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Muñoz Cabrera, Lisandra; Martín Alegre, Sara , dir. Lights and Shadows in Disney-Pixar's Luca : From Normalizing Tender Masculinity to Perpetuating Heteronormativity in Children's Cinema. 2022. 37 pag. (1502 Grau en Estudis d'Anglès i Francès)

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# **Lights and Shadows in Disney-Pixar's *Luca*: From Normalizing Tender Masculinity to Perpetuating Heteronormativity in Children's Cinema**

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation

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June 2022



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## **Acknowledgements**

Words are not enough to express gratitude to my husband Gaspar, for his unconditional support in everything I want to do, but especially for encouraging me during this beautiful adventure of studying for a degree. I would also like to thank my mother-in-law Ana, and my friend Flor, for helping me with the hard task of combining studies and parenting. I am also thankful to the friends that took the time to proofread this work and send me their precious comments. Last but not the least, I would like to thank Prof. Sara Martín for her attentiveness, always accurate remarks, and guidance during the creation process of this dissertation.



## **Abstract**

The Walt Disney Company is a world leader in mainstream culture for adults and, particularly, children, hence the relevance of studying how its films portray gender. Most research focuses on the representation of female characters, yet how masculinity is represented in the company's productions is a rich source of discussion.

Many male characters in Disney's films have been models of Western patriarchal society, portraying traits associated with conventional masculine roles such as strength, braveness, lack of sensibility, love for adventure, or determination. Nonetheless, in the last few years, the audience has witnessed that male protagonists have gradually become more vulnerable and sensitive.

In this dissertation, I aim to analyse how masculinity is portrayed in Pixar's film *Luca* (2021), principally through the two main characters, Luca and Alberto. I suggest that they provide the audience with a tender view of masculinity. Instead of showing stereotypical traits related to young boys, they connect emotionally, openly show their feelings, and support each other, contributing to dismantling prejudices about intimacy between boys. However, I also suggest that this relationship is not a win-win. While Luca gains self-confidence and finds his purpose in life, Alberto eventually stays alone. With Luca's departure to school, Alberto loses the only friend who helped him fill the void his father left. Finally, I argue that the film is disappointing because it perpetuates heteronormativity. Although many viewers saw the film as an allegory of queerness, Disney rejected this reading and, therefore, persists in neglecting the queer collective.

**Keywords:** gender, masculinity, intimacy, heteronormativity, queerness, LGBTBIQ+ persons, children's cinema, Disney, Pixar, *Luca*





## 0. Introduction

The media—especially television, cinema, and the newest social media—have an important influence on how children shape their personalities. During this process, they receive plenty of input that affects how they see the world and themselves in terms of self-confidence, values, respect, or equality. Many theories and studies support the thought that the media contribute to the development of children's gender identity, by spreading normative models of social behaviour (Hine *et al.* 2). Hence, so far gender representation in children's animated cinema has been widely appraised, particularly concerning the depiction of female roles from a feminist point of view. Nevertheless, “virtually no one has discussed whether [the] representations of maleness might too have ramifications for boy viewers learning how to define themselves as men” (Wooden & Gillam 12). Thus, this field is a rich source of discussion and criticism.

The Walt Disney Studios and its subsidiary Pixar Animation Studios (hereafter Disney and Pixar) are gigantic business concerns but also creators of “knowledge and culture” (Macaluso 2). Their texts and products reach people around the world regardless of their age, gender, or social status. Thus, it is relevant to analyse how their films foster or condemn certain moral values, gender stereotypes and beliefs about society. However, Wooden and Gillam highlight that criticism of Pixar's male characters is often superficial because it mainly focuses on the numerical superiority of male characters (12). In this regard, they argue that “counting as criticism assumes the a priori power of the masculine without problematizing the underlying structures on which it is built, without interrogating the definitions and rubrics by which a male character may be judged, and without even examining the surface elements of his character's development or plot trajectory” (Wooden & Gillam 12).

In the last few years, gender portrayal has experienced a notable advance, particularly concerning female characters. Although some critics consider, for instance, the representation of the link between women and power still problematic because “women still cannot possess both love and power” (Hine *et al.* 4)—as in *Frozen* (2013)—one cannot ignore the emergence of a positive movement toward more independent and egalitarian female characters, compared to Disney’s earlier women protagonists. Therefore, girls have been influenced by disruptive models like *Brave*’s (2012) Princess Merida or the more recent Mirabel from *Encanto* (2021) to empower and express themselves.

On the other hand, there has been an effort to distance recent male characters from previous stereotypes, and these companies have created characters like Miguel from *Coco* (2017) or Ian Lightfoot from *Onward* (2020). *Coco* (2017) is a film that teaches boys a lesson about what model of masculinity they should admire and love (Martín 211), whilst *Onward* (2021), focuses on a brotherly relationship that offers a delicate view of affection between boys and “has all the necessary elements to teach young boys how to show emotion” (Martín 215). However, as Davis affirms:

putting boys on screen who conform to cultural ideas and expectations about what is suitable as a construction of “appropriate” boyhood means that the films are deemed by parents, child advocacy groups, educators, and society at large to be “safe” and “family-friendly” entertainment which is suitable for a general audience: filmmakers who have catered to these groups (...) would be foolish to court too much controversy in their characters and their narratives (21).

In other words, in a will to satisfy the average family, children’s animated movies remain attached to traditional values, especially regarding the depictions of sexual orientations and family models. Therefore, these films fail to reflect the wider variety of minorities that are part of the current social reality.

In 2021, Pixar released *Luca*, a story about the friendship between two sea monsters, Luca and Alberto, and a human girl, Giulia, directed by Enrico Casarosa. The plot revolves around the three teenagers training for a race with prize money that would allow them to buy a dreamed-of Vespa. During their adventure, the two sea monsters (who look fully human if dry) strive to hide their identities from the menace of humans and must confront the bully of the town to discover that the best way of succeeding is being themselves.

*Luca* (2021) has been criticized for being an infantile, not very touching movie: “It doesn’t have that emotional kicker of an ending we might expect and hope for, it’s far too slight to evoke an ugly cry, but it’s breezily watchable, low stakes stuff” (Lee online). The critics have also complained about the many plot gaps. For instance, we never know the reasons why Giulia’s parents separated,<sup>1</sup> we do not have more specific explanations about why Alberto’s father abandoned him—just that he left under the pretext that Alberto was old enough to take care of himself—, or the reasons why he does not have a mother. This simplicity, which restrains most traumatic past events, contrasts with Pixar’s previous stories like *Up* (2009), *Soul* (2020), or even *Onward* (2020), which deal with more adult-oriented subjects such as loss, the meaning of life, and death. Nonetheless, *Luca*’s uncomplicated narrative is closer to a child’s perspective, providing fresh insights into gender roles, acceptance, and friendship. Luca and Alberto just behave like children who are growing up. They are not afraid of having fun, appreciate little moments together, and look at the future with the typical naivety of lads of their age. The scene where Luca

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<sup>1</sup> Giulia spends the summers with her father in Portorosso, a small town in southern Italy, and comes back to Genoa with her mother when the time to return to school arrives. The film never says why they do not live together. The story is set around the ’50s and ’60s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when divorce was not still approved in Italy. Divorce was introduced in 1970, so thinking about Giulia’s parents as being legally divorced would not be accurate. However, presenting a girl with separated parents is a milestone in Disney’s and Pixar’s filmography.

falls asleep and dreams about riding a Vespa with Alberto is a celebration of childhood innocence, with the only goal of showing how children enjoy those little moments.

Fictional male characters in children's cinema have been exponents of features and behaviours associated with hegemonic masculinity. In the book *Pixar's Boy Stories: Masculinity in a Postmodern Age*, Wooden and Gillam provide a critical and pessimistic analysis of Pixar's male characters. The authors affirm that, in general, Pixar's boys "must navigate bullying, competition, self-control, the fragilities of same-sex friendship, the social dangers of emotional literacy and display, risky performances of bravery, and various paths to masculine self-worth" (Wooden & Gillam 4). However, the depiction of male characters in *Luca* offers diverse approaches to masculinity—far from those traditional stereotypes—and results in marvellously constructed characters.

I have chosen this film for personal and academic reasons. As a mother of a young girl, I am concerned about gender representations in audio-visual content for children, and *Luca* is a movie that offers healthy models for both girls and boys. I agree that "it is important for educators and parents/caregivers to empower children to critically evaluate the portrayal and behaviour of characters in the media that they consume" (Harriger *et al.* 685). As a feminist, I believe that this work might contribute to raising awareness about the importance of portraying alternative masculinities in the media to reduce the toxic ones. In this regard, I advocate for a queer reading of *Luca*, which provides the audience—especially children—with unconventional representations of gender and sexuality.

When *Luca* (2021) was released, some critics and audiences saw the film as an allegory of queerness and acceptance of homosexuality on the basis of the two boys' close friendship, but these assumptions were rapidly rejected by the film's director Enrico Casarosa. Despite the enthusiasm of the queer community for finally having a story that

mirrored their experiences, Casarosa defended that the film is, indeed, a celebration of male friendship, contributing to reinforcing the company's traditional approach to gender. The aim of this dissertation is, precisely, on the one hand, to analyse how *Luca* portrays masculinity, principally through the two main characters, Luca and Alberto, and friends. I suggest that they provide the audience with a tender view of masculinity that challenges normativity. On the other hand, I argue that despite the efforts to challenge hegemonic masculinity, the film perpetuates heteronormativity, as Casarosa's words confirm.

For this purpose, this dissertation is divided into two main sections. In the first one, I explain how *Luca* subverts traditional stereotypes regarding masculinity. That is to say, how instead of showing the conventional characteristics attributed to young boys, the two male protagonists connect physically and emotionally, feel comfortable when showing their feelings, and support each other, contributing to dismantling prejudices about intimacy between boys. The second section deals with Disney's unwillingness to portray leading queer roles and same-sex attraction between its protagonists.

## **1. Lights in *Luca*: Normalising Tender Masculinity and Intimacy between Young Boys**

### ***1.1. Luca's Plot Summary***

Luca is a young sea monster (about 12 years old) who lives with his overprotective parents and grandmother in the sea, near an Italian coastal village<sup>2</sup> named Portorosso. He 'herds' fish and leads a humdrum life until he meets Alberto, another sea monster, who is slightly older than him, and has a seemingly exciting life on an uninhabited island.

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<sup>2</sup> *Lucas's* film director, Enrico Casarosa, was born in Italy, so he took the Italian Riviera as an inspiration for the setting. Casarosa has also said that Luca's experiences are based on his own with his best friend.

There, Luca discovers that sea monsters can transform into humans when they are dry; and thus a new, terrifying, and thrilling world emerges in front of him.



**Figure 1 Alberto and Luca playing together as sea monsters**

Unlike Luca, Alberto seems to be fearless and knows how to have fun, though sometimes in risky ways. At first, Luca is impressed by Alberto's ostensible maturity and pretended expertise in that strange world. Alberto teaches Luca how to confront what Alberto calls "Bruno"—an inner voice that prevents people from doing what they want—using a motto to silence his fears: "*Silenzio Bruno!*"<sup>3</sup> The two boys soon establish a unique relationship based on Alberto's need for company and care and on Luca's need for self-knowledge and independence.

Luca and Alberto dream together about riding a Vespa, a symbol of their freedom. For this purpose, they built a makeshift vehicle, but it breaks into pieces the first time

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<sup>3</sup>In November 2021, Disney released the film *Encanto* where one of the most important characters is called Bruno. Surprisingly, in *Encanto* (2021) Bruno also represents the fear of the unknown and the estrangement. Bruno belongs to a family with magic powers, but he is rejected because his special gift (seeing the future) is felt as a menace to the family. The Bruno from *Encanto* is also 'silenced', not with a motto but with a song: *We don't talk about Bruno*. However, the election of this name might be just a coincidence: "while the creators of *Encanto* chose the name Bruno for stylistic purposes, Luca's writers picked the name at random" (Brown online).

they use it. When Luca's parents, Daniela and Lorenzo Paguro, discover their son's attraction to human issues, they resolve to send him "to the deep" with his uncle Ugo, because people from Portorosso are obsessed with killing sea monsters. Then, Luca decides to escape with Alberto and go to the human village to find a new Vespa and avoid being sent to "the deep".

Once on the mainland, the two boys meet Giulia, a human girl, who tells them that they can win money to buy a motorbike by enrolling in a local 'triathlon' which consists of swimming, eating pasta and riding a bike. Giulia<sup>4</sup> also wants to win the race as a matter of pride (she has lost the race several times because she could not ride the bike after eating a big dish of pasta), so they decide to form a team to increase their possibilities of winning. While Luca and Alberto train for the race, they must conceal their real appearance, especially from Giulia's father, Massimo Marcolvado who is a fisherman, and from the bully Ercole Visconti, the adversary to beat in the race. Meanwhile, Luca's parents also come to town, transformed into humans, to find their son.

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<sup>4</sup>Giulia is a very interesting character. She is different because her parents are separated. Therefore, she needs to win the race to gain the respect of the other young villagers. Giulia's character challenges traditional gender expectations by the way she dresses, behaves in society, and interacts with their peers.





**Figure 2 Giulia, Luca, and Alberto in Portorosso**

As the story continues, Luca and Giulia establish a beautiful friendship based on their common interest in books and knowledge. Luca realises that he would love to attend school with Giulia, making Alberto become jealous of the girl to the point of unveiling his identity in front of her after a fight with Luca, and of course terrifying the girl. When this happens, Luca pretends that he also fears Alberto, leaving his friend heartbroken. Shortly after, Giulia discovers that Luca is a sea monster too and asks him to leave the village for his own sake. Then, Luca goes to the island where Alberto hides and apologises for letting him down. It is at that moment that Luca finds out that Alberto was indeed abandoned by his father. Luca promises Alberto that he will win the race to buy the Vespa and travel the world together.

On the race day, Luca and Giulia compete separately against Ercole's team, but during the cycling competition, it starts raining. Then, Alberto appears to protect Luca with an umbrella, but Ercole kicks him, so everyone sees that Alberto is a sea monster, but this time Luca exposes himself as well to help his friend. After some tense moments confronting Ercole, they eventually win the race with the help of Giulia and are

recognised as the legitimate champions thanks to Giulia's father's advocacy. Ercole is rejected by his friends and the other villagers.

The film finishes with very emotional moments where the sea monsters and the people of Portorosso share experiences. Although Luca and Alberto manage to buy their Vespa, Alberto sells it since he sees that his friend is not fulfilled. With the money from the sale, Alberto acquires a train ticket so Luca could attend school. Finally, Luca departs with Giulia and Alberto stays in Portorosso with Massimo as his new family.

## **1.2. Masculinities and Male Intimacy in *Luca***

Masculinity is a social and historical construct “about what men are like, how they should act, and how important it is to embody societally-determined masculine norms” (Ingram *et al.* 140). Far from being a static concept, it is a “constantly changing collection of meanings that we construct through our relationships with ourselves, with each other, and with our world” (Kimmel 25). In other words, masculinity “can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting” (Connell 836). Therefore, we should approach the concept of masculinity from the constructionist perspective of diversity, as there are diverse ways of being a man, and different perceptions of the male body, even within the same context: “within the one school, or workplace, or ethnic group, there will be different ways of enacting manhood, different ways of learning to be a man, different conceptions of the self and different ways of using a male body” (Connell 10).

According to Connell, there are dominant forms of masculinities—which are not necessarily the most common—whereas others remain marginalised (Connell 77). These idealised models of masculinity, which Connell has identified as hegemonic masculinity “can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is

taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell 77). In Western culture, especially in cultural texts addressed to children, hegemonic masculinity is associated with “the traits of physical might, aggression, emotional reserve, and authority and/or dominance over women” (Wooden & Gillam 19). Wooden and Gillam also affirm that “boys are taught to be independent, fearless ‘winners’; boys are taught to be the first-person shooter, the tough guy with swagger, the superhero with a sharp tongue” (19). I argue, nevertheless, that *Luca* contributes significantly to subverting these gender stereotypes.

*Luca* provides positive gender portrayals of both male and female characters. Although Pixar has been blamed for being a ‘boys’ club’ since most of the main characters in the films are male, “Pixar’s women are smart, strong, and capable, often even professional” (Wooden & Gillam 25). *Luca*’s girls and women are not the exception: they are indefatigable, brave, intelligent, and sportive.<sup>5</sup> Giulia is a smart, rebellious girl, almost a ‘tomboy’ in her behaviour, considering, of course, the period where the film is set. She is not afraid of failure, and she does not feel inferior for belonging to “the underdogs”—or as Giulia herself explains it: “kids who are different, dress weird, or are a little sweatier than average”. Likewise, Luca’s mother is determined, especially when protecting her son, and Luca’s grandmother is an adventurer, as well.

The film has a villain, the bully Ercole Visconti, who portrays traits of toxic masculinity: he is ruthless, narcissistic, obsessed with competition, and violent. Ercole is allegedly 16 or 18 years old and leads a troupe of compliant boys. He is also the embodiment of intolerance. When he sees his control over the village menaced by the

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<sup>5</sup>There is also a minor character of a policewoman in Portorosso. The Women's Police Corps (Corpo di Polizia Femminile) was an Italian civilian police force, established in December 1959, formed by female personnel dedicated to sensitive and moral issues, such as the protection of women and minors. Therefore, in this regard, Portorosso is again a pioneer village.

newcomers, he becomes aggressive and even hits Alberto in one of the scenes. Ercole senses that Luca and Alberto are in some way different and expresses his disgust by saying that they “smell weird”. Due to his disrespectful attitude toward his adversaries, Ercole is eventually ostracized and all the people of Portorosso take Luca’s and Alberto’s side.



**Figure 3 The bully, Ercole Visconti**

Beyond Ercole’s heteronormative masculinity, what is relevant in *Luca* is the portrayal of alternative masculinities. To illustrate this point, I will start with Giulia’s father, Massimo Marcovaldo, who is a caring, separated parent that shows a deep sensibility despite his ostensible toughness and stoicism. Unlike Luca’s overprotective parents, Massimo tries to trust Giulia and gives her independence, and even though he fears Giulia may suffer if she fails again in the race, he strives to support her.

When Luca and Alberto meet Massimo, they are intimidated by his physical appearance and manners: Massimo is tall, robust, laconic, and has only one arm. So, based on the villagers’ obsession with sea monsters and because Massimo is a fisherman, the two boys assume that the man had lost his arm in a horrible battle with one of their peers, but Massimo confesses that he was just born like that. Wooden and Gilliam stress that

Pixar films treat disabilities as something either humorous or threatening, “rather than actually disabling and worth others’ consideration and care” (77). Likewise, when analysing gender and disability in *Finding Dory* (2016), Silvia Gervasi claims that “the inclusion of disability does not guarantee recognition on the part of the audience nor accuracy of representation on the part of the filmmakers” (49). She states that in that film, disability infantilises Dory, therefore, Pixar’s attempt to portray diversity is ineffective (Gervasi 50). Nonetheless, with Massimo Marcovaldo the studio succeeds in representing a perfectly balanced disabled male character. “Like Luca and Alberto, Massimo was born different. The fisherman handled his limb difference deftly his whole life, and remained a loved, respected and vital part of his community” (Zornosa online). It is this characterisation of Massimo as a realistic mixture of both physical strength and vulnerability that makes him special.



**Figure 4 Giulia’s Father, Massimo Marcovaldo**

Bodies are essential in the construction of masculinities. “The constitution of masculinity through bodily performance means that gender is vulnerable when the performance cannot be sustained—for instance, as a result of physical disability”

(Connell 54). Then, Massimo's more masculine traits like his stoicism, his husky voice, and physical strength might be a strategy used by the creative team to compensate for his missing limb and reinforce his masculinity. In any case, Massimo is a character that helps children to normalise disability, without adding any traumatic background to his story as he is just born disabled.

Similarly, the protagonists offer a positive model for children and teenagers of their age. Luca's and Alberto's psychological characterisation does not intend to show them as perfect boys but as a balanced set of defects, weaknesses, strengths, and virtues. They offer the audience lessons of self-acceptance and tolerance. They have a deep sense of friendship and commitment to their beloved ones. Since *Luca* is also a story about growing up, the main characters of the film, like many adolescents, fight to fit in a world that is hostile and appealing at the same time. They need to belong somewhere, although, at the beginning of their adventure, they do not know where exactly.

Luca is a boy who must overcome his inner fears and insecurities to discover that what he wants is going to school like human children. His sensibility and attraction for the unknown remind us of princess Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* (1989). In the same way as the famous Disney princess, Luca loves to collect human objects and is eager to learn new things. However, unlike Ariel, the achievement of his personal goals does not depend on romantic solutions but on his own final decision and the support of his family and friends. In Alberto, Luca finds a companion that teaches him the determination and courage to pursue his dreams.

Alberto's recklessness is a counterbalance to Luca's fears: he loves the adrenaline and defies the limits of the impossible. He teaches Luca to have fun by doing crazy things which allow them to collect memorable moments. For instance, when they built their rudimentary motorbike, they ride it through an improvised platform placed on a cliff, so

they can ‘fly’ with it but, evidently, they end up falling into the sea, with the artefact destroyed.

At first, Alberto is self-confident and skilled at confronting uncertainty, however, as the story continues, we discover that he is only trying to disguise his loneliness. When Alberto meets Luca, he finds a meaningful connection that opens a new opportunity to recover from the traumatic experience of being abandoned by his father. Hence, when Alberto sees his new life menaced by Luca’s close ties with Giulia, the worst part of his personality arises. Arguably, the tensest moment in the film takes place during a dispute between Alberto and Luca, when Alberto—impulsively and selfishly—decides to unveil his identity in front of Giulia. At this point, Luca feels forced to deceive his friend, by pretending that he was also surprised and scared to discover that Alberto was a sea monster. Then, we learn that this reaction is a consequence of Alberto’s fear to lose someone beloved again. Yet, what makes Alberto an endearing character is his disinterested and unconditional friendship with Luca.

Luca’s and Alberto’s interactions challenge preconceptions about relationships between boys. Wooden and Gillam state that “the hypermasculinity of boy culture is also notoriously homophobic and rigorously policed for same-sex intimacies or any behaviours—including emotional display or even kindness and consideration—that could indicate a chink in a boy’s masculine armour” (20), but Luca and Alberto contradict this statement. They do not behave aggressively, are free to cry when needed, are emotionally overt and, above all, provide an unprecedented level of intimacy between male friends in Disney’s and Pixar’s films. Moreover, their relationship is transparent from the very beginning. They teach the audience the power of sharing; they do not have hidden issues or dark purposes beyond learning from each other and sharing experiences.

From this perspective, their connection can be read as a “bromance”: an extremely close relationship between men or boys. Robinson *et al.* have conducted research examining how bromances influence millennial men currently. The participants in their study define bromance as: “an intimate same-sex male friendship based on unrivalled trust and self-disclosure that superseded other friendships” (Robinson *et. al* 856) where men are free to express love for their bromance and accept physical intimacy. The men in this study emphasise that “the physical and emotional dimensions of bromances resemble the traditional expectations of romantic companionship, namely, the declarations of love, kissing, cuddling, and exclusive emotional confidence” (Robinson *et al.* 865), but excluding sex.

Luca’s and Alberto’s friendship proves that lads can be tender and caring and that they can feel at ease together without their masculinity or sexual orientation being questioned. In fact, the film is full of moments of intimate physical contact between them. They keep their bodies close to each other when wrapping the other’s waist with their arms while riding the Vespa, when gazing at the stars in the night, when sleeping under the stars, in the touching farewell at the end of the film, or in a memorable scene of the two boys watching the sunset in an embrace. They hug and touch without any prejudice, rejecting the belief that this kind of behaviour is commonly exclusively associated with gay boys and without fear of homophobia.





**Figure 3 Luca and Alberto watching the sunset**

*Luca* is also a celebration of the extraordinary. When analysing the representation of masculinities in Pixar's films, Wooden and Gillam propose that Pixar 'punishes' the male characters for being smart, 'nerds' or having special talents (33). These authors highlight how male characters with unique gifts or powers are usually forced to renounce them in order to conform to social norms, seeing this pattern as a danger because it could promote the 'bully society' that devalues gifted kids (33). To illustrate their proposition, the authors use the example of Dash in *The Incredibles* (2004) who is forced by his family to hide his super-speed power in a regular race at school, not to be recognised as a superhero and unveil his identity. Possibly, the authors are ignoring the ethical connotations of competing knowing that nobody can defeat you since you have superpowers. In any case, if we make a parallelism with *Luca*, the sea monsters' innate capacity to change their form outside the water could be seen as a power. However, even though Luca cannot be considered a nerd, his thirst for knowledge is clearly rewarded. Besides, the difference between Luca and Dash is that Luca's mother is proud of him for having beaten the humans because he "raced [his] little tail off", while Dash must

acquiesce to the second prize in a race. Luca's mother says her son was amazing and congratulates him, so she encourages the boy to use what makes him special.

Another way in which *Luca* defies traditional values associated with normative masculinity is in its view of competitiveness and physical force. Luca and Alberto do not have a strong or athletic complexion but since the film is set in the context of a competition, winning is only a means to an end. The two friends do not need to prove anything when they decide to participate in the contest, they just need the money prize. Competition in *Luca* is more about working in teams and sharing experiences than about succeeding. They refute, therefore, Wooden and Gillam's statement affirming that "alpha in their brawny bodies, Pixar's men are often measured in a competitive environment that predictably excludes, exiles, and punishes characters who don't fit the idealised masculine model" (32). Certainly, Luca and Alberto feel menaced for being physically different, but never feel inferior to others.

As it has been demonstrated, most male characters in *Luca* (2021)—especially the protagonists—transgress gender stereotypes. Through their path to adulthood, they learn the importance of being themselves, regardless of what they look like. Their emotional openness, their lack of unhealthy competitive spirit, and their predisposition to intimate contact contrast with many of the established conceptions about masculinity. They also show the audience the power of affection to achieve personal goals.

## **2. Shadows in *Luca*: Perpetuating Heteronormativity**

### **2.1. Disney's and Pixar's Queer Content**

The media contribute to shaping our identities. However, regarding gender identities and sexuality, heteronormative representations still dominate the offer of

mainstream cultural texts and products. Despite the huge steps toward inclusion, most societies are still attached to traditional values, and the LGTBQ+ community continues to be underrepresented not only in the media but also in any other sphere. Thus, in Western societies, straight men dominate most spheres of life (politics, culture, sports, etc.) and hence, homosexual men are subordinated to them (Connell 78). As Connell remarks, gay men are victims of legal and personal violence, abuse, and discrimination, “position[ing] homosexual masculinities at the bottom of a gender hierarchy among men” (78). Connell also highlights that “in homophobic ideology, the boundary between straight and gay is blurred with the boundary between masculine and feminine, gay men being imagined as feminized men and lesbians as masculinized women” (40). Although this perception might have changed in the last few decades, gay men must still endure that other people question their masculinity.

Over the years, children’s animated films have, as well, perpetuated traditional family models and supported a heterosexual orientation. Creators, however, have found strategies like coding queer content to represent diversity without transgressing social norms. As Greenhill proposes, this definition of coding can also be applied to queer content:

A set of signals—words, forms, behaviors, signifiers of some kind—that protect the creator from the consequences of openly expressing particular messages. Coding occurs in the context of complex audiences in which some members may be competent and willing to decode the message, but others are not. In other words, coding presumes an audience in which one group of receivers is “monocultural” and thus assumes that its own interpretation of messages is the only one possible, while the second group, living in two cultures, may recognize a double message—which also requires recognizing that some form of coding has taken place. Coding, then, is the expression or transmission of messages potentially accessible to a (bicultural) community under the very eyes of a dominant community for whom these same messages are either inaccessible or inadmissible (Radner & Lanser, 1993, quoted in Greenhill, 2015, pp. 111-112).

In this regard, Disney's first attempts to show sexual orientation diversity could be identified as queer coding. In some films, the company depicts male roles as effeminate,

for example, Jafar from *Aladdin* (1992), Scar from *The Lion King* (1994), Hades from *Hercules* (1997), Kronk from *The Emperor's New Groove* (2000) or the minor character Oaken from *Frozen* (2013). Nonetheless, some critics have associated the representation of these effeminate characters with a covered intention of Disney to demonise them, since most of them are villains (Hine *et al.*, 2018; Primo, 2018). Hine *et al.* suggest that these representations seek to strengthen “hegemonic masculinity through the demonization of feminine traits and attributes, particularly when performed by men” (11).

In addition, other female characters have been the centre of controversies concerning their sexual orientation. When Disney announced the release of *Frozen 2* (2019), the audience asked the company to create a girlfriend for Elsa for the sequel of the film, with the hashtag ‘#GiveElsaAGirlfriend’ (Gervasi 51), which evidently was ignored by the company. Also, some people assumed that the two women carrying a stroller in *Finding Dory* (2016) were a lesbian couple, but Disney never confirmed it (Gervasi 51).

Very subtle examples of overt same-sex attraction have appeared in recent films, only perceptible to the keenest ears and eyes. Jared Bush—one of the screenplay writers of *Zootopia* (2016)—confirmed in a tweet that the two male antelopes, Judy’s neighbours were indeed a married gay couple (online). Even though they behave like a couple—because they fight like one—the only proof of their relationship is found in the film’s credits that name them Bucky Oryx-Antlerson and Pronk Oryx-Antlerson. In *Onward* (2020), the police officer Specter mentions that she has a girlfriend, which made the film gain the approval of the gay community despite this discrete and brief secondary role. However, it was also “banned in multiple Middle East markets due to the film’s minor reference to a lesbian relationship” (Wiseman online).

Overt expressions of love and sexual desire between same-sex people in Disney's and Pixar's works are rare. In the 2017 remake of *Beauty and the Beast* there appears a scene where LeFou (played by Josh Gad) kisses Gaston. In addition, in 2020, Pixar launched its first short film with two main LGBTQ+ characters titled *Out*, about a gay couple that strives to get out of the closet. The film—a beautifully narrated story, with a touch of fantasy that makes it suitable for all ages—is disruptive not only in its thematic but also in its aesthetics, far from what we are used to seeing in the studio's productions. Nevertheless, although this work meant a turning point in Pixar's filmography, it did not get the publicity it deserved in the media.

Despite these moderate endeavours toward diversity and inclusion, Disney's policies have remained close to their conservative beginnings. More recently, in 2022, the company was accused of financially supporting the anti- LGBTQ+ legislators that approved the 'Don't Say Gay' bill in Florida, which prohibits schools to teach sexual education to children (Associated Press online). As a result, Pixar's workers revealed that not only does Disney endorse these retrograde policies, but that they also had obliged them to ban LGBTQ+ content from their films (Pulver online). After this news became known, Pixar restored the scene of a two women's love kiss in the upcoming *Lightyear*, which had been cut from the definitive version of the film (Padgett online).

### **2.1. *Luca*'s not so 'Happy Ending'**

Since its release, *Luca* raised expectations about the possibility of a romance between the two protagonists. Some members of the audience found a clear analogy between their need to conceal their identities and being a closeted gay person, although the film's director Enrico Casarosa confirmed in an interview, that "he didn't intend to

make Luca a gay romance” (Martinelli online). To understand the spectators’ assumptions, we must analyse both their physical characteristics and behaviour.

Physically speaking, Luca and Alberto belong to a species loosely named ‘sea monster’. Their denomination is meaningful since the word ‘monster’ and its representation in popular culture has a significant symbolic charge. The word monster comes from the Latin *monstrum* which means a portent, and from the verb *monere* meaning to warn. The term was also influenced by the French word *monstre* meaning a creature having a birth defect or deformity. In other words, the word monster referred to a deformed or abnormal creature used as an omen to warn men about their right or immoral behaviour. Nonetheless, sea monsters in *Luca* are not omens to warn the people of Portorosso, but examples to teach them about tolerance and acceptance of differences in terms of race, gender, disabilities, or sexual orientation. They come to the mainland to give lessons to humans about what unites us, rather than what distances us.

Symbolically, monsters are outsiders and their presence in a conventional society produces anxiety and uncertainty. Monstrosity is the representation of otherness, of our inner fears and weakness. Monsters “are always liminal, refusing to stay in place, transgressive and transformative. They disrupt both internal and external order and overturn the distinctions that set out the limits of the human subject” (Shildrick 4). Therefore, a monster “may act as a symbol of change, for alternative embodiments beyond the confines of a patriarchal insistence on binary existence” (Swarbrick 11). As Martín also suggests, monsters are meaningful images, they are the result of the social norms that define what is physical and moral normalcy within a given place and time (9).

In this regard, it seems logical that people have seen in *Luca* an allegory of the process of coming out of the closet. Luca’s and Alberto’s monstrosity, once they get wet and their true bodies are revealed, terrifies the villagers of Portorosso because their

species embodies the fear of difference, but what is interesting is how the sea monsters deal with the duality of their existence. Alberto and Luca transform outside the water, far from the eyes of their peers, but at the same time, they must hide their true identities so, only in private they can be themselves. “Above the water, Luca and Alberto pass as human. Yet, like closeted members of the LGBTQIA+ community, they fear the day that their secret will be discovered” (Maier online). They live between two worlds; they are liminal creatures that strive to discover where they belong to. These inner contradictions and concerns could be read as the identity crisis that many queer people may suffer when they must face society and its expectations.

Spectators like Ginger White consider that beyond the metaphor of being gay and trying to hide it, associated with the principal plot, there are other specific situations in the film to which queer people could relate. For instance, in the scene where Luca’s parents tell him that they are going to send him with his uncle Ugo to “the deep” to prevent him from going to the surface again, she sees a reference to the obscure conversion therapies used to try to change people’s sexual orientation or gender identity (online). Ginger continues by suggesting that Luca’s and Alberto’s necessity to conceal their natural form would be their way of “passing as straight” (online). The reviewer also connects the scene when Ercole Bisconti beats Alberto with other real homophobic violent acts: “there are also the events that transpire in the town, including the beating of the two boys by the antagonist, which draws a heartbreaking parallel to (...) homophobic beatings in history, such as the famous case of Matthew Sheppard<sup>6</sup>” (online).

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew Sheppard was an American student who died in 1998 because of torture and severe injuries provoked by a homophobic attack. The murder of Matthew raised awareness about hate crimes in The United States and paved the way for further legislation against it.

Such extreme parallelisms as the ones presented above are not required to read the film as queer. The way the two boys interact would be enough to believe that a romantic relationship could be emerging between them. In her review, Marissa Martinelli points out that Luca and Alberto “have their share of moments that could be easily interpreted as puppy love, such as when they’re stargazing with their arms around each other, and their secret time together is liberating for them” (online). Besides, Alberto is jealous of the friendship between Giulia and Luca, so this adds arguments to this premise. Additionally, at the end of the film, in a demonstration of reciprocal love and loyalty, Luca exposes himself to save Alberto, and Alberto decides to renounce his dream and sell the Vespa, so Luca can attend school with Giulia. Finally, the moment of their farewell—first with a long embrace, and then with their hands being separated as the train departs—is especially intense and could be compared to any romantic movie that finishes with a separation. Nevertheless, this separation is disappointing because we never have a hint that Luca’s and Alberto’s friendship would continue, and consequently, Giulia wins.



**Figure 6 Luca’s and Albert’s emotional farewell**

In addition to these potential examples of queer coding, there are also some phrases and a short scene—strategically incorporated in the film—that could refer to the gay



community. In the beautiful scene at the end of the movie where Giulia's family and some sea monsters share a meal, Luca's mother tells the grandma that Luca might be ready for a new life in the human world, to which Luca's grandmother responds: "Some people, they'll never accept him. But some will. And he seems to know how to find the good ones". Another touching phrase that could apply to LGTBQ+ people is uttered by Alberto when in the last minutes of the film Luca confesses that he fears Alberto will not be fine without him, and Alberto answers: "You got me off the island, Luca. I'm okay". That island was the place where Alberto was alone, resentful, without a family, a place where he was trapped in an empty life until Luca arrived. Therefore, "getting him off the island" could be read as teaching him to freely love and trust others again. In addition, once Luca and Alberto have revealed their identities by the end of the race, two ladies decide to throw their umbrellas and show that they are also sea monsters. They could be identified as lesbians who have led a happy life together. Then, regardless of what the film's director said, all these—intentional or unintentional—metaphors are still valid for LGTBQ+ people because queer children and youngsters can relate to how Luca and Alberto feel.

Yet, the film's ending is disappointing. Although Luca gains self-confidence and achieves his goal of going to school, and Alberto wins a father by staying with Giulia's father, the latter sacrifices his dream of travelling in the Vespa on behalf of Luca. Eventually, Alberto sells their cherished vehicle to buy the train tickets for Luca's trip to Genoa for the new course, losing his beloved friend. Consequently, when the film team decides to eventually separate Luca and Alberto, they are, indeed, perpetuating Disney's tendency to endorse heteronormativity and ignoring a collective that has been waiting decades to see themselves represented on screen.

In a society where gay men need constantly to struggle against strong traditional values to prove their masculinity, the media should help to normalise other models of sexualities and reduce the homophobia they may suffer. Instead, Disney and Pixar prefer ambiguity, leaving the interpretation of the film's metaphors to each spectator, and preventing children from having an alternative model of masculinities embodied by queer people.

### **3. Conclusions and Further Research**

The media are powerful instruments to foster healthy values and promote diversity within societies, hence the importance of studying its influence. Gender representation in children's animated cinema—and more specifically in Disney's and Pixar's films—has been a source of uncountable studies based on the important role these movies play in shaping kids' behaviours and understanding of the world. However, since most research has focused on analysing the depiction of female characters, more criticism on the representation of masculinities is still required.

In a context where sexist content is constantly subject to scrutiny, boys need models of healthy masculinity. Through the last decade and thanks to feminist approaches, Disney's female characters have been gradually empowered. By the same token, although for a long time Disney's and Pixar's male protagonists have been tied to stereotypical views of gender, we have witnessed an effort to depict more inclusive characters, distanced from the traditional social expectations.

If previous Disney's and Pixar's boys and men were victims of portraying the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity like violence, need for risk and competition, physical strength, and emotional stoicism, among others, more recent creations of these

companies have shown a considerable shift. The new Disney and Pixar boys are caring and tender, can express their emotions, cry, and are not obsessed with competitions. In this regard, these companies have provided the audience with alternative approaches to masculinities embodied, for example, by characters like Miguel from *Coco* (2017), Ian Lightfoot from *Onward* (2020), and Luca and Alberto from *Luca* (2021).

In this dissertation, I have argued that despite its seeming simplicity, *Luca* (2021) is a film that provides the audience with powerful messages about gender, relationships, and the self. Not only is the film a coming-of-age story about self-acceptance and otherness, but it also offers the boys a tender and positive image of masculinity based on respect and emotional openness. I, therefore, suggest that Luca's and Alberto's scenes of naïve fun, intimate physical contact and sharing of feelings, dismantle the deep-rooted idea of 'boys will be boys'.

However, despite these efforts to portray a renewed approach to gender, Disney's and Pixar's animated movies still promote traditional family models and gender identities. In maintaining their conventional positions, these companies are missing great opportunities to represent sexual minorities, perpetuating heteronormativity. Although in Disney's films "finding love is no longer presented as a key endeavour or foregone conclusion" (Hine *et al.* 12), the audience does need to see other alternative romantic relationships beyond the conventional heteronormative messages. Thus, with the beautifully narrated *Luca* (2021) the company neglects a unique chance to openly depict the LGBTIQ+ collective's experiences. If girls had Merida, the princess of *Brave* (2012) who paved the way for other female characters to transgress gender expectations, boys are still waiting to see on the big screen the definitive disruptive male character.

Most studies about the impact of children's animated films focus on adults' approaches and very few on children's perceptions. Given the expectations raised by *Luca*

and its powerful message of tolerance and self-acceptance, it would be interesting to analyse how the film influences queer children and teenagers, or how they feel about not seeing more people of their same sexual identities represented on screen.

Finally, in the current social and historical context, where despite the progress in gender equality violence still dominates the world, Masculinities Studies are more necessary than ever. Many of the conflicts in the world have their source in misconceptions about what being a man means and the dominance of unhealthy values related to power. In the same way that feminist groups have made enormous work to teach girls that they do not need any Prince Charming to save them, boys need also models on how to behave and the media are key tools to spread them.

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