

Unter Freunden beißt man sich schon gegenseitig in den Po. Eine queere Analyse der DreamWorks Franchise Madagascar

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Abstract

Dieser Artikel bietet eine queere Lesart von Madagascar und zeigt, basierend auf den Werken von Judith Butler und Stuart Hall, wie die nicht-menschlichen Charaktere Geschlecht und Sexualität hinterfragen, während gleichzeitig Spannungen zwischen queerer Befreiung und heteronormativen Konstrukten aufzeigt werden.

Keywords

Filmwissenschaft, Queer Studies, Filmanalyse, Animation Studies

1 Introduction

1934 marked the enforcement of the Hays-Code, a set of studio censorship guidelines, resulting in the banning of queer portrayals on the silver screen. However, even throughout these times queer identities have managed to be included in the entertainment industry.¹ The medium of animation strongly showcases the depiction of on-screen queerness, dating back to the early pre-Hays Code era, showcasing effeminate male characters such as Koko the Clown in Max Fleischer's 1932 short *Any Rags?* or cross-dressing characters as seen in the 1933 Looney Tunes release *Buddy's Beer Garden*. The enforcement of censorship, resulted in the depicted queerness becoming more subtle, with the artist sprinkling *queer-coding* into the narratives, as can be seen in characters such as *Bugs Bunny*, who is frequently seen cross-dressing or portraying a very fluid understanding of his romantic attraction. As the Hays-Code was revoked in 1968, the usage of subtle queer-coding continued, however predominantly relegated to the villains rather than the protagonists of the story, with famous examples being Ursula the Sea Witch from Disney's *The Little Mermaid* or Scar from Disney's *The Lion King*.² It must be noted that the explicit act of deliberately queer-coding a character and being able to read a character as queer-coded are two inherently different things. Whilst it is not being claimed that the various animators deliberately villainized or coded these characters as queer, when looking at animation through a queer lens, the trope of an effeminate or nontraditional masculine villain can often be discovered, allowing for an entry point of the *queer gaze*.

Following the turn of the century the archetype of the queer-coded villain continued throughout the animation industry, however through films such as *Monsters Inc.*, *Ice Age*, *The Road to El Dorado* and other films that fall into the *buddy film*-genre,³ audiences saw an influx of non-

¹ Thomas Patrick Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema, 1930-1934*, Film and Culture (Columbia University Press, 1999).

² Will Letts, "Camp Disney - Consuming Queer Subjectivities, Commodifying the Normative," in *Disney, Culture, and Curriculum*, ed. Jennifer A. Sandlin and Julie C Garlen (Routledge, 2016).

³ Ira Konigsberg, *The Complete Film Dictionary* (New American Library, 1987), 36.

heterosexual family dynamics and thus a positive portrayal of potentially non-conventional forms of masculinity.

In 2005, DreamWorks released their film *Madagascar* directed by Eric Darnell and Tom McGrath, in which a group of New Yorker Zoo animals get stranded on the island of Madagascar and are confronted with the Wilderness for the first time. The film was a commercial success, grossing over 540 million US-Dollars worldwide⁴ and subsequently spawning a franchise, including two sequels: *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa* and *Madagascar 3: Europe's Most Wanted*, each film outgrossing its predecessors at the box office respectively, a spinoff film *The Penguins of Madagascar* and multiple spinoff television series and holiday specials. When taking a closer look at the films themselves, it becomes apparent that these characters and storylines are not exempt from prevalent queer-coding and can be read and understood as an expression of queerness.

To begin with, it is of great importance to establish a baseline for terms such as *queering*, *queerness* or *queer reading*. What is *queer*? Or rather what does queer entail for the following analysis? In academia the term is tied to the field of Queer Studies, a field of study which looks at the deconstruction and destabilization of concepts such as sex, sexual orientation and gender.⁵ Yet this is only a short excerpt of the questions posed by queer studies and its field of research goes beyond the restraint of sexuality. While the topic is deeply linked with sexuality due to its history, academics within the field want to question the social constructs in our society and “[attempting] to account for the existence and expression of a wide range of positions within culture that are “queer” or non-, and-, or contra-straight”⁶. To perform a queer reading therefore means to examine an object under consideration of these differing positions in society and the construct of sexuality. The following examines the *Madagascar* franchise under the lens of a queer reading.

2 Establishing *Madagascar*

Before delving into a queer analysis of these animated animals, one must acknowledge the framework and address possible conflicts with the implications of a queer reading of this film. Due to the heterosexual dictatorship⁷ which the social order is built upon and remembering the horrific persecution of queer people throughout history, it can seem questionable ascribing queerness to wild animals, yet through their innate interplay between the animalism and the anthropocentrism, the characters in *Madagascar* can be described as *non/human*, a term from the research of Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird. By viewing the animals as non/humans the possibility of a queer reading emerges, as not only the human-centric social construct of sexuality becomes applicable but also as the inter-species relationships and ways of life challenge the modern understanding of heterosexual standards and gender roles.

⁴ “Madagascar (2005) - Financial Information,” The Numbers, accessed November 3, 2023, <https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Madagascar>.

⁵ cf. Andreas Kraß, ed., *Queer denken: gegen die Ordnung der Sexualität (Queer Studies)*, 1. Aufl. [Nachdr.], Edition Suhrkamp 2248 (Suhrkamp, 2008), 18.

⁶ Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*, 2. print (Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1997), 3.

⁷ cf. Kraß, *Queer denken*, 7 et sqq.

Timothy Laurie describes the animal in *Madagascar* as *anthropocentric*, resembling humans not only visually but also socially, building similar societies and upholding similar morals and values as humanity. He notes that the plot and the humor does not solely stem from the fact that these are anthropomorphic animals, but rather that these animals are specifically New York citizens who are unable to adapt and connect with other cultures outside of the United States social context.⁸ The anthropomorphism of the characters can be seen in the designs of Gloria and Alex, as they are depicted as bipedal animals, naturally walking on their hindlegs, making them appear more similar to their humans rather than to their other animal friends Marty and Melman, who are shown as naturalistic quadrupeds. Following the fluctuation between anthropomorphic and naturalistic character designs, the animals can shift between the two styles in their behaviors, resulting in images such as a zebra shaking a cocktail mixer or a lion using a payphone, even though both parties don't possess opposable thumbs. Looking past the anthropomorphism and focusing on the more influential anthropocentrism, the characterization of the animal gang is created by preserving societal and racial stereotypes of anthropoid concepts, as Marty can be read as a black American man and Melman as a Jewish hypochondriac for example.⁹ These characterizations not only enable the audience to understand the social structures of the animal kingdom but also show the character's ownership of an anthropocentric brain. This gets established further as the characters reference various pop culture phenomena like the song *New York, New York* from the 1977 film of the same name or the awareness of political situations which is shown through Skipper's capitalistic and patriotic personality and his aversion toward Russians¹⁰ due to the geopolitical history between the two nations resulting in the Cold War. These moments characterize the society of the franchise not as a stylized distortion of our world, but rather as a mirror due to the frequent references and correspondences with the world outside of the screen. Reflecting this knowledge onto the animals it becomes apparent that concepts such as sexuality and gender are viable to be applied onto the animals, turning them from simple animals into complex human characters while still considering their animalistic traits and habits. The audience are allowed to look past their animalistic bodies and concentrate on the anthropocentric lifestyle and society in which the animals operate. In similar fashion to the anthropomorphic fluctuation, the animals' understanding of social concepts can also be described as selective, seeing that it falls away whenever a comedic punchline or the plot calls for it, leaving behind only the animal in the animal body. This fluctuation is the essence of the *non/human*, an entity which functions between the nonhuman and the human state, however noting that there is no binary to this categorization. The space which the entities inhabit can best be described as *liminal*, a term which describes the "passing from one relatively stable state to another"¹¹ and therefore inhabiting a state of the in-between. Giffney and Hird propose through the usage of the forward slash "/" that the non/human's state is fluid, ever shifting between the two forms and challenging the knowledge of what is known to be a human and try to expand the definition away from the traditional norms of society. The world of *Madagascar* builds upon this concept, using it not

⁸ Timothy Laurie, "Becoming-Animal Is a Trap for Humans: Deleuze and Guattari in *Madagascar*," in *Deleuze and the Non/Human*, ed. Hannah Stark and Jon Roffe (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

⁹ cf. *ibid.* p.152

¹⁰ *Madagascar 3: Europe's Most Wanted*, Animation, directed by Conrad Vernon et al. (Dreamworks Animation, 2012), at 1:15:23, 93 Min.

¹¹ Brady Wagoner and Tania Zittoun, eds., *Experience on the Edge: Theorizing Liminality* (Springer, 2021), x.

only as a key conflict of the plot but incorporating it into its comedic elements, creating clashing imagery of a lion being best friends with a zebra, whilst usually being in a predator/prey relationship. From a queer point of view, it becomes apparent that there are three central factors at play: bodies, locations, and relationships.

2.1 Bodies

In 1937 Walt Disney Animation shifted its visual style away from the industry standard *rubber-hose animation* towards a style which was grounded in realism and physics. Unlike in early cartoons, where on-screen bodies seemingly had rubber limbs that could stretch and morph into any form that served the plot, bodies now adhered to the principles of *squash and stretch* meaning if one body part stretches another one subsequently squashes together¹². This shift in the animation industry resulted in a long running effort in resembling cinematic realism¹³, spanning all the way into the shift towards computer generated (CG) animation at the start of the 1980s. *Toy Story*, the first fully CG feature film, showed Pixar's commitment of perceived realism making it the dominant paradigm, as Sam Summers points out in his text. Other studios such as DreamWorks would continue to emulate the same principles for years¹⁴. It is important to note that what Summers defines as "realism", does not entail faultlessly emulating reality but rather creating a world which works under the laws of physics congruent to the narrative and injecting the necessary amount of stylization to avoid the "uncanny" resemblance of real life.¹⁵ With *Madagascar* the creative team designed a film with a striking visual style, which moves away from realism, while still adhering to some of the principles set by the industry. By creating a style influenced by illustrations of children's books, rather than creating a realistic design, the animators allow the characters to enter the liminal space between nonhuman and human, severing the ties to their real-life animal counterparts and showcasing their anthropocentric nature to the audience. With this step into the liminal the characters shift and shape into humans or animals when the animators or the plot need them to.¹⁶ The bodies evoke a *plasmaticness*, a term coined by Sergei Eisenstein, which he defines this as "a rejection of once and forever allotted form, [...] the ability to dynamically assume any form."¹⁷ This element of plasmaticness is not only limited to the design of the characters but can be found in their animation, as the creative team tried to push the limits of CG animation at the time, trying to incorporate an animation style which embraces the *Golden Age of Animation* by drawing similarities to early Looney Toons or Tex Avery cartoons.¹⁸ By deconstructing the prevalent approach to animation, the characters live and move in a world which generally adheres to the laws of physics, yet their bodies exaggerate movements, expressions and actions, being "able

¹² cf. Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston, *The Illusion of Life: Disney Animation*, 1. Hyperion ed (Hyperion, 1995), 47f.

¹³ cf. Casey Riffel, "Dissecting *Bambi*: Multiplanar Photography, the Cel Technique, and the Flowering of Full Animation," *The Velvet Light Trap* 69, no. 1 (2012): 12, <https://doi.org/10.1353/vlt.2012.0007>.

¹⁴ Sam Summers, *DreamWorks Animation: Intertextuality and Aesthetics in Shrek and Beyond*, Palgrave Animation (Springer International Publishing, 2020), 23, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-36851-7>.

¹⁵ Summers, *DreamWorks Animation*, 21.

¹⁶ cf. "Madagascar | Making Of - YouTube," July 17, 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20240717005840/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cy6KVT2GIyg> (last accessed: 11.09.2025).

¹⁷ Sergej M. Ėjzenštejn and Naum Ichil'evič Klejman, *On Disney*, ed. Jay Leyda, trans. Alan Upchurch (Seagull Books, 2017), 32.

¹⁸ Summers, *DreamWorks Animation*.

to squish [...] down to a foot high when [they are] eight feet high [or] stretch [an] arm out to be eleven feet long”.¹⁹ Throughout the film the bodies of the characters are staged to explicitly showcase the exaggerated reactions or effects of actions, such as Melman being freed from his shipping crate or Marty teaching Alex how to be wild. Drawing parallels to Eisenstein’s concept, the plasmatic bodies can be seen as a visual representation of the non/human, having a complete freedom of form which is only possible in animation as it is detached from reality. The non/human represents this plasmatic state which Eisenstein calls “the primal protoplasm”,²⁰ allowing a fluid existence between the states of human and animal, “[being] capable of assuming any form [...], skipping along the rungs of the evolutionary ladder, [attaching] itself to any and all forms of animal existence.”²¹ While Eisenstein refers to Disney cartoons of the 1930s where rubber-hose animation was still the common practice, he argues that the fluidly changing bodies on screen represent a momentary liberation from the capitalistic culture of the United States.²² Applying these thoughts to the concept of queerness, the plasmatic and non/human body both embrace queerness by breaking up the binary concept of bodies, challenging the prevailing view of rigid, definitive bodies and allowing characters to fluidly change and adapt to their environments, reflecting the queer desire for transcending the societal constructs. *Madagascar* sets this aspect into the limelight by showcasing plasmatic, non/human bodies interacting with the world, expressing their freedom of form in their non/human liminality and their bodily changes. However, this freedom is limited due to the surrounding environments, physicality, and laws of nature in their world. This could be seen as a parallel to the queer body which is confined within a rigid world of non-queerness, not being able to fully express themselves and raises the question of what a queer reading of *Madagascar* infers about the overarching thoughts on queerness which are expressed during the film.

2.2 Locations

The narrative framework of *Madagascar* establishes a fundamental dichotomy, creating a binary spectrum between the construct of the City and the Wild. As Stuart Hall noted, this is a recurring trope, to which representations of minorities in media are often assigned to or confronted with and is comprised of a binary system existing of two radical poles such as *civilized* and *primitive* in this case. As to why this separation takes place, Hall attributes multiple reasons stemming from linguistics and psychoanalysis, however the key reason in this case being the anthropological approach. He explains by referencing Mary Douglas that “social groups impose meaning on their world by ordering and organizing things into classificatory systems”²³, which means that a set system of categories is necessary to give meaning to subjects, even though the subject may not fit into the categories, such as mercury, which is both metal and liquid.²⁴ These fixed systems give culture as sense of stability, allowing “symbolic boundaries to keep the categories ‘pure’”,²⁵ as a transgression of these boundaries is seen as a

¹⁹ “Madagascar | Making Of - YouTube” 14:19.

²⁰ Ějzenštejn and Klejman, *On Disney*, 32.

²¹ cf. *ibid.*

²² cf. *ibid.* p.34-35

²³ Stuart Hall, “The Spectacle of the ‘Other,’” in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Repr (SAGE, 2012), 236.

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ *ibid.*

taboo of society. The categories not only give society a sense of stability but also create a difference, allowing the stigmatization and expulsion of anything which is considered abnormal or impure.²⁶

Hall's observations can be transferred to the narrative world of *Madagascar*. The exposition confines the audience to the civilized life of an urban metropolis, with the animals detained to their prescribed and accepted space. With the progression of the plot the animals shift into the category of the *Other* as they transgress their boundaries and intrude onto human life, promptly being expelled from Society to the other end of the spectrum the Wild, as the humans try to restabilize their system. The presupposing conflict of primal animals in a civilized setting is now shifted to civilized animals in a primal setting. Even though the animals enter this new conflict, their *otherness* is reinforced, not because of their animal features but because of their deeply embedded showcasing of human civilization through pop culture references or preferred living status. However, unlike in human society the animals are not shunned away for being Other but rather embraced as can be seen by the lemurs' welcome gesture. This can be led back to the creation of the categories, and the transgressors that overcome them. While these transgressors are seen as disturbances to culture, the transgressors themselves feel a sense of power through their difference and expulsion.²⁷ Therefore, the Wild animals such as the lemurs, embrace their power over the cultural system, living their liberated life over the societal norms at the edges of culture and welcome new outcasts to do so in the same way.

In the construction of the film's spaces such as the Wild or the City, the New York City Zoo takes on an interesting role as it creates a liminal space between the two categories of *primal* and *civilized*. While the Other is not allowed to exist in the preexisting societal spaces, the zoo is a place where the abnormal is embraced, however only by adhering to strict regulations such as enclosed cages and opening times where the civilized can awe at the Other. Therefore, a categorization takes place not only through the enforcement of rules but also a physical categorization of freedom and encaged.

While Stuart Hall ties his research on *othering* closely to race, he also notes that they can also be applied to other forms of minorities in a dominant social order such as sexuality. Taking the two poles of the narrative the City and the Wild and applying Hall's theory, creates a spectrum ranging between the City, as a stand-in for the predominant heterosexual social structure and the Wild representing queerness.

The Wild as an analogous representation of queerness is reinforced by the societal concept and understanding of wilderness. Wilderness as a construct, leaves behind all forms of civilization, whether this is on a physical or a metaphysical level, creating a space without rules or boundaries. It signifies a space outside of the construct of human society, outside of the hetero-centric social constructs which are put in place by the heterosexual dictatorship.

²⁶ *ibid.* 237.

²⁷ *cf.* Hall, "The Spectacle of the 'Other.'"

2.3 Relationships

By being a place, which is the juxtaposition to society, the expulsion of the Other to the Wild is seen as an effort to negate the opposing threat that is presented by the Other. In consequence the Wild becomes a concentration point for the Other and non-conforming identities, rendering it an inherently queer space where non-conforming identities and expressions are not only accepted but also celebrated. Exhibited queerness can be found in the resident lemurs of the island, more specifically in the “self-proclaimed lord of the lemurs”²⁸ King Julien XIII., who through his appearance, self-expression and cadence can be read as a presentation of a queer identity. Unlike traditional *masculine* traits, King Julien is depicted as flamboyant, expressive, a tongue in cheek wisecracking, cross dressing character, a stereotypical depiction of queer coding which can be found in other characters such as Timon from *The Lion King* or Bugs Bunny. *The Lion King* presents the Wild or the outskirts in that case, in a similar queer way as in *Madagascar*, with Timon and Pumbaa representing a non-heterosexual relationship²⁹ which was outcast from society. Their performance, cadence and appearance have often been described as *camp*, a term which in this case can be defined as “pointedly ironic, over- the- top, sexually suggestive, broadly comic”,³⁰ especially defined through Timon’s crossdressing hula dance, a skill which is not traditionally defined as *masculine* or prescribed as an element of the male gender. Judith Butler’s research proposes that one is not born with a definitive gender but rather shapes and performs one gender due to the social constructs built around it. Male-presenting bodies are only read as masculine because of historical and social context, thus resulting in traits one defines as explicitly masculine even though this is not the case. In their understanding gender is not a “stable identity” but rather a “stylized repetition of acts”³¹ over time, a performance. Similar to the non/human, Butler’s theory is adamant on change over time and allows gender not to be a rigid constant to which a human is assigned, enabling a fluctuation of performance of the gender spectrum.

Showing characters crossing these boundaries of what is defined as explicitly male makes them inherent queer identities not conforming to the socio-cultural norms around sex and gender. King Julien represents this on multiple occasions with him crossdressing in a straw dress and coconut breast calling out “I’m a lady! Look everyone! I’m a lady”³² and his introduction to the animals by imitating a burlesque fan dancer.

The same stereotypical *camp* can be found in his voice and vocabulary, linking him again back to Timon. Nathan Lane, openly gay Broadway actor and actor of Timon, has stated that when Timon is talking it is simply just him, no need to put on a funny voice, bringing “staggering

²⁸ *Madagascar*, directed by Eric Darnell and Tom McGrath (Dreamworks Animation, 2005), at 41:30, 86 Min.

²⁹ cf. Gael Sweeney, “‘What Do You Want Me to Do? Dress in Drag and Do the Hula?’. Timon and Pumbaa’s Alternative Lifestyle Dilemma in *The Lion King*,” in *Diversity in Disney Films. Critical Essays on Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Sexuality and Disability*., ed. Johnson Cheu (McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2013).

³⁰ *ibid.* 142.

³¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1999), 179.

³² *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa*, Animation, directed by Eric Darnell and Tom McGrath (Dreamworks Animation, 2007), at 0:08:00, 89 Min.

sensuality” and “sexual danger” to the character,³³ therefore there is no doubt that Timon can be considered as a queer voice. As the film continues it becomes more apparent that King Julien is in touch with queerness and a fluid sense of masculinity, with his witty remarks played for comedic effect but seemingly expressing genuineness, like as he comments on friends wanting to “nibble at each other’s butts”³⁴. When King Julien first meets the main protagonists from New York, he expresses his feelings about them with: “They are just a bunch of pansies.”³⁵ The term *pansy* not only refers to a type of flower but is also used as a derogatory term against effeminate or homosexual men and has been in use since the 1920s. King Julien using this term to describe these Other beings, does not directly mean he is being queerphobic but rather the opposite. If the Wild is indeed a metaphor for being inherently queer, it is possible that in the world of Madagascar the term pansy has been reclaimed and reappropriated, in the same way as the word queer is now embraced by the LGBTQIA+ community.

As the main head of power the audience gets introduced to, King Julien can be understood as a stand-in or representation of the Wild. By creating a character that pushes the boundaries on how the audience perceives their gender, the character ultimately transgresses his own self and depicts the reigning power of queerness throughout the Wild.

Shifting the focus to the main characters, where queerness too is a deep part of their character arcs and narrative drive, also connecting the Wild to queerness as a concept. Within the first minutes of the film, the Wild as a signifier for queerness is enforced, showing the Wild as a dreamlike utopia where one should “[r]oam free, to follow your heart”³⁶, creating a link between wilderness and romantic freedom. As this is Marty’s dream, it sets him up as a pivotal character in initiating a queer storyline throughout the film. Mentioned previously, the zoo is considered a liminal space bridging the gap between Society and Wilderness by establishing the participation of the Other in society through a set of rules. When taking this and applying it to a heteronormative society, the zoo becomes a figurative concept, in which heterosexuality lets queerness be a part of culture, but only through set boundaries. Marty begins to question these boundaries and his own identities stating he doesn’t know if he’s “black with white stripes or white with black stripes”.³⁷ By wishing to break free from the zoo and visit the Wild, Marty emerges as a symbolic embodiment of resistance against the established categorical system. He himself becomes the transgressor trying to threaten the cultural order and seeking his liberation in the Wild. This upheaval of the preexisting system can be seen as a queer rebellion against societal norms and an attempt to break free from the constraints imposed by established social structures. By entering a heteronormative space, like the City, Marty’s queerness threatens the cultural order, as he has transgressed the rules and left the space in which he is allowed to exist. While on a narrative level, Marty’s breakout can be seen as a queer rebellion on a character level, one could also argue that the upheaval of the social order by Marty can be read as a *coming out*. The concept of coming out is one that Judith Butler questions in their work,

³³ cf. David Denicolo, “FILM; A Pair of Runyon Guys Roam the Serengeti,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), June 12, 1994.

³⁴ *Madagascar*, at 1:02:50.

³⁵ *ibid.*, at 0:41:00

³⁶ *ibid.*, at 0:00:25

³⁷ *Madagascar*, at 0:13:21.

acknowledging its purpose but criticizing it as not being a necessary liberation. They state that the process of coming out does not constitute a freedom but rather shifts the boundaries to continue to entrap the individual with a set understanding of social norms that constitute their sexuality, allowing for the individual to solely identify with categories rather than their own preferences.³⁸ As a counterproposal Butler builds a concept where the individual has a fluid understanding of sexuality allowing individuals not to be categorized and held back by stereotypes of differing sexualities from the heterosexual perspective, breaking up the rigid categories around sexuality which society created to stabilize itself, as seen in Stuart Hall's work.

Butler's proposal can be seen throughout the film when looking at Alex, Marty and their relationship. As shown earlier Marty is a queer-coded character, as his utopia is the Queer Wild. However, due to the inclusion of a predatory Alex the Lion chasing him, it thus establishes a relationship between Alex and Marty, implying that Marty's own utopia consists of only both living inside it. Their relationship gets cemented further as Alex initiates intimate bodily closeness as he gives Marty his birthday present, which involves Marty putting his head in Alex's mouth, showing their trust in each other but also their willingness to be physically close to one another. The narrative explains this as being best friends, but one can argue that this is far more, seeing them talking about themselves solely as a duo, their dependency on one another and their bodily closeness, as indicated by an alluring pin-up calendar, which Alex had gifted Marty in previous years. Especially their dependency can be read as more than friends, as it is not only the solution to the conflict of the first film but also gets carried into the second film, seeing Marty subject to an emotional monologue by Alex speaking about what their friendships means to him.³⁹ The song *New York, New York* by John Kander plays a big role, as it seems to be a space of refuge and intimacy for the two animals, stabilizing Alex during the critical manic episode of the conflict. Using this song, it connects Alex's well-being to the musical theater industry, stereotypically linked to homosexuality⁴⁰ and similar to King Julien's flamboyancy, subverts the explicitly masculine understanding of gender. Alex's subversion of masculinity goes on in the sequel film *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa*, with him being Othered and ostracized from his own family, as he does not perform his masculinity through typical traits such as fighting but rather dances and sings. The film allows for Butler's thoughts on gender performance and fluidity as well as Hall's research on Othering to take root in its conflicts, with Alex's father questioning his son's validity and confronting him with: "If you were a real lion."⁴¹ but then learning to accept different performances of masculinity.

Going back to the original film, Marty is the transgressor or initiator, who irritates the social norms and actively breaks out of the zoo/heteronormativity, Alex takes on a more passive role to begin with, trying to dissuade Marty from leaving the zoo, thereby not actively trying to subvert or transgress the social boundaries, but rather trying to uphold them. Alex then avoids questions about life outside of the zoo, implying he has thought about the Wild, i.e. his

³⁸ cf. Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Lesbian and Gay Studies (Routledge, 1993), 308–9.

³⁹ *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa*, at 0:59:12.

⁴⁰ cf. John M. Clum, *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* (St. Martin's Press, 1999).

⁴¹ *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa*, at 0:42:36.

queerness but is still deeply imbedded inside of the heteronormative society, even going so far as to being grateful that society has created a space for them to exist in confinement, saying: “You don’t bite the hand that feeds you.”⁴² The underlying wish of Alex’s assimilation to the City drives the character in the first half of the film, shown by his attempts to talk to humans, as he is not aware that he cannot be understood, but rather is only seen as a predator with ill intentions. Entering “the Wild” this assimilation wish continues, just as Alex is confronted with overt queerness for the first time in the film, slowly beginning to break down the embedded heteronormative values. Alex reinforces the negative stereotypes which are connected to a more effeminate performance of masculinity by complaining that flowers and hugs are “lame”⁴³, as well as his look of disgust towards King Julien after he performs his burlesque performance. Alex’s internalized homophobia peaks as he ostracizes Marty from their own group, creating two sides of the beach, a “bad” and a “good” side where Marty can “skip and prance”, again associating effeminacy with a sense of wrongfulness as well as implicitly calling Marty a slur by calling him a “pixie horse”⁴⁴, linking him towards the slur *fairy* which originated in the 1920s.

However, as Alex begins to acclimate to the Wild, Butler’s theory on coming out begins to shine through, with Alex now accepting his fate, allowing himself to tap into his *primal* queerness after Marty shows him the ropes. The act of Alex being able to run as a quadrupedal can be seen as a coming out for Alex, which Butler criticizes but is an internal process of recognition, that his queerness is a part of him. It enables him to feel a sense of liberation, a freedom of movement which was not possible in the zoo, as can be seen in the way he moves around Marty.

While the animals do not engage in explicit sexual activities, it is important to define terms such as *sexual* or *intimacy* with the confines of the *Madagascar* universe. The link can be made that when talking about sexual acts whilst looking at Alex the Lion, his libido is mainly represented through meat and steaks. Referencing the film *American Beauty* (1999) where the protagonist gets showered in rose petals, seeing his love interest symbolizing his desire for her, Alex has a similar dream with him being showered in steaks. Through this reference Alex intimacy and sexual desire get characterized through carnivorous bodily closeness, as can be seen by the moments with him trying to bite into Marty, getting played off for comedic effect but implying the characters know about the implicit sexual intention of his acts. Butler proposes *public coming out*, limits an individual to the social understanding of sexuality, whereas the idea of *internal coming out* forms sexuality more as personal identity rather than something of social importance. This idea is what can be seen in regard to Alex the Lion, who after connecting to the Wild and his queerness, has an understanding of an internal coming out and begins to experience his own non-conforming sexuality as all the animals turn into steaks in front of his eyes⁴⁵, therefore all being eligible sexual partners.

⁴² *Madagascar*, at 0:17:42.

⁴³ cf. *ibid.*, at 0:35:38.

⁴⁴ cf. *ibid.*, at 0:46:05.

⁴⁵ *Madagascar*, at 1:11:52.

The narrative of *Madagascar* can be read as a queer analogy and almost applauded for the representation in its queer subtext, yet it does not go without criticizing the portrayal of queer characters and the effects of queerness. If connecting Alex's queerness to the Wild and his sexual desire to meat, the film suggests a connection between the primal, the uncontrollable and the queer existence. As soon as Alex realizes his sexual freedom, he shifts out of the liminal non/human state, into only the "non" state, the animalistic side in him, reducing his character simply to a predator trying to hunt down his prey for meat. This link to Alex's predatory side can be read as incredibly harmful and damaging towards the queer community, suggesting queerness devolves into uncontrollable predators thirsting for sexual encounters. Alex is not the only character depicted in this fashion, as the Foosa, a native animal to the Malagasy jungle, represent the same predatory behavior, as they are shown not only out for a piece of meat but also characterized as degenerates in contrast to other animals throughout the movie. Once Alex fully reverts to a predator, the Wild as a character also turns into a predator, as shown through a montage of the Wild in which predatory behavior is shown such as a cute duckling being eaten by a crocodile. In the realm of a queer reading, *Madagascar* thereby insinuates queerness as a bad trait which not only ostracizes but also does direct harm to others. Trying to resolve the problem of rampant queerness the film restarts to preach heteronormative constraints, introducing society back into Alex's life. Through the song *New York, New York* Alex is able to overpower his queerness and find back his *closeted* self, implying a way of switching one's queerness on and off and suggesting suppressing one's emotions and living under the constraints of the heterosexual dictatorship. Through the reintroduction of elements from the City such as the song, the film implies that a queer individual can only live peacefully under the regulations of heteronormativity, as well as suggesting sexuality is a choice made by individuals, which can be activated or disabled. The idea of sexuality as a choice is then presented further, as Alex saves his friends from the predatory Foosa appearing on all four paws, with limited vocabulary and his pupils constricted. As he then meets Marty, he decides to revert into his closeted form, with his pupils widening, a full vocabulary and most importantly him turning back into a bipedal creature. He then continues to present himself as an animal, fighting back the Foosa with a put-on limited vocabulary and fake primal roars, however constantly doing this on his two hindfeet to show that he has shut down his own queer desires and is suppressing his true self.

The end of the film showcases the desire to return to society to exist inside of the entrapment of the heterosexual dictatorship, with Alex taking the first opportunity to return to the zoo. The animals can somehow only exist within the confines of the zoo, with the norms and values of the City, a way of living that is not subverting the preexisting establishment or challenging a way of thinking but rather only enforcing it, further establishing the film's stance that liberated queer identities should exist solely outside of society. This however shifts over the course of the franchise, seeing the animals return to the zoo at the end of the third installment *Madagascar 3: Europe's Most Wanted*, but then reject it to live their lives as circus animals. A rejection of existing in the confines of society, tracks to the trajectory of queerness throughout the whole franchise, as the queer storyline turns from a personal story of Alex or Marty to one of collective queerness regarding family. The franchise sets up this shift by turning to the topic of family in the second movie, as mentioned previously. Although Alex's father accepts him in the end, Alex

still yearns to be back in the confines of the New York City Zoo, not realizing his true queer self. It is only through a circus group which they meet in the third film, that Alex learns to reject the zoo for a life of freedom. The element of the circus adds onto another layer onto the Othering process which puts queerness and difference into the spotlight as society is able to mark them as *freaks* pushing them out of the dominant culture category, while still marveling at them in the enclosed space of the circus. The spectacle shows that the Other present in the ring allows them to transgress the boundaries of their category.⁴⁶

The film showcases the meaning of family in a way which can be connected to Judith Butler's text on diverging family images. At the end of the movie the animals join the "circus family", moving away from their *blood-related family* which was introduced in the second film, and adopting the trait of a *chosen family*, which Butler notes in their text is an inherently queer act, therefore distancing themselves from compulsory heterosexuality and heterosexual family roles.⁴⁷

3 Conclusion

Madagascar is one of DreamWorks Animation's top franchises, spanning three feature length films, a spinoff feature and multiple spinoff television series and shorts. Next to *Shrek* the film can be seen as a tone defining film for the studio, due to its cultural impact. Through the impact it has had on pop culture, it is important to look at the material from different perspectives and ask what the films still have to offer.

Looking at the films with a queer lens shows that the franchise can be defined as inherently queer itself. With a queer-coded relationship between Marty and Alex at the center of narrative, spanning over multiple movies, and a journey of queer self-discovery, the movies portray queer characters and relationships in a way, that not only makes them accessible for children but also understandable for adults. The starting point of the narrative, the zoo, is a representation of the entrapment queer people feel in the heteronormative society, with Marty actively breaking out of these boundaries by trying to transgress and break social norms. The films portray queer identities as being Othered and excluded from society, forced to create their own space of existence in the Wild and form familial bonds which transgress the compulsory heterosexual family. The film also acts as a critique of the coming-out process as suggested by Butler, showcasing the liberation of breaking the sexuality categories and living a non-conforming life. Along with Butler's work the films also discuss the idea of gender performance, showcasing male identities who portray their gender in a different way than what is socially deemed as masculine, with characters such as Alex or King Julien.

⁴⁶ cf. Matthias Christen, *Der Zirkusfilm: Exotismus, Konformität, Transgression*, Zürcher Filmstudien 23 (Schüren, 2010), 27.

⁴⁷ cf. "Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?," in *Left Legalism/Left Critique*, by Richard Thompson Ford et al., ed. Wendy Brown and Janet Halley (Duke University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822383871-008>.

Not only can queerness be found in the films' plot, but also in the animation style, deviating from the industry standard, creating a unique visual style, and creating characters which move and behave in a plasmatic way, departing from the prevailing norms in the animation industry. However, the first film's approach to showcasing queerness can and should be criticized, depicting a queer Alex the Lion as a savage, unhinged predator. The film also suggests that queer identities can be controlled by being able to switch from openly queer to closeted, as Alex shows in the final battle. Along with the depiction and suppression of queerness, it tries to reinforce the heteronormative society, as the animals want to go back to their enclosed cages of the zoo, suggesting queer identities should integrate themselves into society like they are told. *Madagascar* is an inherently queer franchise, representing queer characters and showcasing queer storylines. While some of the aspects can be criticized, it is important to continue showcasing queer identities on screen, to evoke a way of questioning our constructs and norms which have been created and forced upon us by society. Through film these constructs can be broken up and hopefully will continue to be deconstructed and criticized.

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