

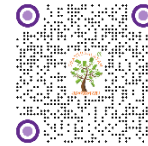


Original Article

CULINARY JOURNEY OF SELF-DISCOVERY AND EMPOWERMENT IN RATATOUILLE

Dr. Jolly Alex ^{1*} 

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of English Christian College Chengannur, Kerala, India



ABSTRACT

Ratatouille (2007) an animated movie is a nuanced exploration of the trans-formative power of art through resistance and self-belief. Its basic premise is about a rat who is blessed with an astute smell of taste and extra-ordinary passion for cooking who eventually emerges as the greatest chef in France. He challenges the stereotypical notion that only humans can cook and proves by his culinary expertise that one can transcend restricting power structures and chase one's dreams and inspire others too to do likewise. The film is a tribute to pioneers who have been marginalised and alienated yet have dismantled oppressive structures, re-ordered power politics and sparked progressive ideological changes and validated their dreams. The protagonist Remy, illustrates the tension between submission and subversion and the choice to be a loner and move ahead towards uncharted territories and thereby realisation of one's dreams. The empowerment which springs from self-belief and steadfast pursuit of one's calling despite opposition-brings forth unprecedented outcomes which are ground-breaking and breath-taking as well. The film underscores the ethical as well as creative dimension of a collaborative approach between human and non-human agents emphasising that true talent can arise from anywhere, literally from the sewers. Hence, the movie is a culinary journey that challenges essentialist norms through a post-structuralist framework affirming empowerment transcending stereotypical constraints.

Keywords: Ratatouille, Subversion, Stereotypes, Creativity, Social Hierarchy

INTRODUCTION

Pixar's Ratatouille, directed by Brad Bird is a multi-layered narrative of a rat who is obsessed with the art of cooking. The movie however, transcends its premise of a rat who is passionately consumed by the art of cooking and emerges as an exploration of identity, passion and the courage to resist stereotypical expectations and limitations. The empowerment which comes from self-belief and pursuing of one's calling in the face of strong opposition is enormous and gives birth to something unprecedented, remarkably jaw-dropping and novel. Remy, the diminutive yet determined hero against all odds, conquers the culinary peaks and garners appreciation of the notoriously hard to please food-critic Anton Ego, proving that greatness can come from the most unexpected places. The paper aims to bring forth how animation movies like Ratatouille caricature the society and offer the harshest social commentary on contemporary society and its attitude towards novices.

*Corresponding Author:

Email address: Dr. Jolly Alex (jollyjeru@gmail.com)

Received: 16 April 2026; Accepted: 03 May 2026; Published 21 May 2026

DOI: [10.29121/Shodhgyan.v4.i1.2026.110](https://doi.org/10.29121/Shodhgyan.v4.i1.2026.110)

Page Number: 122-125

Journal Title: ShodhGyan-NU: Journal of Literature and Culture Studies

Journal Abbreviation: ShodhGyan.NU J. Lit. Cul. Stu.

Online ISSN: 2584-1300, Print ISSN: 3108-2742

Publisher: Granthaalayah Publications and Printers, India

Conflict of Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Authors' Contributions: Each author made an equal contribution to the conception and design of the study. All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

Transparency: The authors affirm that this manuscript presents an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study. All essential aspects have been included, and any deviations from the original study plan have been clearly explained. The writing process strictly adhered to established ethical standards.

Copyright: © 2026 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.

SUBVERSION, IDENTITY, AND ARTISTIC FREEDOM

Ratatouille is an ode to an outsider, to an alienated and marginalized creature yearning for recognition and acceptance, deciphering the struggles of an artist who literally rises from a sewer. The movie is a plea for artistic liberty, which when curbed or strangulated, leads to a dismantling of restrictive societal structures, de-centering of power equations bringing about progressive ideological shifts. Antonio Gramsci says, "The ruling class uses its control over institutions to promote its own interests and worldview, but this dominant culture can be challenged by creating counter-cultures and alternative ways of thinking" (123). Remy, the protagonist, struggles indefatigably against the prejudice of extant power structures-daring to single-handedly challenge stereotypical oppressive social structures and mindsets. The movie on the whole is a subversive collage consisting of Remy-the country rat who loves cooking and dreams of becoming a chef, Linguini- the illegitimate son of the chef yearning for acceptance and his inheritance, Collette- the only female chef who dared to storm the hitherto male bastion and Anton Ego, a notorious food critic and a representative of the arrogant and aloof English nobility, difficult to please or impress. The movie thus celebrates the passionate and relentless struggle for excellence and realisation of dreams by overcoming the moral tug of war between family expectations and individual ambition, submission and subversion, conforming or upsetting the apple-cart.

The hero Remy, is a garbage-scavenging rat, not by a choice of his own, but compelled by his nativity in a rodent family. Unlike his siblings and relatives he has been blessed with an astute sense of taste and smell and hence these garbage-hunting missions which he is frequently subject to are repelling to him. When he broaches this subject with his father, who also happens to be the head of the gang, his father instantly squashes his suggestions and derides his delicate senses. Foucault says, "Power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society" (216). Power is indeed exercised not in isolation but through a web of relationships and strategies to contain the rebel and misfit. Emile, Remy's sibling is very practical and brusque and advises him saying, "Food is fuel. You get picky about what you put in the tank, your engine gonna die. Now shut up and eat your garbage" (00:03:46). His father repeatedly warns him from keeping away from human beings and their kitchens-just the two things that Remy cannot distance himself from. He confesses, "I know I'm supposed to hate the humans, but there is something about them. They don't just survive. They discover, create...good food is like music, you can taste, colour, you can smell it" (00:11:32). Not happy with his son's deviant tastes and in order to curtail his forays into human habitation, his father, the patriarch promotes him to the post of being a poison-detector for the gang. In his essay *Invisible Bullets*, Stephen Greenblatt describes subversion and containment as powerful tools to exercise social control. It is based on the ideology that subversion must be invisible to the subverted. Socialization is a process by which the society disseminates positive feedback to those that willingly conform to their standards, which is generally the majority, while those who refuse to conform are sidelined. However, not all subscribe to the same and consequently a potential for contradiction remains, which the community deals ruthlessly by ostracizing them. When Remy, informs his father of his desire to move out saying, "Eventually a bird got to leave the nest" (00:07:15). His father instantly checks his desires to be independent by his retort, "We are not birds. We are rats. We don't leave our nests. We make them bigger" (00:08:20). The focal point through which the eruption of this contradiction takes place is subversion. Even in literary and cultural establishments, subversion is mostly a matter of reversal of established values or the insertion of other values into them. Remy is a sagacious rat and not an overt rebel, and hence he gingerly tests the waters by and by and constantly debates in his mind the pros and cons regarding conforming to the existing patterns or to subvert it and thereby chart out a fresh new course for himself. Remy does not leave suddenly but maintains a secret life which is known to none but his sibling Emile. He walks on his paws, not wanting to walk on the same paws with which he handles his food. Emile chides him and says, "If Dad sees you walking like that, he's not going to like it" (00:06:45). Remy however dismisses Emile's disapproval by retorting:

You could fill a book, a lot of books, with things Dad doesn't know. You must be imaginative, strong-hearted. You must try things that may not work out. And you must not let anyone define your limits because of where you came from. Your only limit is your soul (00:09:15).

Remy, probably an alter ego of Brad Bird, is a subversive hero, who challenges the dominant order and its ideologies and seeks to transform the established social order and its hierarchy of authority. Transgressive and subversive literature as well as movies-challenge and interrogate those modes of thinking which contribute to the perpetuation of oppressive social and political structures. Since time immemorial, the so-called custodians of society, rigidly enforce patterns of behaviour in order to bring about conformity and enforce control over its members. Though the majority willingly acquiesce, however there are others who refuse to toe the line. For them to conform or not to conform that becomes the question. On one hand, to conform means to court a lifetime of misery and disillusionment, while conversely to not conform is to destabilise the status quo and to face the consequences thereof. Remy is a tribute to pioneer visionaries, who dared to stand against the tide, challenging stereotypes, fighting against odds and braving derision and isolation for the fulfillment of his dreams.

Remy is greatly inspired by the great food connoisseur and Parisian chef Auguste Gusteau, who wrote a bestseller embodying his cherished idea, "Anyone can cook," and consequently he decides to pursue his passion for cooking by trying his luck as a professional cook. This is a very Marxist idea which destabilises class determinism by foregrounding skill over lineage thus prioritizing the subaltern. Remy knows that the odds are stacked heavily against him. He himself remarks, "What's my problem?"

First of all, I'm a rat. Which means life is hard" (00:04:50). He cannot speak or articulate his thoughts, besides no restaurant would allow a rat to enter its portals. In producing a movie with a rat as its hero, is in itself an amusing subversive notion as far as Walt Disney organisation is concerned, its corporate symbol being a mouse. Rats are universally viewed as loathsome and repulsive creatures unlike mice, which are considered to be cute and cuddly. Rats have got the bad press down the years- notorious for carrying plagues and a host of other diseases. A post-structuralist reading of the movie critiques the binaries of human versus animal, refinement versus contamination and culture versus nature. These binaries are destabilised by the presence of Remy in the sacrosanct human kitchen who is not cowed by negative publicity, instead in order to further his prospects he strikes a deal with a garbage boy, Alfredo Linguini. Soon they come into an agreement that Remy's culinary skills and Linguini's human body could combine into a single unit and work to symbiotically benefit both of them. They hatch a system whereby Remy would remain concealed in Linguini's cap and thereby grant him directions in the kitchen. In spite of being hidden, he employs his cooking expertise by under-toque puppetry, an amusing subversive notion, belittling homo-sapien superiority- the rat controlling and instructing the human. Remy challenges anthropocentric views by displaying high degree of aesthetic judgement, intelligence and creativity, the attributes which are supposed to be exclusively human traits. Art is superior and not the artist as Gusteau's remarks, "Not everyone can be a great artist, but a great artist can come from anywhere" (00:10:25). Like a man pulling a horse's bridle to make it obey his wishes, Remy pulls Linguini's tresses to direct in his cooking endeavours. "Creativity is the seed of all innovation" (Sarooghi et al. 715) and Remy by employing his creativity and guided by his sixth sense produces a soup which is an instant hit. The denouement is reached when Anton Ego announces his decision to revisit the Bistro. The notorious food- critic, is a nightmare of all Parisian eateries and he boasts about himself saying, "I don't like food, I love it. If I don't love it, I don't swallow it" (01:18:52). The nail-biting suspense is reached when Linguini presents Anton with a ratotouille, a French vegetable stew- the signature dish that could make or break the bistro's flagging reputation. However, the very first bite transports Ego nostalgically into his childhood days, when he first fell in love with food. He immediately asks for the cook and behold the moment of anagnorosis, here comes the little chef, Remy the Rat. When Linguini reveals the rat's true identity to his cooking staff, they all abandon him one by one, even Collette his love. At that moment of disillusionment and despair, it is amazing how the entire rat community comes to his rescue. Expecting a scathing review from Ego, they wait for the verdict with baited breath, and to their great surprise Ego proves to be gracious. Ego's transformation is laudable, a man who was willing to admit that he was harsh and prejudiced and was willing to embrace change and move ahead. This metamorphosis is sadly lacking in Remy's father's life, who though stands and supports his son in an hour of crisis, yet he continues to distance himself from his son's culinary endeavours. Django represents those patriarchal mindsets which though people are aware of that these need to be dismantled yet are still entertained on account of inertia to embrace changes. Ego, the mouthpiece of Bird comments:

The world is often unkind to new talents, new creations...last night I experienced something new, an extra ordinary meal from a singularly sunexpected source. To say that both the meal and its maker have challenged my preconception about fine cooking is a gross understatement. They have rocked me to my very core (01:12:30).

Hence, eventually Anton is not ashamed to name and acknowledge Remy as the "finest chef in France". The critic's recommendation stands as a testament to Remy's hard-won victory against all odds. As David Ansen remarks, "Ratatouille is a film about the power of creativity and imagination and how these qualities can be used to overcome even the most daunting challenges". Brad Bird subtly infuses a moral compass in this amusing storyline. He refrains from hammering the message on the viewers, instead he allows the characters themselves to speak on inclusion and acceptance.

CONCLUSION

Ratatouille is a celebration of the triumph of passion and courage over rigid social hierarchies. The movie therefore is a heartfelt tribute to the pioneers who dare to risk their everything and stand tall by themselves if need be, for the fulfillment of that which they believe is birthed in their soul and yearns for a release from their creative womb. The use of food as a metaphor for art and creativity is an innovative tool to bring to the fore the subversive dismantling of societal and patriarchal structures to break conventions and embrace innovations. Jean Cocteau remarks, "The function of the artist is to disturb". In this movie, we find Remy disturbing the status quo and hence, one can trace the growth and evolution of Remy from being a commonplace sewer rat to becoming an accomplished French chef and the entire gang of rats likewise progress from inhabiting the Parisian sewers to attaining a nearly human status. Thus Remy's from being marginalised to an accomplished cook is a testament to the truth that one should challenge entrenched power structures and reshape one's world while inspiring others to rethink theirs as well.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

- Ansen, D. (2007, July 4). *Ratatouille*. *Newsweek*.
Bird, B. (Director). (2007). *Ratatouille* [Film]. Pixar Animation Studios.

- Cocteau, J. (1992). *The Art of Cinema* (R. Buss, Trans.). Marion Boyars.
- Foucault, M. (1990). *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1: An Introduction* (R. Hurley, Trans.). Vintage Books. (Original work published 1976)
- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith, Eds. and Trans.). International Publishers.
- Marx, K., and Engels, F. (2002). *The Communist Manifesto*. Penguin Classics. (Original work published 1848)
- Saroghi, H., Libaers, D., and Burkemper, A. (2015). Creativity in Firms: A Meta-Analysis of its Relationship with Innovation. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 60, 1–12.
- Wolfe, C. (2010). *What is Posthumanism?* University of Minnesota Press.