

Women and Pixar:  
The Creative Climate for Female Directors at Pixar Animation Studios

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## **Abstract**

For decades, Pixar Animation Studios has been male-dominated in its directorial staff for its films. In the 33 years since its founding, the studio has only had two women as directors for cinematic releases. Recently, the studio has announced its newest department, SparkShorts, which will aim to give voice to diverse directors in the company's employ, like women and people of color. My research will aim to observe the creative climate of Pixar Animation Studios and discover how the company developed from male-dominated to more open to diverse voices, particularly female, in its productions, and what this gender diversity means for the future of storytelling for the studio.

## **Introduction**

For years, Pixar Animation Studios has been recognized as a powerhouse in animated films. Since its cinematic debut with *Toy Story* in 1995, the studio has continued to release blockbuster hits with critical acclaim including *Finding Nemo* (2003), *Up* (2009), and *Inside Out* (2015). The studio is not only well-known for its animated feature films; it has also gained a reputation for releasing praise-worthy short films, including the Academy Award-winning *For the Birds* (2001) and *Piper* (2016). In the studio's 33-year span, it has received fifteen Academy Awards for "Best Animated Film", five Academy Awards for "Best Animated Short Film", and had two of their films nominated for "Best Picture" ("The Academy Awards Database"). Beyond Academy Awards, the studio has also won multiple Grammy Awards, Annie Awards, and numerous others for their productions.

Though the studio has existed for more than 30 years, it is starkly apparent that the number of women receiving various awards, Academy or otherwise, for feature films and short films is widely disproportionate to male recipients (“The Academy Awards Database”). But this is not a surprising observation when placed in the gender disparity within the animation industry as a whole. The animation industry itself far from epitomizes gender diversity within the workplace. In a June 2019 research study of the film and television animation industry funded by USC Annenberg’s Inclusion Initiative, researchers reported only 2.5% of top 120 animated films from 2007 to 2018 had female directors, while in a survey of the top 52 animated films from 2014 to 2018, only 7% of Heads of Story, 14% of Art Directors, and 8% of Heads of Animation were female (Smith). The gender disparity within the industry as a whole is prevalent in Pixar’s staff of directors, designers, and animators.

## **Background**

In the last 33 years, Pixar Animation Studios has had only two female directors for cinematic releases: Brenda Chapman for *Brave* (2012), the studio’s first film with a female protagonist, and Domee Shi, director of the Academy Award-winning short film *Bao* (2018). The studio has not been well received by half of its female directors, however, as Chapman was removed from the production of her film in 2010 and replaced by director Mark Andrews, and experience from which she learned “never to give any of [her] ideas to a studio again” (Failes). More recently, Pixar has come under fire regarding the atmosphere the studio has towards its female artists and people of color. Actress, screenwriter, and director Rashida Jones, part of the *Toy Story 4* writing team, ceased to work with Pixar on the film for cited creative differences;

however, she noted that the studio “is also a culture where women and people of color do not have an equal creative voice” (Eckardt).

Pixar Animation Studios’ second female director, Domee Shi of *Bao*, has a different story to tell regarding her experience during the development of her short film, one that is thankful for a Pixar executive, the studio’s new CCO Pete Docter. In a 2018 interview, Shi commends Docter as a “huge supporter of unique voices at the studio” who is “interested in different types of stories, different types of characters—and he always wants to try new things” (Grobar). Through Docter’s mentorship and a strong creative voice, Shi developed her film into the first female-directed Pixar cinematic short.

In 2019, Pixar announced its newest department, SparkShorts, which is meant to allow for more diverse directors and storytellers for short animated films. The films are not cinematic releases and artists are given six months to complete their projects. The goal of the department is to “discover new storytellers, explore new storytelling techniques, and experiment with new production workflows” (*Pixar Animation Studios*). Two SparkShorts films have been released on YouTube, while the rest are to be released on Disney+ in November of 2019. A notable example of the productions from SparkShorts is the short film *Purl*, directed and produced by Kristen Lester and Gillian Libbert-Duncan, respectively, tells the story of a ball of yarn new at her job at Bro Inc. She is left out and ignored initially until she changes everything about herself in order to fit in at work. When another ball of yarn joins the team, she realizes that she has lost who she is and tries to make the newcomer feel welcomed in the way she never was. Eventually, more balls of yarn are hired at the company as they provide meaningful contributions to the company (Lester). As SparkShorts films continue their release, “each set of SparkShorts will feature an

equal number of male and female directors” (Schellong). The new department implies a desire from the studio to change the way its artists tell their stories by giving them an avenue

The announcement of SparkShorts and Pixar’s new CCO Pete Docter leads to the question of how Pixar’s creative climate is changing from dominated by male artists to include more female artists in leadership roles. The studio’s initiatives to have a more inclusive and diverse team of female artists and artists of color who get to tell the stories that they want to tell. My research will aim to gain insight into the creative climate surrounding SparkShorts, and how female animators and artists feel regarding the development of a specific department for telling diverse stories. I plan to inquire into these three questions:

1. How has Pixar’s creative climate changed for their female artists who aspire to be directors?
2. What attitudes do female artists at the studio have toward the SparkShorts department?
3. What opportunities, if any, are present in the studio’s climate for developing ideas into bigger projects?

## **Methods**

I plan to conduct interviews with ten female employees at Pixar Animation Studios to gain insight into their attitudes toward the recent company changes. I would like to interview female employees primarily in the animation, story, and visual development departments since employees in these departments focus on the initial storytelling and visual direction for a story more so than the technical departments of animation studios. My questioning will include inquiries into whether the employees have directoral pursuits, and if so, if these pursuits are in the independent sector of animated film or within a studio setting. Then my questioning will turn

to Pixar specifically, addressing whether the recent changes encourage said employees in their directorial pursuits within the studio, the general attitude toward the SparkShorts department, and the process for presenting one's ideas for short films.

### **Expected Results**

Through this investigation, I hope to build a comprehensive summary of the attitudes of female artists at Pixar Animation Studios regarding the company's inclusion initiatives. I plan to write an article with the results of my findings, conveying the effectiveness of SparkShorts and any other changes to foster diversity beyond just commercial success. This study will yield benefits for the animated film industry as it will assess the success of the diversity initiative of a large studio and provide insight into the effectiveness of said initiatives to female artists and make it clear if studios going forward need to make changes to the nature of inclusion initiatives within a studio setting.

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