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The Wish their Heart Made? The Disney Canon and Transtextuality in the Movie *Wish*

Abstract:

Marketed as the studio's centennial celebratory film, *Wish* by Chris Buck and Fawn Veerasunthorn was released in November 2023. More than Disney's 62nd animated feature, the film was consciously made to celebrate the studio's history and legacy, starting with a bulletin board displaying one scene from each of the 61 preceding classics. Presented as a throwback-yet-innovative animation, the film received harsh criticism. It nonetheless fulfilled its celebratory purpose by exploiting the Disney canon through various modes of referentiality. These instances of referentiality can be defined as Easter eggs. Such references can assume different forms related to characters, plot, dialogue, or world-building, and are woven into the film at different levels corresponding to those of Gérard Genette's model of transtextuality. This author of the article argues that the film not only pays homage to but also, in essence, keeps building the Disney canon by partaking in the studio's prior canonisation strategies. By engaging in what can be termed a form of retrospective continuity, *Wish* confirms that the Disney animated canon represents a distinctive instance of a continuing multiplicity within the cinema industry – an ongoing tradition of technical achievements, as well as industrial and artistic excellence, that the film, as its last instalment, celebrates through its transtextual use of Easter eggs.

Key words:

Disney 100, Disney animated canon, Easter eggs, transtextuality, Walt Disney, *Wish*

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Życzenie z głębi serca? Kanon Disneya i transtekstualność w filmie *Życzenie*

Abstrakt:

Promowany jako film zrealizowany z okazji 100-lecia studia, *Życzenie* Chrisa Bucka i Fawn Veerasunthorn miało swoją premierę w listopadzie 2023 roku. To nie tylko 62. pełnometrażowa animacja Disneya, lecz także produkcja stworzona z myślą o uczczeniu historii i dziedzictwa wytwórni – zaczynając od tablicy, na której umieszczono po jednej klatce z każdego z 61 wcześniejszych klasyków. Przedstawiana jako nostalgiczna a zarazem nowatorska, animacja spotkała się z ostrą krytyką. Mimo to w pełni zrealizowała swój jubileuszowy cel poprzez wprowadzenie różnego rodzaju nawiązań do kanonu Disneya, które można definiować jako *easter eggs*. Mogą przybierać one różne formy – dotyczyć postaci, fabuły, dialogów czy świata przedstawionego – i są wplecione w strukturę filmu na różnych poziomach, które odpowiadają modelowi transtekstualności Gérarda Genette'a. Autorka artykułu dowodzi, że film nie tylko oddaje hołd kanonowi Disneya, lecz także przyczynia się do jego dalszego rozwoju, wpisując się tym samym w dotychczas stosowane przez studio strategie kanonizacji. Poruszając się w obrębie tzw. retrospektywnej ciągłości, *Życzenie* stanowi potwierdzenie, że disneyowski kanon filmów animowanych to szczególny przykład nieustannie rozwijającej się wielości w przemyśle filmowym – nieprzerwanej tradycji technicznych osiągnięć oraz przemysłowej i artystycznej doskonałości, którą film, jako jej najnowsza odsłona, celebruje poprzez transtekstualne wykorzystanie *easter eggs*.

Słowa kluczowe:

Disney 100, kanon animacji Disneya, *easter eggs*, transtekstualność, Walt Disney, *Życzenie*

Introduction

Marketed as the Disney studio's centennial celebratory feature, *Wish* was released on Thanksgiving Day 2023 and promised the audience "a story a century in the making" (official trailer). The film's directors, Chris Buck and Fawn Veerasunthorn, along with its producers and several lead animators referred to their work on the film as "a wish come true" (Rebello & Baughman, 2023, p. 8). If wishing upon a star has long been a staple of the studio's gripping tales and serves as the film's initial plotline, *Wish* was also a way for the cast and staff to follow "the wish their heart made" – to borrow a line from *Cinderella*'s (1950) iconic song. As suggested in the bonus features of the special Blu-ray edition and the film's art book, the artists involved in the production saw *Wish* not only as a tribute to the studio's century of achievements but also

as a way to acknowledge their own personal milestones as part of this legacy. As animation supervisor Jennifer Hager put it, "the film is just a love letter to the history of the studio" (Buck & Veerasunthorn, 2023).

However, the film's promise – pitched to producers as an origin story of the wishing star – was met with lukewarm, and sometimes mixed, reactions from both critics and audiences. It reached only 48% on Metacritic and Rotten Tomatoes, and a disappointing 56% on IMDb. The critics' consensus line on Rotten Tomatoes (n.d.) craftily encapsulates the film's main conundrum: "*Wish* earns some tugs at the heartstrings with the way it warmly references many of the studio's classics, but nostalgia's no substitute for genuine storytelling magic – no matter how beautifully animated it might be." In a similar vein, many print and online reviews emphasise the film's artificial, "manufactured," (Tallerico, 2023) – even "recycled" (Gleiberman, 2023) – self-consciousness, as well as its "generic" (Wilkinson, 2023) or "formulaic" (Smith, 2023) nature. This insistence on industrial artificiality, however, seems to directly contradict the filmmakers' working process. Screenwriter Jennifer Lee insists that the inclusion of references to earlier Disney classics was done "organically" (Polowy, 2023), with most of these allusions occurring naturally, beginning with Chris Buck lining the walls of the Disney Animation Studio with images from all the previous Disney films.

One can indeed ponder over the very nature of *Wish*, and, quite interestingly, the film itself does so on repeated occasions. This article endeavours to provide an answer to that question, beginning with an observation – and admittedly partial listing – of the movie's Easter eggs, it examines the filmmakers' storytelling techniques, arguing that *Wish*, through its (self-)referentiality, manages to create an artistic vision that, contrary to many critics' opinions, holds its own in comparison with other Disney masterpieces and rises to the challenge of creating an original Disney fairy tale. One that not only pays homage to the studio's legacy but also, in essence, continues to build the Disney canon by partaking in the studio's prior canonisation strategies. By engaging in what can be termed a form of retrospective continuity, *Wish* confirms that the Disney animated canon represents a distinct instance of continuing multiplicity (Klein & Palmer, 2016) within the cinema industry – an ongoing tradition of technical achievements and industrial and artistic excellence that *Wish*, as its last instalment, celebrates through its transtextual use of Easter eggs.

Easter Eggs and Their Canon-Celebrating Nature

The bonus features of the film's Blu-ray special edition include a short piece entitled "*Wish* D-Classified," which opens as follows:

> In celebration of Disney's 100th anniversary and to pay homage to the Walt Disney Animation Studio's long-lasting legacy, the filmmakers and artists who created *Wish* have filled the movie with unique references and nods to other Disney films created over the last century.

In accordance with the definition provided in the Oxford Dictionary, "*Wish* D-Classified," as a piece included in the bonus features, makes these nods and references Easter eggs: "a hidden surprise or extra feature that is included in something such as a computer game, a piece of software or a film, for the person using or watching it to find and enjoy" (Easter eggs, n.d.). In film, Easter eggs – a term derived from the tradition of hunting for something hidden – typically take the form of for (self-)references involving elements of cinematic language, cinema history, or the outside world that the audience is invited, although surreptitiously, to identify or recognise. As a result, Easter eggs are sometimes read as more or less cryptic inside jokes that rely on assumed common knowledge and contribute to the viewer's enjoyment. Easter eggs can therefore be read as tangible realisations of what Daniel Herbert (2017) calls 'industrial intertextuality': tangible clues that a film "is a cultural product designed to make money (industry), and […] is simultaneously connected to a wide range of existing products (intertextuality)" (p. 10). In other words, Easter eggs reference the pop culture industry and its creative products in a form of more or less "calculated textual connectivity" (p. 9).

In a recent paper, I (Louckx, 2024) further define Easter eggs as an overarching category for such protean references, based on four shared characteristics. First, Easter eggs are the result of a playful gesture on the part of the filmmakers and can denote a range of different intentions, from paying homage or creating pastiche to parody and caricature — all essentially intertextual intentions (Genette, 1982/1997a; Gray, 2010; Herbert, 2017). Second, Easter eggs are more or less hidden within the film and are therefore more or less difficult to spot, depending on their position in the frame or the level of knowledge or 'expertise' they may require from the audience. Third, Easter eggs tend to be humorous or ironic in tone. Finally, they are, to some extent, unexpected: their degree of surprise contributes to their playful, sometimes humorous, character (Louckx, 2024, pp. 133–134). This element of unpredictability and potential

off-handedness helps categorise Easter eggs on a continuum ranging from narratively consistent additions to audience-oriented[1] nods with no clear narrative objective. In this discussion, rather than attempting to rise to the – according to IMDb – "impossible" challenge of spotting and listing all of *Wish*'s Easter eggs, I would like to focus on how some of these have been used for an openly diegetic purpose. This article, therefore, does not seek to engage in forensic fandom practices[2] and will not discuss anecdotal nods such as the questionably meaningful inclusion, during the "I Am a Star" song sequence, of fledglings whose colourful eggshells are meant to evoke Flora, Fauna, and Merryweather's recognisable red, green, and blue dresses.[3]

Easter eggs in *Wish* are presented as central to the film's celebratory nature and can be categorised by the specific aspects of the Disney legacy they seek to honour. This legacy is established and exemplified through the Disney animated canon. Although a discussion of the definition of the Disney animated canon and its relevance to the identity of the Disney fandom lies beyond the scope of this article, it is worth mentioning its commonly accepted description as found on the Disney Fandom Wiki page:

> The Disney Animated Canon (sometimes known as the Disney animated features canon) is the name given to the overall body of works that is the Disney theatrical animated feature films produced by the Disney Animation Studios since *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937" (Disney Fandom, n.d.).[4]

In the context of this article, the Disney animated canon therefore includes the 61 fully animated feature films produced by the Disney Studio prior to *Wish*. This definition can arguably frame the Disney animated canon as a form of multiplicity or textual plurality (Klein & Palmer, 2016) in its own right, as it (a) relies on "the reuse, reconfiguration and extension of existing materials,

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1 These nods may also be directed toward the industry or an industry-savvy audience, as exemplified by the technical Easter eggs discussed below.

2 Numerous online sources testify to the fact that *Wish* incorporated a large number of such references (see, for example, Colangelo, 2023; Hayward, 2023; Lascala, 2024; Polowy, 2023; Pop Culture Wonders, 2024).

3 Flora, Fauna, and Merryweather are Aurora's fairy godmothers in *Sleeping Beauty* (1959). Whether the use of these colours was intended as a nod to these characters seems debatable, yet this interpretation has been put forward by some fan accounts, such as Hayward (2023).

4 The website adds that the films began to be referred to as "Disney classics" in the late 1980s and that numbers were affixed to each feature around the same time. At the time of writing, the canon includes 63 films, *Wish* being number 62 and *Moana 2* (2024) number 63.

themes, images, formal conventions or motifs" and (b) "invite[s] viewers to appreciate the new in the context of the familiar and already approved" (p. 1).

When taken in the celebratory context of *Wish*, the Disney canon also evokes a reflexive stance on the challenges Dick Tomasovic (2011) identified in his argument about Disney's self-canonisation process. Tomasovic argues that the studio overcame these challenges over its foundational decade and concomitantly set "benchmarks for [future] film production" (p. 107).[5] Such a process testifies to "those relatively extraordinary situations of artists […] who, at the very moment when they conceive their work, not only think in terms of aesthetic ambition and commercial success, but also in terms of imposing a new form" (p. 107). In Disney's case, the challenges involved establishing technical *savoir-faire* (mostly achieved with the *Alice Comedies* from 1923 to 1927), devising cartoon inventiveness (with the *Oswald the Lucky Rabbit* shorts in 1927 and 1928), instituting a new aesthetic norm with Mickey (starting with *Steamboat Willie* in 1928), and finally building a new and complete artistic vision with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937). These, Tomasovic insists, were all supported by a self-reflexive, manifest-like discourse, which he notably identifies in *Pinocchio* (1940). Tomasovic, however, tempers this boisterous description by noting that *Fantasia* (Armstrong et al., 1940) appeared to be the studio's rhetorical apex and first downfall, underlying this rhetoric's status as a double-edged sword. As a matter of fact, establishing and solidifying the studio's self-canonical discourse – notably through reflexivity – inexorably involves implying that each new film needs to meet the standards set by its predecessors; in other words, each film will constitute a new outstanding instalment in the multiplicity of Disney classics, thus meeting Disney's previously established ideological and aesthetic requirements. Some Disney classics greatly suffered from this rhetoric, being received as falling below the expected standards; this is undeniably the case with *Wish*. Nonetheless, it can be argued that the filmmakers' homage to the Disney canon in *Wish* is achieved through pastiche references to the technology, founding figures, work processes, and canonical texts that have come to represent the studio's sophistication and mastery — in short, what made Disney part of the contemporary animated-film canon and a flagship studio of the cinematic industry.

Most of the Easter eggs found in the film are either quotational (i.e. verbatim quotes, animation sequences, or character cameos) or allusive (i.e. evocative scenes, colours, shapes, or patterns) in nature, and thus needed to

[5] All quotations from Tomasovic's (2011) article are my own translations.

be categorised differently. I organised the Easter eggs appearing in *Wish* into five formal categories that can be related to the studio's canonisation strategies: (1) technique and *savoir-faire*, (2) style and aesthetic, (3) characters or characterisation, (4) plot structure and genre, and (5) world-building techniques meant to reinforce the believability of the storyworld. In other words, by directly relying on the studio's self-canonisation strategies, the Easter eggs in *Wish* make the film an inherent realisation of Herbert's (2017) notion of 'industrial intertextuality,' both recounting and playfully reflecting on contemporary cinematic recycling practices, while at the same time endorsing, if not solidifying, the studio's canonisation discourse.

Examples of the technique and *savoir-faire* category include the film's 2:55:1 aspect ratio, which has been used only in earlier Disney productions, and the constant focus of its backgrounds, which evokes the use of the multiplane camera. Examples related to style and aesthetics appear in the film's colour palettes, which draw on *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *Pinocchio*, and *Encanto* (2021). The most striking example of characterisation would certainly be Asha's seven teen friends, who are directly inspired by *Snow White*'s Seven Dwarfs, with each character's clothing and behaviour explicitly referring to their original counterparts. In terms of plot and genre, the central storyline is based on the idea of "wishing upon a star," which appears directly in *Pinocchio*, *Lilo and Stitch* (2002), and *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), and is alluded to in many other Disney classics. Easter eggs connected to world-building techniques would include, for example, the fact that King Magnifico's castle draws inspiration from the castles featured in previous Disney films. This last category also relies heavily on referentiality: references to the "real world" developed through trips down "research rabbit holes" (Rebello & Baughman, 2023, p. 14). Such a strong emphasis on research, true-to-life accuracy, and believability is one of the Disney trademarks, as clearly demonstrated in Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston's (1984) seminal volume *The Illusion of Life: Disney Animation* (1984).

Crafting an *Original* Disney Fairy tale

By their own admission (Buck & Veerasunthorn, 2023; Rebello & Baughman, 2023), *Wish*'s screenwriters sought to create an *original* Disney fairy tale. The use of the term 'original' – which, as Herbert (2017) observes, has become highly contentious within the cinematic industry – accounts for both the film's innovative nature and its mixed reception. Echoing Herbert's remark that "nothing is original" and that "all culture comes from the culture before it" (p. 20),

the story *Wish* offers unfolds along a plotline that, though not directly derived or adapted from one explicitly found in previous oral or literary traditions (as, for example, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* or *Beauty and the Beast* from 1991 did), still heavily relies on characters and motifs that have come to define the Disney animated canon. This diegetic and generic hiatus was potentially reinforced by the films' promotional material, which Gray (2010), building on Gérard Genette's (1982/1997a) theory of the five levels of transtextuality, terms 'paratext,' identifying it as supporting not only the audience's speculative consumption of texts but also the "reading strategies that [they] will take into the text" (p. 26). By announcing in its official trailer that "from Disney […] comes a story a century in the making," *Wish* effectively established that, although the story would be new, and therefore 'original' in the sense of being previously unseen, it would also serve as the latest instalment in Disney's now century-old canon, reiterating many of its long-established narrative motifs. This may help explain the disappointed and rather harsh remarks of critics who considered the film to feel "as if generated by an A.I. trained on Disney's catalog," giving audiences nothing that "would – or even could – shape our worldview" (Wilkinson, 2023). *Wish*, however, can be understood as attempting precisely that. Its highly innovative use of Easter eggs not only drives the plot forward but also defines its generic and diegetic character: the film is a previously unseen story within the Disney fairy-tale tradition – as evidenced by its many references to the studio's earlier productions – while simultaneously inviting the audience to adopt a new worldview, one that could only be shaped by the studio's century of existence.

This new worldview is effectively epitomised through the derivative relationship *Wish* establishes with the Disney canon. Screenwriter Jennifer Lee contended that it was "not a collage" (Rebello & Baughman, 2023, p. 84) but rather a set of elements drawn from the Disney stories that together gave the film its own direction. Amy Nicholson (2023), in her review for *The New York Times*, identified – although disparagingly – the film as one that "retcon[ns] Disney's entire back catalog into a single magical universe." 'Retcon,' or 'retroactive continuity,' which Andrew J. Friedenthal (2017) defined as a narrative process in which creators of a fictional world deliberately alter its history to accommodate future stories, describes precisely the kind of relationship *Wish*, as a Disney fairy tale, establishes with the canon. I would, however, like to propose a new meaning for the blend and speak of the film as establishing a retro*spective* (rather than retro*active*) continuity. The film somehow "reinterprets" (Friedenthal, 2017) the history of the Disney canon and alters how characters from some of the earlier works may be read, although not in a definitive way,

leaving the choice, as Friedenthal argues, to the audience between the canonical and the new Disney fairy-tale history

In this sense, the filmmakers' premise seems to rest on the double meaning of the word 'original': the magic kingdom they sought to create was to be both previously unseen *and* foundational. The city of Rosas, the storyworld where *Wish* is set, stands both referentially and narratively at the origins of the Disney fairy-tale universe: the city, according to the filmmakers, refers to the earliest medieval period pictured in a Disney fairy-tale film – the 13th century, approximately (Rebello & Baughman, 2023, p. 58), and is meant to evoke the first fairy-tale story, as it depicts the origin story of the wishing star and other magical figures central to the Disney canon, such as *Cinderella*'s fairy godmother or the Evil Queen's magic mirror in *Snow White*. *Wish* thus establishes a complex form of storytelling that weaves together referentiality and intertextual elements to create a unique appropriation of the fairy-tale genre that both celebrates the Disney canon and acknowledges its legacy. In the way Steven Watts (1997) described Disney's 'classic' visual style as a form of "sentimental modernism" (p. 105) born of subtle cultural compromises, *Wish* is woven out of sentimental loyalties that coexist with postmodernist instincts. Sentimentality is most perceptible in the film's aesthetics and themes, while its postmodernist instincts seem to be derived from what Chris Pallant (2010) referred to as "neo-Disney." These spell out as reflexiveness, metafictional humour, cartoon parody, and a nuanced depiction of the boundaries between good and evil. All of these are organised around the now common Disney "adorkable" (Rua, 2023) heroine.

The story that the film offers the audience to see is what I would call a "textually transcendent" (Genette, 1982/1997a) Disney fairy tale, showcasing a postmodern fantasy rooted in sentimental memories drawn from the Disney animated canon. The postmodern and sentimental nature of the film can partly explain its mixed reception. Postmodern primarily because of its self-conscious, reflexive, and intertextual nature, the film also evokes the critical interpretations of postmodernist scholars such as Jean Baudrillard (1981) or Umberto Eco (1973/1986), who explored Disney's hyperreal spectacle and reliance on simulacra. At the same time, its sentimental loyalty to what Janet Wasko (2020) identified as Classic Disney values and themes (mainstream American values and a form of fantasy escapism or utopianism), and to what Jack Zipes (2015) ironically and derogatorily called "the Disney 'well-made' fairy tale film" (p. 8) reinforces its formulaic or recycled nature — what Owen Gleiberman (2023) dubbed "a portable magic kingdom." Nonetheless, *Wish*'s postmodern dimension – expressed mainly through its self-consciousness and

reflexive playfulness – makes it an open venture in industrial intertextuality and metafiction, worthy of both audience and academic interest. Through its reflexive engagement with the studio's history and its associated discourse, *Wish* exemplifies the contemporary studio practices that J. D. Connor (2015) associated with neoclassical Hollywood. Most notably, however, by creating a 'retrospective continuity' for the canon, *Wish* adds a new layer to Disney's canonisation strategies – one that could only develop in the contemporary cinematic industry, so heavily defined by extreme textual connectivity.

The Canon as Intertext

Intertextuality, defined as "a relationship of copresence between two texts or among several texts" (1982/1997a, p. 2), is the first of the five levels in Genette's model of textual transcendence. As noted earlier, most, if not all, of the Easter eggs in the film take the form of intertextual references, either as quotations or allusions. Considered as a network of intertextual relations, these references foreground the very essence of copresence. The canon itself becomes the intertext – a distinctly *industrial* one – where the canon, and therefore the studio, is omnipresent, yet its presence is only subtly alluded to. Although these elements appear in a new storyworld, all references to the earlier classics position the new characters and their story arcs in a state of effective copresence with their predecessors. This establishes the film not only as part of the Disney Studio's legacy but also as a new instalment in the series of classics it has created. In this way, *Wish* serves as a compelling example of J. D. Connor's (2015, p. 71) argument that all films are allegorical of the industry and studio that produce them, effectively illustrating that, for Disney, the relationship between studio and story is far from contingent.

By the same token, the Disney canon also becomes an 'architext.' Architextuality, which Genette (1982/1997a) defines as the most abstract – and therefore largely silent – set of relations between texts, links a text to "the general or transcendent categories" (p. 4), such as genres, types of discourse or styles from which it emerges. By establishing within its narrative the copresence of all works in the Disney animated canon, *Wish* effectively offers a literal embodiment of the self-canonisation discourse identified by Tomasovic. In doing so, it legitimates *Wish*'s position as part of the canon and playfully echoes some of its most representative codes. The film not only reappropriates the studio's most iconic techniques but also engages fluently with some of its archetypes. The most recognisable of these is certainly the Disney villain. The characterisation

of King Magnifico heavily relies on Easter eggs – from his quotations of earlier villains (Ursula and Maleficent) to hiding his dark magic in a lair evocative of the Evil Queen's, with its colour palette, poisoned apple, and the green hue recalling many of his wicked predecessors. In fact, King Magnifico can easily be read as a transtextual Disney villain. All of this demonstrates that *Wish*'s engagement with the canon is, perhaps paradoxically, both serious and playful.

As observed earlier, this stance is explicitly articulated through the film's 'paratext' – in Genette's model, the liminal devices and conventions that mediate the text to the reader and can be found either within the text itself or in its industrial or critical periphery. Jonathan Gray (2010) expanded on Genette's theory, moving paratexts to the centre of his "textual cartography" (p. 16) arguing that "they create texts, they manage them, and they fill them with many of the meanings that we associate with them" (p. 6). Gray distinguishes between 'entryway' paratexts – "those that control and determine our entrance to a text" and 'in media res' paratexts – "those that inflect or redirect the text following initial interaction" (p. 35). *Wish*'s trailer was already a crucial entryway paratext, announcing and partly preparing – though admittedly unsuccessfully – the audience's and critics' interpretation of the text. The film's opening (still 'entryway') and closing credits ('in media res') are equally significant in outlining and then validating *Wish*'s relationship to the Disney canon and the studio.

Wish's opening credits, in addition to returning to the early classics' practice of *literally* opening a book to begin the tale, also reference *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Disney's first fairy-tale film by reproducing the same font, colour, and the inscription "A Walt Disney Feature Production." These references clearly establish *Wish*'s legacy and its entry into the canon, while at the same time grounding its fairy-tale nature – in this case, crossing the paratextual "threshold" (Genette, 1987/1997b, p. 2) of Disney's canonical architext through the literal opening of the book. Similarly, the end credits feature representations of characters from across the Disney canon, underscoring that *Wish* has now effectively entered it. The characters are designed to evoke Star's stardust – one of the film's central achievements in effects animation, which also happens to be a self-reference to the "We're all stars" musical sequence in the movie. Beyond being one of the movie's central characters, Star reinforces the "wishing upon a star" trope as a staple of the Disney architext. Star, the *original* wishing star, is the one whose stardust all beloved Disney characters are – or have been throughout the studio's history – made from.

The end credits, as an 'in media res' paratext, confirm *Wish*'s entrance into the canon, but they have also been taken to inflect – or at least unsettle – the audience's engagement with it. The filmmakers repeatedly said that

they had included references to *all* 61 predecessors, yet some films are noticeably absent from the end credits. Certain omissions seem unsurprising: excluding the 1940s anthology films (such as *The Three Caballeros* from 1944, *Saludos Amigos* from 1942, or *Make Mine Music* from 1946) can probably be explained by the difficulty of selecting one representative character, although the inclusion of Mickey in his sorcerer's apprentice attire and a yoyo-playing flamingo from *Fantasia 2000* (1999) seems to contradict this rationale. Similarly, omitting sequels (such as *Winnie the Pooh* from 1966 or *Frozen 2* from 2019) can easily be explained by the economy of not showing the same character twice. However, other omissions seem more surprising: *The Rescuers* (1977), *The Black Cauldron* (1985), and *Meet the Robinsons* (2007) appear to have disappeared from the canon altogether. A quick online search yields pages and videos (fan-made or professional) showcasing audience reactions to the credits (sometimes in theatres). These responses range from fond recollections of old classics to surprise (if not irritation) at not seeing personal favourites and wondering about these omissions. Yet none of these paratexts offers a convincing explanation.[6]

A possible explanation for these omissions may lie in the interpretation of *Wish* as retconning the history of the Studio and allegorically establishing it as a physical intertext. Rather than implying that *Wish* here seems willing to, at least in part, obscure the studio's past (more specifically its darker decades, epitomised by *The Rescuers* and *The Black Cauldron* or some of its flops such as *Meet the Robinsons*), a more alluring explanation could be found in the film's *calculated* textual connectivity. According to a Screen Rant article, "the decision for Disney to highlight these characters from previous movies came after many of them were brought together for the *Once Upon a Studio* short" (Hood, 2024). The short, which features a host of Disney familiar characters taking a group picture in front of the studio's premises, was released in the lead-up to *Wish*. Interestingly, it features multiple characters from all the movies absent from *Wish*'s end credits, who are ultimately seen standing alongside Asha, *Wish*'s main character, in the final group picture. Although the relation between the two films deserves to be unpacked in a full article, both works were designed to celebrate the studio's centennial and can be seen as jointly reinforcing *Wish*'s intertextual and allegorical premise.

[6] It is also worth noting that the end credits have inspired numerous fan (re)creations – from art seeking to deliberately rectify the omissions to pastiches incorporating favourite characters from other studios' films or television series – thereby demonstrating the effectiveness of the film's homage strategy.

As has become common since the 1990s, the film also includes a post-credits scene that quite literally embodies the importance of the studio's legacy. This scene features Saba Sabino, Asha's grandfather, who is about to celebrate his 100th birthday at the beginning of the film. For this grand celebration, Asha hopes that her grandfather's true heart's wish, which he entrusted to King Magnifico, as all Rosas citizens are invited to do, will be granted. Early in the story, Magnifico refuses to grant Sabino's wish, "creating something to inspire the next generation" (Buck & Veerasunthorn, 2023, 19:09), because he fears that it might enable him to stir civil unrest. This refusal constitutes the inciting incident that ultimately leads Magnifico down the path of evil and prompts Asha to become the heroine. At the end of the film, all wishes are returned to their rightful owners. The post-credits scene thus shows Sabino fulfilling his wish by playing on his mandolin the first few notes of "When you wish upon a star."[7] This confirms that Sabino has been representing the Disney Studio – and the values and aspirations it stands for – all along: inspiring a new generation while still guided by Walt's legacy and spirit.

Gazing in a Metafictional Mirror

Since its first feature in 1937, Disney has been associated with the fairy-tale film. Within the Disney animated canon, a dozen earlier films can be classified as fairy-tale adaptations if one considers narratives drawn from pre-existing oral or written traditions. In 2015, Jack Zipes, one of the most eminent scholars of fairy-tale studies, suggested a broader understanding of the Disney fairy-tale film, which he defined as "a recipe for universal success" that the studio cultivated over the decades, acculturating audiences by "adjusting the fairy tale's structure" (p. 8). What Zipes called a "recipe" is a seemingly fixed formula he identified as the Disney "well-made" fairy tale (a term he borrowed from prolific 19th-century French playwright Augustin-Eugène Scribe), based on six unvarying ingredients – "(1) traumatic and unfortunate incidents […], (2) songs of woe and joy […], (3) banishment and isolation […], (4) quest, conflict and comic relief […], (5) peripeteia […], and (6) magic resolution" – all imbued with "puritanical and capitalist values" (pp. 8–9). Among these values, Zipes highlights

[7] The song, originally featured in *Pinocchio* – which Tomasovic (2011) positions as the film that solidified the studio's self-canonisation discourse – became a studio icon in the 1950s when it was used to accompany the *Walt Disney* anthology television series and the Disney logo. It is also the song that all characters sing at the end of *Once Upon a Studio*.

those he finds problematic: privileging sympathy for elite characters (whose social status is often reinforced by their stereotypical physical appearance), employing comic relief to make "simple storylines palatable" (p. 9), and relying on magical happy endings that restore a harmonious status quo through the villain's incarceration or death (whose evil nature is also frequently accentuated by a stereotypical physical appearance). From Zipes's perspective, the Disney well-made fairy tale is essentially an architext – a genre in its own right – of which the Disney classics are iterative examples. In this sense, and as the filmmakers openly acknowledge, *Wish* is no exception, albeit with certain modulations that would certainly merit discussion in a separate article.

The Disney well-made fairy tale is also typically a hypertext – that is a derivative of a prior iteration of a story that it translates to the screen. As Genette (1982/1997a) explains, hypertextuality refers to "any relationship uniting a [later] text, [the hypertext], to an earlier text, [the hypotext], upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary" (p. 5). Although hypertextual relations are derivative in nature, they involve formal or thematic manipulation; they are forms of imitation and transformation. Zipes describes Disney as "adjusting" prior structures, while other scholars even more uncompromisingly accuse the studio of having "usurp[ed] the source" (Cartmell, 2007, p. 169). At first sight, *Wish* seems to be the exception. Asha's quest to save the wishes of Rosas citizens from Magnifico's evil clutches did not appear in any prior text or tradition. Yet the film's use of Easter eggs would suggest otherwise, as does its innovative engagement with the canon and some of its iconic representatives, for which the film offers new backstories. Asha is repeatedly shown wearing a cloak recognisably similar to that of Cinderella's Fairy Godmother. At the end of the film, Star turns the magic twig Asha broke earlier into the iconic magic wand and offers it to her; upon her initial rejection of the gift, Asha is told by her friend Dario that she should be "[their] fairy godmother" (Buck & Veerashunthorn, 2023, 1:25:00). Similarly, when King Magnifico is defeated and trapped into his magic staff, the face of the Evil Queen's magic mirror appears in a discrete flash. The ironic trapping of the vain King in a mirror is alluded to by Queen Amaya, who sentences him to be "h[ung] […] on the wall in the dungeon" (1:23:24). These elements demonstrate the filmmakers' essentially ludic approach to the story they are telling, while simultaneously grounding a hypertextual, retrospective continuity with the Disney canon within the characters themselves.

This retrospective stance also involves a form of reflexiveness which is not always devoid of irony. When gazing into the mirror of the Disney legacy, the filmmakers also sought to candidly reflect on their past. In this way, the

film engages in both metafiction and metacinema. As Genette (1982/1997a) observed, metatextuality "unites the text with another without necessarily citing it" (p. 4), and such relations are most often labelled commentary. In *Wish*, metatextuality is primarily established through the film's self-consciousness and its interpretation as an allegory of the Disney Studio. Several moments refer – ironically or as earnest homage – to the technical achievements and history of animation. For example, when Asha is interviewed for the position of King Magnifico's apprentice, she showcases her talent by revealing pages in her notebook where she has animated a baby goat[8] jumping merrily (her sketches are very precise and even include time codes). This breach of the fourth wall becomes a metacommentary through Magnifico's reaction: "That is a unique talent. Do we call that a talent?" (Buck and Veerasunthorn, 2023, 12:40). This scene clearly alludes to Disney's aspiration to establish animation as an art form in its own right.

As J. D. Connor (2015, pp. 336–339) observed in his discussion of *Pocahontas* (1995) and its allegorical representation of the Disney studio's incorporation of criticism, sung sequences in Disney films can be particularly meaningful when interpreted as allegories of the cinema industry. Indeed, most of the songs in *Wish*, created by songwriter Julia Michaels, can be read on at least two levels. As suggested earlier, "I am Star," when considered alongside the end credits, plays on the double meaning of the word 'star'; "Welcome to Rosas" introduces the audience to the city while subtly presenting it as the fictional counterpart of the Disney Magic Kingdom "where your dream and your reality can collide" (Buck & Veerasunthorn, 2023, 02:04); and "At all Costs" shows Magnifico and Asha vowing to protect the citizens' wishes – all of these songs evoke earlier films in the canon and therefore suggest the importance of safeguarding the studio's legacy. "This is the Thanks I Get" acquires a whole new meaning if Magnifico is viewed as representing Walt Disney's now contested legacy.

Perhaps the most compelling instance of this potential double reading is "Knowing What I Know Now." The song functions as the film's climax: Asha, Star, the Teens, and Queen Amaya agree that they need to unite and fight against the power-hungry Magnifico. Interestingly, the animators decided to illustrate this sequence with images and actions evocative of the history of animation, positioning the characters metafictionally as both the animated and the animators. The battle against Magnifico is suggested through silhouette animation created through Star's luminescence and rainbow-coloured backgrounds

[8] The sketches are representations of Valentino, her talking animal sidekick – another staple of the Disney studio.

that recall the early works of artists such as Lotte Reiniger. When haphazardly rebuilding the silhouette of Rosas' castle with any objects at hand, Gabo (one of Asha's friends) places the cylindrical rim of a cage on a table and spins it, reproducing the cylindrical mechanism of the zoetrope, an early pre-cinema animation device. The Teens are also seen moving in an exact replica of their early-day animation counterparts in *Snow White*. The characters' chorus of "knowing what we know now" can be read as a metatextual chant of Disney's new generation of animators, who seem ready for the future: as Asha insists, "If it's not us, then who and when?" (Buck & Veerasunthorn, 2023, 1:05:30).

Conclusion

There are many aspects worth noting when considering the film's engagement with fairy-tale genre – such as the return or obliteration of archetypal characters (although now perceived as a Disney princess, Asha is a commoner and thus partly departs from Zipes's prior concerns), or the revival of cartoon inventiveness through Star as a pantomime character – all of which deserve further scholarly attentions. The creators of *Wish* "wanted the look of the film to harken to the past and speak to the future" (Rebello & Baughman, 2023, p. 160), and these elements also testify to that intention. The filmmakers certainly managed to create "an aesthetic vision that would marry the contemporary with the classic" (Rebello & Baughman, 2023, p. 9). Despite what its detractors might say, by crafting a textually transcendent fairy tale that marries postmodern tropes with nostalgia-infused sentimentalism, the film demonstrates that the studio can look backward to move forward, launching the next Disney century without getting stuck in the previous one.

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