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Finding Nemo (review)

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of identity gives the false sense of a unified, constant identity that is supposed to be uniquely our own).

The elements of the home and family, politics, celebrity culture, and sexual transgression lend this film to a queer reading. Queer theory need not focus on homosexuality, but I read *The House of Yes* as purposefully referencing gay culture. Of course, the sexual behavior of Jackie and Marty clearly proves non-normative, but their characters also play with stereotypes of gay identity. Homosexuality is historically thought to be the result of self-obsession and narcissism, symbolically figured here by the fact that Jackie-O and Marty are twins ("It's like fucking a mirror," Anthony notes). Jackie-O and Marty easily fit a certain depiction of gay male identity modeled on the upper-class, educated, effete male who lives in the city and lacks traditional morality, and they have a sort of camp sensibility, playing off of each other with witty banter, speaking French, and even playing a sophisticated piano ensemble after Leslie stumbles through "Chopsticks."

Beyond these surface connections, we see that the house functions like the closet, a space where Marty can "be himself" with Jackie in a way that he cannot in the real world. And one must note that the reference to Jackie Kennedy Onasis is a loaded one, since almost immediately after JFK's assassination, she became an icon to counter-cultures in America. Andy Warhol produced many paintings based on photos of her, and she was a popular character among female impersonators, notably impersonated by Divine (aka Glen Harris Milstead) in John Water's 1967 film *Eat Your Makeup*. In music, JFK's assassination was reenacted in the video "Coma White" by Marylin Manson, who starred as JFK with Rose McGowan playing Jackie, and she appears in "Jackie's Strength" by Tori Amos—a song about a girl who purposefully "gets lost" on her wedding day.

The movie reads as exemplary of the idea that identity is itself an imitation. Judith Butler famously theorized gender as a copy with no original—a copy of a copy that constitutes a performance of the self. The struggle for Marty is that he wants normalcy. The struggle for Jackie is that she wants to create an anti-norm, and she insists that the house that they live in becomes the place where the threat of nonconformity is death. The gun that initiates sex also threatens the participants by the mechanism of its violence—what queer theorists might call normative violence. The fetish of the gun and of the costumes, which began as such a transgressive act, become the markers of that transgressive identity—"Jackie O"—which then insists on "fixing" itself in the space of the house. Marty's death, however, may not be seen as any different by Jackie as the sort of "killing off" of parts of himself in order to take on the normal identity of husband to Leslie.

The movie closes with more 8mm home movie footage. Jackie sits at the top of the steps exhausted, and Marty, behind the camera, approaches her, asking, "do you want me to stop?" "Yes, stop it Marty," Jackie responds, "stop it…." The camera closes in from above on Jackie's face, and she speaks as though she is worn out, yet her voice and expression is unmistakably sexual. The camera lingers on the shot of her for several silent seconds before the film ends. Jackie begs Marty to stop the camera, to stop the play, to stop the performance. The artificiality of Jackie's identity based on a popular and political icon of the twentieth century is more real to her than Marty's struggle to play the part of a normal man. Death, therefore, is simply the end of the performance, just as we all are sometimes forced to kill off a part of ourselves in order to function within the narrative of a life that, frequently, was written long before we came around.

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Finding Nemo

Disney has, over the years, received its share of well-deserved criticism. Feminist critics in particular, as well as vigilant parents everywhere, worry about young, animated heroines with tiny waists and amble bosoms—heroines who, more often than not, are loved and granted their happy endings *because* of their beauty. Hand in hand with these beauties come their enemies—strong, powerful characters when they're male but simply ugly, fat, or old when they are female. Contrast *The Little Mermaid's* Ursula with *Aladdin's* Jafar, for instance. Even worse, Disney's villains are often related to their heroines as "wicked" or "evil" stepmothers (*Snow White* and *Cinderella*). These absent mothers and evil replacement moms might just be part of the classic fairy tales, but Disney has done nothing to downplay or soften them for young viewers. Nor have they altered their fairy tale endings: happily-ever-after means the girl is coupled up and the evil mother/ugly villain is vanquished, frequently violently. Non-traditional families—with stepparents or siblings, with absent parents, even just single people—are either non-existent or unhappy. Critics worry about the effect of these character types on young, uncritical minds, and such worries seem well founded when one considers that Disney movies and marketing are the first, most frequent, best loved taste of culture in the lives of many very young people. Disney influences almost anyone who wants to, say, own a TV, shop at the mall, go outside. It seems not just fair then, but also important, to note progress and offer praise where it is due. Pixar's most recent animated feature, co-financed, owned, branded, marketed, and distributed in partnership with Disney, avoids these pitfalls, not just incidentally but purposefully and interestingly, offering young viewers, and the rest of us, important messages about alternative families and alternative heroines.

Like many classic Disney movies, *Finding Nemo* wholly and conspicuously lacks mothers. Not only is Nemo's family male-headed, so are all the other families in this film. The three parents we meet dropping their kids at school are all dads; a sea turtle from whom Marlin gets sage parenting advice is a dad; even the one human parental figure we meet is male (an uncle). Nemo's mother is killed, hours before his birth, in the film's harrowing opening scene, along with the 400 eggs containing his would-be brothers and sisters. He and his father, Marlin, are the family's only survivors.

Thus, by the time we meet a now school-age Nemo in the next scene, Marlin is a loving but overprotective, neurotic father whose parting question to his son on his first day of school is, "What's the one thing we have to remember about the ocean?" to which his young son mechanically replies, "It's not safe." Though it is Nemo who is captured by a scuba diving dentist and placed in an aquarium, the film's adventure is really Marlin's. His unwavering search for his son among the tagline's 3.7 trillion fish seems almost an aside. The real point is learning to let his son experience life and therefore danger, to be happy despite all of the things that can and sadly sometimes do go horribly wrong. Trapped inside a whale and hanging onto its tongue for dear life, Marlin's new friend Dory prompts him to just let go. "How do you know that we won't get hurt?" Marlin asks, and Dory replies, "I don't," but realizes that the only way out is to "take a shot and hope for the best." Marlin is amazed that this approach to life works. His task, finding Nemo, seems so difficult that he figures his only chance is by carefully calculating every moment and detail. When, through the kindness of strangers and the loyalty of someone he has only just met, he does find his son, Marlin realizes the value of humor, risk, exploration. This knowledge saves Nemo—Marlin's film-end advice to Nemo when he drops him at school is, "Go have an adventure"—it brings them closer together so that at the end we find Nemo in a much happier, more functional family from which he is encouraged to enjoy learning, make friends, see the world.

In addition to a positive father-centric family, *Finding Nemo* offers an eminently recognizable female lead. She is a fish, so the fact that she lacks an hourglass figure is faint praise, but even better, she is…well, she is a little bit nuts. When we first meet Dory, she is suffering from a memory disorder. She cannot keep track of tasks or thoughts for more than a minute at a time. She is a highly flaky, easily distracted, difficult to understand, hard to talk to super-freak. Dory is all of us (male and female) in both our weakest and finest hours. She suffers from lack of love, friendship, trust, and understanding, and it makes her, not weepy-pretty-weak and in need of rescue, but unstable, unsure, and confused. Marlin deals with life's cruelties by trying to control every moment; Dory forgets because it is easier to let her mind go than to make it focus on what is hard and painful and scary. Her demons creep up on her, and they are scarier than any wicked stepmother or oversized octopus (interestingly, there is no real villain in this movie) because they come from inside. Dory embodies all of us on our bad days when we lack self-confidence, when we let our fears get the better of us, when we secretly suspect we might be losing it. But Dory is our best days too. She remains absolutely loyal: even when snapped at; even when it means risking her own life; even without very much evidence that her loyalty is deserved or even desired. She is brave in the face of sharks, jellyfish, the belly of the whale, and the vastness of the ocean. The film grants her wish, her heart's desire —loyal friendship and control over her head—as the narrative reward for her goodness, bravery, and devotion and teaches young viewers that happily-ever-after lies in being and having a good friend.

Non-traditional family and non-traditional heroine combine, finally, to offer an alternative idea of home. Nemo and Marlin's little family has grown from just father and son to include Dory as well. Though there is no hint that Dory and Marlin have, say, fallen in love and gotten married, she does seem a permanent friend who helps take care of and love Nemo. As a dejected Marlin tries to leave her, Dory begs, "Please don't go away. Please. No one's ever stuck with me so long before…I remember things better with you because when I look at you, I can feel it. I look at you, and I'm home." Home becomes friendship, people who will always be there, faith, trust, constancy. For Nemo, home is easy: a father, a friend, some freedom, and a childhood. For Dory, home is more complicated as it centers on Marlin's trust in her, the chance to help someone, and her own mental stability. We see the effects of "home" in her improved memory, belonging, and state-of-mind. For Marlin, home is taking care of his son but also learning that doing so means not only protecting but also trusting, encouraging adventure, accepting danger.

Though we still want for some moms, *Finding Nemo's* happily-ever-after really is happy. We learn that good friends can be family, that a little bit of crazy is not such a bad thing, that one earns love, not through outer beauty, but through trust and loyalty. I came out of last summer's Disney blockbuster, *Lilo and Stitch*, similarly encouraged by its alternative family and by female characters who looked realistic in bikinis. If Disney's hold on kids' culture remains relentless, at least their messages are finally turning towards an alternative.

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Abraham and Mary Lincoln: A House Divided

Taking its place among the growing number of documentaries dealing with Abraham Lincoln and the American Civil War, PBS's *Abraham and Mary Lincoln: A House Divided* (a part of its popular American Experience series) appears to have two related goals. First, the film wants to further the effort to humanize