with a reflection of human life. This is how most Disney and Pixar children's films seem to work (consider *Cars*, *Toy Story*, *A Bug's Life*, *Wall-E*, etc); i.e., by making what is not human seem human.

We are left to wonder about the broader implications of this circumstance, certainly with regard to the question of whether there can actually be a place for reality in this kind of film.

Alternative Solutions

What I should like to do is to consider the implications of finding a balance in the culture/nature negotiation, and to consider the implications of rectifying the omission in question by subjecting the film to a transgression of the theoretical kind. There is a sense in which *Finding Nemo* echoes Guy Debord's observation that "[e]verything that appears is good; whatever is good will appear."²⁰ For whatever the film-makers 'leave out' is apparently undesirable to them. A part of deconstructing this film has been to challenge the decision to privilege one side of the binary and repress the other, not least of all by critiquing the very circumstances of their division. To take this process a few steps further, I should like to actively disrupt the male/female binary in this visual cultural context by drawing attention to Nemo's undecidability in a way that fights fire with fire. If the suppression works to conceal information in order to perpetuate a conservative sexual ideology, what might be the outcome of creating a very special (hypothetical) sequel for *Finding Nemo*, i.e. *Changing Nemo*, the narrative of which would be concerned primarily with Nemo's transformation from a male clownfish to a female clownfish? Thinking through alternative solutions to *Finding Nemo*'s story further enables us to critique the cultural content of this representation.

Whether we consider the omission to be an implied rejection of transgender identity, or of something else like a gender identity disorder (as classified in the DSM-IV), it does not favour hetero-anomalous criteria.²¹ We can speculate about what is unfavourable by identifying what is missing. What is left out of this heteronormative narrative but the loss of the male sex organs and the appearance of the female equivalent? While the natural world and the humanised natural world of the film are different, the narrative plays out in a human field of interpretation. The personification of characters results in a quasi-cross-species context that promotes viewer-identification. This identification is seen in the aforementioned demand for clownfish as children's pets. If Nemo can change from male to female, then what is protected by the suppression of information is the phallus; and any potential trouble which is avoided by the film-makers through the omission is constituted by the female.

To put this in a Freudian framework, the omission of Nemo's potential for transformation from presence to absence, from wholeness to lack, becomes a way of deferring the conditions for the fetish. According to Freud, the fetish is a "penis-substitute" that becomes desired when the boy refuses "to take cognizance of the

fact perceived by him that a woman has no penis..., for if a woman can be castrated then his own penis is in danger.”²² To apply Freudian theory to the present case study, showcasing Nemo’s transformation from male to female might be enough to conjure the conditions under which fetishism might emerge among children; enough to instigate the search for that object which might, once identified, become “the vehicle both of denying and of asseverating the fact of castration.”²³ If Nemo functions as a vehicle for ideology, then to display his genital-transformation would be tantamount to representing the act of castration, and in this sense might perhaps be enough to arouse the fear of castration in the minds of the male viewing audience (Freud’s theory emphasised the neurosis in the boy/female relationship). The film in its current form suggests a fear of castration and insofar as it does this works to privilege the phallus. By omitting the details of Nemo’s hermaphroditism, *Finding Nemo* privileges the phallus, the starring male, despite the fact that his ‘lost’ status places his maleness in question, or at the very least displaces it, until that point at which he finds courage in the dentist’s aquarium.

On the matter of masculinity, would it make any difference if Nemo was instead Marlin’s only daughter? After all, Marlin conducts the search, has much more screen time, and is also a sequential hermaphrodite. Perhaps this can be unravelled through Freud’s theory of the fetish, where the thought of becoming female, or of entertaining female gender roles, is framed in terms of ‘lack.’

In terms of the fetish, Freud goes on to discuss the “[t]ender and hostile treatment of fetishes” and refers to “the behaviour of people who cut off women’s plaits of hair; in them the impulse to execute the castration which they deny is what comes to the fore.”²⁴ He also makes mention of “the Chinese custom of first mutilating a woman’s foot and then revering it.”²⁵ Within the narrative limits of *Finding Nemo* the full expression of Nemo’s identity as a sequential hermaphrodite and the logical conclusion of this, his veritable castration, is denied; repressed. Yet he is the star of the show upon which the weight of the greater institutional body stands. His weak and deformed fin can be taken as an object to be revered, as if to say that the fish that hatches out of the cracked egg can still achieve so much if only he believes in himself and others. And yet a significant part of who Nemo is remains hidden behind a veil of human beliefs and expectations about what is worthy of inclusion and what is best left out.

Correlating Freudian and Frankfurt School Modes of Analysis

The *Finding Nemo* narrative contains Nemo in a ‘pixel prison’. We know that Nemo is not real. What *Finding Nemo* really becomes then is a doorway for institutional repression. Considering the omission of Nemo’s sequential hermaphroditism

provides one way of addressing the broader issue of institutional repression that takes place through the circulation of heteronormative ideas. In part, this step entails considering the play of Freud's theory of the fetish in order to establish a link between the absence from the film of Nemo's sequential hermaphroditism, and the notion of phallic lack as a condition for penis-substitution in response to the threat of castration. Because *Finding Nemo* is a product of the entertainment industry, Frankfurt school critical theories will be used to interrogate the film's ideological content.

The Frankfurt School is concerned with the institutionalised notions of what is normal, natural, or inevitable as circulated by the mass media. This is a consequence of the School's revised Marxism: Marx and Engel's project of empowering the working class is taken by the School to imply that it is desirable to critically examine society's consumption of the products of popular culture. In Marxism generally, there is an emphasis on historical materialism; on humankind's evolution through time as being underpinned by a desire to fulfil material needs. In his theory, Freud maintains that the fetish develops from the context of a childhood trauma—a young man's grappling with a genital-based neurosis that involves the fear of castration, itself arising when he realises that his mother does not have a penis. There arises the material need for a fetishised object that is adequate compensation for the traumatic event.

It is important to note that, because he is born after his mother's death, Nemo does not experience this trauma. A deferral of undecideability, in Nemo's case, can be taken as the deferral of this experience. Much entertainment, not least of all children's entertainment, includes a happy ending. Freud's supposition of 'genital trauma' does not meet the criteria for happy endings. Where the fetishised object stands in for the phallus, Freud argues, there is an insurmountable need to be reconciled with the locus of trauma. If we accept Freud's views, there is perhaps an obligation on the part of Pixar to omit the conditions for such potential trauma. A child's reaction to the film may be directly linked to the denial of the fetish—the denial that a degree of reverence is afforded to inanimate objects as having magical powers (or sexually magical powers: here, we may think of Aleister Crowley's Thelemic philosophy). Ironically, this denial is also a denial of non-sexual parts of the body that act as a "focus for sexual desire," where these pertain to a "charm, sorcery, an incantation or oath."²⁶

Part of the relationship between Frankfurt School criticism and Freudian thought rests in their shared contribution to a theorisation of commodity fetishism and its function in the social reproduction of a dominant ideology. Marx defines commodity fetishism as "a definite social relation between men that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things."²⁷ The context of social

relations includes the interpersonal dynamism at play when a child or group of children are either taken to see *Finding Nemo* at the cinema, escorted by parents or guardians, or when they are in the confines of a private home under much the same conditions. It is not unusual for adults and children to sit down and view the animation together, for example 'as a family' enjoying 'family entertainment.' Nevertheless, there is no reason why family entertainment should be exempt from critical interrogation. As Jillian Hinkins explains, the production of animated films for children

is an area that increasingly warrants careful and thorough investigation. In her article 'Monsters, Inc: Notes on the Neoliberal Arts Education' (2005) Elizabeth Freeman suggests that 'children's films are themselves "portable professors" of a sort, offering diagnoses of culture for adults even as they enculturate children' (p.85). Certainly animated film produced for children can provide a window for examining societal structures and cultural practices by the adult audience, whilst at the same time instructing and guiding children in regard to an understanding of themselves and their place in the society that they inhabit. Indeed, implicit and explicit ideologies in children's animated film are likely to inform both adult and child audiences, promoting certain beliefs and assumptions and shoring up idealized goals and expectations. There is also a sense in which explicit and embedded ideologies are being knowingly transferred from one generation to the next. In this way, children's film can provide a sense of continuity and of clarification, performing a pedagogic function with regard to a myriad of issues.²⁸

The matter of ideological meanings being trafficked via children's animation is of critical concern, certainly given that, as Slavoj Žižek observes, ideology is "*a social reality whose very existence implies the non-knowledge of its participants as to its essence* – that is, the social effectivity, the very production of which implies that the individuals 'do not know what they are doing.'"²⁹ Ideology works best by deception; the fallacy is central to ideology's social reproduction. The word 'fallacy' derives from the Latin 'fallācia,' or 'deceit', and means a deceptive argument or a delusion.³⁰ Also, Žižek adds:

Ideology is not a dreamlike illusion that we build to escape insupportable reality; in its basic dimension it is a fantasy-construction that serves as a support for our 'reality' itself: an illusion which structures our effective, real social relations and thereby masks some insupportable, real, impossible kernel.³¹

We can say that ideology is not simply about delusion but that this plays a significant role in ensuring its "ontological consistency."³² Ideology, then, is built best in a non-knowing audience—an audience of children. However, if such an audience is most receptive to ideological assumptions about what is normal, natural, or inevitable, this same audience is needed for the ideological success of

the film; it is as if this is what we are really witnessing when a film's significant box-office takings are announced.

What Althusser calls the "this external 'machine' of ideology exercises its force only in so far as it is experienced in the unconscious economy of the subject as a traumatic senseless injunction."³³ Senseless trauma pertains to "the action of enjoining or authoritatively directing someone; an authoritative or emphatic admonition or order...whereby a person is restrained from beginning or continuing an action threatening or invading the legal right of another."³⁴

Here we could draw attention to either the *Nemo* audience member's legal right to engage in uncritical entertainment or the same viewer's right to be privy to the conditions of the fetish. So long as it is not conducted unethically, the development of the fetish is certainly a legal right. The legal operation of fetish clubs, such as the Hellfire Club in Sydney, is a testament to this.

Thus, we can say that the *Nemo* viewer is affectively and authoritatively directed by way of the film's content (as a vehicle for Althusser's external ideological 'machine'); the viewer is warned against error. This error is of a sexual nature—a perceived erroneousness in nature as represented by the sequentially hermaphroditic Clownfish.

Finding Nemo does not include details pertaining to sequential hermaphroditism, it omits them—on the level of the unconscious economy of a predominantly pre-adolescent audience. The film capitalises on an extant social relation between consumers and commodities, and circulates support for a false economy in the guise of harmless entertainment. It denotes an ideological reality-construction—rated G.

The economy of the fetish is also false in that the fetish is a phallus substitute.

In *Finding Nemo*, these false economies play out in a privileging of Nemo's self-growth (personality-based growth) that does not acknowledge his potential physiological growth. Contrary to the notion of the growth as excess, excessive, or as 'excesence' (in a Baudrillardian sense—protruding like a cancer from the extant body), this 'other' manifestation of Nemo's growth would entail the veritable excision of the phallus. The denial of the female Nemo, the omission of his physiological excessiveness as manifest by his gender fluidity, is also the denial of nature's generative and reproductive power. A cultural authority sees the scope for ideological perpetuation, dominating, colonising, and domesticating Nemo's sequential hermaphroditism.

Both Frankfurt School criticism and Freudian theory lead us to consider the conditions under which Nemo's self-growth manifests as a disclosure of a fallacy at the level of an unconscious economy. While Freud offers insight into repression (framing this as a private defense mechanism used to contend with a broader

socio-cultural reality), Frankfurt School critical theory offers insight into repression as an institutionalised cultural mechanism (in part, comprising that potentially contentious socio-cultural reality to which the private defense mechanism is a response). Thus, it is useful to go beyond Freud by delving into Frankfurt School analyses. Drawing from Althusser, it follows that the external machinations of an ideological fallacy rely upon an audience member's subconscious receptivity to this fallacy. All these theoretical frameworks assist in exploring *Finding Nemo* as a "fantasy-construction which serves as a support" for a dominant, heteronormative social reality.

Nemo at Play

Predictably the film's happy ending is a heteronormative ending. Now reunited with his father, we see Nemo swimming off of the waiting Mr Ray and rushing back to give his dad a hug before starting another day at school: "I love you Dad." "I love you too son." Nemo swims back to Mr Ray and the other classmates as Dory too enters the frame and says good-bye. "See you after school, Dory", says Nemo as he heads out on another adventure. Dory is now a part of Nemo's family, as if she has taken on the mother role. The original female died, but never was there any scope for one of the male clownfish to fulfil his duty to the species by transforming into a female, thus giving Nemo a new mother and Marlin a new mate. Instead, Marlin ends up with a fish from an entirely different species.

By privileging a distortion of the natural world, Pixar privileges a heteronormative narrative. This privileging entails leaving out details pertaining to the natural world that are not consistent with the film's conservative ideology. In other words, undesirable features of the natural world are excluded via the decision-making process invested in a capitalistic ideological reality. It is in maintaining this internal coherence between visual representations and the majority audience that *Finding Nemo* functions as a platform from which its ideological position can be taught. Interrogating the film's representation of the world by considering the implications of Nemo's hermaphroditism has led to an interpretation of *Finding Nemo* that is very different to the one that is pressed on us.

In what way could Nemo's transformation into a female (or Marlin's for that matter) be deemed unhappy? Isn't there something very powerful about demonstrating genuine social responsibility and conducting oneself in a way that is not driven purely by a desire to attain immediate gratification? Instead, what we find at 'play' in *Finding Nemo* is a dominant patriarchal hegemony that obscures and silences facts that might reveal its ideological position as arbitrary and scientifically indefensible. Nemo's full potential is denied – his potential is yet to be realised. He remains repressed by the narrative expectations in which he exists.

His growth does not exceed the limits determined by the ideological structure with which the narrative complies. The resolution of his disobedience is his renewed and active participation in the conservative circle of socialising agencies to which he is made to belong (the family unit, the neighbourhood, the school system).

As a member of the diverse natural world, the clownfish reminds us that what we think is normal is only normal for us. It has the capacity to disrupt a cultural self-centredness that forgets its own constructedness. However, this means challenging the presumed inevitability of cultural notions about sex and gender roles, thus putting traditional power relationships into question. As Giddens implies, ideology encourages the practice of cherry-picking through available information and choosing those things that serve that system. In this instance, it has meant censoring the facts about the animal kingdom, and replacing them with a mass-marketable reflection of human life. Unfortunately, *Finding Nemo* does not, as Pixar would have us believe, take us “into the breathtaking underwater world of Australia’s Great Barrier Reef.”³⁵ Instead under the guise of providing viewers with purely pleasurable escapism from the banalities of everyday life, it takes us into direct proximity with the very conventions that exist to govern our day-to-day social behaviour. The film’s privileging of heteronormative interpersonal relationships surreptitiously returns us to, and further seeks to embed us in, our cultural point of departure. In this way, Nemo’s ongoing socialisation can be taken as a reflect our own. What we now do with this information will certainly depend upon our own attitudes towards the uncriticised values that affect the thinking of our youngest generations.

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