

Disneyfying Demise

Taming Death with Enchantment in Disney Animation Films

Abstract

Despite the prevalence of violent and exaggerated deaths in Disney animations, they have a reputation for being magical and wholesome. This disparity is largely due to the various ways of enchantment that are used to Disneyfy death, which is to say make it marketable, controlled and entertaining. Disneyfied death can hence be simultaneously thrilling, threatening and full of life-affirming wonder. Research has already shown that Disney deaths are frequently supernatural and sensational, but the exact ways in which death becomes enchanted has remained largely unexamined. Drawing on recent theoretical discussions about the dynamics of enchantment and reflecting on cultural discourses surrounding mortality, this article identifies three models of re-enchanting death – and the aesthetics associated with them – in the selected films. The first makes death reversible, for instance through resurrections or otherwise postponed inevitably, which can be understood as a form of death denial. The second suggests that death is not the annihilation of life, for existence continues in the afterlife and supernatural encounters are possible. The third proposes that death has a finality that holds a special power to enhance the meaning of life. While these approaches vary in their messaging about how to understand and approach death, each contains its own variation of the re-enchantment narrative.

Keywords

Disney, Enchantment, Disneyfied Mortality, Supernatural, Death, Film, Animation, SOUL (Pete Docter / Kemp Powers, US 2020), VAIANA (MOANA, Ron Clements / John Musker / Don Hall, US 2016), RAYA AND THE LAST DRAGON (Don Hall / Carlos López Estrada / Paul Briggs, US 2021)

Biographies

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Introduction

Walt Disney (1901–1966), the visionary behind one of the most influential entertainment companies, persistently feared untimely death.¹ This preoccupation with mortality had a significant impact on Disney productions, as is evident even in the first feature-length film, *SNOW WHITE AND THE SEVEN DWARFS* (William Cottrell / David Hand / Wilfred Jackson / Larry Morey / Perce Pearce / Ben Sharpsteen, US 1937), where the titular character escapes her murderous stepmother only to be poisoned by her. When the film premiered, audiences cried over the protagonist’s apparent death and stood up cheering when she was magically resurrected in the end.² The spectacular and violent tale of demise had been “Disneyfied” to produce a fairytale ending, changed into something controlled, safe and marketable.

The use of death to add suspense as well as sentimentality and wonder to a story became quintessential for Disney animations – and remains so to this day. This study will analyse three contemporary Disney animations to illustrate how the Disneyfication of death can be achieved through enchantment. Disney has successfully branded itself as synonymous with magic and enchantment – or, as Gary Laderman states, “in the Disney imaginative universe, death can be overcome and serve as a source of regeneration because there are wondrous, supernatural forces in the universe that help us face our darkest fears: abandonment, disintegration, chaos.”³

Supernatural beliefs in the afterlife and magic abound in contemporary popular culture despite the often-heard claim that the Western world has become “disenchanted”, that is, devoid of wonder and magic as a result of rationalisation and secularisation.⁴ Furthermore, sociological and psychological research shows that even many non-religious people in Western societies hold supernatural beliefs.⁵ Disney animations approach death by richly elaborating on extraordinary and supernatural beliefs and experiences, ranging from communicating with the dead and scenes of resurrection to depictions of different forms of afterlife. Additionally, the

1 Laderman 2000.

2 Watts 2001, 66.

3 Laderman 2000, 43–44.

4 Partridge 2013.

5 See Herbert/Bullock 2020.

animations often portray how exposure to themes of mortality can become a life-affirming source of wonder. Such storylines draw on the cultural imagination and on the idea of the disenchantment of the (Western) world and how it might be reversed, resulting in re-enchantment. These stories are appealing because contemporary audiences may have a nostalgic longing that moves from perceived rationalisation toward something more extraordinary.

The prevalence of sensational and supernatural deaths in Disney and Pixar animations has been noted by several previous studies. For example, Alan Ackerman⁶ explored how Pixar films centre on themes of resurrection, and Meredith Cox, Erin Garrett and James Graham⁷ have identified Disney animations' tendency to portray death ambiguously. Kelly Tenzek and Bonnie Nickels⁸ expanded on Cox, Garrett and Graham's study, noting the prevalence of supernatural moments, transformations and spiritual connections. More recently Marissa Lammon⁹ has pointed out that the critical public responses to the themes of mortality in *SOUL* (Pete Docter / Kemp Powers, US 2020) could hinder the development of purposeful death depictions. She has also examined death rituals in Disney animation,¹⁰ highlighting their ties to supernatural beliefs about mortality.

In this study we expand upon existing research by delving in greater depth into the role that enchantment plays in taming death, focusing especially on the aesthetic means by which this is achieved. By analysing three contemporary Disney and Disney-Pixar animations, we can discern three basic forms of enchantment that reflect trends in current Western understandings of and approaches to mortality. We argue that drawing on the dynamics of enchantment, narrative Disney animations construct what we call a *Disneyfied death*: a death that is either (1) denied and postponed, (2) encountered by re-affirming the concept of, and making contact with, an afterlife, or (3) made into a life-enhancing experience.

6 Ackerman 2005.

7 Cox/Garrett/Graham 2005.

8 Tenzek/Nickels 2017.

9 Lammon 2022a.

10 Lammon 2022b.

Theory and Key Concepts: Dynamics of Disenchantment and Re-enchantment

The concept of disenchantment derives from the work of sociologist Max Weber.¹¹ He used it to describe secularisation, demystification and ultimately modernisation and rationalisation as a Reformation-led process of weeding out magic and the supernatural, which were central sources of power in the pre-Christian world and especially in popular Catholicism. It has increasingly been claimed, however, that disenchantment is a heavily ideological narrative that constructs and legitimates the imagination and self-image of Western modernity as an age of progress, rationality and secularity. The concept of disenchantment is thus an important part of the history of colonisation and othering.¹²

Several scholars have argued that lately we have been witnessing a process of re-enchantment that aims at restoring magic, spells and wonder to everyday private and public life, and that this kind of re-enchantment can be readily identified in the interest in new spirituality and perhaps in popular and material culture and media in particular.¹³ It may also be that enchantment has never been absent from human life and society, and that it assumes different forms in different contexts.¹⁴ The contemporary world may find significant utility in the conditions that accompany such trends of re-enchantment, such as the weakening grip of institutional religions, the advance of globalised commercial trends, and the diversification of epistemic and affective cultures. In the context of this article, it is also important to note the special historical and sociological role of films and the film industry as creators and utilisers of enchantment,¹⁵ on which the Walt Disney Company has notably capitalised.

Especially in the new materialist thinking, for example in philosopher Jane Bennett's work,¹⁶ enchantment is understood as an invigorating force inevitable for human life. In this line of thought, enchantment can never be completely erased from culture and imagination: even if we attempt

11 Weber 1946.

12 See Cuthbertson 2024; Saler 2006.

13 See Elkins/Morgan 2011.

14 Bennett 2001.

15 Benjamin 1991.

16 Bennett 2001.

its elimination, it will return and haunt us as something suppressed. Enchantment can be acknowledged, embraced and used in several ways. It can happen spontaneously (one can be charmed or spellbound by something unexpected), or it can be actively sought out through means such as art and rituals. Bennett sees enchantment as rooted in affect and embodiment and vital for human beings. She writes that enchantment “entails a state of wonder” and that to be enchanted is to be transfixed and spellbound.¹⁷

For Bennett the most powerful contemporary forms and outlets of enchantment are not religious, for it is increasingly produced and expressed through, for instance, art, new media and other technologies.¹⁸ However, as art and media frequently maintain traditional, religious and magical forms of enchantment in their expressive repertoire, it is important and necessary to acknowledge the complex place and role of religion (and spirituality or magic) in contemporary tangles of enchantment.¹⁹ Enchantment and disenchantment can be seen not only as diametrically opposing forces but also as dynamically interacting in modernity, and they can also be found even within science and technology, modernity’s strongest fortresses.²⁰ It is this kind of understanding that guides our search for features and moments that produce enchantment in Disney films.

Re-Enchantment of Death and Disneyfied Mortality

The understanding of enchantment described above, and the narrative of disenchantment and re-enchantment have a powerful impact on how death can be imagined and approached. If the mundane and immanent world is devoid of wonder and mystery as a result of secularisation, rationalisation and science, death can no longer be conceived as a gateway between dimensions. With the narrative of disenchantment, death becomes the ultimate limit and end of life; there can be no communication between the dead and the living, an exchange that was part of practices and rituals in the still-enchanted world. One of the costs of secularisation and rationalisation would be that death (whether one’s own or that of others) cannot be cancelled or

17 Bennett 2001, 5.

18 See Elkins/Morgan 2011.

19 See Cuthbertson 2024; Utriainen 2020.

20 Cuthbertson 2024; Saler 2006.

reversed. Today, understandings of death as the ultimate end are applied not just to human deaths but also to, for example, the death of other species and civilisations. We are also seeing, however, emerging discussion of the re-enchantment of death in various cultural spheres.²¹

Here, we explore three methods used by Disney animations to enchant death. These ways are also found more widely in contemporary culture. (1) Death avoidance or denial are increasingly enabled by science and technological advances that push death further away or aim to restore the presence of the dead, for example through digital technologies.²² (2) Religious and spiritual means, some more traditional than others, enable contact with the afterlife and with those who have already died, who may be fellow humans or other-than-human. One contemporary example is the notion that when beloved pets die, they go to the Rainbow Bridge to wait for their human companions.²³ (3) Finally, proximity to death can expose the value and meaning of ordinary life. An extreme example is provided by near-death experiences, which suggest that existence can continue even after clinically defined death and that intimacy with death can fill life with significance. Additionally, narratives found abundantly in media as well as art-of-life guides and self-help describe how serious illness or accident can highlight the value of ordinary life – making each day filled with wonder and delight.²⁴ We find such themes, features and moments within our cinematic material.

Material and Methods: Discovering Wonderment in Disney

With so many Disney animations candidates for inclusion in this study, it was necessary to narrow the selection to allow space for in-depth analysis. We began by selecting Disney animations from the 21st century – excluding sequels – that name death as a central theme in the description of their plots. In a preliminary viewing, we noted that many of these films use death and its various supernatural interpretations as a central source of enchantment. The selection was then refined down to three recent films that use distinctly different approaches to create an enchanting image of death.

21 See Lee 2007; Walter 2016.

22 Nowaczyk-Basińska/Kiel 2024.

23 Magliocco 2018.

24 See Byock 2002.

We thus arrived at (1) *VAIANA* (*MOANA*, Ron Clements / John Musker / Don Hall, US 2016), (2) *SOUL* (2020), and (3) *RAYA AND THE LAST DRAGON* (Don Hall / Carlos López Estrada / Paul Briggs, US 2021). Our analysis illustrates how these three films establish distinct ways in which death, and its proximity, creates a sense of wonder. We begin with *RAYA AND THE LAST DRAGON*, which tells the story of a young woman who goes on an adventure to defeat a supernatural plague. The film exemplifies how death can be enchanted so that it is overturned and postponed. Then we analyse *VAIANA*, which is about a Polynesian girl who is encouraged by her deceased grandmother's spirit to restore a magical heart to prevent the death of her island. The film illustrates enchantment through its mysterious and magical portrayal of a lasting afterlife. And finally, we analyse *SOUL*, in which the jazz-enthusiast Joe is in an accident in which his soul detaches from his body. Here, accepting the finality of death is a life-affirming source of wonder that eventually enchants life.

The qualitative content analysis focuses on all scenes and elements where death can be understood as enchanted, that is, depicted as extraordinary or more than a commonplace or even as transcending the natural world. We created a coding frame with various categories and examined all aspects of the source material that were relevant to the research question.²⁵ To ensure our approach was comprehensive, we focused on aspects such as supernatural symbols, spirits and spaces as well as on aesthetics, including sound and visual effects. Although soundscapes, music, visual effects, lights and colour make a crucial contribution to the sense of wonder, they have received little attention in earlier studies. Rooted in older aesthetic traditions such as painting or poetry, these elements have persisted into the aesthetics of digital media.²⁶ Additionally, in order to refine the interpretations of earlier research, our analysis considers how each of these films creates its own variation of the re-enchantment narrative on the basis of the theme of mortality.

Overtuning Death

The search for immortality is hardly a new endeavour. Throughout history, religious and spiritual movements have promised eternal existence, and

25 Schreier 2014.

26 Mitchell 2013, 23.

recent inventions have echoed promises of an extended life – a theme that has also received plenty of attention in fiction. Medical advancements aim to prolong the patient’s life, and technological inventions guarantee digital immortality as death bots imitate the deceased.²⁷

This section examines *RAYA AND THE LAST DRAGON*, which tells of a once-thriving civilisation that falls into disarray and faces extinction but ultimately survives, with wonder restored by a magical glowing symbol. The film begins with the titular character recounting how the world had been a paradise sustained by magical dragons until a supernatural plague turned people into stone. The plague is banished through dragon magic, but all that is left of the dragons is a magical gem, which shatters as people fight over it. The plague resurfaces, and most people turn to stone, including Raya’s father.

Years later Raya has grown up witnessing the abundant paradise turn into a wasteland. To reverse the damage, she revives a dragon called Sisu to restore the gem, and they join forces with others who have the same goal. To the detriment of the mission, the involvement of an antagonistic character accidentally leads to Sisu’s death, causing the water to disappear and allowing the plague to wreak complete destruction. As a last resort, Raya and her companions restore the gem, and for a moment everyone turns to stone, until the gem banishes the plague, and water returns to revive the paradise and resurrect everyone. Even Sisu is resurrected with the magic of the dragons.

This film reflects contemporary Western death denial as well as the desire for immortality, with mortality to be reversed and postponed indefinitely. Unlike in the other two films that we will discuss, death itself is not a source of wonderment. It is precisely the *overcoming of mortality* that is synonymous with re-enchantment. Conversely, disenchantment is depicted as the magic fading away, with death thus becoming an ever-present threat. Although disenchantment is a highly complex topic and has both positive and negative connotations,²⁸ in these fictional stories it is seen as invoking threat of death as well as less delight, wonder and meaning. And instead of death being an inevitable end to one’s life, death is a violent, unnatural hurdle that can be overcome and controlled with wonder and magic.

Life and death are then framed as opposing forces. Disconnection from magic and barren wastelands are linked with death, whereas nature,

27 Hurtado 2024; Nowaczyk-Basińska/Kiel 2024.

28 Cuthbertson 2024, 5.

wonderment and engagement with magic are intertwined with life. This contrast is reflected in mesmerising aesthetic choices, which are especially evident in the end scenes where death is banished and paradise revived. These aesthetic choices include ethereal music, twinkling sound effects, glowing lights and uncanny fog, and the supernatural restoration of the environment. In the final scenes of *RAYA AND THE LAST DRAGON*, the reassembled crystal blasts blue light and fog to destroy the plague as twinkling sounds and hopeful music play. The fog turns to clouds, and rainfall resurrects everyone and revives nature. The song grows triumphant as dragons fly in and form a water spiral to resurrect Sisú, creating a victorious mood for the celebration of the defeat of mortality.

In the film, nature, especially water, which is both a material and symbolic source of life, is associated with overcoming death. Nature can inspire enchantment and wonder: Ian Cuthbertson has noted, for example, that it offers a way to access sacred supernatural sites, which inspire feelings of awe and wonder.²⁹ In the other films discussed in this article, nature is similarly intertwined with death and the afterlife or used as a source of wonder that helps make the inevitability of death more tolerable. Here, however, flourishing nature is associated with the absence of death, with which nature is incompatible.

In traditional Disney fashion, the story offers audiences a comforting and cheerful conclusion with the return to a paradise where one does not have to accept a painful loss. Despite the abundance of death depictions, nobody stays dead. A remarkably similar narrative is present in *ATLANTIS: THE LOST EMPIRE* (Gary Trousdale / Kirk Wise, US 2001), which ends with the return to a paradise where the heroic ensemble is granted extended life. Re-enchantment is achieved, as the characters have seemingly gained control over death. Yet although the survival of the main characters eases the audience's death anxiety, these feelings are only postponed and left unaddressed.³⁰ Death has not been "tamed", to use Philippe Ariès's term, for that would require it to be familiar and accepted.³¹

29 Cuthbertson 2024, 4; 84.

30 Rieger/Hofer, 2017.

31 Ariès 1974, 13–14.

Enchantment from Departed Guides and Companions

Another way to enchant death is to draw on religious and spiritual traditions that present death not as an annihilation of consciousness but rather as a transition. In this section we examine *VAIANA*, in which the titular character gets encouragement from ancestral spirits, especially her beloved grandmother, who transforms into a magical ray after death. The glimpses into the spirit realm give Vaiana an awe-inspiring, holistic view of the world, illustrating how magical depictions of the afterlife can be a source of wonderment. More specifically, the film draws inspiration from Indigenous spirituality – and in the process also commodifies it. Earlier research has criticised Disney on this count: Mārata Tamaira and Dionne Fonoti suggest, for example, that the depiction of the grandmother’s spirit turning into a ray could reinforce the idea of Indigenous spirituality as the mystical, primitive and exotic “other”. They also note, however, that such depictions can raise awareness of important beliefs in Pacific culture, such as the connection between the living and the deceased.³² And in the film, it is such ongoing connections that enable death to become enchanted. Nevertheless, it must be noted that the film prioritises marketability in its depictions of Indigenous spirituality, which largely cater to Western consumers.

VAIANA is also not the only Disney animation to utilise Indigenous spirituality in this way. For example, in *BROTHER BEAR* (Aaron Blaise / Robert Walker, US 2003) the spirit realm is a crucial part of the world of the living, as the Inuit protagonist witnesses when his deceased brother’s spirit transforms into an eagle. Additionally, in both films spirit animals can transform into human spirit form when necessary. Bennett discusses such fictional cross-species encounters that combine two species into one, suggesting that crossings of species (such as a catwoman) hold enchanting power.³³ The concept “species jump”,³⁴ which describes the ability to transform from one species to another, is also relevant here. This ability echoes religious ideas of rebirth and spiritual notions that death is a kind of return to nature, beliefs that can comfort the dying and the bereaved.

Thus, death is framed as a natural transition. The grandmother can therefore be serene as she lies on her deathbed, comforting Vaiana by saying,

32 Tamaira/Fonoti 2018, 307.

33 Bennett 2001, 16–17.

34 See Bergesen 2016.

“There is nowhere you could go that I won’t be with you.” This sentiment turns literal: Vaiana sails off as her grandmother dies and transforms into the magical glowing ray that swims alongside her. This consoling notion of continued bonds is reaffirmed in the closing scene, where the grandmother’s spirit is seen in her animal form, still guarding the protagonist. The same idea is present in *BROTHER BEAR*, where the deceased continue to play a vital role in the world. As Lammon has noted, death in Disney tends to be depicted as another form of existence.³⁵ Here this allows the deceased to play the role of spirit guide. Such encounters are filled with a sense of wonder and therefore help the protagonist view the world differently.

The aesthetic choices for these enchanting encounters, with their ethereal soundscapes and blue glowing lights, are comparable to the aesthetics mentioned in the previous section. Importantly however, the messages differ: instead of marking a moment of resurrection or revival, here it signals the lifting of the veil between the living and the dead. An example of such a scene takes place when Vaiana is feeling defeated. Her grandmother’s spirit, first as the blue glowing ray, swims up to her as a mystical song with twinkling sounds starts to play. Amazed, Vaiana witnesses her grandmother appear in her human spirit form – still glowing in blue – to give her encouragement. Disney often depicts the soul as blue in colour, possibly due to the Western context, where blue has an association with the spiritual realm, Lammon notes.³⁶

Captivated and emboldened, Vaiana starts to sing as more ancestral spirits appear in their blue glowing boats and join the uplifting song as they sail past her. The music helps significantly in creating the wondrous atmosphere, and although each of these three films addressed here has a distinct soundscape, they share elements like choir music and twinkling sound effects. The sound track in *VAIANA* is influenced by Polynesian composer Opetiaia Foa’i, with drumbeats, male chorus chanting and singing in a Polynesian language – however these sounds are framed by Western musical characteristics, possibly once again highlighting Disney’s commitment to marketability.³⁷ Disney utilises Indigenous spirituality and tradition as well as mesmerising aesthetics to portray death less as a tragedy and more as a mysterious transition into the ancestral realm.

35 Lammon 2022b, 111.

36 Lammon 2022b, 114.

37 Armstrong 2018, 106.

Re-enchanting Life by Accepting the Inevitable

Death awareness is constantly used to remind us of the value of life, from self-help books that guide us to live each day as if it is our last, to bucket lists, and all the way to aphorisms such as *carpe diem* that remind us that “we only live once”. And although death anxiety can prompt people to live life to the fullest, studies have suggested that a near-death experience might simultaneously cure death anxiety and generate a deeper understanding of how our limited time should be spent.³⁸ *SOUL*, which draws inspiration from the cultural phenomenon of near-death experiences and also from New Age spirituality, posits that facing death can be a life-affirming source of wonder. It also insinuates that there is an eventual finality to death, with a depiction of a conveyor belt filled with souls disappearing into a glowing white light. Acknowledging the inevitability of the end of life is framed as making life more precious. Although grappling with that finality can be difficult, the film suggests that it can be accepted once one becomes familiar with mortality.

The film’s protagonist, Joe, who is consumed by the idea of becoming a successful jazz-musician, is in an accident that leads to his soul being separated from his body. Joe’s soul, along with others, all depicted as simplistic and rounded shapes glowing in hues of mostly blue, is on a conveyor belt heading towards what is called the Great Beyond. Leaving behind the darkness the other souls calmly enter the white glowing light. This scene is evidently influenced by core elements of near-death experiences: peacefulness, body separation, entering a darkness, seeing and entering a bright light.³⁹ However, a shocked Joe falls into a liminal space where souls prepare for life, and he embarks on a venture to try and find a way to return to his body. Through his journey he becomes enamoured with the wonders of ordinary life but also, eventually, accepts his death. As he is about to dissipate into the Great Beyond, he is granted another chance to finish his life. Studies on near-death experiences suggest that the event can increase mindfulness and appreciation of life,⁴⁰ a sentiment echoed in the closing scene, where visibly grateful and present, Joe notes that he is going to live every minute of his life. Joe’s new mindset reflects Bennett’s notion

38 Pehlivanova/Carroll/Greyson 2022; Tassell-Matamua/Lindsay 2016.

39 Ring 1980.

40 Zaleski 1989.

about the importance of cultivating wonder in everyday life.⁴¹ Joe has also seemingly gained an increased sense of spirituality from his experience, another common feature of near-death experiences.⁴²

This is not the only Disney animation from the 21st century to share this perspective on death. For example, both *COCO* (Lee Unkrich / Adrian Molina, US 2017) and *ONWARD* (Dan Scanlon, US 2020) explore the topic of mortality through various liminal spaces and insinuate that there is an eventual finality to existence. All three films include some kind of buffer or mysterious liminal space before the final death, illustrating how enchantment can function as a way of facing mortality even if it can be interpreted to be the ultimate end. These liminal spaces also exemplify how the enchanting aesthetics of death across the film selection share similarities, with souls softly glowing and ethereal music setting the scene. With *SOUL*, however, it is important to note that Joe is mostly enchanted by ordinary things as he reflects, for example, on his life and its simple pleasures.

The film also posits that by becoming familiar with and accepting death, magic and wonder return to one's life. In other words, the proximity of death inspires and calls for enchantment, not because death is reversible or a transformation, but because mortality crystallises the value of life. Conversely, it could be argued that death is indeed overcome in the film, as the protagonist returns to his life. However, Joe does not fully die, as he is seen in the hospital unconscious whilst his soul is in the liminal space. The ending of *SOUL* – as well as of *ONWARD* and *COCO* – emphasises that we must learn to let go eventually and that while it is not possible to escape the inevitability of death, we can accept its finality. Interestingly, the film suggests that the world can be supernatural, magical and filled with wonder, and simultaneously mortality can be understood to be final and inevitable. Death becomes familiar and accepted and therefore tamed – this is what enchants life.

Conclusion

In this article we analysed depictions of death in terms of enchantment in three 21st century Disney and Disney-Pixar films. Previous studies have noted the depictions of resurrection, afterlife and the spirit world in Disney

41 Bennett 2001, 160.

42 Tassell-Matamua/Steadman 2017.

films and have often focused on the frequently violent portrayal of death in such films and its possible impact on young audiences. This article has looked instead at the narrative and aesthetic means used to tame the threat and thrill of death, and in particular at how the dynamics of enchantment can transform (violent) death such that it becomes controlled, safe and marketable.

Our qualitative content analysis showed three ways of enchanting death. First, death can be overcome magically, thus postponed or even reversed. The overcoming of death is especially clear in *RAYA AND THE LAST DRAGON*, where death is framed as an opposite force to life, which is reflected in aesthetics signifying resurrection and revival. Ethereal soundscapes, glowing lights, nature and water are repeatedly present in scenes where death is overcome. Such dramatisations can be understood as a form of death denial, adding to Western discourse in which death is not accepted as a natural, inevitable part of life, but instead turned into a taboo spectacle that must be postponed and avoided as much as possible.

The second way of enchanting death is to depict end-of-life as a transition into a spirit realm but with ongoing bonds to the living. In *VAIANA* the connections to the spirit world make death more magical and more tolerable. Proximity to mortality provides a more holistic view on life, for example by re-connecting with cultural traditions and ancestral spirits. The films draw inspiration from Indigenous spirituality and use various aesthetic markers in depicting death and the spirit realm as an indivisible part of the natural world. Ongoing bonds, spirit visits, transformations and species jumps are utilised to make death into something mystical and magical.

Lastly, in *SOUL* the finality of death reveals the wonderment and value of life. Like near-death experiences, the films suggest that awareness of one's mortality can inspire one to make the most of life. Various liminal spaces between life and death are used to explore mortality and its finality. Here too, the film uses specific aesthetic markers and supernatural incidents, but the most important feature is the restoration of wonder within everyday life. Disney films' engagement with the dynamics of enchantment is in line with Disney's branding as a magical, nostalgic feel-good storyteller, which appeals to contemporary audiences' longing for ways to tame death and supposedly (re)discover wonderment in everyday life.

The films analysed in this article approach enchantment in a way that closely resembles new materialist thinking: enchantment revitalises life, and even if it is suppressed at times, it will resurface. As the analysis shows,

however, the films clearly draw from the broader Western narrative of enchantment, in which disenchantment can be returned to re-enchantment. In these movies, encounters with mortality are central in inspiring and calling for re-enchantment. Thus, death or the threat of death works as a powerful plot device that varies from tragic, violent and sensational to mysterious, wondrous, flexible and supernatural. It is fitting that the films approach death through the supernatural, as contemporary audiences playfully engage with and half-believe in various enchantments.⁴³ The films present audiences with ways to explore mortality and related topics, such as death anxiety, grief and loss, that lead to comforting and life-affirming conclusions – even if they simultaneously give ample space to violence and fear of death.

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43 Cuthbertson 2024.

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