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“The Traveling Song”: Shifting Depictions of Home & Family in *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa*

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“The Traveling Song:”

Shifting Depictions of Home & Family in *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa*

In the early 2000's, animated family movies portray various versions of home and family. Some movies portray home as the place where you were born, whereas others portray home as any place you want it to be. While some films, such as *Bao*, portray family as blood relatives, other films, such as *Wreck-It Ralph*, *Ice Age*, and *Monsters University*, depict families as a group of individuals that have strong friendships and end up becoming their chosen family. An example of both of these concepts of family being portrayed in a family film is *The Book of Life*. In this essay, I will focus on the portrayal of home and family in animated family movies with a focus on case studies from the second movie of the *Madagascar* franchise: *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa*. In addition, I will be analyzing how the soundtrack, in particular the songs “The Traveling Song” and “Alex on the Spot,” help in showing the film’s portrayal of home and family.

The movie *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa*, is centered on the zoo animals: Alex, Marty, Gloria, and Melman. The setting begins in Madagascar, with the zoo animals getting on a plane, which is under the command of the penguins. Their original destination is to go to New York City, which is what the zoo animals consider their home, but due to the plane malfunctioning, they end up crashlanding in Africa, the zoo animals’ ancestral homeland. Throughout the film, the zoo animals experience new things that they would have never been able to experience back in New York, such as meeting animals from the same species for the first time.

In this movie, there are multiple representations of both family and home. While the main goal for the zoo animals throughout the trilogy series is to get back to their current home of New York City, the audience is shown another version of home through the animals’ ancestral

homeland, Africa. In addition, a common theme throughout all of the Madagascar movies has been the portrayal of chosen family. No matter what, the four zoo animals stick together. An aspect that this movie has that neither of the other two movies from the trilogy has is the portrayal of the nuclear family. For the first time, the audience is introduced to Alex's parents. His relationship with his mother and father, especially his father, is very different from the relationships that Alex formed with his chosen family.

Background

For starters, what is a family animated movie? In this essay, the term 'family animated movie' will refer to all animated films that are able to be viewed by all ages. It should not get confused with a 'children's movie,' which has a very specific audience group. Even though animated family movies tend to be labeled as 'children's movies,' in this essay there will be a clear distinction between the two. As Andy Bird, former chairman of Walt Disney International, put it, the way of truly finding out if a film is a family movie "is if a child and his/her grandparent could go together and equally enjoy a film" (Brown 2).

When it comes to the term 'chosen family,' there are multiple definitions. One could refer to how individuals choose their significant others and decide to become each other's family. What usually happens in these types of situations is that the chosen family then transforms into a nuclear family. A nuclear family is a family unit that consists of two parents and their children. This term does not include extended family, single-parent families, and families that have more than two parents. Some examples of this can be seen in *Ice Age: The Meltdown*, *Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs*, *Shrek*, *Shrek 2*, and *Shrek the Third*. The other definition for the term 'chosen family' is a group of individuals that form bonds based on friendship, instead of biological

bonds. Another term that can be used is 'found family'. In this essay, the second definition will be used for the term 'chosen family'.

Now that the different types of movies and families have been defined, it is important to briefly review the history of animated family films. According to *The Hollywood Family Film*, in the 1910's and 1920's, it was very important for Hollywood to establish itself as a 'family' institution, since that was the time period it was securing "its status as a cultural institution with tremendous international reach" (Brown 4). For the most part, in the United States, cinema was viewed as a form of entertainment for the whole family. In 1929 though, this view began to be questioned when Hollywood transitioned from silent films to films with sound. Before this transition, films with themes that were clearly geared toward adults were still considered appropriate to watch with the whole family because there was no audible dialogue. That way, children would not be able to hear any conversations that had mature content in the films. After films with sound came out, there was a huge chance that censorship legislation would be imposed due to the increase of 'adult' films. Due to this, Hollywood ended up creating the Production Code, which was a type of self-censorship that oversaw all films that were under general release. In an attempt to preserve its brand as a 'family' institution, Hollywood purposely began creating films specifically for families.

Skipping to a couple of years later, in 1937, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* became the first ever Hollywood feature-length animated film (Brown 65). Creating a feature-length animated film was not an easy feat. For instance, a feature-length animated film needed about 2 million individual pictures, whereas a regular short only needed about 10,000-15,000 pictures. In other words, a feature-length animated film required about 200x more the amount of individual pictures than a regular short needed. In addition, creating this type of film was extremely

expensive, and it did not help that at the time, even though adults enjoyed ‘cartoons’, animations were viewed as entertainment just for children (Brown 65). Even though shorts were successful by having one type of audience, a film like *Snow White*, which cost a huge amount of money and dedication, also needed to appeal to adults if it was going to be successful. Prior to the film’s release, people had reservations about it, but those feelings disappeared once the film came out. The success of this film is what quickly placed Disney as a “one-of-a-kind creative ‘genius’”, and his work was considered ‘art,’ whereas the animated shorts of other companies such as Warner Bros., MGM, and Paramount were considered ‘cartoons’ (Brown 67).

Now skipping to a couple of decades later, up to the mid-1990’s, it was uncommon for animated films to become box office hits, even though they had the potential (Brown 204). Even decades later, the process to create these types of films was still very time-consuming and difficult. In addition, animated films were still associated as entertainment for children. Everything changed though when the industry decided to start using computer-generated imagery, better known as CGI. Using CGI made the production process much easier, and as the technology continued to improve, a lot of films began to have less ‘cartoonish’ aspects. As a result, the films are now a little bit less likely to automatically be labeled as ‘children’s entertainment’ (Brown 206). This trend eventually led to the creation of 2008’s *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa*.

Staying Together: Madagascar’s Consistency with the Chosen Family & Why It Matters

As previously mentioned, *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa* is different from the other two films due to the portrayal of the nuclear family. In the other two films, there is no mention of other blood relatives. In fact, at the beginning of the third movie, the four main characters are still in Africa, but Alex’s parents are nowhere in sight. It gets to the point that the zoo animals

end up leaving Africa, and there is never a scene of Alex saying goodbye to his parents. After the second movie, there is no mention of them. That is why the second installment of the *Madagascar* franchise is so important. It portrays the theme of the chosen family and the theme of the nuclear family. Since *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa* is the only movie that has a portrayal of a nuclear family, it puts a bit more emphasis on the portrayal of that type of family than on the chosen family. With this movie being the exception, the theme of the chosen family is something that is strongly portrayed throughout the *Madagascar* franchise.

In fact, something that was also added into the sequel from the first movie of the franchise was the idea of the four zoo animals “staying together”. In the first movie, once they reunited after getting stranded in Madagascar, Melman and Gloria pull Alex and Marty into a hug. Gloria then says, “We’re all here together” (*Madagascar* 0:34:11) (see fig. 1). This scene is later referenced in *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa*’s theatrical poster (see fig. 2). The poster is the four zoo animals in the same position, with the addition of the other side characters. At the very top of the poster, the tagline says, “Still Together, Still Lost”. Even the way that the movie is being promoted shows how one of the main themes of the *Madagascar* franchise is the friendship that the four zoo animals have.



Fig. 1. Zoo Animals arriving on the Island from Eric Darnell et al.; “Madagascar”; *YouTube*, *YouTube*, 17 Oct. 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=5bbcWPTq0mE&t=187s.

Fig. 2. *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa* Theatrical Poster (2008)

When the group accidentally lands in Africa, everybody begins to panic, worrying about how they are going to fix the plane in order to be able to go back to New York City. In this situation, Marty’s response is “As long as we’re together, we’ll be okay” (*Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa* 00:17:50). In other animated family movies from the same time period, even if they also had the portrayal of the chosen family, there had been moments in which one member of the group had contemplated doing something else and leaving. An example of this is portrayed in *Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs*, when Diego thought he no longer fit in the pack, and that it was time for him to leave. In the case of *Madagascar*, Marty left the zoo, but he always planned on coming back the next day. When the rest of the zoo animals found him missing, they

immediately went to try and bring him back to the zoo. No matter the circumstances, even if they would get angry and fight, throughout all the movies, the zoo animals always stayed together.

In this movie, there was not much time in which the four zoo animals spent time together, each of them being preoccupied with hanging out with animals from the same species. Even though they did not have a lot of quality time together, this still reinforces the idea of the chosen family. In the first film, they did not have a lot of options. They grew up in the zoo together, and they got stranded in Madagascar together. Even though they were all close friends, it could be debated that they had no other choice but to choose each other since there was no other option. In the second film though, that changes. Alex has the option of living his life with his parents; Melman has the opportunity to create a community with other giraffes; Gloria has the choice of potentially creating a family with the hippo Moto Moto; Marty has the option of joining a herd that is like him. They all now have more options. In the end, they all end up choosing each other, showing the audience how powerful their friendship is, and how they truly view each other as family.

This is crucial because it shows the audience a depiction of a family that is different from the conventional nuclear family. The audience should be exposed to different types of families; if they are only exposed to one portrayal of family, then it could lead to them assuming that that specific portrayal is the only accurate depiction of what it means to have a family. According to the cultivation theory, one of the effects of watching television for a long period of time is that the audience begins to view the real world in the same way that it is portrayed on television (Stacks 30). This affects viewers who use television as a source to learn about values and beliefs. In addition, since television is one of the most prominent ways that a story is told, not only does this impact the thought process of individuals; it impacts the thought process of society as a

whole (Stacks 30). That is why it is extremely important to have more than one portrayal of family on the silver screen. For the viewers who get influenced, whether consciously or not, by movies and TV, it is important for them to know that there is more than one way of forming a family. They need to know that they have options, just how the zoo animals also had options in choosing who they wanted to be their family.

Lion out of the Jungle: The Role of the Soundtrack

Besides the animation and dialogue, another way that this film helps in showing their portrayal of home and family is through the soundtrack. According to *A History of Film Music*, non-diegetic songs can be used in order to show “unspoken aspects of character and motivation” (Cooke 413). In addition, in a lot of DreamWorks’ films, non-diegetic songs are “a reflection of a character’s inner thoughts” (Summers 69). In other words, even if there is a scene in which a character is not speaking, or does not speak a lot, non-diegetic songs can assist in telling the story by revealing what the characters are thinking through the lyrics.

At the beginning of the film, “The Traveling Song” begins to play. Although nobody in the actual film is speaking, and the audience must see what is occurring on the screen to understand Alex’s emotions, the song playing in the background helps give a clearer idea of what he is feeling, and the portrayal of home that this movie is trying to deliver.

To begin with, the tone of the beginning of the song, and the scene in which it plays, is of feeling lost and of not belonging. The diction and imagery in the lyrics help in giving that impression. For instance, the song starts with the artist stating that they have “been around the world in the pouring rain” (will.i.am 00:07-00:10). What this means is that the artist has traveled the world in very harsh conditions. The image of being out in the rain makes it feel gloomy and lonely. This is also displayed in the actual film, with Alex huddled in one corner of the crate,

drifting off into the sea. The next time the audience is shown the crate, it is no longer in Africa. With the Statue of Liberty in the background, the crate is shown looking extremely weathered down, with barnacles attached to it, seaweed scattered all over it, and a seagull with a fully built nest resting on top of it. It had not been a pleasant voyage for Alex. Other words that demonstrate the feelings of being lost and of not belonging are when the artist of the song describes feeling “out of place” and “strange”.

The set of lyrics that gave the most powerful imagery though is when the artist says, “I’m a fish out of water, lion out of the jungle” (will.i.am 00:20-00:23). The artist is describing themselves as an animal that is out of their natural habitat. A fish’s natural habitat is the water, and even though lions technically do not live in jungles, making the nickname ‘king of the jungle’ a myth, in the context of this song, the artist is describing the jungle as the lion’s natural habitat – their home. This feeling of being in a place where you are not from is mirrored in the film. Alex is no longer in his homeland and is in a new environment that he has never been in before. In addition, in the official soundtrack audio, that set of lyrics, along with the second half of the verse “(He a fish out of water, lion out of the jungle)” is only sung once (will.i.am 00:23-00:26). In the film though, these lines are repeated twice. By using repetition, the film is doing two things. One, they are emphasizing the fact that Alex is *literally* a lion out of his natural habitat. The first time that the lyrics “I’m a fish out of water” is said, the crate is no longer in the water, and when the crate is opened, Alex is holding a fish in his paws. During the other half of the verse, “(He a fish out of water)”, the scene transitions to Alex’s photo being on the front cover of a newspaper, with the headline saying, “LION CUB FISHED FROM SEA”. The film and the lyrics are working together in telling the story. For instance, in the song, there are lyrics describing being a fish out of their natural habitat. That is demonstrated in the film by quite

literally showing a fish that is no longer in the water, but in Alex's paws instead, and by using the word "fished". The second thing that the film is doing by using repetition is emphasizing the feeling of being in a place that one does not belong in. The second time this verse is sung, Alex is placed on the edge of the stone pedestal and is given a nudge by one of the zoo workers, encouraging him to move closer to the front. Alex cautiously walks toward the front, seeming a bit curious but overall nervous. The lyrics assist in letting the audience know how Alex is feeling. Even though he does not speak, by gathering information from both the film and the non-diegetic sound, the audience is able to both see and hear how Alex feels out of place in this new environment.

In the official soundtrack audio, when will.i.am sings, "Could I have someone, could I have someone, to relate to", that line is repeated twice (will.i.am 00:34-00:38). In the film though, the line is only repeated once. This shows how for Alex, at that moment, the feeling of being in a strange place overpowered the feeling of finding someone that he could connect with. Once the line is sung, the tone of both the scene and the song changes. Now, instead of sounding uncomfortable and like they do not belong, the tone sounds nervous but hopeful. The artist is softly asking if they could have somebody that they could be able to relate to, somebody that accepts them, somebody that can be their friend. In the film, when that line is sung, Alex is cautiously testing out the waters. He very timidly copies the pose of the lion that is on the pedestal that he is on, waiting to see the reaction of the public that came to see the zoo animals. They applaud him.

Once he realizes that the audience likes him, the lyrics that are being sung in the background are "Feeling right at home" (will.i.am 02:43-02:44). This is when the tone of both the scene and the song changes again. The tone is now happy. His anxious face is replaced with a

huge smile, and he begins to gain more confidence and dance to his heart's content, something that his father scolded him for earlier in the film. Alex continued to dance, and the lyrics that were being sung in the background were "See I been traveling, been traveling forever, But now that I found a home" (will.i.am 00:48-00:53). When the song first began, Alex did not have a home, but it was at that moment when he felt like he had found a home. He had found a place that appreciated him for who he was and applauded him instead of reproaching him. The song ends with an orchestral string, and with Alex jumping and twirling in the air. Once he lands, he is older, showing the audience the passage of time. In the background, an announcer can be heard saying, "The king of New York City, Alex the Lion!" (see fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Alex waving at the crowd from Eric Darnell et al.; "Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa"; *YouTube*, YouTube, 12 Jan. 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=7HsLsXok6iU.

A few other details to point out are the portrayals of home and family that this scene shows. At the beginning of the song, Alex was leaving his homeland and arrived at New York

City. As the song ended, Alex viewed New York as his home. He was the “king”. That was his jungle, and he felt like he was in his natural habitat. It was the first place that accepted his real self without trying to change him, which may be one of the main reasons why New York had a special place in his heart, and why throughout all of the films in the franchise, Alex tried to go back to it. In addition, when young Alex was dancing in front of the audience, in the back, young Marty, Gloria, and Melman were watching him. They then become Alex’s life-long friends – his family.

Another song that helps in showing the portrayals of home and family is the song “Alex on the Spot”. Whereas “The Traveling Song” takes place at the beginning of the film, “Alex on the Spot” takes place toward the end of the film. This song shares some similarities with the previously mentioned song. It mostly starts the same way. When the lyrics “I’ve been around the world in the pouring rain, Feeling out of place, I’m feeling strange” are sung, the tone of the song is serious (Zimmer 00:05-00:12). The song’s tone mirrors what is occurring in the film. At that moment, with a gun being pointed at him and his father, Alex begins to dance. Unlike previous times throughout the film, he is not dancing for pleasure. He knows that if he does not do something to try and calm down the New Yorkers, he and his father will get killed.

When the lyrics, “Take me to a place where they know my name, Where everyone knows my name”, are sung, one of the New Yorkers, who is holding a camera and watching the way Alex is moving, recognizes him (Zimmer 00:12-00:17). That is when the tone of both the song and scene change. It becomes more upbeat and confident. An example of this is when the artist says “Check it out, I’m out to do my thing” (Zimmer 00:20-00:23). Another example is when he sings “King of the floor, king of the swing” (Zimmer 00:23-00:26). In other words, the artist was calling himself the king of dancing. What was occurring in the film while those lyrics were being

said was that Alex was dancing, making big moves that left the group of New Yorkers in awe, while his father looked at the situation in disbelief. This let the audience know that Alex was confident in himself and his ability to dance. Throughout the film, there had been multiple times in which he had been scolded and looked down on for loving to dance. There had even been a scene in which his identity as a “king” had been questioned. It had been when Alex got defeated in a fight, and Zuba confronted him, stating “You told us you were a king. And a king does not get beat” (*Madagascar:Escape 2 Africa* 00:40:42). Even after that encounter, with the artist confidently singing that they are the king of dance, it lets the audience know that Alex did not let others’ opinions about him bring him down.

When it got to the climax of his dance, the lyrics in the background were “This is my home” (Zimmer 00:47-00:49). This showed how Alex no longer felt out of place. Even though he had been belittled by others and was not considered a real lion due to his love for performance, Alex accepted himself and knew that it was his home. Even though he was confident in his dance skills, it did not necessarily mean that he was dancing for fun. Alex still had a concentrated look on his face. If he did not keep the tourists entertained, then there would be a high chance that they might just go back to their original plan and kill him and his father.

It wasn’t until his father began dancing with him that Alex slightly broke his concentration to look back at his dad and ask him what he was doing. Zuba’s response, “I’m dancing with my son!” is what made Alex stop dancing like his life depended on it, and instead he just danced for enjoyment (*Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa* 1:11:51). This is shown through the lyrics that are played in the background, which are “See I been traveling, been traveling forever, But now that I found a home, feels like I’m in heaven” (Zimmer, 01:02-01:09). His father, who had disapproved of his dancing, had let go of his previous way of thinking and decided to dance

alongside him. In a way, that was a sign of Zuba accepting Alex for who he is, and no longer trying to change him into something that he is not. Similar to the beginning of the film, toward the end of the song, there is an orchestral string, in which both Alex and Zuba jump and twirl in the air. Alex lands gracefully, while Zuba lands on his face, but quickly recovers and they both end the performance with a roar.

This mirrors what occurred at the beginning of the film with “The Traveling Song”. After young Alex had been accepted by the zoo visitors, he began to dance more freely, and his face was filled with joy. When Zuba began to dance with Alex, that was both a sign of acceptance and encouragement. In addition, compared to the beginning of the film, with Alex waving and bowing at the crowd by himself (see fig. 3), towards the end of the film, it is him and his father that are bowing together (see fig. 4). The film is visually showing the audience the difference between Alex’s relationships with his different families, and how they have grown and changed from the beginning to the end of the film. At the start of the film, Alex was in the spotlight, with his chosen family supporting him in the background. At the end of the film, Alex is sharing the spotlight with his father, who is supporting him by partaking in the dance. The relationships with his chosen and nuclear family are different, but that does not mean that one relationship is worth more than the other. After all, in both scenes, Alex is equally happy.



Fig. 4. Alex and Zuba bowing at the crowd from Eric Darnell et al.; “Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa”; *YouTube*, YouTube, 12 Jan. 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=I-KQNgHkGRw.

Some details that should also be mentioned is, how for the most part, the first three lines in “The Traveling Song” and in “Alex on the Spot” are the same. The one part that is different is the second line. In “The Traveling Song”, the line is “Feeling out of place, really feeling strange”. In “Alex on the Spot” though, the line is “Feeling out of place, I’m feeling strange”. The word ‘really’ has been replaced with ‘I’m’. Even though it may not seem like a big difference, the change of words indicates the slight shift in Alex’s perspective. When he had first arrived at New York City, he had felt “really strange” because he was in a place that he had never been in before and surrounded by things he had never seen before. In “Alex on the Spot”, he is not feeling “really strange” anymore. He just feels strange. Unlike the first time he had gone to New York, he had been to Africa before. Another important detail to point out is that when the lyrics “See I been traveling, been traveling forever, But now that I found a home...” are played,

that is when Alex is dancing happily. In “The Traveling Song” he began to dance, and those lyrics began to play when he got applauded. In “Alex on the Spot” after his father told him that he was dancing with him, those lyrics also appeared. In addition, when “Alex on the Spot” was being played, both of Alex’s homes were in it. He is in his homeland, and he is dancing for the people that come from the place that he considers his home.

Conclusion

Even though animated family films are also labeled as ‘children’s movies’, which then leads to them being taken less seriously, these films deserve to be praised and critiqued like any other type of film. These films have power. Unlike other types of films that do have a wide audience demographic, animated family films, and family films in general, have the ability to touch the hearts of different generations.

Through the cinematographic techniques, dialogue, and soundtrack, *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa* was able to tell a story that portrayed home and family with multiple layers. These different factors all helped in telling the story and in portraying home and family with more complexity. This movie did not have one set definition of what home was, just how it did not have one set depiction of what family was. The movie showed how New York City was the zoo animals’ home, but how Africa, the place where their ancestors are from, is also their home. The movie showed how the zoo animals could form a family with animals from the same species, and how their family could be the four of them due to their strong friendship.

It is important to be able to show an audience various portrayals of what a family and home can look like. If all the depictions were the same, then the message that the audience would receive is: if their family and home does not look like what is shown on the silver screen, then it is not right. That is why the portrayal of family and home that is shown in *Madagascar: Escape*

2 *Africa* is so important. It shows the audience that it is okay to find individuals who you connect with and form a deep friendship that eventually leads to them becoming family. For some individuals, they may have a stronger connection with people who are not related to them. In Alex's case, at the start of the movie, his relationship with his parents was pretty much nonexistent. As the movie progressed, his relationship with his father would go up and down, similar to a rollercoaster. When they reunited, up. When Alex lost a fight, down. When Zuba began dancing with Alex, up. Even though by the end of the film, Alex's relationship with his father had grown and developed in a very positive way, Alex still wanted to go back to New York with his friends, who he viewed as his family (see fig. 5). And that is okay. Because he chose them, and they chose him.



Fig. 5. Alex hugging Marty from Eric Darnell et al.; “Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa”: *YouTube*, Youtube, 10 Dec. 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=cGGZOM7S8PM&t=209s.

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