

The Established and the Outsiders: A Relational Analysis of Political representations in the trilogy *Shrek*

Aurélie Lacassagne PhD

Department of Political Science

Laurentian University

alacassagne@laurentian.ca

PLEASE, DO NOT QUOTE WITHOUT PERMISSION OF THE AUTHOR

The trilogy *Shrek* has been one the most successful animated movie in the box office in the history of cinema. DreamWorks, the production company, decided to make the Green ogre a worldwide cultural product, by designing hundreds of products relating to the monster. The profits of the franchise are estimated at 1.4 billion dollars (The Independent, 2007). Just the first movie *Shrek*, made a total box office of \$ 479.2 million (Hopkins, 2004: 33). This fact could clearly lead to insights pertaining to the political economy of film. This paper, however, will focus on the narratives of the movies. We are interested in these narratives (in our case visual representations) and their interplay with power politics and especially race and gender conflicts. Insofar as movies constitute partly social reality, how can we interpret these visual texts? Our contention is that popular culture, among which children movies, constitutes and represents the social world. Therefore, proposing an interpretation of these texts, also offers an interpretation and a representation of the world. Children (and in our case also adults) are more than just socialized by movies, the films as texts affect directly their representation of the world and participate to the constitution of the social world. As the early writers like Hall (1997) on cultural studies showed, popular culture is a site of struggles between the hegemonic discourse and resistance to it. The immanent divisions of our capitalist societies (in terms of class, race, gender, sex) are, at the same time, produced, reproduced and contested through popular culture.

Will Wright (1975: 19) gives the example of Burke, in his interpretation of *Venus and Adonis*, in which he:

interprets the characters of a narrative as representing social types acting out a drama of social order. In this way, interaction – such as conflict or sexual attraction – is never simply interaction between individuals but always involves the social principles that the characters represent. Thus, a fight in a narrative would not simply be a conflict of men but a conflict of principles - good versus evil, rich versus poor, black versus white.

The narratives being very rich, we will focus on representations of political regimes. Indeed, the movie series depicts a number of regime types: a liberal capitalist monarchy, in the form of Far

Far Away; totalitarianism as instantiated in the Kingdom of Farquaad; and finally, an individualist anarchist space - Shrek's swamp. All of these regimes are disrupted by rebellions led by groups excluded from the established social order. The three political regimes identified are all-territorially based. The space is segregated: an inside and an outside. This spatial segregation is associated with a social segregation. In international relations literature, Andrew Linklater (1990) speaks about this "tension" between "men" and "citizens". Citizens of a particular spatially-defined political community are entitled to specific rights, while outsiders are deprived of those very rights. But even within the community of citizens, appear logics of "established" and "outsiders" to speak in Eliasian terms. This logic often relies upon exclusion based on perceptions of gender, race, class, ethnicity, bodies. This paper is therefore informed by an Eliasian perspective (Elias, 1994) and explores how logics of exclusion are constructed. The paper is divided into three sections, each describing a particular political regime.

Individual anarchism

The first few scenes of the first movie *Shrek* open with the ogre living by himself in his swamp. The space is clearly delimited by the "décor" of the swamp; but the ogre goes further and territorially marked his space with signs to signify the others that this territory belongs to him and that no one can trespass. Two images can come in one's mind while watching this scene. First, the absence of authority: Shrek lives alone in his swamp and he is the sole master of his life. It refers to individualist anarchism. Second, for anyone familiar with French literature and political philosophy, Shrek evokes images of the myth of "le bon sauvage" (the noble savage) depicted by Montaigne (1595) in his *Essays* and Rousseau (1992) in his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*.

Individualist anarchism encompasses various conceptions. It is not the point here to refer to a particular conception of this philosophy but to make the point that, Shrek living in his swamp matches with the spirit of individualist anarchism. There is no state and no society. Nothing seems to prevent Shrek from fulfilling his self-interests. Shrek appears also very reluctant to engage in any form of social relations. One can say that he is egoist. He represents more the tradition of Max Stirner than William Godwin. Shrek looks fully in control of himself- his mind and his body. Even if one can see a sort of melancholia, he seems satisfied and happy, enjoying the calm of his swamp, the easiness of his life; he eats whatever he finds around him, he has arranged his shelter to his taste. He does not appear like having intellectual or spiritual concerns. As long as he can live alone in his swamp, he fully accepts the body he has; his body appearance becomes an issue when he enters into social transactions. I insist on the full control of his body because not only it is important for the rest of the story, but also because it is what makes him an egoist individualist anarchist:

Not till one has fallen in love with his *corporeal* self, and takes a pleasure in himself as a living flesh-and-blood person – but it is in mature years, in the man, that we find it so – not till then has one a personal or interest, i.e., an interest not only of our spirit, for instance, but of total satisfaction, satisfaction of the whole chap, a selfish interest. (Stirner in Horowitz, 1964: 295)

Therefore, Shrek seems to represent this egoist adult with none of the material and spiritual constraints described by Stirner. He is fully satisfied.

But as stated earlier, for someone ingrained of French literature, Shrek also triggers memories of the myth of the “bon sauvage”. When Montaigne (1960: 210) speaks about the Indians, he underlines the fact that they live in harmony with nature”:

Now to return to my subject, I think there is nothing barbarous and savage in that nation, from what I have been told, except that each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice; for indeed it seems we have no other test of truth and reason than the example and pattern of the opinions and customs of the country we live in. There is always the perfect religion, the perfect government, the perfect and accomplished manners in all things. Those people are wild, just as we call wild the fruits that Nature has produced by herself and in her normal course; whereas really it is those that we have changed artificially and led astray from the common order, that we should rather call wild. The former retain alive and vigorous their genuine, their most useful and natural, virtues and properties, which have debased in the latter in adapting them to gratify our corrupted taste. And yet for all that, the savor and delicacy of some uncultivated fruits of those countries is quite excellent, even to our taste, as that of our own.

Montaigne continues on to describe how their shelters are made with materials from their natural surroundings; how their food is made, what they hunt and gather. He depicts a perfect world, an idealized world. For Montaigne, society is a form of corruption of the man living in harmony with his natural surroundings. Rousseau (1983: 145), a century and a half later, will echo this idea:

O man, whatever may be your country, and whatever opinions you may hold, listen to me: Here is your history, as I believe I have read it, not in books by your fellow men, who are liars, but in Nature, who never lies. Everything that comes from her will be true; if there is falsehood, it will be mine, added unintentionally. The times of which I am going to speak are very remote: How greatly you have changed from what you once were! It is, so to speak, the life of your species that I shall describe to you, on the basis of the qualities that you have received. Your upbringing, education, and habits may have corrupted those qualities, but they have not been able to destroy them. There is, I feel, an age at which each individual man would like to stop: you will seek the age at which you would have liked your species to stop.

Rousseau (1983: 146-147) continues on:

When I strip that being, thus constituted, of all the supernatural gifts he may have received, and of all the artificial faculties that he could have acquired only by long progress; when I consider him, in short, as he must have come from the hands of nature, I see an animal less strong than some, less agile than others, but on the whole, the most advantageously constituted of all. I see him sitting under an oak tree, quenching his thirst at the nearest stream, finding his bed at the foot of the same tree that supplied him with his meal; and thus all his needs are satisfied.

And indeed, Shrek is reluctant to enter into the social world because he equates it with problems. When his swamp gets invaded by the magical creatures that Farquaad dumped there; he mentions very clearly that he wants to be alone, “in peace”; solitude means for him peace of mind. And it is by egoism that he accepts to go and speak with Farquaad about the issue: his trip to Duloc (the name of the kingdom ruled by Farquaad) as well as the quest to rescue the princess are motivated by his selfish interest to get rid out the magical creatures and live alone, in peace, in his swamp.

Throughout his adventures, he will develop a more altruistic behaviour. Yet, he remains overly sceptical about the benefits of living within a society. His actions are mainly motivated by his will to go back and live in his swamp with his true love Fiona. The fact that in *Shrek 3*, he refuses to become king and does everything he can to find another heir, represents very well his rejection of the society, independently of the way it may be organized.

Totalitarianism

We interpret the kingdom of Duloc as an analogy of a totalitarian state. It is our contention that this kingdom does not represent an authoritarian dictatorship, but indeed the very special category of totalitarianism. One needs to go back to the five elements of totalitarianism as described by Hannah Arendt (2004).

The first element underlined by Arendt (2004: 407-422) is a classless society that allows for the mobilization of the masses that follow the leader without any doubt. Each scene in which the people of Duloc appear, it is noticeable that it is not a gathering of individuals but indeed an undifferentiated mass. There is no specific way to distinguish one character from another. Visually, they all look the same and they all act in the same manner as a mass, as one body. They shout, move and applaud as a single entity. Here, the similarities with the propaganda films of the Nazi regime are striking.

This idea is linked to the second element that is the atomization of the individuals within the society (Arendt, 2004: 422-424) and total loyalty of these atomized individuals to the leader. Arendt (2004:429) explains: “*Such loyalty can be expected only from the completely isolated human being who, without any other social ties to family, friend, comrades, or even mere acquaintances, derives his sense of having a place in the world only from his belonging to a movement, his membership in the party*”. The mass of Duloc is represented in different scenes (in the arena, in the church) as completely subjugated by the orders. One character hands posters to order them to laugh or to applaud. The people of Duloc do not possess individual agency or collective agency; they obey systematically the orders in a mechanical fashion.

The third element is a sort of consequence of the two previous one: there is no more distinction between the private sphere and the public sphere. As Arendt (2004:431) puts it: “*Totalitarianism is never content to rule by external means, through the state and a machinery of violence; thanks to its peculiar ideology and the role assigned to it in this apparatus of coercion, totalitarianism has discovered a means of dominating and terrorizing human beings from within*”. And further “*Their idea of domination was something that no state and no mere apparatus of violence can ever achieve, but only a movement that is constantly kept in motion: namely, the permanent domination of each single individual in each and every sphere of life*” (Arendt, 2004: 432). There is no one single scene in which one could see the people of Duloc in their private sphere. Their movements, actions and words are always fully controlled by the State. They are all dressed in the same manner. Another indicative feature is the architecture of Duloc. In non-totalitarian societies, people organize their private spaces (their gardens, their homes) in distinctive ways. It is a way of expressing individuality. In Duloc, one can see a perfect example of a totalitarian architecture: very large avenues (nowhere to hide); all the houses are the same; the flower beds are all symmetrically displayed. There is no one patch of color, or one type of flower that could show

that this space is organized, arranged by individuals. It reminded me of Minsk. The Belarusian capital was fully destroyed during the Second World War; and rebuilt in a Stalinian fashion. Its architecture is quite similar to Duloc, except even uglier; but one gets the same sense of oppression just because of the architectural arrangements. And to reinforce this idea there is the enormous tower of the Duloc castle (like in Minsk with the monument to the 1945 victory on the *plochiat' pobedi*). Apart from the obvious phallic symbolism, it is a clear representation of the absolute power of the leader. Several times, one can witness that Lord Farquaad has the right to life and death on any of his subject. The first room the viewer is introduced to in the castle is the long hallway leading to the torture room, where indeed a masked brutish executioner is torturing Gingerbread. The character of Farquaad represents also a clear analogy with Hitler. The rather short size of Farquaad (pointed out several times) is an obvious mockery of Hitler's own size. Another bibliographical common point is the social background of both. The fact that Hitler came from low social background and the impact this had in the development of Nazism has been widely documented. Farquaad, in the same manner, must marry a princess to become a king because he is not of royal origin.

The fourth element is the use of totalitarian propaganda and terror. Arendt (2004:450) wrote: "*Wherever totalitarianism possesses absolute control, it replaces propaganda with indoctrination and uses violence not so much to frighten people (...) as to realize constantly its ideological doctrines and its practical lies*". She continues on: "*Propaganda, in other words, is one, and possibly the most important, instrument of totalitarianism for dealing with nontotalitarian world; terror, on the contrary, is the very essence of its form of government*" (Arendt, 2004:453). Every aspect of the life in Duloc is violent and people behave towards violence again in a mechanistic way, they have no reflexivity. Farquaad calls the knights in the arena and explains to them that they will have to fight possibly to the death to see which one is the best fighter. Then, the "winner" will be sent to combat a dragon and bring back the princess to Lord Farquaad. No one knight challenges this crazy idea. The risk of losing his life for the Lord and his kingdom is taken for granted and fully internalized. Worse, it is an honour as Farquaad points out. And the public is happy; they are delighted at the perspective of the bloody combat. When Shrek enters and Farquaad orders to kill the ogre, there is a complete delectation of the fight between Shrek and the knights, there is no self-restraint, no self-control. Now, Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning (1986) in their study of sport showed that this is the very purpose of the development of sports and their regulations: to create a regulated space where people could express some degree of violence in order to compensate for the increasing self-restraint on violence in everyday life. But in the case of the people of Duloc, it is unsure if there are moments in their life where violence is not expressed. Another scene showing the people of Duloc is when the peasants gather to capture and kill the ogre. There is no discussion of why they should kill him (the discussion is on the methods...). This specific scene can also quite clearly be read as an analogy with the pogroms. Several visual elements make the allegory pretty clear: it is at night; they go in a group to attack an isolated individual; they have pitchforks and other farmers' tools to be used as weapons. It is how pogroms are imagined in the collective memory of Europeans. Another scene represents the inhabitants of Duloc obeying the order to bring their magical creatures to the authorities so that they can be "removed". Again no one challenges the order or questions the guards; people of Duloc are so docile... like were docile citizens, gendarmes, civil servants in Europe when Nazi authorities decided to "remove" Jews and other "unfit" people from Europe.

The fifth element is the totalitarian will to create a new man and a new society; be it the Volksgemeinschaft of Hitler or the “communist promise of a classless society” (Arendt, 2004: 473-474). This is probably the most distinctive and peculiar element feature of totalitarianism. And it is clearly identifiable in Duloc. The whole Shrek story starts with the will of Lord Farquaad to get rid out of the magical and fairy tale creatures from his world in order to build a “perfect world”. They do not fit in, like Jews, Gypsies, disabled, homosexuals did not fit in. Every single action in Duloc must fit in the ideal of the perfect world. It is brilliantly explained when one arrives at Duloc and goes to the information desk. There, one can pull a knob and a song starts worth quoting wholly:

Welcome to Duloc, such a perfect town
Here we have some rules, let us lay them down
Don't make waves, stay in line
And we'll get along fine
Duloc is a perfect place
Keep your feet off the grass
Shine your shoes, wipe your...face
Duloc is, Duloc is
Duloc is a perfect place.

This song is sung by a school choir composed of wooden boys and girls absolutely all physically similar. They sing and dance in unison and in line. The teacher is the conductor and on her score that she unfolds, one can read “rules”. Farquaad is obsessed by the creation and maintaining of his perfect world which implies the expulsion of the ones that, in his eyes, do not fit this perfect world.

Liberal democracy

Far Far Away is the kingdom of Harold, Fiona’s father. Politically, this kingdom seems to represent a democratic monarchy. We do not have actually a visual text that clearly indicates the democratic character of the kingdom; but we do not have either visual texts indicating that the kingdom is ruled in an authoritarian fashion. Nevertheless, several scenes support the idea that Far Far Away is a democratic polity. For instance, when King Harold is asked by the Fairy Godmother to get rid out of Shrek, he does not use his oppression forces (his army or secret services); he calls on Puss in Boots to take care of this task. He is obliged to disguise himself and secretly asks him to perform this illegal mission. Now, this is certainly not the type of actions that respects the rule of law; but, if it were a dictatorship, Harold would not be obliged to take all these precautions. Only in a democratic state, does one need to do this type of dirty jobs in a secrete fashion. A second example can be seen in the way the society functions. The subjects look as if they enjoy complete freedom in their movements and in the expression of their individuality (they are wearing different clothes; their physical appearance are different; they exercise different professions). But, the people of Far Far Away are nevertheless alienated by their extreme consumerism. The function of Far Far Away is to serve as a clear and assumed denunciation of the capitalist – consumerist society.

... Far Far Away came to resemble more and more the familiar mecca of conspicuous consumption we all know and love: broad, immaculate streets lined with Palm trees, star-map stands, carriage limos, and oversized shop windows crammed with every conceivable luxury. However, this was more than just clever visual satire. The perception of Beverly Hills – its emphasis on glamour and glitter, appearance over reality – was perfect for intensifying the Shrekian themes of identity and self-doubt. After all, it is the Fairy Godmother who dominates this land of milk and honey, and it is her insidious influence that can be found on every street corner and store sign. It is in this world of image and unreality that Shrek, as an ogre and an outcast, must struggle to survive and ultimately triumph” (Hopkins, 2004: 66)

When producer Katzenberg saw the first drawings of Far Far Away, he demanded that the very characteristics of Beverly Hills be more accentuated. He wanted the analogy to be understood by anybody (Hopkins, 2004: 66). As explained in the above quotation, this peculiar description of a consumerist society accentuates the identity issues of Shrek. What matters in Far Far Away is your appearance and self-confidence. The politics of bodies at play in this kingdom is paramount in the structuration of social – and political - relations. You are successful and powerful if you fit into the canon of beauty. Politically, the fact that the kingdom seems to be a democratic polity does not mean that phenomena of exclusion are not present, on the contrary. Fiona, the heir of the kingdom, was sent and locked in a castle most of her life because she transforms into an ogress at night. King Harold was a frog and entered into an immoral contract with the fairy godmother: in exchange with a proper human body, he promised his daughter to the son of the Fairy Godmother. Thus, he abandons his real political power to the evil fairy godmother, and later to complete idiot Prince Charming, who, then serves the function of the false hero (Propp, 1968). A third group was excluded from the kingdom: all the fairy tales characters that are not beautiful, that do not fit into the frame of acceptable body appearance - Captain Hook, the talking trees, the one-eye man, one Cinderella stepsister, Snowwhite’s stepmother and other villains to use Propp’s classification (Propp, 1968). Because they are not beautiful, they are considered as bad. And indeed, their exclusion from the society transform them into resentful people, ready for violence, full of hate, at the mercy of anyone who would give them back their social status and inverse the logic of distinction. We will see that Prince Charming will use their exclusion and their status of outcast to form a social movement and seize the political power. Yet, at the end of *Shrek 3*, the moral of the future king Arthur is that your physical appearance should not matter, that you can be ugly and good, and that everyone indistinctively of his / her body can be part of a more inclusive society. The last element that should be noticed about the social inclusion / exclusion game in Far Far Away is that some villains are accepted within the society. Two are particularly worth noting: the first, Cinderella’s stepsister who has become friends with Fiona and the other princesses, and the second, the Wolfe who is part of Shrek’s close friends group along with Pinocchio, Gingerbread and the three pigs. But in both these cases, politics is at play: politics of body is overruled by politics of gender. Indeed, both characters are transgender (Pinocchio is also transgender; he wears pink sexy underwear). Thus, Far Far Away is permissive with gender issues but not with body issues. Clearly, the message is the following: no matters how permissive and open a society is, there seems to always be some exclusion at play. And in a consumerist society, exclusion is based on physical appearance, thus transforming the bodies into mere consumption items, into fetishized objects. Far Far Away is a sign in Baudrillard’s sense (1981) – the identity of the individuals are built thru their frenetic activity of consumption. It is a spectacle in Debord’s sense (2006) – social relations in the kingdom exist only through the images projected by the individuals. If one sees Far Far Away as a spectacle, then we are not far from a

form of totalitarianism, which explains why Shrek rejects both Duloc and Far Far Away. He does not want to share the Weltanschauung of Far Far Away.

In conclusion, we have described how three different political regimes are represented and can be interpreted in the Shrek trilogy. These regimes are necessarily places of struggles. Indeed, one feature common to all three regimes is the logic of exclusion of a certain segment of the society in question. Those logics of exclusion beget roots for resistance and the emergence of social movements hoping to bring political change. We unfortunately do not have the space here to offer a description of the different social movements that are emerging to fight these logics of exclusion. Therefore, one could say that the movies carry an important political message: different political regimes, even a democracy, are based on spatial and social exclusion. Yet, one could hope for the development of a polity that will be all inclusive, a cosmopolitan community. The movies resonate with the vibrant call of Andrew Linklater (1998) to transform the political community, to transcend our identity with particularist communities (whose boundaries are based on class, space, gender, ethnic, racial divisions) and become citizens of a new cosmopolitan community of humankind. In fact, the movies are very Kantian inspired. The message is delivered as a Kantian moral as the end of *Shrek 3* when the future king, Arthur, explains that everybody can change, and that everybody would be accepted in his kingdom.

Bibliography:

Arendt, Hannah. 2004. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Schocken Books.

Baudrillard, Jean. (1981). *A Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. St Louis (MO.): Telos Press.

Debord, Guy. (2006). *The Society of the Spectacle*. London: Rebel Press.

Elias, Norbert. Dunning, Eric. 1986. *Quest for Excitement: Sport and leisure in the Civilizing Process*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Elias, Norbert. 1994. *The established and the outsiders: a sociological enquiry into community problems*. Sage.

Hall, Stuart (ed.). (1997). *Representations: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: Sage.

Hopkins, John. 2004. *Shrek. From the Swamp to the Screen*. New York: Harry Abrams Publishers.

Linklater, Andrew. (1990). *Men and Citizens in the Theory of International Relations*. London: Macmillan (2nd edition).

Linklater, Andrew. 1998. *The transformation of Political Community. Ethical Foundations of the post-Westphalian Era*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Montaigne, Michel de. (1960). *Essays. Volume I*. New York : Anchor Books (translated by Donald Frame).

Propp, Vladimir. 1968. *Morphology of the Folktale*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. 1983. *Discourse on the origin of Inequality*. In *The Essential Rousseau*. translated by Lowell Bair. New York: Meridian.

Stirner, Max. extract entitled "A Human Life" from *The Ego and His Own* (1907) in Horowitz, Irving (ed.). (1964). *The Anarchists*. New York: Dell.

Unknown. 2007. "Interview: Jeffrey Katzenberg, DreamWorks Founder and Shrek Producer". *The Independent*, June 22.

Wright, Will. 1975. *Sixguns and Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.