‘I don’t have a skull... Or bones’: Minor Characters in Disney Animation

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Abstract
This article explores the place of minor characters in Disney’s animated features. More specifically, it proposes that Disney’s minor characters mark an aesthetic rupture by breaking with the mode of hyperrealism that has come to be associated with the studio’s feature-length films. Drawing on character theory within literary studies and on research into animated film performance, the article suggests that the inherent ‘flatness’ of Disney’s minor characters and the ‘figurativeness’ of their performance styles contrasts with the characterizations and aesthetic style of the leading figures. The tendency of Disney’s minor characters to stretch and squash in an exaggerated fashion is also reminiscent of the flexible, plasmatic style of the studio’s early cartoons. In addition to exploring the aesthetic peculiarity of minor characters, this article also suggests that these figures play an important role in fleshing out the depicted fictional worlds of Disney’s movies. By drawing attention to alternative viewpoints and storylines, as well as to the broader narrative universe, minor characters add detail, nuance and complexity to the animated films in which they appear. Ultimately, this article proposes that these characters make the fairy-tale-like worlds of Disney animation more expansive and believable as fictional spaces.

Keywords
animated performance, animated worlds, Disney, flat characters, hyperrealism, minor characters, plasmaticness, worldbuilding

Introduction
In an article about cartoon physics, Scott Bukatman (2014: 315) ends his discussion by looking back nostalgically at what he perceives as the ‘seven-minute heyday’ of early Hollywood animation. As he suggests, the beginning of modern digital animation has led to an evolution away from the idiosyncratic ‘topsy-turvydom’ of its forebears and the specific type of reimagining of the world that this inverted logic presupposed (pp. 311, 315). ‘I miss the impossible’, Bukatman notes,
and refers to the transgressive and playful universe that he suggests characterized these early 7-minute cartoons and the sets of unnatural laws governing its characters’ bodies (p. 315).

This ‘special realm’ of the cartoon universe, which Bukatman (2014: 311, 314) also associates with comedy and a certain degree of freedom from narrative constraints, has been frequently discussed in reference to the Walt Disney Studio. Perhaps most famous is Sergei Eisenstein’s (1986: 21) celebration of the ‘plasmatic’ quality of Disney’s early work, which he describes as a ‘rejection of once and forever allotted form, freedom from ossification [and] the ability to dynamically assume any form’. As Eisenstein observes, the creatures that inhabit the worlds of these cartoons are malleable and elastic in the sense that their bodies stretch, squash, twist, bend and repeatedly metamorphose into new forms. Eisenstein also imbued his theory with a political subtext in the sense that the freedom of the plasmatic figure to assume any form could be indicative of the freedom to imagine the world beyond the current status quo (see Wells, 1998: 22).

With a similar focus on Disney, Paul Wells (1998: 22–27) has observed that the aesthetic principles established in these early animated shorts were largely abandoned when the studio turned to feature filmmaking and aimed for greater realism and verisimilitude in the late 1930s. Instead of reinforcing the implausible, fantastic and surreal scenarios and characters that permeated the early cartoons, many of which belonged to the Silly Symphony series, Disney embraced a visual register that was more closely aligned with live-action cinema’s representation of reality. The bodies of its characters and their movements were also increasingly subject to conventional physical laws and made to correspond to creatures from the real world. Due to animated cinema’s inherent artificiality and Disney’s tendency to exaggerate the depictions of its characters and their surroundings, however, Wells deploys the term ‘hyper-realism’ to describe the studio’s aesthetic (p. 25). As he puts it, it is a kind of realism ‘which is simultaneously realistic but beyond the orthodoxies of realism’ (p. 27).

Drawing on both Eisenstein and Wells, Bukatman (2014: 315) similarly describes this shift towards greater realism in feature-length Disney animation. Curiously, however, he also insinuates that the studio did infuse its feature films with glimpses of the topsy-turvydom of its earlier shorts. Before concluding his article, Bukatman writes that he is grateful that ‘Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs had its Dopey, Pinocchio its Gideon [and] Dumbo its pink elephants . . . physical laws and bodies were transcended somewhere’ (p. 315). Even though Disney embraced an increasingly realist aesthetic, then, Bukatman takes solace in the fact that the studio nevertheless left traces of its plasmatic tradition in the bodies of individual minor characters. Somewhere amidst the pervasive hyperrealism of the studio’s aesthetic style, there were elements within the design and performances of certain minor characters that broke with the dominant aesthetic and harkened back to the ‘impossible’ worlds of the studio’s early cartoons.

This idea that Disney allowed its minor characters to transgress the aesthetic strictures of hyperrealism raises a multitude of intriguing questions that invite further elaboration. Although Bukatman leaves space for exploring precisely what caused Dopey, Gideon and the pink elephants to register as so conspicuous, his article prompts the question of whether there is something about the anatomy or narrative position of minor characters that allow them to ‘transcend’ whatever rules govern the protagonists. If we are to understand Disney’s minor figures as elements that somehow contradict the dominant hyperrealism, how does this affect our understanding of the studio’s historical move towards greater realism and verisimilitude in its feature films?

This article attempts to pick up where Bukatman left off in order to explore this peculiar nature of minor characters in Disney’s animated features. More specifically, it explores how we might understand and theorize such figures of marginal, narrative weight in reference to the much-debated issue of animated realism. Drawing on character theory in literary studies and on research into animated film performance, I suggest that Disney’s minor characters are constructed in ways that
cause them to mark a rupture in the type of realism with which the studio became associated in the late 1930s.

The main arguments of this article are based on observations of multiple minor characters from a variety of Disney features from 1937 and up until today. For the sake of clarity, however, the detailed analyses are focused on a more limited number of films that I consider to be representative of Disney’s wider body of work. The chosen examples are also meant to illustrate how the aesthetic tendencies described in the article persisted through the decades and can be identified in a diverse range of films from different time periods, including *Pinocchio* (1940), *The Sword in the Stone* (1963), *The Lion King* (1994) and *Frozen* (2013).

As the first part of this article proposes, Disney’s minor characters are more coarsely drawn in comparison to the leading figures in the sense that their personalities are less complex, rounded and multifaceted. They also stand out as excessive, exaggerated and somewhat detached from the (relative) realism of the central narrative thread. Even though Disney has aspired towards a degree of hyperrealism in its feature films, then, its minor characters are typically made to embody a certain ‘topsy-turviness’ or ‘plasmaticness’ that recapture the worlds of the studio’s early cartoons.

As the second part of this article explores, this tendency of Disney to let its minor characters rupture the hyperrealist paradigm has also had implications on what I refer to as the fictional worldbuilding of these movies. The performed difference of Disney’s minor characters and the contrasting values and sentiments that their presence conveys expands the palette of the movies’ expressions and invites the spectator to look beyond the main concerns of the film. By drawing attention to alternative viewpoints and storylines, minor characters initiate a narrative movement ‘outwards’ or ‘sideways’ so that the environments of Disney’s movies are given definition and become more expansive and believable as fictional spaces.

**Breaking with realism**

To claim that minor characters break with the ‘realism’ of animated cinema rests on the presumption that animated movies are characterized by a realist aesthetic in the first place. Although the term realism is frequently used when describing the aesthetic changes in Disney cartoons of the late 1930s, scholars have debated whether classical notions of film realism are useful within this context. Responding to Wells’s discussion about Disney’s hyperrealism, Stephen Rowley (2005: 68–69) notes that the type of realism found in these types of cartoons is better understood as ‘heightened’ or ‘exaggerated’. Even though Disney’s feature films correspond to many of the conventions of live-action cinema, Rowley argues that there is a distinct and apparent ‘unreality’ to these films (p. 69). Not only does Disney usually set its movies in fairy-tale-like worlds with anthropomorphized and talking animals, but the studio also tends to exaggerate its character depictions. The over-emphasis on movement in the films and ways in which characters’ bodies react to or anticipate movement is another manifestation of Disney’s ‘heightened or exaggerated depiction of the real’, as Rowley puts it (p. 69).

Arguing along somewhat similar lines, Chris Pallant (2010: 342) suggests that the aesthetic style forged at Disney in the late 1930s and early 1940s was one that emphasized believability rather than absolute realism. While embracing Wells’s definition of hyperrealism, Pallant introduces the concept of ‘Disney-Formalism’ in order to better delineate and describe the relatively brief time period during which this aesthetic paradigm was established at the studio. As Pallant notes, while the hyperrealist aesthetic of Disney-Formalism reached its peak with the production of *Bambi* in 1942, it has continued to influence Disney’s later production as well as animated cinema at large (pp. 348–350).
Regardless of which definition is most accurate within this context, research into the particular mode of realism embraced by Disney has paid closest attention to the major characters and the dominant narrative threads. When discussing the production of Disney’s first feature-length film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), Pallant (2010: 347) for instance describes how the studio strove to achieve as naturalistic an image as possible of Snow White. As he argues, the insistence on realism meant that the exaggerated squash-and-stretch physics and cartoonal metamorphosis that characterized Disney’s early shorts (and which Eisenstein celebrated as so transgressive) were largely absent in the film, ‘with the exception of the Queen’s transformation into the Witch’. One might add to this exceptionality the character of Dopey, whose body repeatedly manifests a distinct squash-and-stretch motion. In a sequence where he is seen chasing and accidentally swallowing a bar of soap, for example, his body seems strangely elastic. Curiously, the soap slides right through Dopey’s body as though it were an empty sack before reaching his posterior, which distends from the impact. When he shortly thereafter begins to hiccup bubbles, Dopey’s neck stretches and squashes, his eyes spin around and his body shoots up into the air.

As the case of Dopey illustrates, Disney’s animated realism, whether perceived of as heightened, exaggerated or hyperrealist, appears to affect different characters with different intensity. This is not to say that there are no examples of leading characters that can be described as ‘heightened’ or ‘exaggerated’ with regard to how their bodies react to movement, as Rowley (2005: 69) maintains. However, I would suggest that this effect is typically more pronounced in minor characters. Consistently in Disney’s animated features, the bodies of minor characters seem to adhere to different laws of physics than their leading counterparts and they are regularly typified in a more ‘cartoonish’ manner. Although the configuration of the major characters may complicate the established realism to some extent, they adhere more closely to these conventions than minor figures. As individuals of principal, causal importance, major characters not only make up the dominant force of the narrative, but the axis or centre that sets the norm from which other figures may deviate. By virtue of their very marginal or de-centred position in the narrative, then, minor characters possess the potential and freedom to depart from this axis and from whatever type of realism that permeates the central narrative thread.

With the term ‘minor character’, I refer to figures of limited on-screen presence who feature in stories that primarily revolve around (an)other, more prominently featured, major character(s). Within cinema studies, there is limited research into what defines a minor character, and how it functions in narrative. Pamela Robertson Wojcik’s (2004) research into Hollywood’s typecasting traditions is one of the few academic studies that speaks at length about the US film industry’s own definitions of different types of actors within live-action cinema. As she explains, the emergence of the star system in the mid-1910s created an increasingly hierarchical division of labour in Hollywood whereby actors were ranked and categorized. While stars were cast as leads, smaller parts were filled by what Wojcik refers to as ‘a range of non-star types’ (p. 181). In addition to extras and bit players, character actors were considered to be a component of these non-starring categories of actors. The US film industry also created subcategories of minor character types in their casting catalogues in order to facilitate a more efficient system for typecasting their non-starring actors (p. 181–184).

Although Wojcik focuses on live-action cinema and on actors rather than characters, her distinction between stars and non-stars is valuable within the context of animation. Above all, her research demonstrates Hollywood’s persistent tradition of differentiating between individuals whose attributes are considered suitable for leading roles, and individuals whose attributes are considered suitable for supporting roles. In Disney animation, a similar kind of demarcation between leading and supporting role is evident. The difference is not only noticeable in the uneven distribution of screen time, but in the contrasting depiction of the characters and their performances. Akin to how the
leading stars of live-action classical cinema were expected to look and perform in ways that conformed to normative ideals that often contrasted with the supporting actors, the ‘stars’ of Disney animation have likewise consistently been constructed in ways that set them apart from the minor characters.

Looking to theories on animated performance and to *The Lion King* (1994) as a case in point, the protagonist (and star of the film) Simba is a good example of what Donald Crafton (2012: 36) has defined as an ‘embodied’ animated character. Expanding on his definition in relation to animated acting, Crafton describes embodied performances as ‘introverted’ in style in the sense that the impulse of the character is not outwardly expressed. It is a performance style that aims for believability and for subtle ways of hinting at the ‘individuality, depth, and internal complexity’ of the character in question (p. 36). In reference to research into acting traditions in live-action cinema, Simba’s performance might also be described as ‘verisimilar’ (Pearson, 1992: 28–31) in style, or as characterized by a low level ‘ostensiveness’ (Naremore, 1988: 34). Rhetorical or codified gestures are toned down with this type of performance in favour of more subdued or restrained forms of expression, such as subtle facial expressions and discreet gesticulation. Simba’s performance also reflects the increasingly naturalist acting styles that began to characterize US film acting in the early 1930s. As Cynthia Baron (2014: 109–110) has shown, the significant increase in Broadway actors looking for work within the film industry in the late 1920s instigated a move away from pantomimic traditions towards subtler, Stanislavskian methods for building modern and naturalist performances on screen.

Although an animated character created many decades later, Simba’s performance can be characterized by a similar rejection of ready-made or ‘ostensive’ pantomimic gestures in favour of more ‘invisible’ or subdued forms of expression. When Simba’s father Mufasa is killed in the most traumatic scene of the film, a combination of subtle body movements and facial expressions are employed to convey his grief (his careful steps, folded ears, hesitant breathing, repeated blinking and slight twitch in the corner of his mouth). There is a level of emotional restraint that lends the character gravitas and imbues the scene with a relatable sense of sadness and despair. In particular, it is Simba’s eyes that express his inner emotions as they begin to tear up and sparkle. To borrow Crafton’s (2012: 36) definition, the depiction of Simba can be described as ‘introverted’ in the sense that his understated expressions hint at the internal complexity of his character.

In contrast to this naturalistic and restrained performance style, however, Simba’s two eccentric sidekicks Timon and Pumbaa express themselves in a considerably more ostentatious manner. Far from showing any kind of subtlety, Timon and Pumbaa are free-spoken extroverts whose performance styles lie closer to live-action cinema’s ‘histrionic’ (Pearson, 1992: 21–27) performative traditions. If Simba’s eyes tear up and sparkle when he is upset, Timon and Pumbaa resort to broad and exaggerated forms of expression. Not only do they scream and shout when expressing their emotions, but their bodies repeatedly contort in an exaggerated fashion. In the case of Pumbaa, his whole head spasms when he reacts to fear. In addition to screaming at the top of his lungs, Pumbaa’s head begins to stretch and squash, and his eyes bulge and palpitate. Similarly, Timon’s face grows several sizes when he is frightened – his eyes pop and his mouth expands disproportionately. When the two of them cry, tears spray into the air as though shot from a sprinkler. In the company of their naturalist companion, Timon and Pumbaa stand out as flamboyant curiosities who encapsulate a different performative regime. They also offer a comic respite, a departure from the emotional intensity of the main plot and a relief into a somewhat debauched and grotesque physicality in the form of Pumbaa’s uncontrollable flatulence and burping. Their performative ‘difference’ hence also functions as a means of conveying the duo’s irreverent attitude and disregard for social codes of conduct. That is, their deviation from the dominant, hyperrealist paradigm parallels their breach of decorum.
A number of scholars researching performance in live-action cinema have pointed to this kind of contrast or variation in acting style within a single cast. In reference to Hollywood cinema, Richard Maltby (2003: 388–389) suggests that, while leading stars typically aim for naturalism, supporting actors (or characters with lesser ‘status’ in the narrative, as he puts it) are rather expected to adopt a more expressive gestural vocabulary. Similarly, James Naremore (1988: 43) proposes that Hollywood has traditionally required its supporting actors to employ a higher level of expressiveness in their performances. While film stars are expected to be ‘relatively inexpressive’ and perform as though they are behaving rather than acting, supporting players are instead free to ‘show off their histrionic abilities’, as he puts it (p. 224). Naremore also mentions the eccentric and humorous ‘overplaying’ that many character actors embraced during Hollywood’s classical era, which he suggests contributed to a distinct stylization in studio filmmaking (p. 249). The sheer flamboyance of Timon and Pumbaa’s performances in *The Lion King* (despite the film’s release in the 1990s) are similar in style and can be traced back to those of the more expressive (and excessive) character performances in classical, live-action cinema. The duo’s comically heightened and over-the-top presence on screen, akin to the conspicuous presence of an eccentric character actor, complicates the ‘realism’ that has been established by the more naturalist and subtle performances in the film.

In reference to theories about performance in animated cinema more specifically, Timon and Pumbaa are also illustrative examples of what Crafton (2012: 23) has defined as ‘figurative’ characters. In contrast to their ‘embodied’ counterparts, who express ‘emotive personality, character nuance, and emotional expression’, as Crafton puts it, figurative characters ‘behave as recognizable “types,” marshalling a small range of instantly identifiable facial and body expressions – We appreciate them as we understand clowns or slapstick comedians with distinctive yet familiar styles’ (p. 23). Unlike ‘embodied’ figures such as Simba, both Timon and Pumbaa are clearly demarcated types whose comic intensity in many ways obscures their potential for psychological complexity. In addition to being accessible and recognizable, they are characters who offer comic relief through their exaggerated and pantomimic performance styles. They also offer figurative relief from the realism and seriousness that often comes with the complexities, nuances and depth of a fully embodied characterization.

A similar case can be made for a number of minor characters across Disney’s feature films. In *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), the enchanted candleholder Lumière and his similarly enchanted partner Cogsworth the clock are more emphatic in their performance styles than the naturalistic and restrained protagonist Belle. Cogsworth, in particular, is very vocal and flamboyant, and he expresses an impressive range of eccentric facial expressions and pantomimic gesturing that are accentuated by his dramatic mood swings. Similarly, Aladdin’s kleptomaniac pet monkey Abu in *Aladdin* (1992) acts in an over-the-top manner that comes across as caricatured and almost clown-like in comparison to the more toned-down performance style of titular protagonist and his love interest Jasmine. In addition to metamorphosing into a variety of objects and animals (including an elephant, a car and a camel), Abu’s body consistently displays a heightened squash-and-stretch motion. During the transformation process, his body is also notably plasmatic as it twists and bends before settling into its new form, as though it consisted of a malleable gelatinous substance. The character who causes Abu’s transformation, Genie, displays an even greater degree of plasmaticness. As a spirit with boundless shape-shifting abilities, Genie is almost an incarnation of Eisenstein’s definition of a character who behaves like a ‘primal protoplasm’ – a substance that is yet to achieve stable form (Eisenstein, 1986: 21). In reference to the more ideological aspects of Eisenstein’s theory, Genie also carries the potential for a more radical kind of transformation because of his ability to reconfigure the world around him and conjure things from nothing (as he notes himself, he holds ‘phenomenal cosmic power’). As Wells (1998: 22) has pointed out,
Eisenstein traced this kind of freedom of the plasmatic, animated form to a freedom from the prevailing ideology. Although Genie indeed holds the unrealized capacity to fundamentally alter the world, he is limited by the protagonist’s conservative wishes and lack of imagination until he is set free (at which point he simply decides to leave). Even so, his presence in the film allows for an imagination of a different kind of existence and it offers a glimpse of an alternative aesthetic mode.

This tendency is by no means limited to the films from Disney’s Renaissance period from the late 1980s through the 1990s. Going back further through the studio’s animated features, similar claims can be made about characters such as Dinky and Boomer in *The Fox and the Hound* (1981). These two eccentric birds, who spend most of their time trying to catch an equally eccentric caterpillar, are both figurative characters whose mannerisms and facial expressions are overstated in comparison to the leading figures, the fox and the hound. They are also somewhat detached from the solemn tone of the principal storyline and their seemingly elastic bodies remain uninjured when subjected to physical harm. When the two of them are electrocuted by a telephone wire, their bodies are propelled upwards whilst vibrating and emitting bolts of electricity. Upon hitting the ground, their faces and eyes expand and palpitate in a humorous manner and their feathers burn to a frazzle. Much like Timon and Pumbaa, Dinky and Boomer are figures of fun whose plasmatic and figurative potential stands in sharp contrast to the realism and seriousness of the protagonists’ embodied characterizations. Although they hardly represent any kind of radical remaking of the world, their presence nevertheless has a sense of rebellion and their comedic irreverence can be understood as forming a resistance that kicks against the dominant aesthetic of the film.

Going back further in time, the same designs can be found in films such as *The Sword in the Stone* (1963), *Peter Pan* (1953) and *Pinocchio* (1940). In the first two of these films, the character of the Wolf and the Crocodile respectively appear almost modelled after one another as their bodies stretch and squash in a similar and notably unrealistic fashion. They also seem to be driven by the same constricting character trait: that of being hungry and wanting to eat up their leading counterparts. In *The Sword in the Stone*, the Wolf pops up sporadically to try and devour the protagonist whilst his body takes repeated, comic beatings that offset the hyperrealist tendency of the film at large. Similarly, the Crocodile in *Peter Pan*, who consistently tries to devour Captain Hook, is something of a display of a plasmatic body. When emerging from the water, the Crocodile surfaces like a submarine as his eyes pop out like separate periscopes in time to the music. His tongue is also strangely floppy, his mouth opens too wide and his mannerisms resemble that of a dog. When he finally manages to swallow his prey, it bounces right back out of his body after reaching his tail (as happened with Dopey and the soap). In *Pinocchio*, the drunken and chain-smoking cat Gideon likewise recalls the plasmatic potential of early Disney. As he stumbles about the film in a permanent state of flimsiness, Gideon’s body appears almost misaligned and it does not behave or act in line with the established hyperrealism. His movements and gestures are also fluid in a way that makes his body seem strangely viscous and his debouched experience is somehow rendered physical when we see him pick up his own smoke rings and eat them as though they were doughnuts. Although Gideon exists in a world in which a puppet transforms into a boy, he stands out as excessive and his presence does not quite gel with the rest of the film.

Michael Barrier (1999: 398–401) has discussed something along these lines in reference to some of the minor characters in *Cinderella* (1950). While noting that *Cinderella* is easily imaginable as a live-action movie, Barrier adds that the cat-and-mouse sequences that recur in the film play out as stand-alone cartoons from a Silly Symphony. The cat Lucifer in particular is a character that Barrier suggests stands in sharp contrast to the leading figures because of his caricatured appearance and movements. In comparison to the realistic movements of Cinderella, Barrier notes that
there is ultimately no sense . . . that Lucifer is anchored in physical reality, at two or three removes. The cat’s mouth gives the game away – when he smiles, it stretches wide, to comic effect but in a manner wholly inconsistent with the idea that this is any sort of real creature. (p. 401)

Not unlike Lucifer, characters such as Gideon, the Crocodile and the Wolf are also exaggerated in style and their figurative performances and plasmatic potential contrast with the depicted hyperrealism. Notably, this is a tendency that continues into the contemporary era of Disney animation. In *Frozen* (2013), the comedic snowman Olaf demonstrates a similar plasmaticness as he keeps reassembling his repeatedly dismantled body. Unlike the two mortal and naturalistic human leads, Anna and Elsa, Olaf carries the capacity for regeneration and transformation. His complete defiance of the laws of physics also gives Olaf an outsider status that accentuates the fact that he incarnates an alternative and potentially more liberating form of existence. Throughout the film, we see Olaf’s very loosely connected body come apart: his head flies off, the middle section of his body rolls away, his arms come off, his nose is pushed right through and out the back of his head. Whenever Olaf is disassembled, however, the separate pieces of his body gain autonomy and simply wander back into place. Or, as happens repeatedly, assemble themselves in the wrong order. The peculiarity of Olaf’s fluid, constantly changing and seemingly indestructible body is also a repeated point of interest to those around him, as well as to Olaf himself who is well aware of his radical state of existence. As he puts it when he hears that Anna’s love interest Kristoff has hurt his head: ‘I don’t have a skull… Or bones.’

While Crafton (2012) does not propose any kind of connection between figurativeness, character size and/or narrative importance in his analysis, the above-mentioned examples suggest that such a connection exists in Disney animation. Crafton’s theories, however, bear some resemblance to literary theories in which such a structural binary between major and minor characters has been similarly emphasized. Among the most influential discussions on this topic is EM Forster’s (2002[1927]) geometry-informed theory about flat and round characters. The notion of the flat character, which Forster suggests is a figure constructed around a single idea or quality, has since become associated with minor characters in literature. He also notes that these types of characters are easily identifiable as types, remain unchanged by circumstances and can be summed up in an epithet (p. 48). In reference to the minor character Mrs. Micawber in Charles Dicken’s *David Copperfield*, Forster provides the following summary: “I will never desert Mr. Micawber.” There is Mrs. Micawber – she says she won’t desert Mr. Micawber; she doesn’t, and there she is’ (pp. 48–49). Viewed in this way, there is a one-dimensional rigidity to the flat character or an unalterable, essential quality that keeps the character from existing or expanding beyond the epithet that defines her.

*The Lion King*’s Pumbaa is a character who might also be described as constrained by a limited number of character traits that are repeated throughout the film, the most striking perhaps being his inclination to fart and burp. As Timon puts it in an attempt to describe his partner: ‘With you, Pumbaa, everything is about gas.’ There are multiple examples from earlier Disney films that suggest that these types of characterizations were introduced as soon as the studio turned to feature filmmaking. Besides Pumbaa, we may recall the singularity of characters such as the Crocodile from *Peter Pan* and the Wolf from *The Sword in the Stone*, both of whom have hunger as their defining character trait. Similarly, Gideon is an example of a character whose limited space in *Pinocchio* constrains his potential to develop any kind of fleshed-out character traits. Although Gideon is supposed to assist his partner in crime, the malicious Fox, he spends most of his screen time binge drinking, smoking and hiccupping. As he is mute (or perhaps prefers not to talk), we are also denied access to Gideon’s thoughts. The few things we know about him are implied through his flimsy body language.
In his analysis, Forster does not see this kind of flatness in a character as a downside, however, but rather as something that is of great advantage to the writer. As opposed to ‘round’ characters, he notes, flat ones ‘never need reintroducing, never run away, have not to be watched for development, and provide their own atmosphere – little luminous disks of pre-arranged size . . . most satisfactory’ (p. 49). Although Forster does not develop this argument, the notion that minor characters provide their own atmosphere implies that they carry with them a quirk that differs from or provides contrast to (and potentially even disturbs) the rest of the text: a quality that, as Forster also notes, renders them less susceptible to being tied down or modified by any developments in the main storyline and the events that shape the protagonists (p. 50). When it comes to Timon and Pumbaa, this is quite literally the case as they assert their very own and carefree approach to life in a song that states that they live by a unique and ‘problem-free philosophy’. The duo’s presence in The Lion King temporarily also takes the spectator out of the seriousness of the central narrative thread and into an insouciant existence that primarily revolves around having fun. Even though Timon and Pumbaa have clear causal functions in the story as they help Simba get back on track to reclaim his lost kingdom, this is not all that defines them. More than anything, Timon and Pumbaa are figures of fun who offer Simba (and the audience) an escape into a world where comedy and fun are more highly valued than causal motivation and narrative progression. \(^2\) They also offer a welcome diversion into their light-hearted escapades that offsets the sober tone of the rest of the film. To borrow from Bukatman (2014: 315), it is as if a slice of the ‘seven-minute heyday’ of early animation were slipped into the feature length film in the form of these two characters.

Olaf in Frozen might also be understood as a character who carries his own distinct atmosphere. Even though he was conceived in Anna and Elsa’s childhood, Olaf only comes to life when things are turned upside down in Arendelle as Elsa sets off the eternal winter. When the climate reverts back to normal, Olaf is given his own little flurry: a small cloud that hovers above his head to sustain his very own microclimate. This keeps Olaf from melting and allows him to stay alive in the world of the protagonists. But it also accentuates the fact that he is out of his element and so out of step with the world around him that he needs an artificial, magical life support to prevent his literal dissolution.

As the presence of these eccentric minor characters illustrates, Disney’s shift to hyperrealism within its feature films does not appear to have put the old aesthetic to rest. Rather, the topsy-turvy potential of the studio’s early shorts is consistently recalled and renewed through these variations of ‘flat’ and ‘figurative’ minor characters, the formerly overarching aesthetic having been relegated to the margins of the films. Indeed, Disney’s minor characters retain a trace of the plasticity or suppleness that Eisenstein found so exhilarating and transgressive. While hardly free to assume any shape or form, their bodies are more supple, bendy and elastic than those of their leading counterparts. The exaggerated ways in which Timon and Pumbaa’s faces twist and bend when reacting to fear, the fact that Gideon can pick up his own smoke rings and eat them, that the Crocodile’s prey bounces in and out of his body, or that Olaf repeatedly reconfigures himself, illustrate how these characters’ bodies and actions transcend the established hyperrealism. As though they were all carrying their own self-sustaining flurries, Disney’s minor characters establish an alternative aesthetic and performative regime that runs alongside the relative realism of the main storyline.

**Intensified realism and narrative worldbuilding**

If Disney’s minor characters can be understood as breaking with the dominant hyperrealism, their very departure from this norm also provides clear variation to the stories. Even though Disney’s movies revolve around embodied protagonists, minor characters offer glimpses of and access to contrasting values, sentiments and forms of expression. As I argue, the presence of these outliers
helps bypass the threat of homogeneity in terms of tone and character, and enables the fictional worlds of Disney’s movies to feel more fully realized and holistic. If the development of embodied characterizations in Disney contributed to an increasingly realistic aesthetic, I would suggest that the presence of minor characters has contributed to the creation of more balanced, textured and expansive fictional environments. Minor characters were, and continue to be, important cornerstones to the detailed worldmaking of Disney’s animated features.

The notion of animated ‘worlds’ and the idea that animated movies confront spectators with particular and medium-specific, fictional environments has been discussed by a number of scholars. In her editorial introduction to the anthology *Animated Worlds*, Suzanne Buchan (2007: vii) defines these worlds as the ‘realms of cinematic experience that are accessible to the spectator only through the techniques available in animation filmmaking’. Narrowing his focus to computer-animated cinema, Christopher Holliday (2018) instead coins the term ‘Luxo world’ when referring to the virtual environments made possible through this particular mode of production. With an emphasis on the busy atmosphere of digital animation and the hyperactivity, energy and internal richness engendered by the multitude of characters that populate these environments, Holliday suggests that Luxo worlds are distinctively ‘open’ and expansive in style (pp. 80–82). As he argues:

> The sheer scope of a Luxo world and its levels of spatial freedom involve computer-animated films in a playful illusion that narrative is a single, unfolding plotline progressing through a broader fictional space in which many other possible narratives remain unrealized. (p. 82)

My understanding and use of the terms animated ‘world’ or ‘worldmaking’ are similarly related to the idea that animated cinema has a particular way of constructing its fictional environments. Drawing on Crafton (2012: 305), I would also emphasize the imaginative role of the spectator in this process. Indeed, one of the ways in which Disney builds and enriches its movies is by populating them with minor characters that encourage the spectator to look beyond the main storyline and towards the broader (and implied) fictional field. In reference to live-action cinema, VF Perkins (2005) has discussed this interpretative act of imagining how a movie’s fictional world stretches beyond its networks of cause-and-effect relationships and possibilities outside of the realm of the main plot. As spectators, we accept that we see things from a particular viewpoint or perspective, but we are also made aware of the complexity of the narrative and the world that extends beyond the frame (p. 20). Seen in this light, the idea of cinematic worldbuilding is closely related to questions of narration. More specifically, it is related to how narratives can be constructed to accentuate the impression that we are tracing a single narrative thread that runs amidst a tangle of innumerable others that collide, intersect, entangle, run in parallel and perpendicular to one another.

With a focus on live-action cinema, Aaron Taylor (2012) has interestingly theorized the role of minor actors (and characters) specifically in reference to such questions of narration and audience engagement. As he suggests, the presence of certain minor actors on screen can evoke a ‘cognitive shift’ in the response of the spectator (p. 122). Rather than (or in addition to) being concerned with the main plot and the function of minor actors in reference to this plot, such figures encourage spectators to become aware of aspects of the film that are less immediately apparent. The performance of a supporting actor may, for example, encourage spectators to contemplate the limits of the narrative structure and to imagine what lies beyond the ‘surface action’ of the film. As Taylor puts it, the spectator is in this case prompted to ‘identify the energies, tensions, complexes, feelings and so on that animate a story, giving it weight, breadth, life’ (p. 123).

Although Taylor does not frame his discussion around notions of worldbuilding, his idea that minor actors can cause a narrative to ‘branch outwards’ (p. 26) in this way is nevertheless relevant within this context. When it comes to animated cinema, Taylor’s theory is also intriguing because
it sheds light on the spectatorial response to elements of marginal, narrative importance. In Disney’s animated features, minor characters are consistently employed in ways that raise awareness of the wider, fictional world and the dimensions of narration that lie beyond the linear forward-movement of causality. This effect is noticeable both when it comes to the exaggerated ways in which these characters are depicted, as well as in how their eccentric goings-on tend to be hard to motivate.

Even if characters such as Gideon, Olaf and Timon and Pumbaa serve a (causal) narrative purpose in their respective films, the conspicuousness of their performances and their peculiar on-screen activities nevertheless surpass this function. This is not to say that Disney’s minor characters work in the same way as some film theorists have suggested that gags function in slapstick comedy, in the sense that they puncture or disrupt the narrative flow (Crafton, 1995; Jenkins, 1992). Drawing on Taylor, I would rather suggest that the seemingly excessive presence of these figures opens up the narrative to other dimensions by moving it ‘sideways’ into a broader, narrative field instead of forwards in a linear fashion. By giving the narratives breadth and depth, minor characters contribute to the sensation of the stories taking place in open, three-dimensional worlds in which the weight of causality is less pressing. To borrow from Kristin Thompson’s (1977) discussion about cinematic excess and elements that outweigh their original motivation, minor characters (much like excessive details) enrich the ‘perceptual field’ of the given film (p. 59). Their presence is one that provokes a different kind of narrative movement; one in which the unbounded vision of the fictional world is given priority over the forward-moving plot.

This way of expanding the narrative beyond causal lines can also be understood in reference to realism. In his essay ‘The reality effect’, Roland Barthes (1989: 141) talks in depth about what he suggests has been overlooked in structural analysis in favour of ‘major articulations of narrative’, namely the significance of detailed description in storytelling. The example Barthes gives is that of Gustave Flaubert’s description of a barometer in the house of one of his characters in *A Simple Heart* (1877); a non-essential addition that says nothing revelatory about the character, the time or the place. The barometer is a ‘useless detail’ or ‘insignificant notation’ that appears to serve no purpose, as Barthes (1989: 142) puts it. If anything, it is an element that comes across as a ‘narrative luxury’ (p. 141). However, it is precisely (and paradoxically) this outward insignificance of the barometer that renders it significant. As an object devoid of symbolic and causal signification, the barometer is an example of ‘concrete reality’ finding its way into storytelling, as Barthes (p. 146) puts it. Although its presence does not contribute to the progression of the plot, it contributes to the creation of a more believable depiction of reality. In this view, realism lies in the details of storytelling and, specifically, in details that lack clear signification and that do not contribute to the narrative development.

While the depiction of an inanimate barometer has little in common with Disney’s minor characters (with the exception perhaps of a passing, superficial resemblance to a less lively version of Cogsworth the clock in *Beauty and the Beast*), the idea that narrative storytelling includes ‘stuff’ that cannot be causally motivated and which does not necessarily ‘mean’ or signify a whole lot is nevertheless relevant when discussing the excessive nature of these figures. Although a character such as Gideon serves a causal function in the sense that he assists the Fox when capturing Pinocchio, his striking performance repeatedly outweighs this function. Rather than moving the narrative forward, Gideon’s excessive mannerisms seem to widen it by adding ‘unnecessary’ detail to the depiction of the surrounding environment. In this way, his presence in *Pinocchio* also provides an example of how narratives are more than just a string of cause-and-effect relationships. If not precisely a ‘reality effect’, the depiction of minor characters engenders something not too far off in the sense that their presence broadens the narrative to include contrasting viewpoints, mannerisms and attitudes that outstrip the demands of the main storyline. Somewhat ironically, the
addition of these flat characters add depth to the narrative. While the effect may not be realism in a classical sense, it leads to an enhanced believability and a more elaborate worldmaking.

Another way of understanding the ways in which minor characters contribute to this kind of textured worldbuilding is to look at the narrative possibilities they open up as the films unfold. Recalling Forster’s (2002[1927]) notion of the flat character, an additional argument he makes about these figures is that they might ‘vibrate a little’ (p. 51). Although he describes the phenomenon as a ‘conjuring trick’, Forster suggests that flat characters can dupe the reader into perceiving them as weightier than they really are. As with some of his other arguments, Forster does not expand upon his theory. Presumably, however, the idea is that flat characters may seem rounder and more complex than they really are, and that this conjuring trick occasions imaginative work on behalf of the spectator (who begins to read between the lines).

A number of critics and scholars have picked up on and expanded on this line of thought. In his study of minor characters in literature and film, Andrew Galef (1993: 6) suggests that minor figures do not necessarily have to come across as flat at all, but rather as characters ‘out of context’ whose potentially ‘unplumbed depths’ are simply not illuminated in full because they appear in stories that centre on someone else. With a focus on the suggestive power of flat characters, Edwin Muir (1967[1928]) similarly rejects the notion that there is only one side or quality to these figures. Rather, as indicated by their name, flat characters have two sides: the one that we see, and the other one that we do not see, but which is nevertheless hinted at. As flat characters are obscured or ‘masked’ by narration, as Muir puts it, they invite us to think beyond the text (pp. 142–146). This emphasis on the power of imagination can also be found in WJ Harvey’s (1970[1965]: 55) character theory, as he contends that there are instances when a ‘sketchily realized’ figure may be granted a moment of illumination or dramatic intensity during which she or he takes on dimension. However brief, such moments may provoke the reader to ‘speculate’ and ‘give substance to the character’, as Harvey puts it:

What we are offered, so to speak, is only one arc of the circle that if fully drawn would make up the rounded character. But the arc is so curved that we can, if we wish, extend it full-circle in our imagination. (p. 55)

Moments such as these, in which minor characters ‘vibrate’, briefly take on dimension or invite us to speculate about the wider, fictional world and its potential storylines and viewpoints, occur repeatedly in Disney animation. We might also think of it in terms of Disney playing with levels of ‘embodiedness’ and ‘figurativeness’ in its characters’ performances, to reconnect to Crafton’s definitions. By occasionally allowing minor characters to show signs of embodiedness and complexity, Disney encourages spectators to imagine the worlds of these films as more expansive and inclusive. That is, we are prompted to imagine details left undrawn and potential narrative progressions that were never animated.

For example, although Simba is the primary emotive character in *The Lion King* and the one who most consistently expresses depth and internal complexity, the film occasionally hints at the hidden or implied complexities of its minor characters. In one instance, we are given a glimpse of Pumbaa’s troubled childhood and find out that he was bullied. Albeit lightened up and turned into a moment of comic respite because of Pumbaa’s repeated farting and burping, it is a poignant scene that suggests that there is more to this character than the narrative discloses. Despite being treated as foolish by everyone around him, Pumbaa is also a great deal smarter than his friends give him credit for. When we see him studying the stars together with Timon and Simba one night, Pumbaa proposes that they are ‘balls of gas burning billions of miles away’. Timon, on the other hand, is convinced that they are fireflies and Simba believes they are deceased kings. Whether we conceive
of Pumbaa as though he is vibrating, taking on embodied character traits or as simply drawing attention to the fact that his personal storyline is out of context, the implication is the same. Pumbaa’s performance invites us to think beyond the boundaries of The Lion King’s narrative perspective and about storylines that remain just out of reach.

Similarly, it is tempting to make more of Gideon’s role in Pinocchio, especially in the case of his utter disregard and lack of concern for the narrative progression. Although Gideon’s partners in crime work hard to facilitate the capturing of Pinocchio, Gideon himself only ever does the bare minimum (which is not enough to warrant his presence in the story). Albeit not necessarily a sign of embodiedness, there is something to this character’s reluctance to participate that makes his behaviour come across as low-level resistance to having been dragged into a narrative in which he has no interest. His detached attitude and incongruous presence in the film also point to the fact that Gideon is a character ‘out of context’, to borrow Galef’s (1993: 6) expression, whose story belongs elsewhere and whose own sets of concern are unrelated to those of the leading figures.

In his study of film performance, Andrew Klevan (2005: 89) has observed that the skill of the supporting actor in live-action cinema is to ‘suggest other stories while not allowing them to become the centre of attention’. Following this notion, we might say that characters such as Gideon, Timon and Pumbaa are designed to do precisely this: to make us aware of the many possible storylines that are omitted for the sake of narrative economy. This obstructed view of minor characters, however, is also what makes the worlds of these films more believable in the sense that it reflects our own and limited perception of reality. To reconnect to Perkins’s (2005: 20) observation:

‘to be in a world is to know the partiality of knowledge and the boundaries of vision – to be aware that there is always a bigger picture. To observe a world humanly is to do so from a viewpoint, with angles of vision and points of focus whose selectivity is inflected by the seeing mind.’

In Disney animation, minor characters are constant reminders of this bigger picture and their presence offers a potential glimpse of the many alternative viewpoints and storylines that surface over the course of the films.

**Conclusion**

While the topic of minor characters has gained some prominence in the disciplinary field of literary studies and in research into live-action cinema, it has been largely overlooked in animation studies. With the aim of bridging this research gap, this article has attempted to explore the role of minor characters in Disney’s animated features, arguing that a closer look at these figures sheds light on previously unexplored aspects of the studio’s aesthetic style and its particular form of worldbuilding. The ways in which Disney’s minor characters manifest a rupture in the otherwise dominant mode of hyperrealism suggests that the studio did not fully abandon the ‘tospy-turvydom’ of its early, more plasmatic tradition. Rather, this potentially transgressive aesthetic mode was relegated to the margins of these movies, and specifically to the bodies of minor characters.

The performative difference of these minor figures is also an important aspect of how Disney built and enriched its fictional worlds. By drawing attention to alternative viewpoints, sentiments and forms of expression, Disney’s minor characters give definition to the wider, fictional environments of these movies and they hint at the dimensions of storytelling that lie beyond the strictures of the forward-moving plot.
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Notes
1. A number of scholars have called Forster’s geometry-inspired definitions into question and suggested alternative terms for identifying differences between characters. Paul Pickrel (1988), for instance, proposes a distinction between essential and existentialist characters. The first definition refers to characters whose nature appears more fixed and unchanging over the course of the narrative. They are characters ‘to be looked at’, as Pickrel notes (p. 183). The existentialist characters, on the other hand, merge with and are shaped by the surrounding circumstances. They are characters ‘to be felt with’.

2. It is likely no coincidence that the world into which Simba is offered an escape is something of a regression into (or perhaps extension of) childhood.

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