



Animating leadership: Crisis and renewal of governance in 4 mythic narratives

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Leadership
Popular culture
Organizational myths
Leadership and the media

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes four animated films in order to explore themes of leadership crises and leadership emergence. Drawing on psychoanalysis and structuralist film studies, this paper explores leadership emergence as a mythic structure within the four films, arguing that these myths are structured around a struggle of a young novice against an evil power figure, and the overcoming of this figure through a process of self-discovery and maturation. Central themes include the relations between self-realization of leaders and the social harmony, the battle with evil leaders as an ego-struggle, and exile and journey as a precursor to mature leadership competence. The paper attempts to show how, following Miendl et al. [Miendl, J. R., Erlich, S. B. & Dukerich, J. M. (1985). The romance of leadership. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 30, 78–102] leadership myths often conflate individual psychological well-being with social well-being, and add to this perspective that such a conflation may be key to understanding leadership myths as projections of internal psychological dynamics. More generally, it is argued that treating popular culture such as animated allegories as contemporary myth offers scholars a view into popular conceptions of leadership, possibly illuminating the relationships between leadership and social organization.

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1. Introduction

Popular entertainment has often been seen as a vehicle for the dissemination of core social beliefs (e.g. Adorno, 1954; Rhodes, 2001). The study of film in particular has recently gained some momentum in the leadership literature (e.g. Warner, 2007), as has the idea that mythic or archetypal leadership categories persist in contemporary society (Abramson, 2007). Popular culture provides an important vehicle by which we can explore such categories. Hassard and Holliday (1998), for example, stressed that popular entertainment offers intense, dramatized portrayals by which cultural categories become highly visible. From the perspective of visibility, few cultural artifacts offer the intense characterizations of animated film (Rhodes, 2001, 2002). Animation, with its simplified structure, caricatured portrayal of actors, and young target audience, may provide an ideal setting in which to examine social narratives. I wish to show specifically that how leaders are portrayed in such narratives appropriates and transforms classic visions of self-realization, epic journey, and cosmic equilibrium in the guise of fun entertainment.

Here, I analyze leadership myths in 4 animated films: *Antz* (Dreamworks, 1998), *A Bug's Life* (Pixar, 1998), *Monsters, Inc.* (Pixar, 2001) and *Robots* (Blue Sky Studios, 2005). These films were chosen on the basis of their fable-like portrayal of social life and their common thematic axis which dealt with leadership emergence and the relationship between leaders and society. Treatments of science fiction have long noted that the use of magical creatures (*Monsters, Inc.*), animals (*Antz*, *A Bug's Life*), or human-like machines (*Robots*) allows artists to make statements about social life that could be offensive if stated in human terms (e.g. Horton, 2000), a classic example being Orwell's (1945) *Animal Farm*. Second, although it is not claimed that the films constitute a representative sample of all animated films, using multiple films allows a comparative approach that attempts to go beyond a

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simple case study (Warner, 2007, for example, draws leadership implications by comparing different versions of Henry V). Third, one may note that four major motion pictures using the relatively new digital technology, within the first few years of the technology's inception, have all dealt with issues of emergent leadership within societies, and have chosen allegorical characters to embody these issues. As we will see, these strong parallels suggest that the films encode common leadership narratives. Thus, I argue, a comparison of these movies could shed some light on the social myths surrounding leadership in contemporary culture.

In the following analysis, I track contemporary views of leadership through the four films, showing how these films demonstrate variations on a common myth of leadership. I attempt to draw lessons from these films about how cultural productions have represented the social and psychic foundations of leadership, the difficulties and paradoxes of leadership, and the processes by which new generations of young workers capture and envision leadership positions. I will now turn to the theoretical premises of this interpretive approach and to the films themselves, nesting my analysis in the structuralist and psychoanalytic literatures.

2. Background

The current study follows Traube (1994) in framing a narrative analysis in terms of the textual qualities that embody social categories and the narrative and relational properties that relate those categories. This type of analysis relies on two broad categories of textual elements that have been historically important in the structural study of narrative, myth, and folklore (Dundes, 1997; Levi-Strauss, 1955; Propp, 1968; Saussure, 1974). The first, the *paradigmatic* or associative dimension (Saussure, 1974), concerns the conjunction of elements into categorical schema that, according to Saussure, rely for their associations on memory, and form the objects of discourse. In short, the relationships between characters and elements of the text. The second dimension, the *syntagmatic*, describes the linear progression of discursive objects in a narrative form, and is based on the fact that any exposition of truth in language requires a narrative structure, because of the linear nature of language (Saussure, 1974). Thus, a textual exegesis requires both a description of the various categories that are called up by the text, and an examination of the ways these categories develop and transform through a line of progression.

My main thesis is that the narratives under study utilize a myth of leadership by which the leader completes a heroic-journey of self-discovery (e.g. Campbell, 1949; Murdock, 1991) which is at once framed as an individual and a social transformation. In order to explore the psychological underpinnings of the journey metaphor, I will draw on Lacanian psychoanalysis, a much used approach in cinema studies (e.g. Altman, 1977; Zizek, 1991) but often understudied in the leadership literature. Lacan was a key figure in combining structuralist views with psychoanalysis, making this approach a good fit for studying mythic conceptions of leaders. Psychoanalytic approaches are particularly relevant to the current study for several reasons. First, because of the importance in all 4 films given to conflicts in leadership identity, coming of age themes and personal maturation, ambiguities in visions of leader-as-idol versus leader-as-adversary, and competition over love interests between leadership rivals, analyses of psychological dynamics are highly pertinent. Second, the leadership literature has traditionally drawn very heavily on psychological theory (e.g. Messick & Kramer, 2005; Sternberg, 2007); however, with some important and notable exceptions (e.g. Gabriel, 1999; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984), psychoanalytic perspectives have been largely absent from this literature. By contrast, film criticism has historically drawn extensively on such perspectives (e.g. Altman, 1977; Berman, 1997; Brandell, 2004; Dervin, 1985; Zizek, 1991), encapsulating a long tradition in which both syntagmatic elements of character and plot development and paradigmatic relationships between characters have been treated by a combination of semiotics and psychoanalytic film theory (for a critique of this tradition, see Currie, 1995). Thus, using psychoanalysis to explore leadership in film interestingly allows a rapprochement between two fields which have been historically influenced by psychology in very different ways, and also allows an in-road for psychologists to study the structure of organizational myth.

To preview the argument that will hopefully become clear throughout the presentation of the films to be studied, I will draw on three apparently separate motifs that become structurally linked when seen through a psychoanalytic framework. These three motifs are a) The struggle with and eventual overcoming of an evil external leader b) The estrangement and subsequent self-discovery of an incipient leader and c) The establishment of social harmony upon the return of the protagonist and his ascendance to power in a community. The argument is based on a Lacanian reading of Freud's well-known Oedipus complex, and the transformation of this complex into a symbolic structure representing society's search for self-identity and harmony.

The argument may be summarized as follows: In his work Totem and Taboo (Freud, 1913), Freud argued that early societies manifested a version of the patricidal Oedipus complex, in which rejected male members of tribal societies returned to depose the leader or alpha-male of the society, and that this tendency became codified in various social symbols and taboos. The father role is at once seen as a figure of identification to be sought after (e.g. Fishman, 1982) and a rival to be overcome. In Lacan's reading, the father/rival is not so much an actual person, but rather the embodiment of prohibition, a social role symbolizing the repression of self-realization and ruining the unity of the subject's world by preventing full enjoyment or pleasure.

To back up one step, the subject for Lacan (1977), as well as Freud (1971), is in constant search for unity with his world, an attempt at self-realization through the attainment of a fantastic ideal self. However, as will be described further later, this ideal self, which is imbued with power and authority, is structurally unattainable, because a fantasy, by its very nature, always remains just out of reach of its attainment. The father figure in Lacan's reading becomes associated with the prohibition from reaching this self-unity, and posed as an evil force to be deposed. This fantasy of prohibition, from the perspective of the subject, appears as an anomaly in the harmony of the world itself, a plague or catastrophe preventing harmony; the illusory nature of this conclusion remains hidden, because it is embedded in the very logical grammar of the subject's thinking. The person's inner identity conflicts are projected as social ills, and the story of the leader becomes a metaphor for the society as a whole, a point which will be further elaborated.

So then, following this reading, there is a certain mythical structure that can be outlined as a fantasy of ascendant leadership: An evil power holder banishes the young leader who would reinstate harmony to society; the mere existence of this leader prevents social harmony through tyranny. The young leader returns and in the same moment (e.g. that of discovering one's hidden talent or staying true to one's values) both realizes himself and deposes the tyrant, which in the structure of the myth are one and the same act. This act of self-realization establishes the subject as the new leader, deposes the tyrant, and brings harmony to the world.

It is hoped that this very brief outline of the exposition to come will become more evident through its application to the films to be studied. In the next section, after a brief description of the basic plots of the stories, I will attempt to show how governance problems are framed as projections of individual character flaws and virtues, and the basic prosperity of society is seen as a reflection of character. My thesis will be that in this mythical structure, macro-level governance and individual character are inextricably intertwined, such that the self-realization of the protagonist as a human being becomes the foundation of, and prerequisite for, the health of society.

3. The crisis of leadership as a mythical structure

3.1. Background on films

The four films analyzed in this paper, *Antz*, *A Bug's Life*, *Monsters, Inc.*, and *Robots*, revolve around the travails of enterprising and unique individuals within social systems that are discouraging of creative innovation, whether due to weakness of the leader to outside threats, or corruption from within the ranks. *Antz* begins with Z, a worker-ant who, in order to impress the Princess Bala, unwittingly ends up a war hero and social icon, to the rage of the corrupt General Mandible, whose evil plans include eradicating the masses in order to create a warrior society. In an attempt to escape the General's guards, Z ends up on a journey with the Princess to Insectopia, an ideal land which was not thought to exist but that Z, through his nonconformity, discovers with the Princess. Meanwhile, his name comes to stand for individualism and worker's rights in the anthill, and his return as the hero of a social movement ultimately leads to a moral transformation of the colony, as well as to the deposition of General Mandible and the foiling of the genocidal plans.

In *A Bug's Life*, also set in an ant colony, Flik, an innovative and entrepreneurial ant, is chastised for not conforming to the colony's futile labors to please the evil grasshopper gang. As punishment for Flik's exacerbating the rage of the grasshoppers, Flik is sent to find help from an outside land. In this film, as in *Antz*, the protagonist has a love interest, also the Princess, who is caught between the normalcy of the colony and the infuriating but charming individuality of the innovator. Ultimately, it is Flik's ability to inspire the colony to create new technologies that allows them to overcome the oppression of the grasshoppers.

Robots continues the profile of the protagonist as a non-conformist innovator, this time a young robot, Rodney, who comes to the big city to work for his hero, a famous industrialist named Bigweld with the motto "See a need, fill a need". However, upon finding that his dream business has turned into a bed of corporate corruption, with an evil surrogate and his over-controlling mother making decisions in place of Bigweld, Rodney is left to scrounge with the socially marginalized robots of the city, whose lives are threatened by the corporate plot to replace them with "upgrades". Using his idols' motto, Rodney begins fixing the neglected robots, drawing aggression from the corporation. Rodney ultimately succeeds in improving society by re-motivating the disillusioned Bigweld, who revives the lost entrepreneurial spirit, and deposes the wicked CEO in favor of a just corporation of the Golden Age with Rodney as his heir.

Monsters, Inc., like *Robots*, is set within a corporation, an energy company that extracts fuel from the screams of children to power the city. The protagonists, a worker duo composed of star talent Sully and comic relief sidekick Mike Wazowski, accidentally befriend a child (believed to be highly toxic), and learn about a scandalous plot to extract more energy from children through a harmful machine. Through their attempts to save the little girl, they end up uncovering the plot and ousting the corrupt CEO, but ultimately save the company by discovering an alternate energy supply—children's laughter.

In short, while the descriptions given of the basic plot lines of the movies has been brief thus far, certain family resemblances can be drawn between the films that make them good artifacts to compare. All of the films deal with leadership, corruption and innovation. Also, they involve the attempts of aspiring and hopeful young members of society to deal with the disillusionment resulting from discovering the villainy of their leaders. The following sections, will attempt to elaborate on the conceptual themes that run through the films, while at the same time attempting to add relevant details to the bare-bones descriptions given above.

4. Corrupted governance and social problems

In each of the films analyzed, the central conflicts revolve around the inability of current leaders to recognize or deal with social threats, or to avoid corruption or evil, and the social problems that result. In these narratives, a key link always exists between the wider social ills and the individual ignorance or maliciousness. As in Meindl, Erlich and Dukerich (1985) well-known thesis, the leaders were framed as the principle agents responsible for the health of society, imbued with a super-human (or super-ant, robot or monster) power to personally embody the state of society in general. For example, *Antz* and *A Bug's Life* take place in monarchies where the insuperable pressure from the leadership to conform to prevailing social norms causes difficulties in finding ways to deal with social challenges. In *Antz*, the unquestioning deferral of the queen to the positional power of the general leads to the de facto control by a treacherous militaristic leader that wants to eradicate the "lazy" workers. Thus the colony becomes lead by an illegitimate force marked by a jingoistic militarism. In *A Bug's Life*, a similar reluctance by the queen to challenge an outside tyrant

reflects a fearful, non-innovative workaholicism as the norm in the colony. In these two examples, the idea of governance by conformity to rigid roles leads the ant colonies into paralysis when faced with challenges; particularly in *Antz*, the value of conformity is clearly linked to tyranny.

Monsters, Inc. and *Robots* similarly treat differing leadership profiles, but do so as different paradigms of corporate governance. In both these films ideal forms of leadership are contrasted with corrupt and anti-social forms. Both films frame the currently corrupt corporation as socially responsible and industrious in an idealized “golden age”; however, false leaders of one sort or another (outsiders, sneaky insiders, unmindful CEOs) hijack the process and cause a rupture in the harmony of this age. In *Monsters, Inc.*, this takes the form of a secret plan to build a machine that produces energy by harming children, while in *Robots*, the secret plan involves recycling poor robots if they cannot afford expensive “upgrades”. Similarly to *Antz* and *A Bug's Life*, these two films differ with regards to the agentic attribution of responsibility: *Antz*, like *Monsters, Inc.*, frames the corrupt influences as coming from a malicious element within the governance structure (the militaristic ant leader, and, in *Monsters, Inc.*, a corrupt and jealous worker, Randall), whereas in *A Bug's Life* and *Robots*, weak or apathetic governance allows the leader to be overcome by corrupt forces. In all 4 films, however, it is the inability for the leader to articulate a coherent vision and fight for this vision in the face of opposition that leads to corruption. In all cases, the main problematic of the film appears when the protagonist is faced with a dysfunctional society led by tyrannical or corrupt means.

What is key to note is that in every case, the social problems that beg resolution are based in problematic leadership and assume the direct flow of the personal deficiencies of leaders into social ills. In this sense, they conform to Meindl et al.'s (1985) concept of the “romance of leadership”, a cultural motif in which the leader of an organization brings prosperity or demise to the organization through the expression of personal virtues or qualities. This conception dates historically back to ancient thought, from Sophocles' framing of famine as resulting from Oedipal lack of self-knowledge and Plato's emphasis on the enlightenment of rulers, to Hobbesian monarchy as the “head” of a nation, to modern representations of leader characteristics as symbolic representations of the organization as a unity (e.g. Pfeffer, 1981). As the evil grasshopper leader explains to the weak princess in *A Bug's Life*, “First rule of leadership—Everything is your fault. It's a bug eat bug world out there princess, one of those circle of life things”. The figure of the leader becomes a symbolic condensation of the character of the colony as a whole (c.f. Pfeffer, 1981).

Thus, the leader comes to stand for society as a whole; the current despotic leader is associated with social ills, and as will be described, the journey and return of the new leader becomes a trope for the reestablishment of the healthy society. One advantage of this framing of a leadership is that it allows social ills to be neatly compressed into the moral struggles of an individual leader, and conversely, to allow the projection of individual ethical experience onto a global stage, thus giving individual morality universal import. Connecting individual experience to cosmic themes in this manner has the virtue of liberating ethics from the arbitrary sphere of “personal decisions”, because, in this romantic conception, each individual moral decision is also a choice for a certain kind of society.

5. Leadership, the journey and the “false-father” motif

Following Meindl et al.'s romantic conception of leadership and the psychoanalytic notion that myth is a projection of psychic tensions, if it is true that the leader role in myth functions as a prototype or template for society as a whole, then it is worth examining the burgeoning personality of the young ascendant leader as portrayed in these films. According to Lacan (e.g. 1977), the process of character development involves the young subject's identification with a power position, which is seen as both alien and is posited as an aspiring self-position. However, this position may be “occupied” by a rival who is seen as threatening, recreating the well-known Oedipus struggle that Freud had written about (Freud, 1924). The subject forges its identity by assuming the position of this projected, false object self, who is seen as wrongly occupying the subject's identity position. The scheming tyrant, wrongfully in power through treachery or deceit, exemplifies this point of view.

This process of self-idealization and realization establishes a rivalry for the position of the “other”. The overcoming of the powerful other involves a struggle in which the child is locked in a power and identity battle with a father figure. The fake ruler who is wicked is well-known as a variation of the Oedipal myth, which is modified by replacing the real father as a locus of anger with an unjustly replaced father, an object of anger by the protagonist but also a projection of the protagonist's own path in attaining the idealized power position. This literary figure is well exemplified in Oedipal readings of Hamlet, for instance (Jones, 1976). The “wrongful ruler” provides a foil against which the protagonist attempts to realize his outwardly projected identity, and thus “discover the leader within”.

In all of the films other than *Monsters, Inc.* (which will be addressed separately), the protagonist is small, child-like, and bungling, a far cry from the heroic prototype of social leadership. This setup allows the development of a coming-of-age narrative in which a maturation process of self-discovery marks the transition from a wayward adolescent to a seasoned leader. This transition in all cases involves the deposition of an evil dominant figure that, as described above, rules tyrannically over the social group.

The particular form of this ascendance to leadership is notable both in its ubiquity across all the films and its strong echoes of Oedipal themes. In all cases, the protagonist's journey begins with some form of expulsion from the community and an ensuing journey to the “outside”. In *Antz* and *Monsters, Inc.*, this involves a flight from the authorities, while in *A Bug's Life*, it involves a self-conscious quest for outside help, and in *Robots*, a rejection by the corporation Bigweld Industries. This journey, however, always culminates in a return to the community, where the fundamental struggle for social control begins. The figure of the journey is perhaps best described by Van Gennep (1960) as reflecting a “liminal phase”, a time of indecision and soul searching which is finalized in the assumption of a new identity.

The journey described above, in addition, always revolves around a love interest of the protagonist, but the possibility of love is always intertwined with the identity quest of the potential leader. For example, in *Antz*, the protagonist Z falls in love with Princess Bala, who is arranged to be married with the evil general. Z masquerades as a soldier in order to catch the attention of the princess. When Z, through no skill of his own, is thrust into the hero role, the princess and the general discover that he is a fake, and he is exiled. In *Robots*, the protagonist Rodney becomes involved with the beautiful robot Cappy, an executive at Bigweld Industries and the target of unwelcome advances by the corrupt CEO of the company. When Rodney accompanies Cappy to a company party uninvited, he is discovered as an intruder and chased by police. In *A Bug's Life*, while there is not a direct love relationship between Princess Atta and the evil grasshopper invader (perhaps explainable by their being different species), the princess remains under the sway of the grasshopper tyrant and supports the continued appeasement of the invader until won over by the hero.

In *A Bug's Life*, there is no direct father role, but similarly to *Antz*, the princess/love interest is caught between the tyranny of the grasshoppers and her relationship with an innovative individual. The technique of replacing a governing father figure with an evil power figure, who rules through trickery and duplicity, is present here (in the foreign dominant ruling grasshopper) and in *Antz* (with the scheming general).

With *Monsters Inc.*, there is a clearly ambivalent relationship between the protagonist and the corrupt corporate leader. On the one hand, Sully is seen as the good son, the most productive of all workers, and the paradigm of the original founding principles of hard work and dedication. This worker, beloved of the CEO, is nevertheless the target of aggression, being thrown into exile by the CEO when the illicit scheme is uncovered. The CEO of the company, caught up in the illicit scheme, at least shows remorse at the unethical punishment, but must continue because of the profit motive.

As we shall discuss further in the next section, only in *Monsters, Inc.* is a redemptive relationship not with a mother figure or powerful woman, but with a daughter, whom the protagonist attempts to save from the abuse of the corporate leader.

Interestingly, the *Monsters, Inc.* is the only film where the protagonist does not have a mother figure, and also the only case where the protagonist is a large, powerful and dominant figure and not child-like. In this case only, the female who is "saved" is herself a child, and their love is one of paternal protection, rather than self-proving. This is notable, also, because of the two protagonists, one enormous and dominant and the other tiny and comedic, the love relationship develops among the former, the latter never really being emotionally invested in the little girl.

In *Robots*, we also encounter a corrupt, fake leader figure that takes the place of the real leader, who has become downtrodden and passive, but not evil. The current CEO is only concerned with money and power, and again, with capturing the affections of a female employee against her will. This employee finally rescues the protagonist from being persecuted by the CEO and his guards.

In addition, an interesting gender-related twist occurs in *Robots* that is not evident in the other films. Here, we see the transferal of the blame for the illicit scheme onto the mother of the current CEO, who is cast as the source of all social inequalities. This mother, a horrific figure of gigantic proportions who chops up robots without remorse, has chained the father passively in a corner, and threatens the son with the same if he does not continue his reign of terror. Also, echoes of a Hamlet-type transferal of aggression to the mother are clearly evident in *Robots*. Here, the establishment of a productive industrial complex is thwarted by the destructive will of the mother, who is behind the scenes of the evil behavior of the CEO, even to the extent of forcing the CEO to commit unethical actions that he would otherwise not have the courage to commit.

In summary, throughout all of the films we see strong suggestions of oedipal components in the telling of the leadership tale. In particular, the "problematic" wedding of a female figure to the evil leader often develops into a burgeoning relationship between the female and the protagonist (who is always male). Usually, the love object is portrayed as a high-status woman, who is nevertheless politically powerless. The tension in the plot more or less centrally involves the developing relationship with this love figure as the protagonist comes closer to realizing his aspirations to "fix" the corrupted situation. In the next section, I will describe how this resolution involves the transformation of the protagonist into a leader figure, and subsequently, how this transformation realizes a renovation of governance paradigms and a renewal of a healthy social order.

6. Self-realization and the ascendant leader

In the light of the above relations described between powerful evil leader and child-like protagonist, it begins to make sense why the overcoming of this "other" would be an essential step in the self-realization of the individual and the restoring of equilibrium to the environment. In each case, this self-realization involves an initial distancing from the home and disillusionment with the current leadership, and a turning point, when the protagonist turns *back* to society and faces the evil *Imago* as a renewed subject.

Antz, for example, demonstrates a clear progression of the protagonist through childish, attention grabbing antics to individual wanderlust, and finally to a return to society and the grassroots mobilization of the community in order to survive a crisis. While earlier, his actions were driven by the dream of reaching the mythical "Insectopia"; once having reached the paradise, which is reality a garbage bin, he is compelled to return to rescue his love and mobilize the workers against the authoritarian dictator. In this act of leaving his imagined utopia, he paradoxically realized his vision of a better society at home.

A Bug's Life presents a somewhat different picture of the ascendant leader, although the exile-self discovery-return theme is also very strong, and the return from a utopian dream to help the community is also central. In this case, it is the development of self-reliance and innovation that mark the creation of leadership. The protagonist, Flik, also leaves the colony in order to find help to save the community from the grasshoppers, thinking that he will build an army of larger heroic bugs. When he discovers that the bugs he brings back are mere circus performers, his deception is eventually replaced by the realization that, by taking a leadership role, he can use the talents of these performers to trick the oppressors into submission. Finally, his maturation is completed after

the failure of this new plan, when he turns his attention to his own community, declaring “Ants don't serve grasshoppers! It's you who need us.” As in *Antz*, the maturation of a leader signifies the return of the wanderer to his community.

Similarly, in *Robots*, the protagonist ultimately ascends to a leadership position through the use of his creativity and innovation. However, rather than fleeing his old community, he follows his dream of working for the Bigweld Corporation, only to be disillusioned by the false veneer of creativity and the underlying truth of corporate corruption. Dejected, he begins to do the mundane work of fixing robots. Ultimately, however, his creative nature leads him to attain his dream in a renewed and uncorrupt Bigweld organization. Rather than the spectacle of innovation, the reality of hard work leads to the maturation of his creative potential.

Finally, in *Monsters, Inc.*, the transformation enacted is complicated by the presence of two protagonists, one enormous monster who is pure of heart, and another tiny little monster who is self-interested. An obvious reading of this size difference would be to parallel it with the maturation theme. As the narrative progresses, the little monster, Mike, acquires the compassion that Sully, the large monster, already had, and in this acquisition they become a virtuous leadership team. In a telling example, the human girl left to their responsibility becomes a sincere concern for Sully, whereas Mike wants to get rid of her at all costs. The rejection of the father role by the egoistic subject, along with its subsequent acceptance of caring and stewardship over personal profit, marks the point where the team coalesces into a mature whole.

7. Renewal of leadership

Traditionally, the Oedipal myth has been used to demonstrate a tragic human condition of perpetual chasing after the father image (e.g. Fishman, 1982); to remember, the villain was none other than Oedipus himself, creating a tragic circularity in the myth. Modern narratives have transformed Oedipal tensions into challenges to be overcome in reaching “healthy” development through internalization of the authority role (Freud, 1924), thus turning the ousting of false leaders into a heroic quest and underplaying the tragic element. This tendency in contemporary mythologizing is repeated in the narratives here studied. Following the original Hamlet-esque transformation of the father into a “false-father”, the central question moves from one of dealing with our tragic natures to one of overcoming evil. In the stories studied, the evil force is defeated, and the new leader, once self-realized, ascends to an authority position.

Generally, the plot resolution focuses on switching bad leaders for good leaders, leading to the betterment of society; however, this resolution does not imply any radical change in the structure of society itself. In both *A Bug's Life* and *Robots*, no major social transformation is achieved. Admittedly, in these two narratives, innovation and self-reliance are reinforced as important. In the former film, realizing that they outnumber the evil exogenous enemy, they begin to work together to preserve their community. In *Robots*, Rodney's dedication awakens the original enterprising attitude of the corporate founder, and at the end, Rodney acquires the position of Bigweld's assistant and successor to the leader. Only in *Monsters, Inc.* is there some movement toward a changed paradigm of corporate governance. Discovering that laughing (a renewable resource) produces more monster fuel than screams (a limited resource, due to child jadedness), Sully and Mike formulate a sustainable solution for future operations. In this sense, although the corporate structure of production is never questioned, the rearrangement of corporate practices in new, sustainable ways provides a model of social change absent from the other films.

Thus, social change in the form of adoption of new innovations does occur in some cases; in *A Bug's Life*, the newly liberated colony adopts Flik's grain harvesting invention, while in *Monsters, Inc.*, the new corporation in the end adopts a technology that is sustainable. However, in terms of leadership, the story does not deviate from the heroic-journey renewal (e.g. Campbell, 1949) archetype based on a struggle between old and new leaders. In this sense, innovative leadership forms are eschewed in favor of a repetition of an age-old heroic tale. This reinforces the idea that, despite the new digital media and contemporary cinematic presentation, these stories function as myths that recode classic themes. It also reinforces the idea, central to the status quo reinforcing view of myth (Durkheim, 1961), that the function of myth is not innovation or transformation, but the consolidation of society. Finally the focus on the renewal, rather than transformation, of society suggests that leadership myths based on individual self-realization may not simply function as psychological projections, but may serve an ideological function of focusing responsibility for social health on the virtue of leaders rather than on more “macro” systemic features of society.

8. Discussion

In the following section, I will discuss the above analysis and its implications for the study of leadership and popular culture. First, given the unorthodox nature of the object under study (i.e. most leadership studies do not look at film), it is valuable to examine the methodological assumptions of my approach. Second, I will turn to the substantive conclusions, organizing the above analysis into specific points relevant to leadership.

9. Method

Because the above analysis involves not the enactment of a leadership process in an actual setting, but a narrative genre that has made its way into the popular culture, it involves various questions about the analysis and interpretation of these narrative structures. The interpretation of structural features underlying surface phenomenon is a contested terrain, and thus it may be worth taking a moment to pre-empt criticism by exploring the limitations of such a perspective.

It is important to note that both a structural and a psychoanalytic approach to film study treat the film as a self-contained cultural artifact; in fact, this may be one reason why the two approaches are so compatible with each other. In other words, where structuralism studies the film as myth, psychoanalysis studies it as fantasy. Using the two together allows us to think of the stories as embodying collective fantasies that are expressed through the medium of film. This approach, however, has come under some criticism (Kristeva, 1969; Said, 1971). For example, the self-contained nature of this analysis tends to privilege the static structures of the text (the paradigmatic) over the transformative potential in the text. To elaborate, because the text is usually seen as an integrated whole or “single network” of meanings (Leech, 1974, p 285), the whole text is seen as an exposition of a single basic structure that only uses its narrative flow in order to explain the blossoming of the final, completed object or text. As Eco (1976) suggests, this is an unfortunate but necessary consequence of the need to explain change in terms of narrative “structures”, so that radical change is always captured within previously existing structures. Put more simply, the content of the film is seen as adequate as a static, complete object of study, a reflection of society, rather than a producer of transformative messages or an ideological tool. Myths, here, do not transform; they repeat.

An immediate implication of this view is that the analysis of the texts tends to assume that they are reflective of deep rooted social traditions, and take for granted their status as culturally significant (McCanles, 1982). Thus, it naturally tends to underplay the critical questioning of how these categories are produced and sustained within a community, following instead what Traube (1994) calls a “reflectionist theory” of media. This approach thus correctly or falsely sees media as a reflection of social values and beliefs. The main problem with this, according to Traube (1994), is that it overlooks the ideological nature of cultural messages produced by a “culture industry” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972), viewing media as a reflection of society when it should be viewed as a reflection of the dominant classes' attempts to impose a narrative on society.

Any analysis of film or popular culture that attempts, as I have here done, to present a cultural artifact as myth must thus respond to critical views which attempt to look “beyond” the myth (e.g. see Meindl et al., 1985, for an application to leadership myths) to social messages and underlying power dynamics. One response is that this critical view must clearly be tempered by the fact that culture industries must also respond to consumer preferences and impose views only within the gamut of what will be bought. This is tempered by the fact that, as Traube points out, a seller's market in the film industry, and an lack of understanding of “true” consumer preferences has led to the creation of a “myth” of consumer society that is always is perceived through the prism of industry producers (see also Slotkin, 1984). In this view, whether the myths I describe are industry myths or consumer myths is an empirical question about who has more power to organize the film market.

For better or for worse, this paper consciously avoids radical ideological critiques, notwithstanding their usefulness or validity. On the one hand, the mere act of analyzing a story as myth and not as received truth does imply a critical perspective; however, it is important to note that by calling the stories “myths” I remain agnostic as to their truth value. I argue that taking narratives seriously in their own right has value, not as a refutation of ideological critique, but as a complement to such perspectives. While critical perspectives took issue with earlier work on myth and structure in the works of Saussure and Levi-Strauss, among others, many post-structuralist thinkers have, in turn, questioned the idea that we can escape myth and symbol, arguing that like it or not, myths are here to stay (e.g. Baudrillard, 1993). To these scholars, looking at context rather than content is simply to create new narratives and myths, at higher levels of analysis, and not to escape myth-making as a whole. As such, it is reasonable to go back to content from context, seriously considering what a film is *about*, and not only who created it and why. To some extent then, it is important to realize that this study (and text-centered approaches generally) must be content to depict the structures of “myth” neither claiming that these structures fully describe the social phenomena they “reflect”, nor claiming that they serve only the interests of power.

One consequence of this return to content is that it recreates the emic point of view that the Marxist or critical theorist would have seen as naïve, and considers as a theoretical question what it would be like to believe from a given point of view. I use the narratives surrounding leadership in the four films studied here to explore myths regarding how bad leadership is linked to social problems, when and why effective leaders arise, and what kinds of rehabilitative forces good leaders exert in a society. Throughout this narrative, I attempt to show how individual identity conflicts and resolutions form the basis for these wider social conflicts and resolutions. I do not argue (though I tend to believe) that leadership works, in the “real world”, in the ways describe above; however, I argue that though myth may not be identical to reality, it has important consequences in framing the complex social worlds around us. Additionally, if social realities are in large part the outcomes of collectively held beliefs, and thus if social myths recursively act to create the realities that created them (c.f. Searle, 1995), then there may be more to such myths than illusion and ideology.

Closely related to this point is the role of psychoanalytic theory is giving meaning to these texts. While as an empirical psychological science, psychoanalysis has been hotly debated (c.f. Eagle, 2007; Grunbaum 2006), as a study of aesthetics, text and narrative, psychology has had increasing success, a phenomenon referred to by Barsani (2006) as the “depsychologizing of psychoanalysis” (p. 161). As described above, idealized structures may be imperfectly reflected in applied settings, so approaches that deal in showing structures must use caution. Perhaps because the processes described by psychoanalytic theory are structures of fantasy, it makes more sense to apply these structures to narratives than to people's actions. That said, to the extent that societies use myth as models of reality, and mental models to structure their actions and beliefs, these the spheres of narrative and action should be highly coupled. In other words, it is the author's belief that the phenomena described above do affect leadership beliefs and behaviors, but it has not been the objective of the paper to establish how this might occur.

9.1. Leadership projected onto the big screen

The above analysis of animated narratives reveals important themes regarding the emergence and psychology of leadership, as well as the relationship between leaders and the wider social situation. To repeat briefly the main components of those themes:

- 1.) The leader becomes the locus of a wider evaluation of a society, in which his/her influence takes on almost cosmic significance. The connection between the person of the leader and the “macro” context has been found in many cultural narratives, where poor leadership is seen as the cause of plague, famine or otherwise brings about misery, and where good leadership is equivalent to universal and cosmic harmony (Frazer, 1998). Thus, whether positive or negative, there is a link drawn between the individual's character and the well-being of the environment.
- 2.) This link is used to transition the narrative from a tale of survival and social order into an allegory of personal development, in which the virtue of the protagonist becomes the dominant factor in explaining objective outcomes. The struggles of society thus become struggles of establishing moral leaders. In addition, once the wider social order is “compressed” into an individual tale of struggle between good and evil leaders, a common love object often enters the picture and becomes an object of struggle.
- 3.) There are two ways that this establishment is accomplished. The first is through identifying an evil leader, who leads through trickery, crime, or brutality, and describing the process of supplanting this leader with leadership based on caring (*Robots*), competence (*Monsters, Inc.*), or natural right (*A Bug's Life*). The second process is internal, through the self-discovery of the good leader, who through struggle finds the confidence and motivation to lead. From a psychoanalytic viewpoint, because myth is an outward projection of fantasy, within the mythic narrative these two processes can be seen as one in the same, that is, in the establishment of mythic harmony.
- 4.) These two processes, one external (defeating the evil leader) and the other internal (discovering oneself), are complementary and structurally linked, in that internal self-discovery is found through either alienation from the community by the evil leader (all 4 stories involve some sort of banishment), and defeating the external enemy involves a return of the hero from his/her wanderings to assume his position of leadership.

To trace the origins of these mythic elements would be beyond the scope of this paper; however, I have tried to give some brief allusions to place where such a tracing could begin. As described above, there are strong Oedipal overtones in all of these stories, and where there is no direct reference connecting the father to the evil leader as in the Oedipus myth, there are indirect variants of the myth such as that found in Hamlet, where the evil leader is not the father but an ill-fitting father substitute. The notion of a process of self-discovery through exile, and return to society in a transformed role might suggest that the key narrative device for all 4 films was an enactment of ritual transformation, where individual and society alike are caught up in the ritual, and the changing of leadership became what could be called a “hermeneutic key” (Amado & Brasil, 1991) to understanding social transformation and renewal.

To say that these old themes are represented here is not to say that the films drew deliberately on such mythologies to construct their stories. Rather, it is to suggest that perhaps the idea of leadership itself embodies more than simply a functional role in a social or organizational structure. Rather, for the idea of leadership itself to even make sense, it may be necessary to posit a symbolic link between (certain) individuals and society as a whole, and that positing will open certain interpretive spaces wherein the activity of the individual leader becomes more than individual behavior.

The idea that leaders encapsulate and condense in their persona an image of society as a whole is by no means alien to leadership theory. For instance, Weber's (1947) charismatic leadership provides an example where individuals identify the leader's magnetism as representing the character of a society. Pfeffer's (1981) symbolic view of leadership, similarly, uses the fundamental attribution error to explain how people focus social issues onto a single individual. Hogg's (2001) identity view of leadership holds that prototypical leaders come to stand in for a group's social identity. Although charismatic or heroic leadership styles may be only one pathway that leadership relationships can take (e.g. Mumford, 2006), it seems to be a prevalent basis of leadership myths (Meindl et al., 1985). Thus, leadership theories have long recognized, at least implicitly, the leader as a special kind of interface between individual and society. Here, I attempt to show that narrative structures encode this aspect of leadership into myths that get repeated in various ways in popular culture.

Like all cultural artifacts with embody leadership stories, these films may affect people's views on leadership, or they may not. In an important sense, such effects are tangential to the current study, although other studies would do well to empirically examine the effects and causes of film and other cultural artifacts. Here, I have attempted to critique artifacts as artifacts, as internally coherent narratives that repeat in various forms throughout a genre. This study shares with most critical works two broad objectives: First, to unpack meanings in cultural products that may be radically different from their “surface” meanings, but that upon second glance, give us clues and change how we view these works. But also, and perhaps more importantly, to demonstrate that key social ideas may lie in seemingly odd places, in cartoons, for example, in stories about bugs and monsters, and that often in these most unregarded places there rest epic and tragic ideas we appreciate without noticing.

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