

## Mirror Mirror: Cinema as an Iconography of the Life of the Other in Walt Disney's *Encanto* (2021)

مرآة مرآة: السينما كأيقونة لحياة الآخر في إنكانتو (2021) لوالث ديزني

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### Abstract:

To display the zeitgeist of every instant in life, to embody new explorations and agonistic experiences, cinematography did not fail in exalting enthusiastic spirits fond of exploitation and creativity. Indeed, the rise of the Walt Disney Company and the dispersion of its captivating and entrancing motion pictures provided a new dimension to the art of storytelling. Quite entertaining and instructive at the same time, Disney's movies vociferate themes and messages profound in meaning and understanding. Referential to the experiences of migration and to the embodiment of refugees, Disney's newest animated movie, *Encanto*, provides an accurate depiction of the lives of third generation immigrants of colour. Revolving around the Madrigals, the *Encanto* recounts the story of a Colombian family blessed with a miracle, the encanto that keeps their family safe by giving them extraordinary abilities to serve their community. While fleeing their home land from an armed conflict, Abuela Alma loses her husband, Pedro, but gains a magical blessing through a candle she carries. By creating a hidden town with a sentient casita that keeps the family safe, Abuela becomes the matriarch leader of the household. Throughout the storyline events, the trauma of migration and the generational trauma that comes with it surges to the surface. Therefore, this article presents an insight into the lives of immigrants of colour. It lays down a contemporary representation of immigrants in 2021 Disney's *Encanto*. In this essay, the purpose is to unveil the experiences, struggles, contributions and, most importantly, image Disney grants to refugees.

**Keywords:** Cinematography; Walt Disney Company; embodiment; generational trauma; refugees.

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**ملخص:**

لعرض روح العصر في كل لحظة في الحياة، لتجسيد استكشافات جديدة وتجارب مؤلمة، لم يفشل التصوير السينمائي في تمجيد الأرواح المتحمسة المولعة بالاستكشاف والإبداع. في الواقع، قدم صعود شركة والت ديزني وتشتت صورها المتحركة الأسرة والرائعة بعداً جديداً لفن سرد القصص. مسلية ومفيدة للغاية في نفس الوقت، تعزز أفلام ديزني الموضوعات والرسائل بعمق في المعنى والفهم. بالإشارة إلى تجارب الهجرة وتجسيد اللاجئين، يقدم أحدث فيلم رسوم متحركة من إنتاج ديزني، **إنكانتو**، تصويراً دقيقاً لحياة الجيل الثالث من المهاجرين الملونين. تدور حول لمارغالز ، يروي **إنكانتو** قصة عائلة كولومبية تنعم بمعجزة إنكانتو التي تحافظ على أسرتها الآمنة من خلال منحهم قدرات غير عادية لخدمة مجتمعهم. أثناء فرارها من أرضها من نزاع مسلح، فقدت أبويلا ألما زوجها بيدرو، لكنها اكتسبت نعمة سحرية من خلال شمعة تحملها. من خلال إنشاء مدينة مخفية بكازيتا واعية تحافظ على سلامة الأسرة، تصبح أبويلا القائدة الأم للأسرة. طوال أحداث القصة، تصعد صدمة الهجرة وصدمة الأجيال التي تأتي معها إلى السطح. لذلك، تقدم هذه المقالة نظرة ثاقبة على حياة المهاجرين الملونين. إنها تحدد تمثيلاً معاصراً للمهاجرين في **إنكانتو (2021)** لـديزني. في هذا المقال، الغرض هو الكشف عن التجارب والنضالات والمساهمات، والأهم من ذلك، الصورة التي تمنحها ديزني للاجئين.

**كلمات مفتاحية:** تصوير سينمائي، شركة والت ديزني، تجسيد، صدمة الأجيال، اللاجئين.

### ***Introduction:***

Artistically conjoining the art and technology of motion-picture photography, interestingly revolutionizing the world of entertainment, the universe of moving motions and captivating iconography did certainly contribute in the creation and the dispersion of true artworks. Recognized for its own peculiar language and elaborate aesthetics, praised for its particular techniques of the general composition of a scene; the lighting of the set or location; the choice of cameras, lenses, filters, and film stock; the camera angle and movements; and the integration of any special effects, cinematography maintains a central place as a form of art deemed highly creative. Defined as “a representation of a story by means of motion pictures” by Meriam-Webster online dictionary, “a form of entertainment that enacts a story by a sequence of images giving the illusion of continuous movement”, by Word Web Dictionary, the stories recorded by a camera possess a unique way of rendering the ordinary extraordinary.

Fitting perfectly the universe of fascinating pictures and attracting animations, and rendered a decisive element of the cinematic production is the rise of the new trend; the Walt Disney Company. Highly instructional, the Walt Disney projections own a great ability of translating profound and abstract ideas and thoughts to the screen. In point of fact, Disney's movies not only diffuse meanings and morals, but as well display and explore real-life issues throughout magical and child-friendly images. Varying from intellectual disability to intergenerational trauma, the production house represents a captivating insight on topics which have been marginalized and shut down for decades on the big screen, such as women representation through female characters or even immigrants' culture and their struggles in the hosting country.

Incorporating a beautifully accurate depiction of immigrant culture, Walt Disney's 2021 production of *Encanto* puts forth refreshingly accurate insight into the lives of third generation immigrants of colour. From Reggaeton to Cali salsa, Colombian mountains, and lively flora and fauna, *Encanto* is a spirited showcase of everyday life in Colombia. By celebrating food, music, and family, the Madrigal household represents a spectrum of cultural diversity which accurately exposes the Colombian population. Therefore, this article attempts at providing a luculent deciphering of the embodiment of generational trauma in immigrant families. It aims at investigating the portrayal of immigrants in Disney's 2021 *Encanto* and the way it features characters of all different skin tones, highlighting the diversity within the Latino community.

### ***1. Review of Literature***

To fully expose and understand the way Walt Disney's *Encanto* embodies the life of immigrants and the generational trauma they go through, it is certainly indispensable to lay down a variety of concepts and elements deemed essential to unveil the sustained inquiries of this essay. Indeed, the exploration of definitions related to certain literary concepts, such as cinematic adaptation or even the rise of the Walt Disney Company are primordial for tackling and enlightening the main interests of this article.

### ***1.1. Cinematic Adaptation: Beyond the Written Word***

Regarded as an advanced instrumentality of dispersing moving pictures, possessing a particular ability of translating profound and abstract ideas and thoughts to the screen, defined as the transfer of a work or story, in whole or in part, to a feature film, cinematic adaptation is perceived as a highly realistic medium of delivering a unique and surreal vision of the world. As a matter of fact, for eons and eons, cinema have always had a close relationship with literature. That is, “in the era of interdisciplinary, nothing is healthier than trying to see the literature’s verblatency from the perspective of cinema and the movie iconicity from the perspective of literature” (Brito cited in Gualda, 2010, p. 202). The *Encanto* is very much an example of the way cinema relies on literature to produce the most attractive and passionate stories of all time as Disney’s *Encanto* utilizes techniques of magic realism to create enchantment and fascination on the screen. Therefore, when literature as an inventively recognized body of writing of elevated artistic values is conjoined with cinema, the work of art created is deemed iconic.

Quite appealing and impressive, the nature of the relationship between literature and cinema is impressive as Dr. Omar Rahmoun pontificates:

Much has been said about literature and cinema. Although both are abinitio distinct arts that leave us to think that there is no room for any kind of analogy, comparing them seems to be a reasonable endeavour that allows us to discuss the fascinating relationship. (Rahmoun, 2018, p. 50)

Certainly, literature and cinema possess a myriad of common points. Very much inspired by literature as much as literature is inspired by cinema- an ambition of the ancients as the author Joseph Conrad made obvious back in 1897 in the preface of his novel, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*: “My Task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel it before all, to make you see”, literature and cinema embrace a mutual influence mainly justified by their possession of two key common factors: narrative and storytelling. Moreover, engaging the viewer in either a mental or visual stimuli which enables them to perceive, interpret and assimilate elements according to their own understanding, reasoning and background, both of literature and cinema provide an emotional experience fulfilled through the artwork’s written words and the film’s dynamic visual succession of moving pictures.

In addition, endeavouring at creating a universe for the reader/viewer to escape, seeking at allowing for an emotional outlet and most importantly developing empathy towards the story and character, both of movies and literature create a genuine experience enabling the people who read or watch to hope for “the opportunity to identify with other human beings for a while, and, vicariously participate in their lives” (Boyum, 1985, p. 39). Furthermore, “just like the significance of narrative in human culture can be seen from the fact that written cultures seek their origins in myths which they then record for posterity” (Fludernik, 2009, p. 1), the movie industry desires as well to enrich its history by registering the numerous acted and played scenes by men.

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Therefore, on the grounds of the power of words found in literature and dreamlike audible and graphic attributes embraced by cinema, both of literature and cinema desire a history of their own; a long recorded narrative of past events which ensures the continuum of both empires. Indeed, in the greatest attempt of making “the unseen visible” (Flavin, 2004, p. 5), a filmmaker can create a fiction with cinematic tools. Admittedly, the French film theorist Astruc (1948) claims that: “the filmmaker/author writes with his camera as a writer writes with his pen”. Then, based on a specific narrative structure and embracing a referential nature, film and literature as Orr declares:

Both produce stories which work through temporal succession. Both refer to, or connote, pre-existent materials. Fiction works through a pre-existent language, film through the raw data of the physical world its camera record. In both cases, words and images give off associations which go beyond the immediacy of their physical objects (1992, qtd in Bane, 2006, p. 12).

Either through the exponent of ink or through fascinating imagery and captivating sounds, the uppermost aim of both literature and movie production is to deliver to the reader/viewer an unforgettable experience full of high interaction of the senses and great identification to the stories. Representing an unprecedented dynamic relationship between literature and cinema, the invention of cinema brought to the front new considerations as well as novel techniques and approaches to the literary text; a revolution that would have certainly not occurred without film adaptation. Allowing for an astonishing transference to occur between one medium and another, it is therefore worth to highlight that “if film did not grow out of literature, it grew towards it; and what novels and films most strikingly have in common is the potential and propensity for narrative” (McFarlane, 1996). Overturning the universe of cinema, supplying the world of entertainment and adaptation with a peculiar touch of the grotesque and the surrealistically real is the for certain the rise of the new cinematic trend; the Walt Disney Company.

## ***1.2. Real and Surreal: The Walt Disney Company***

Projecting an unequalled commitment to creativity, representing an unparalleled way for storytelling to amalgamate with innovative technologies, the Walt Disney Company undeniably revolutionized the world's entertainment industry. Indeed, with the redact technological invention of cinema, which dates back to the 1890s, the Disney Company created, transferred and adapted surreal productions on the screen. Gaining huge privilege and massive popularity over the written text, Disney's inventive and attractive visual side was highly praised and led to the birth of a newly iconic cinematographic movie genre filled with enchantment, excitement and magic.

Gone a time where literary authors had the supreme authority as herein it is the team of directors, screenwriters, animators and producers which became vital for the invention of every single film. Fuelled with the mission of entertaining, informing and inspiring people around the globe through the power of unparalleled storytelling, the Walt Disney Company reflected the iconic brands, creative minds and innovative technologies becoming the world's premier entertainment company. Accordingly, the Walt Disney Company was the best-known provider of entertainment

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and disillusioned amusement of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In point of fact, the genesis of Walt Disney backdates to the 1920s where, along with the help of his friend and gifted Kansas City film animator Ub Iwerks, Disney constituted the Laugh-O-grams Films studio and started realizing a series of cartoons based on fables and fairy tales.

Dealing intensively with wonder tale plots and themes at the time, and joined in the studio by several animators notably Hugh Harman, Rudolf Ising, and Isadore Freleng. Walt Disney adopted and adapted many of the Grimm and Perrault's tales, including Puss in Boots, Cinderella and Jack and the Beanstalk. Consecutively, ambitiously craving for further success, Disney's fabulous career was not restricted in Kansas; he then moved to Hollywood and created the Disney Brothers Studio with his brother Roy. Termed later on the Walt Disney Company, Disney made sure to reflect unparalleled storytelling through the power of elevated cinematography techniques. In the same years, henceforth, he produced the prospering animated shorts, *The Silly Symphonies*.

Not only flourishing, but these 1930s very popular music cartoons paved the way for the establishment of the company as a leader in the animation industry, with the creation of the widely popular character Mickey Mouse. First appearing in Steamboat Willie, The character would go on to become the company's mascot. Then, since the 1980s, Disney has created and acquired corporate divisions to market more-mature content than is typically associated with its family-oriented brands known as Walt Disney Pictures, Walt Disney Animation Studios, Pixar, Marvel Studios, Lucas film, 20th Century Studios, 20th Century Animation, and Searchlight Pictures.

However, apart from all the enchanting characters, captivating journeys and magical experiences which Disney movies delivered, the values and messages transferred throughout the films were very much intriguing. In other words, behind the childish spirit that Disney movies carry, there are real-life messages, morals and portrayals infused in each and single character. Certainly, with the rapid growth of educational television and the increasing awareness that schools and the mass media adopted, Walter Elias Disney's fertile mind made him occupy various roles, but, most of all, he was a master of communications who conjoined both entertainment and education into the world in a distinctive manner. Deemed the dean of those who have attempted to use the commercial mass media in a way that would make those media educationally beneficial to persons who attend to their messages, Disney's movies managed to expose several themes and issues deemed important to its viewers.

Among the numerous themes tackled are the representation of other cultures and the embodiment of the lives of third generation immigrants of colour. Hence, as an ode to Colombian history, Walt Disney's newest film, *Encanto*, was highly praised for its portrayal of Colombia and Latinx cultures, and for the way it sparked positive conversations about refugees and other displaced people. However, before unravelling the image of immigrants drawn in Disney's *Encanto*, it is quite essential to start by presenting a summary of the movie; its main characters and the flow of events its took.

## **2. An Insight into Encanto**

Premiered on November. 24, 2021 and just recently on Disney+ on December.24, 2021, Disney's newest animated movie *Encanto* mirrors a magical adventure of an extended Indigenous family. As a movie whose voice actor cast is lined up with many famous Hispanic celebrities such as: Stephanie Beatriz, Jessica Darrow, Diane Guerrero, John Leguizamo, Maluma and Carolina Gaitán to name a few, the *Encanto* recounts the story of Mirabel Madrigal; an ordinary girl who lives in Valle de Cocora, Colombia with a family who possess extraordinary magical powers. Aged 15 years-old, each of Mirabel's family members own a supernatural power. Her older sisters have gifts such as florakinesis- the power to mentally grow and manipulate flowers and plants- and super strength. Mirabel, however, remains gift-less; the thing which caused her to be shamed by her Abuela, or grandmother, her family and the whole Encanto village she resides in.

Indeed, as an armed conflict forces the young married couple of Pedro and Alma Madrigal to flee their home village in Colombia with their infant triplets Julieta, Pepa and Bruno, the attackers kill Pedro, but the candle of Alma enchantingly repels the attackers and creates Casita; a sentient house for the family located in Encanto, a magical realm, bordered by high mountains.

Fifty years later, a new village thrives under the candle's protection. In fact, this candle's magic grants 'magical powers' or 'gifts' to each Madrigal descendant at the age of five which they use to serve the villagers. Bruno, who can see the future, is ostracized and vilified when he has a vision of his future niece, while Mirabel, standing in front of the casita as it crumbles, learns the possibility of the end of the encanto. Her warnings go unheard as Casita appears undamaged to the others. After overhearing Alma praying, Mirabel resolves to save the miracle's magic. The next day, she talks to her strong older sister Luisa, who confesses to feeling overwhelmed by her near-constant obligations then suggests that Bruno's room, situated in a forbidden tower in Casita, may make the phenomenon comprehensible.

In there, Mirabel discovers a cave and barely escapes it with some pieces of a slab of opaque emerald glass in hand. Outside, Luisa discovers that her gift is very much weakening. After her family reminds her why Bruno is vilified, Mirabel reassembles the glass and perceives a picture of herself with Casita cracking behind her. Therefore, it is up to Mirabel to challenge the traditions and beliefs of her family to heal them and the Encanto. By refusing to access the status quo and leaning into her emotions and empathy as strengths, Mirabel becomes the leader her family needs to heal the traumas they have faced.

After several ordeals, Alma finds a tearful Mirabel back at the river where Pedro died. Determined to preserve the magic, Alma tearfully explains her tragic backstory and how she ignored the sufferings of her family; how her expectations were harming the family and finally accepts responsibility for what happened. Mirabel and Alma reconcile, and the two, with Bruno in tow, return to the village and assemble the Madrigals to rebuild Casita. Mirabel installs a new doorknob to the main door; restoring the family's gifts and reviving Casita.

### *3. Encanto's Embodiment of the Other*

Transparent about the displacement and political conflict that has historically affected its citizens, displayed as an ode to Colombian history, *Encanto* is being glorified for the way it features characters of all different skin tones, highlighting the diversity within the Latinx community. Indeed, in Mirabel's journey the idea of home is not determined by location, but rather through the preservation of art, nature, and heritage. In point of fact, the animated movie has earned lots of traction recently with numerous members of the Hispanic community praising the film's profound meaning mirrored through the storyline. By highlighting generational trauma as the main issue in immigrant families, the movie was not created to be related to by first generation Hispanics only, but other first generation children of different ethnic groups.

To put it simply, there are four original Madrigal family members who migrated to the enchanted town created by the encanto: Abuela, Julieta, Pepa, and Bruno. Of these four members, Abuela is the only family member who is not gifted. Instead, Abuela is engaged in leading and protecting the encanto at all costs. As for her children, Julieta heals, Pepa forecasts, and Bruno sees the future. Indeed, though not entirely one-to-one as a comparison, the similarities in their purpose as service to the safety and stability of the family are obvious. Julieta would be the doctor who heals the community, Pepa the lawyer who forecasts the political climate for community members, and Bruno the engineer who helps community members reverse engineer to understand the path from their future to their present. In this sense, co-director Jared Bush pontificates in a recent interview on the larger-than-life adaptations of real-life stories for *Encanto* saying:

For this movie, we leaned into magical realism which is a huge part of Colombian literary traditions," he said. "It's about taking emotions and lending that to something beyond reality. Between the gifts our characters have and the way the mystery expands in this magical house, there are still themes we can relate to that are heightened. Anytime we felt it stopped being relatable, we hit the brakes. This movie- a family story first, everything else second- has to function as if there was no magic in this world at all (Garza, 2022).

The gifts of the encanto are hitherto the embodiment of practicality in service to the family above all else, and this theme affects as well the next generation of the Madrigals. Filled with passion and meaning, *Encanto's* characters own personal struggles demonstrate what it feels like to belong to a first generation family which deals with generational trauma. Defined as a traumatic event which started decades prior to the current generation and has impacted the way that individuals understand, cope with, and heal from trauma, generational trauma in this case came from Abuela; the trauma she endured and the way her sentiments were negatively affecting her whole family members. Therefore, each character in the movie is used to portray a peculiar aspect of struggles faced in a first generation household. Portrayed in a quite harsh picture, Abuela as the embodiment of immigrants faced various horrific traumatic events which caused her character to build up incredibly high walls around her family. She, in fact, created unreasonable expectations



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desiring everyone in her family to meet; a huge pressure shown several different times throughout the movie.

Consequently, a great example of such a confinement is the oldest grandchild of the family, Isabella Madrigal. With the immense power of growing and manipulating plants and flowers, Isabella serves as the representation of perfection as she is expected to utilize her gift in a way that fits into the standards. Though her power permits her to grow any plant she wishes, Isabela must only grow perfect roses in order to appease her Abuela's expectations of *ne plus ultra*. This denotes the standard of perfection as one of the various issues immigrant children are pressured to fulfil. In other words, be it to present themselves as the ideal role model for future generations or the perceived onus to make their ancestors' immigration toils worthwhile by earning a stellar education or achieving immense career success, there is often a tremendous burden on the shoulders of immigrant children.

Another form of pressure immigrant children go through is portrayed by the middle sibling, Luisa Madrigal. Granted the gift of super strength and power, Luisa is forced to carry every physical and emotional burden handed to her. She feels quite overwhelmed and under tremendous pressure for the big responsibility of dealing with every object, issue and province her family could not handle. Quite relatable to many immigrant children around the globe, the pressure of carrying everything and the expectation of supporting the family far before the younger siblings is a heavy burden which deprives immigrant children from their moments of innocent laughters and childish instances. Portraying the great effect this movie had on immigrants is the sophomore and first generation child of a Mexican-Panamanian family, Jane Medina. In an interview, Medina claimed:

Personally I relate to Luisa because on the outer surface she shows her strong, cool and collected side but deep down she knows that she's struggling under the pressure her family puts her through. Luisa's strive for greatness comes from her family's enormous expectations set on her, that part of her storyline reminds me of how being born in America is such a great opportunity in the eyes of many immigrants that they just expect so much from you because of it. I think they often forget how difficult it is to assimilate into a country you have no connections in (cited in Garza, 2022).

Contrariwise, Mirabel Madrigal defines another standard immigrant children go through. Being the only child who does not meet Abuela's base family standard of possessing a gift, Mirabel is constantly excluded from family pictures and reprimanded when she tries to help. Whereas her sisters symbolize standards that children feel forced to embrace, Mirabel's inability of fulfilling her grandmother's expectations makes her feel inferior, useless and rejected. Hence, from Mirabel's insecurity and belief of disappointment, to the pressure of perfection and meeting standards Luisa and Isabella are forced to carry, the struggles embodied by the Madrigal family are a spectacular representation of the strenuous effort children of first- or second-generation immigrants endure.

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Indeed, from survival through resilience to survival through assimilation, each member of the Madrigal family demonstrate how difficult it is to be the other. From generation to generation, an expansion from a life of survival to a life of prosperity is portrayed as the family finds their roles and dynamics to provide what they need for their community. The *Encanto* does perfectly embody the generational trauma brought about by migration; rejection, alienation, pressure for good standards and expectations of perfection make of the life of the other quite harsh and challenging.

***Conclusion:***

Neglecting cultural appropriation, glorifying the Indigenous Zenu population with its food, culture and ceremonies, the *Encanto* does a fantastic job in demonstrating how far Disney has come as a franchise. Embodying the struggles that many minorities are forced to face, Disney's 2021 production incorporates a pleasant and a refreshingly accurate depiction of immigrant culture. Praised for its criterion of fidelity, Walt Disney's Madrigals' story of a displaced family building a new life is also the story of the 81 million displaced people around the world.

Indeed, the storyline of *Encanto* triggers positive conversations about refugees. The Madrigal family; a family celebrated for its special powers used in helping the people of the adopted town, reflect the hard effort and the unique contributions refugees bring to their new communities. Throughout the Madrigal's struggle into fitting into their new home, migration is portrayed as both a blessing and a traumatic challenge to immigrant families. The bitter truth of migration tells that for migration to take place, there was both not enough instability and coincidentally a better opportunity available, leading a person or people to decide to leave behind their homeland for the unknown. Better opportunities for work, better living conditions, better education, and or to escape persecution or violence, the Madrigal's narrative of migration encourage a focus on opportunity, renewal, and resilience rather than living in the harsh reality of family separation, discrimination or violence.

Each member of the Madrigal family embody the struggles, the desire, the determination and the strong will of overcoming the trauma and eventually surpassing generational trauma. By confronting the family's past, a golden chance of moving forward with love and compassion is created. Complex and quite painful, the migration process is complex and by confronting its traumas, healthier dynamics of life are put forward. Passionate by the amalgamation of literary techniques with highly innovative cinematographic practices, faithful for a real representation of immigrants in contemporary cinema, the Walt Disney Company did not fear embodying the marginalized and the rejected to share and outvoice atrocious experiences; the *Encanto* is but an affined representation of the life of the other.

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