

REWRITING A TALE AS OLD AS TIME:
DISNEY'S FEMALE CHARACTERS, FROM THE
ORIGINALS TO THEIR MODERN
REPRODUCTIONS

MAJA ESKILDSSEN SINDBERG
MASTER'S THESIS



Rewriting a tale as old as time: Disney's female characters, from the originals to
their modern reproductions

*A discursive, multimodal analysis of how female agency and gender roles are
portrayed by the significant characters in Disney's classic animated fairy tales and
their live action versions*

Maja Eskildsen Sindberg

Master's Thesis

Aalborg University

Supervisor: Torben Ditlevsen

June 2021

Abstract

This Master's thesis asks the question of how Disney has depicted topics such as love, gender roles and female agency in both their animated and live action films. The data used for this paper were four animated films and the live action ones based on the same stories from 1950 to 2020:

Cinderella 1950/Cinderella 2015, Sleeping Beauty 1959/ Maleficent 2014, Beauty and the Beast 1991/ Beauty and the Beast 2017 and Mulan 1998/ Mulan 2020. The thesis focuses on discovering similarities and changes within the films, as Disney reproduced their own animated content into live action ones, as well as looking further into what types of remakes the live action films were. The analysis was aided by Norman Fairclough's critical discourse, Murray Smith's concept of Structure of Sympathy, Thomas Leitch and Lisa Hill's terminology on remakes and adaptations. Multimodality as a method was also included due to several modes having been utilised for this study, including colours, spoken and written words, films and online comments. Using these theories and methods, the paper examines how Disney portrays their princesses, princes, villains and overall concepts of love and gender. What this thesis found was that Disney's characters have developed through time, as socio-cultural needs have changed in accordance with a constantly evolving society. As humans become progressively aware of dated ideologies, they transcend them in order to create new power structures more concerned with equal gender representation. Characters have become more three-dimensional and complex, which in turn makes them seem more human. Thus, deeming them more deserving of redemption and sympathy from the audience. Both the heroes and the villains have achieved this development in more than one of the live action films, and the idea of one's 'happily ever after' being directly tied to the love of a man seems to fade into the background. Instead, Disney now seems to open up to other representations of love being in the forefront of their stories. True love, particularly the romantic, heterosexual kind, is still a major aspect of Disney's storytelling, but the narratives in recent productions seem to suggest that this power structure may be changing. Lastly, this thesis discovered that the success of these live actions films was debatable, considering that audiences seem conflicted on whether or not they like these additions to the fictional world of Disney.

Table of contents

1. Introduction.....	1.
2. Methodology.....	2.
3. Theory.....	3.
3.1. <i>Theory of film remakes.....</i>	3.
3.2. <i>Fairclough's critical discourse.....</i>	9.
3.3. <i>Murray Smith's Structure of Sympathy.....</i>	11.
4. Analysis.....	13.
4.1. <i>The princess.....</i>	13.
4.1.1. How is the original princess portrayed?.....	14.
4.1.2. Agency and passiveness.....	22.
4.1.3. Is the princess's portrayal changed in the modern version?.....	27.
4.2. <i>The topic of love and the prince himself.....</i>	33.
4.2.1. Disney's focus on everlasting true love.....	33.
4.2.2. The purpose of the prince.....	34.
4.2.3. Rewriting the prince.....	38.
4.3. <i>The Villains.....</i>	44.
4.3.1. The villain's purpose.....	44.
4.3.2. Remaking the villain.....	50.
4.4. <i>The topic of remakes and fan reception.....</i>	56.
5. Discussion.....	66.
6. Conclusion.....	68.
7. Bibliography.....	72.

Introduction

This Master's project sets out to investigate how Walt Disney Pictures first adapted and revised these well-known storylines of princesses, princes and villains, and then re-revised them later on in a more modern aspect. Specifically, this paper will analyse how the most significant characters in these films have been shaped and reshaped throughout time, starting from their animated version to the newer live action films based on the same stories.

The purpose of this will be to understand how time, society and cultural changes may have affected and thereby changed Disney's female protagonists, villains and love interest and their story arcs. To do this, some of Disney's traditional animated princess stories will be used alongside their modern remakes or adaptations. The movies, which will be delved into, are as follows: *Cinderella 1950/Cinderella 2015*, *Sleeping Beauty 1959/ Maleficent 2014*, *Beauty and the Beast 1991/ Beauty and the Beast 2017* and *Mulan 1998/ Mulan 2020*. The reasoning behind choosing more than merely one animated film and its live action remake is because a single text or film on its own would not be able to show recurring tendencies or differences through time. As Norman Fairclough one of the chosen theoretics for this paper, states, "a single text on its own is quite insignificant: the effects of media power are cumulative, working through the repetition of particular ways of handling causality and agency, particular ways of positioning the reader, and so forth" (1992 45). The chosen animated Disney films date back to the fifties, thus spanning all the way from the first wave of feminism to today's fourth wave, wherein all the live action films exist. Considering that the live action films are very recent, having been created within the past ten years, this analysis therefore expects to see clear evidence of a certain degree of change in the stories and characterization.

To complete the analysis, relevant dialogue and screenshots from assorted scenes will be used in order to gain an understanding of how Disney portrays the significant characters, as well as examine what overall themes seem to recur throughout the narratives. Furthermore, this analysis will be aided by Norman Fairclough's concept of critical discourse and his three-dimensional model of discourse. The purpose of doing so is that this paper wants to not only understand how Disney has chosen to portray and later reportray these characters, but also gain an understanding of what the specific portrayals tells the audience about the current time period in which the films were produced. The animated movie and its live action remake will thereby function as each other's contrast and any changes or similarities between them is expected to

reflect how Disney has either changed or upheld their perception of feminism/female agency/gender portrayal.

Beyond that, as this paper tackles not only the original movie, but their modern counterpart as well, it will be just as relevant to look into how audiences have reacted to Disney creating live action versions of their classic animation films. This will be done by examining relevant comments on the website Reddit, where several subforums dedicated to each of the films exist. By gaining awareness of how viewers feel about these films being reproduced, the thesis expects to acquire an understanding of whether or not remaking and reproducing these old classics work. Another theoretical scope for this paper will be Murray Smith's *Structure of Sympathy*, because a major part of the analysis will focus on understanding characters and character portrayal. As such, his concepts of how we, as an audience, come to recognise, understand and perhaps even form an attachment with certain characters is significant in order to accurately answer the thesis statement. As this thesis tackles not only Disney's original animated film, but their live action re-revisions of them, Thomas Leitch and Lisa Hill's definitions of adaptations and remakes have been crucial for the paper's theoretic structure. These definitions have been implemented in order to understand and define what specific type of remake each of these live action films may be, along with aiding in comprehending what the purpose and criteria of the specific remake may be. Lastly, Amy Davis' works on Disney's male and female characters, as well as Gunther Kress's approach to multimodality and semiotics have been helpful in order to complete the analysis.

Therefore, the thesis statement is: How has Disney depicted love, gender roles and female agency in their classic animated films, and how are these topics reshaped years later in their live action films?

Methodology

This thesis seeks to examine the visual aspect, the spoken and sung dialogue, and the reception of these Disney films. Therefore, the methodological approach for this paper is Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of discourse, as Fairclough functions both as a theoretical approach and a methodological tool. His model will be used to analyse the films in order to understand both the content within the fictional world of these Disney films, as well as the social context surrounding it and the viewers' reception of said material. However, it is important to note that this paper will not be doing a close linguistic analysis of the texts. When dealing with

the textual layer, overall communication and song lyrics performed by the films' characters will be analysed. Specific phrasing or enunciation and the counting of how many or few times specific phrases emerge will not be regarded as a vital part of this analysis, as phonetic aspects of speech have not been deemed relevant in regards to the scope of this thesis.

Furthermore, as this project utilises film as its chosen piece of text, the paper will be multimodal in its approach, as it will not only analyse spoken pieces of dialogue, but also visual aspects in film production, such as colours, character design and sounds. Beyond that, online comments from the website Reddit.com will be implemented in the analysis in order to investigate how viewers have received and interpreted these Disney films. To briefly define the concept of multimodality, it implements the "use of more than one semiotic mode in meaning-making, communication, and representation generally, or in a specific situation" (Chandler, Daniel, and Rod Munday "multimodality"). Multimodal is concerned with using multiple modes, as there are many more semiotic signs beyond that of spoken and dialogue. Anything from words, written language or colours to shapes can become a sign, if someone derives a deeper meaning from it (Harwood, Debra, et al. 2). Considering that several modes are at play here, both the multimodal aspects within film production viewers interacting and discussing the films online, multimodality as a method cannot be ignored and will be a crucial part of this thesis.

Theory

Theory of film remakes

For the purpose of this paper, the need to understand the concept of remakes is crucial. There are different kinds of reproductions of a given text and they all serve different functions. Differentiating between these categories can be a tricky subject, according to Lisa Hill. "The distinction between remakes and adaptations can be slippery, and the film industry has a long history of retelling tales in both forms. Remakes imply a sense of replication and are conventionally defined as films remade as films, while adaptations suggest a greater license in terms of both form and content" (Disney, Nostalgia, and Adaptation: Who's Watching Watson's Belle). Furthermore, the act of remaking earlier works is often driven by technological advancement, such as sounds, technicolour and CGI. The constant development of tools enables film-and animation studios to perfect their work and, as such, allow studios like Walt Disney to remaster their earlier animated films into live-action ones (ibid.).

It is important to remember that what is being referred to in the section above as the Disney original or earlier film, does not equate that this is the original version of the fairy tale. Fairy tales, much like many other classic texts, have changed form constantly throughout time and thereby survived for many generations. As Hill elaborates with the use of Linda Hutcheon's concept of adaptations in *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), "cultural texts are understood to evolve in accordance with socio-cultural needs in a Darwinian, 'survival of the fittest' way. Fairy tales are a well-documented cultural artifact exemplifying this model, as they have moved from oral tales, to written tales, to animated and live-action films" (2017). While these stories have existed for a very long time, they have evolved by changing modes. When film studios, like The Walt Disney Company, use a classic text as a film, be it animated or live action, they are updating the text to fit the current socio-cultural needs of the time period in which it exists. Disney is therefore not only remastering their own earlier films to make a more modern, realistic version, they are also recycling old material instead of having to create something brand new each time. By recycling a story which has already been successful, Disney manages to entertain new generations of children, while still holding onto the now-adult audience that watched the original version. Additionally, they can update the story to become more relevant with the social context in which the film will be placed.

While Hill discusses two means of retelling a text, a remake and adaptation, Thomas Leitch elaborates further on the matter and adds the homage, the readaptation, the update and the true remake to the roster. For clarification, when speaking broadly about the subject, this theory section will henceforth refer to the overall concept of a reproduction as a remake and specify which type of remake that is being discussed, when needed.

When any piece of text is recreated, it needs to please a broad collection of viewers, as it will have a variety of audiences, each with their own expectations for the particular remake. The audiences' expectations are not only different but can contradict each other as well.

A remake's very status as a remake presupposes audiences who come to it with different backgrounds, which encourage different wishes and expectations. The remake aims to please each of these audiences: The audience that has never heard of the original film it is based on, the audience that has heard of the film but not seen it, the audience that has seen it but does not remember it, the audience that

has seen it but liked it little enough to hope for an improvement, and the audience that has seen it and enjoyed it (Leitch 139).

He elaborates on this by explaining the very success of any remake is dependent on its ability to either deliver various types of enjoyment for viewers with a varying degree of knowledge and care for the text the remake is based on, or more often on the remake creating a mutual understanding which enables such a broad audience to understand and enjoy it in the same way (141). Some audiences will not even care that there exists an original text that this film is based upon, it is insignificant for their enjoyment; for others, however, the original will be used as a reference to measure out every scene in the remake and see how it holds up against the initial text. As such, most remakes will do their best to satisfy all of these aforementioned groups of audiences by appealing to a broad spectrum of common needs (139-140). To ensure that a remake will satisfy as many as possible, any remake typically invokes the aura of the original piece, rather than its concrete memory. Leitch explains that the whole reasoning behind remaking anything is that, according to conventional assumption, the original text was exceptional. If it was anything but, then why would any director bother remaking it at all? However, even though the original was outstanding, any remake must be expected to be even better; if it does not compare to the original, the audience would simply watch or rewatch the original instead of giving the remake a chance. Remakes come with a paradoxical promise of being, “just like the original, only better. The fundamental rhetorical problem of remakes is to mediate between two irreconcilable claims: That the remake is *just like* its model, and that it’s *better*” (142). Since remakes are created with these two claims as their driving force, there will be a level of competition between any remake and its original. Of course, there are certain cases where competition does not exist, such as when filmmakers like Alfred Hitchcock reproduce their own earlier films. Here, the purpose is not to compete with their first film, but rather to revise and improve them. However, these cases are rare when it comes to remakes and the majority will set out to compete with their predecessor.

When remakes seek to please both audiences familiar with the original and those who have never heard of it, they have to be careful with not creating a film that will invoke too many memories of the original. This is a complicated matter, considering that they are retelling a story, which will limit the level of change they can introduce to the storyline. This complication of not conjuring too many memories of the original is usually solved by adding some sort of twist to the

plot. This twist functions in two ways: It teases the viewers that know how the original story is told and ensures that a completely new audience with no pre-existing knowledge will be able to pick up the same amount of background knowledge. Such expository strategies help to unify a very wide variety of audiences, by “giving the new audience a crash course enabling them to have the same kind of informed expectations as the audience who has seen the original film but implying at the same time that familiarity with the original film will provide an additional teasing intimacy with this one” (141). No matter which type of audience one might start out as, this method ensures that they will all understand enough to create several expectations of what might happen, without having enough knowledge to know exactly what will follow.

This all leads back to a general rhetorical problem of any remake, which is the issue of intertextuality. By invoking the aura of the original, the remake should be able to unify audiences, satisfy their varying desires and cement its claim to be like the original, only better.

Now, this is where the different types of remakes come into play, as to better understand their functions and which general attitude they each adopt towards the original. Thomas Leitch is very specific when explaining that the philosophy of remakes being better than originals is not relevant when it comes to film sequels, for example. Some sequels occasionally gravitate towards appearing like a remake and, likewise, some remakes may contain aspects of sequels. However, the two genres are inherently different, and they serve to please two distinctive appeals for their audiences. A sequel’s purpose is to give the viewers more insight into a finished story and allow them to learn more about their favourite characters’ lives and fates. On the other hand, a remake does not promise the audience any new information: They merely promise us the same story in a slightly new format (142). The format of the remake can be altered as explained above, because of the paradoxical promise of remakes being better than their original. In its search to be just like the original, only better, the remake can adopt one of four different approaches to how they are going to retell the original story, each with its own characteristic technique to solve the contradictory claim of being the same as their original, but better still.

The first of these approaches is the readaptation. A readaptation is a cinematic remake of a classic literary work that has already been adapted. However, the readaptation will ignore any earlier adaptations. The purpose of a readaptation is to recreate the story as true to the original as possible, ensuring complete fidelity with the first model, which means that it is often more rigorous with retelling the original story than earlier cinematic retellings may have been (Leitch

142). Some adaptations often form a hierarchy of textuality, because these film versions, “treat their source material as a classic text to be preserved and dismissing the textual claims of earlier versions of those stories” (142). This is predominantly the case with classical plays, such as Shakespeare’s works or novels by Dickens. This creation of hierarchy happens, because even though everything may be a text, as Fairclough defines (*Discourse and Social Change* 4), some texts may hold more authority than others. As such, any earlier version of a text can be ignored in the interest of invoking the essence of the true, original text, even though the earlier remakes may have tried vigorously to do the very same thing. By dismissing any textual claims made by earlier adaptations, the adaptation lowers any competition between their retelling of the original text and earlier retellings. To exemplify, a adaptation of Hamlet from 1969 can try to avoid any comparison with another version of Hamlet from the 1940’s by invoking the original story, Shakespeare’s play itself, rather than any earlier films. “Adaptations can present themselves as just like their models only better because they pose as original translations of the models to a new medium rather than remakes of earlier movies” (Leitch 142).

While this method of retelling classic texts relies on its fidelity to the original text, not all remakes of classics strive to make fidelity their objective. Frank Kermode’s study *The Classic* is centred on coming to terms with literary classics by reconsidering the classics’ relations to newer generations of readers. Based on this, he creates a contrast between two general perspectives on classic pieces of text. These two perspectives are known as essence and disposition, which can be translated into story and discourse (143). The story is the basis of meaningful events, which will remain constant no matter which version of the specific story is told in any given remake of the original. For example, Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* has been reproduced several times, but the core of the story is that Romeo and Juliet are star-crossed lovers. However, the discourse surrounding the basis of meaningful events may change. Thus, the way the story is depicted can be altered without changing the core narrative (143), such as *Romeo and Juliet* having a cartoon version, where they are all garden gnomes living in the neighbouring gardens of Mr. Capulet and Miss Montague.

This possibility of change in a remake’s discourse becomes possible, when authors sell the rights to their work, such as a play or book. If they choose to do so, then they are simultaneously selling the rights to adapt the story into a new discursive mode – film – and remakes are adaptations of a particular story to a new discursive embodiment within the same mode of representation (143).

To exemplify: While this is not a readaptation, in the final Harry Potter book, changes within the discourse is apparent in the film version. Voldemort dies in one way in the book and in the movie another. Again, the essence stays the same: Voldemort dies, but the way this event is enacted is slightly different, because it is no longer J.K. Rowling who is telling the story, but a film director retelling the story in a different mode.

Next, there is the update. This type of remake will treat the original text as a classic, however, the story will be changed in a very obvious way. Leitch describes it as being overtly revisionary (143), as it may change elements such as altering the original's system of values, the setting or by using elements of realism that essentially denounces the original text as being outdated, obsolete or completely irrelevant. An update can come across as a parody even, when critiquing the original source. As opposed to other types of remakes, the update will generally not be content with being seen as inferior compared to the classic piece it is based on. Instead, it wishes to compete directly with the original by updating it and accommodating it to a newer, changed audience's presumed liking.

In clear contrast to the update, Leitch introduces the homage. Homages are a type of remake, which "situates themselves as secondary texts whose value depends on their relation to the primary text they gloss... Homages therefore present themselves as valorisations of earlier films which are in danger of being ignored or forgotten" (144). Its essential aim is to celebrate and pay tribute to an earlier film, rather than try to appear superior and steal its place. This is very different from the readaptation, which completely ignores any earlier film versions. The homage will deal with the aforementioned contradictory claim of remakes being 'just like their originals, only better' by simply denouncing any proclamation of being better, as it is not their intention (145).

The last type of remake defined by Leitch is the true remake. This particular type seeks out to make the original relevant by updating it. To do so, it combines a focus on a certain cinematic original with their take on an accommodating stance (145). This type of remake is very dependent on its triangular relationship with the author of the source, typically a literary one, as well as a cinematic original that the true remake will borrow information very directly from without crediting the film. Here, Leitch refers back to Kermode and explains that, according to Kermode's view, the primary matter at stake with film remakes and their originals is the economic aspect. Producers of a given remake wish to not only make the original story more fitting for a new audience, as well as a new discourse, but also completely eradicate any audience's desire to watch the original film that

the remake seeks to replace. Therefore, even though the remake honours the original, “the true remake admires its original so much it wants to annihilate it” (145). In true remakes, there may be updates to the older version, restorations of suppressed material or erasure of any references that could tie the film to a particular historical period and, as such, cause the film to become dated later. As Leitch exemplifies, this is done in *Body Heat*, a film loosely based on *Double Indemnity*, both of which originate as a novel written by James M. Cain. In *Body Heat*, a line from the earlier film is edited from stating the particular value of a house being six thousand dollars to simply insinuating that it is expensive (147). *Body Heat* becomes the definitive version of the original story instead of merely being presented as a new version of a familiar tale, which causes the other models to become antiquated, similar to when a new model of a phone or car is revealed to awaiting buyers. This means that they are not introduced as a new discursive version of a well-known story, instead they are the story themselves: Updated, renewed and effectively void of any mistakes that may have impaired their originals. Instead of adding new material to an old story, the true remake frees values that were hidden in the original story all along. It acts as if it has no discourse of its own, effectively seeking to completely deny its own discursiveness and textuality. By denying this, the purpose is to never become outdated, as it appears to be fully congruent with its story and thus timeless (147). As such, the true remake is the only type of remake that is dependent on a “triangular notion of intertextuality, since their rhetorical strategy depends on ascribing their value to a classic earlier text and protecting the value by invoking a second earlier text as betraying it” (147).

To conclude, the topic of remakes is a complicated one, as there are a variety of subcategories. Each of these try to entertain the majority of an audience by retelling the original story in their own way, whether it be by updating the story, paying tribute to the original, readapting it in any sort of manner or simply retelling it in a slightly different format. Thomas Leitch’s definitions of remakes will function as a way to categorise the modern Disney remakes to better understand which particular category they fit into.

Fairclough’s critical discourse

This paper intends to create a two-tiered analysis, which looks into the fictional world of the Disney films, as well as the social context surrounding them. Thus, Fairclough’s notion of critical discourse and his three-dimensional model of discourse will be useful in completing the purpose of this paper. The three-dimensional model is composed of three levels, namely text, discursive practice and social practice. Each layer requires three different types of analytical methods and

Fairclough regards each of them as indispensable for discourse analysis (Fairclough *Discourse and Social Change* 78).

The textual level deals with pieces of text, or description. In the case of this paper, the textual level will revolve around the chosen selection of Disney films. To specify, the textual level will go into detail with how the stories are told, both verbally and visually.

The discursive practice level is centred around the processes of text production, distribution and consumption, all of which vary greatly between different types of discourse based on social factors (ibid. 78). As Fairclough describes, social context contributes to the way texts are produced. To elaborate, the author's intended meaning in a text may be quite different from how a reader of said text interprets it. Texts are created in specific ways based on their social context and read in specific ways as well. For instance, a commercial is not created at random; each image, text or voice-over is chosen with a purpose. However, while the producers of said commercial have their own intended meaning, the receivers can very possibly interpret it in another way. As such, this level focuses on interpretation. The analysis will utilise the discursive practice level in order to understand the processes of both how the films are produced, as well as how they are perceived and interpreted by the audience.

The third dimension of the three-dimensional model deals with the social and historical conditions that control the aforementioned processes of production and reception, meaning that it intends to explain the context around the other processes. Social practices are centred around ideology and power in the form of hegemony. Ideology appears in societies where categories such as "class, gender, cultural group, and so forth" (Fairclough 91) are instrumental in the dominance of said society or community. Fairclough considers discursive practises to be ideologically invested, when these practices carry signifiers that assists in either restructuring current power structures or upholding them (91). Because power structures can be affected, Fairclough does not consider ideology to be something which is permanently etched into our society. Rather, it is a concept that can be transcended and changed by human beings, when they transcend societal power structures. Regarding power structures, Fairclough places discourse "within a view of power as hegemony and a view of the evolution of power relations as a hegemonic struggle" (86). The concept of hegemony cooperates with the three-dimensional model's third level in the sense that hegemony provides a way of speculating change related to the development of power relations. More specifically, it

grants the possibility to focus on discursive changes, while simultaneously seeing it as not only contributing to but being shaped by bigger processes of change.

Hegemony is leadership as much as domination across the economical, political, cultural and ideological domains of a society. Hegemony is the power over society as a whole of one of the fundamental economically-defined classes in alliance with other social forces, but it is never achieved more than partially and temporarily, as an ‘unstable equilibrium’... Hegemony is a focus constant struggle around points of greatest instability between classes and blocs, to construct or sustain or fracture alliances and relations of domination/subordination, which takes economic, political and ideological forms. (Fairclough *Discourse and Social Change* 92)

Hegemony both deals with creating, changing or breaking down certain alliances, as well as integrating subordinate classes using ideological modes. However, no matter how much power one particular group has over society, it will never be permanent. This is due to human beings having the power to transcend and change power structures, which causes any form of domination to be an unstable and merely partial form of dominance.

All the levels in the three-dimensional model are dependent on each other, which means that the order in which the analysis utilises each dimension is not important, as they are “mutually explanatory” (Janks 27).

To summarise, this concept of Fairclough’s three interrelated dimensions of discourse and his approach to critical discourse analysis can thus be used to find patterns and disconnections in texts. Here, the first level will be used to create the textual analysis, also referred to as description, with the chosen texts serving as the objects of analysis. The second layer functions as the aspect of context, meaning that in this dimension, the processes of production and reception by human beings will be looked further into in order to understand how struggles over power relations in discourse happen. Lastly, the third layer concentrates on the social practices, as it is an analysis of the social and historical circumstances that dictates the aforementioned processes of production and reception. These three dimensions in Fairclough’s model will aid this paper in describing, interpreting and explaining the phenomenon that is the Disney princess, her fictional world and close relations, as well as her evolution through remakes.

Murray Smith’s Structure of Sympathy

This paper's chosen objects of analysis are an assortment of Disney films. All these films fall into the genre of fairy tales, where each type of important character is often very clearly defined as either good or bad in the sense that they are villains or heroes, princesses or witches, or good and evil sidekicks. As such, it seems only necessary to explain how we as an audience understand character types and how we develop a relation with them that either causes the viewer to root for them or hope for their defeat. With fairy tales, it appears to be obvious for the most part which characters are good or bad, considering that these characters are often accompanied by certain semiotic signs, which help to indicate their function for the story.

Murray Smith's theory of the structure of sympathy is useful in understanding how the audience not only recognises specific characters in any sort of production, but also has the opportunity to create alignment and allegiance with them. If one wishes to build allegiance with a character, all three of these steps are necessary and need to be completed in order to achieve the final stage of allegiance (*Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* 81). Firstly, the point of recognition is simply being able to tell one specific character apart as an individual, as well as understanding this particular character's relevance towards the plot. Here, viewers are likely to recognise the most important characters' functions in the story as well, such as whether they are looking at a hero or villain.

Secondly, after this is achieved, the viewer may move on to the point of alignment. This happens, when one is given both subjective access to the specific character, as well as spatio-temporal attachment (83). Subjective access simply means that the audience is allowed inside the character's head and is able to hear their inner thoughts: By inviting viewers into their most personal spaces, the audience gets to be more aligned with them and experiences the world in which this story is told through their eyes. The element of spatio-temporal access means that even though the viewer may be watching an act that does not directly include the main character, the scene will most likely turn out to be important to the main character's story arch. Regardless of whether or not he or she is not in the scene, the information given here will all lead back to the main character anyway.

Lastly, there is the final step, the matter of allegiance. This is defined by Smith as both a cognitive and emotional response (84), meaning that it is not as simple as the viewer being able to single them out as an important character based on cinematic storytelling elements; the viewer chooses if they want to root for any particular main character based on their core values and morals. After being thoroughly exposed to them and invited inside their head to create a deeper connection

between the audience and the character, the audience decides whether or not they wish to root for them. Their allegiance is based on whether or not they are feeling sympathetic towards the character and their goals. Additionally, the act of feeling sympathetic towards a character's moral values is closely linked to one's own core values, as we judge based on our own principles. If the viewer feels as if a character acts in the same manner as the viewer themselves agrees with, it forms an attachment (84). One could also refer to this concept of allegiance as loyalty: If we feel as if we wish to root for the character to succeed in their goal, we are claiming our loyalty to them and our opposition to the character's antagonist.

Analysis

The analysis will be divided into four chapters, namely *The princess*, *The topic of love and the prince himself*, *The villains* and *The topic of remakes and fan reception*. The three first chapters will be focused on analysing how these significant Disney characters are portrayed in the animated original, and then how Disney may have changed their characters in the live action films. The purpose for doing so will be, firstly, to see which characters have received the most agency and whether or not there is a coherence between who either receives considerably more or less agency, and thereby seems either independent and active, or passive and dependent on others. The last chapter will take a step back from the fictional world and utilise Fairclough's second and third levels of his three-dimensional model of discourse in order to understand how audiences have received these films, particularly the aspect of the live action films. Here, the analysis hopes to determine if these remakes are a success according to Leitch's theories on what makes a particular remake profitable, and thus successful. Furthermore, this section will delve into what meaning audiences have created based on their pre-existing knowledge of the animated films, combined with the new aspect of seeing the live action films as well. Will their perception and attitude towards these well-known family films have changed, and if so, are their new opinions negative or positive?

The princess

At the centre of each of these films is the Disney princess. As the princesses are the main, female characters, this chapter will have a large section of the analysis dedicated to them. While not all of these women start out as princesses, all of them except one ends up becoming one in the end. However, all of these female protagonists are defined as "official princesses" and reside on the princess *Line* list created by The Walt Disney Company (Orenstein *What's Wrong With Cinderella?*). This concept of an official list was created as a marketing strategy, specifically

targeted at a wide variety of young girls. The strategy's purpose was to create and sell merchandise, like toys and costumes, which highlighted the characters separately from their movies' releases and encouraged children to personally identify with their favourite character. This ensured that parents would buy the products associated with their child's preferred princess and thereby contribute to Disney marketing sales (Setoodeh and Yabroff 2007). Besides its function as a marketing- and sales strategy, this list also operates as a way to define which of the female Disney protagonists make the cut to officially be defined as a princess. The princesses on the list are considered royals either by birth, marriage or due to their heroic actions, which is the case with Mulan. Because these characters are all defined as official princesses, it must be assumed that they likely have overlapping character traits, both appearance- and personality wise. Considering that each of the princesses in this paper are on the official list, it seems relevant to ponder further upon how they are portrayed, as the list is heavily targeted towards young girls. With such a young audience as their primary target group, Disney's portrayal of gender holds an influence over young women from adolescence to adulthood, which causes Disney to contribute to how femininity and the female gender are perceived and performed by children (England et al. 2011). According to Judith Butler, gender itself is a performance rather than an identity human are born with. She defines gender as something that is concerned with "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance of a natural sort of being" (1999 43). As such, the values, gendered stereotypes and behaviours in Disney films will directly influence the young people watching them, because television holds a powerful social influence over how children define concepts of gender (England et al. 2011).

As such, this analysis section wishes to delve into how these princesses are portrayed in order to discover if Disney has a recurring set of personality- and appearance traits that they have deemed important for all their official princesses to possess. Any recurring traits must be assumed to hold value for Disney's idea of a princess, meaning that whichever way this character is depicted has to be considered the preferred way that 'good' women must carry themselves. Undoubtedly, there is nothing more pure, thus good, than a Disney princess within the fictional world of Disney. This means that the way these women behave will teach children, particularly the main target group of girls, how a 'good' girl or woman acts and what traits the 'good' woman must possess.

How is the original princess portrayed?

Starting out with the aspect of personality traits in the originals, the princesses all seem to fall into three distinct types, all of which have overlapping tendencies: There is Mulan's feisty and clumsy, albeit well-meaning personality, Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty's serene, kind and animal-loving nature and lastly, Belle's intellectual, forward-thinking mind. Additionally, the princesses can all be ranked from most to least passive in terms of agency. Sleeping Beauty remains the most passive, then comes Cinderella and Belle, and lastly, Mulan acts as the most active.

Considering the age gaps between the films, it seems necessary to briefly define the waves of feminism with the help of Martha Rampton's definition. This will serve as a reference for understanding why these women may differ in their portrayal based on the year they were created in, as "a film reflects the society which produces it" (Davis *Good Girls & Wicked Witches* 116). The first wave, centred around the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was mainly concerned with voting rights for women and women's participation in politics, while the second wave, which spanned from the 60's to the 90's was predominantly concerned with sexuality and reproductive rights (Rampton "Four Waves of Feminism"). Furthermore, this wave became increasingly aware of issues regarding women being confined to the role of housewives or, if they had jobs, it was mainly low wage ones. The topic of sex and gender being two separate entities came into light, as well as the idea of all types of oppression (gender, race class) being related (ibid.). The mid-90's birthed the third wave, which concerned itself with body image, reproduction rights and the patriarchy in an attempt "to subvert sexist culture and deprive it of its verbal weapons" (ibid.). Rampton goes on to state that a current fourth wave is evolving around us. However, as this article was created in 2008, it seems safe to say that the fourth wave is not merely emerging, it is here, with rape culture and sexual harassment concerning the MeToo movement at its forefront.

The Disney princesses are different characters with their own plot, but nearly all of them seem to fall into a trope, which has become popularised in Chick Flicks in the early 00's, known as "She is not like other girls". It is most often used as a way to distinguish yourself as being different from other women, usually in the case of femininity, hobbies and other gender stereotypes (More *The Problem With Saying "You're Not Like Other Girls"*). In film and TV, the trope relies on a main character to be inherently different from the movie's other (female) characters in some way to establish her as the main character. From a filmmaking perspective, this tactic also serves the function of a viewer being able to easily distinguish the protagonist from others, which ensures that viewers will quickly form a recognition with the main character (Smith 116). With Belle, Cinderella

and Mulan, it creates “us versus them” dichotomy. Here, the ‘us’ is the princess and the viewers of said film and ‘them’ is the antagonists and other minor characters who either work directly against the princess’s happy ending or remain unsupportive of them. Belle, Cinderella and Mulan all display traits of being different from the other women in their respective age groups. This is evident in *Beauty and the Beast*, when the village sings about Belle in the opening scene.

Look, there she goes, the girl is strange, no question
Dazed and distracted, can't you tell?
Never part of any crowd
'Cause her head's up on some cloud
No denying she's a funny girl, that Belle
...
Very different from the rest of us
She's nothing like the rest of us
Yes, different from the rest of us is Belle (*Beauty and the Beast* 1991 00:06:33)

The whole village singles out Belle as being divergent which ostracizes her. Belle simultaneously sings about the village being dull and repetitive with their daily actions, hinting that she does not want to fit in with them at all. It is evident that Belle is not considered to be similar to the other girls in the village and that her hobby of reading is peculiar: “With a dreamy far-off look and her nose stuck in a book, what a puzzle to the rest of us is Belle” (ibid. 00:05:40). While the villagers consider Belle’s actions to be strange, and thereby signify it to be less acceptable, they are indifferent towards the triplets continuously fawning over Gaston. This seems to divide the love seeking girls and Belle, who merely wishes to read her favourite books and imagine herself in faraway places. This act of differentiating between the young women interested in romance and the main character is also evident in Mulan. When they are walking in line towards the matchmaker, Mulan needs to copy the other girls’ postures and movements, while they either seem to have it perfectly memorised or know how to carry themselves without having to practice at all.



(*Mulan* 1998 00:08:47)

Lastly, in *Cinderella*, all the young eligible women are eager to meet the prince and hopefully secure a marriage proposal from him, while *Cinderella* is simply excited to have a night out. As such, the three of them are all shown as having different priorities than the other girls, which causes them to stick out from the crowd and thereby being “not like other girls”, even though the princesses never outright claim to be different themselves. Belle, however, does hint at being different, considering that she finds the village life mundane and uninteresting, which signifies that the other young women partake in actions that Belle cannot relate to. Aurora from *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) has no specific hints at her being different from other girls, which makes sense given that she is kept hidden for most of her life. Because she has no peers to either compare herself to or clash with, the topic seems irrelevant to her story and how her personality is constructed.

When discussing portrayal, the matter of physical appearance cannot be ignored. Carrying on with the earlier notion of the princess being “not like other girls”, it is suitable to have a side-by-side comparison of the other women that the main character is either directly described, or heavily hinted to, as being different from. To clarify, *Sleeping Beauty* has no one in her age group to be

compared with, since she spends most of the film accompanied by her fairy godmothers, all of which are older women in a matronly image. For reference Aurora's appearance, a screenshot of her is included as well.



(Beauty and the Beast 1991)



(Cinderella 1950)



(Mulan 1998)



(*Sleeping Beauty* 1959)

Beginning with Belle, her largest contrast to the recurring characters of the triplets is their exaggerated waistline and much more revealing clothing. While Belle is dressed modestly, albeit still showing her curves, the triplets have exposed cleavages and shoulders and all of them have donned their lips with red lipstick. The contrasts here could indicate that the triplets are actively seeking the attention of men by highlighting their feminine features. Furthermore, they are not wearing aprons, which insinuates that they are not performing the same duties that Belle likely is. As we see, Belle rejects Gaston's attention repeatedly and makes no attempt to catch his gaze, or any other man in town for that matter. The triplets seem uninterested in anything other than Gaston and every time they appear on screen, they fawn over his looks. By only including them in this particular context, the triplets come across as slightly silly compared to Belle, who has a more fully fledged personality and a routine of daily chores. They have no conversations about any other topics besides their shared crush on Gaston and appear ditsy, when they literally faint over the "tall, dark, handsome brute" (*Beauty and The Beast* 1991 00:07:23) that Belle is simultaneously trying to get away from. Because Belle is the main character, we, as an audience, adopt the negative attitude towards Gaston along with her. To refer back to Murray Smith, as a

result of viewers being exposed to Belle's thoughts and inner workings, we become aligned with her mindset as we connect with her. We can clearly see that the way Gaston tries to woo Belle is ineffective and comes across as rude: When Belle disapproves of him, we tend to agree, as it is obvious that her interests are unimportant to him. Considering that it quickly becomes evident that Gaston merely prioritises Belle's looks and his own status above anything else, this only furthers our attitude towards the triplets as being silly for even liking him in the first place.

In the case of *Cinderella*, body image is very distinctive as well. While *Cinderella*, much like Belle, is drawn in feminine shapes without wearing overly revealing clothing, the stepsisters have no feminine shape at all. They are drawn as lacking any sign of female curves: The only thing that is exaggerated is the shape of their behinds, which is enhanced due to their skirts and undergarments. It seems comedic even, when their behinds bounce up and down as the stepsisters move. Unlike the triplets, the stepsisters are not drawn in a conventionally attractive way at all; they have crooked noses and unflattering, harsh facial features. Here, it is important to note that by conventionally attractive, the concept of beauty in Disney often revolves around and is defined by their female main character. Particularly within the earlier days of The Disney Studio films, the preferred beauty ideal seemed to revolve around women, who resembled the "all-American girl" (Davis 92) with blonde hair, fair skin and bright blue eyes. When introducing the film's lead character, the princess's beauty is often highlighted as one of her main attributes: When *Cinderella* begins, a voice-over can be heard singing, "Cinderella, you're as lovely as your name, Cinderella, you're a sunset in a frame" (*Cinderella* 1950 00:00:17). Mulan's father uses the metaphor of a late flower as a way to describe her after she fails to impress the matchmaker: "But look, this one's late. But I'll bet that when it blooms, it will be the most beautiful of them all" (*Mulan* 1998 00:14:05). When singing about Belle, the villagers say, "Now it's no wonder that her name means beauty, her looks have got no parallel" (*Beauty and the Beast* 1991 00:06:15). In *Sleeping Beauty*, Aurora is offered the gift of beauty as one of her birth presents from the fairy godmothers, thus showing a pleasing outward appearance as one of the most important assets to possess in life. Additionally, both Belle and *Sleeping Beauty* literally have beauty in their name, even though *Sleeping Beauty* is merely the name of the film and the character is named Aurora. As such, it cannot be denied that Disney presents these women and their looks as the favoured beauty ideal, even though their specific features may vary slightly from one another. In contrast, they show characters, such as the stepsisters in *Cinderella*, who

look nothing like them. The triplets from *Beauty and the Beast* are not depicted as being unattractive in the same sense as the stepsisters, but more so as being inherently different from the much more modest main character. The main female character often dons a much more casual dress, even a working apron in the case of Belle and Cinderella and she covers her shoulders and cleavage. This could indicate that the princess is purer, even innocent in her mannerisms, considering that she has no need or desire to show off more of her figure. None of the main female characters are drawn as overtly sexy, which could hint to contrasting characters, such as the triplets, being more sexually experienced, and thereby not as pure in terms of societal expectations of chastity (Davis 118). However, even though none of the princesses show as much skin as the triplets, they are still drawn as having a small hour-glass figure with petite waists, because the emphasis on beauty is still relevant. “The emphasis on beauty throughout the 1930’s, 1940’s, and 1950’s was upon the soft, physically comforting, inviting (although not *too* inviting)” (ibid. 118). While this notion of beauty is predominantly relevant in the case of the 1950’s *Cinderella*, this stereotypical notion is visible in more than one of the objects chosen for analysis. The idea of “pure” women being beautiful and dressed modestly, but not too covered up contrasted with the less than pure or “bad” women either showing much more body, or simply lack any sort of feminine curves or beauty to show off at all divides women into two categories: That of the innocent, beautiful and thereby good woman, and the sexually adventurous, flirtatious or attractive women as the bad ones. These two harsh categories are reaffirmed every time we are shown that the women who look this way are not very nice, such as the stepsisters (Davis 2004 172) or ditsy and unimportant like the triplets. Again, these examples all show certain contrasts, which enables audiences to differ between the protagonist and other characters. These other characters are portrayed as either outright bad, unattractive or just essentially different from the main character. Once again, the princess character is “not like the other girls”. As such, Disney seems to tell us that beauty equals goodness and any lack of beauty equals bad (Northrup and Liebler 2010), a concept that is evident in three of the four animated films.

Agency and passiveness

Earlier, the princesses were ranked from most to least passive, and considering that the subject of agency is a large part of this paper, it is crucial to discuss the matter further. The issue of agency and passiveness is closely linked to the princesses’ portrayal and personalities, considering that the most gentle women are also depicted as being the least active, when it

comes to their own fate. The princesses from the earlier or “classic” years (Davis 83) are the least active and dynamic characters, and both of them spend most of their life under poor circumstances: Aurora lives in a small, secluded cottage with the Fairy Godmothers, while Cinderella is forced to be the help in her own home. Moreover, both live in fear from a wicked antagonist in the form of an older woman. However, while both Cinderella and Aurora suffer similar circumstances, Cinderella is the only one who is pictured as actively performing any kind of straining physical labour. Contrarily, as Davis describes, “Aurora never does any work of any kind throughout the film: she goes into the forest with the intention of picking berries, but never actually does, and after meeting the prince, is hurried off to the castle, pricks her finger, and then is reawakened by the prince at the end of the film” (102). Thus, she is never hinted as actually suffering any kind of strain from living in very modest conditions. It seems plausible that the Fairy Godmothers are the main caretakers of the home, while Aurora spends most of her time in the forest with friendly animals. Even though Cinderella is forced to perform household duties and does not do it of her own free will, she is the only active caretaker of the family, the animals and the property. She seems to have accepted this fate with a very composed mindset, considering that she berates the dog for not liking Lucifer, her stepmother’s cat: “You know the orders. So if you don’t wanna lose this nice, warm bed, you better get rid of those dreams. You know how? Just learn to like cats!” (*Cinderella* 1950 00:12:00). This sentence seems to suggest that Cinderella herself may not like the situation, but follows the rules, or orders, of Lady Tremaine and, in lack of any other options, she has simply learned to see the benefits of living with her and the stepsisters. Furthermore, this simultaneously indicates that there is nothing else, but the audience will never know if Cinderella actually looked for other options in life, before accepting her fate as a maid in an abusive living situation. Considering that we never see Cinderella actively speak up against any orders, abuse or other derogatory behaviour towards her, it is likely that she has either given up on defending herself a long time ago or has simply never tried to. In fact, the only beings she berates are the animals, never any humans. This could be an indication of the time period Cinderella exists in, considering that it was not until the second wave that women began to protest the image of them as dutiful, demure housewives (Rampton “Four Waves of Feminism”). However, she still differentiates from Aurora, when she chooses to defy Lady Tremaine and goes to the ball. When Aurora is denied her chance to see prince Philip again, she is extremely unhappy. Nevertheless, she complies with the rules set upon her. There

seems to be very few points in the film, where Aurora makes an independent decision that goes against what she is told.

Moving on, to the more active women, Belle and Mulan act independently of their families or others' rules and opinions. As such, they are portrayed as having a much larger sense of agency, considering that they act on their own free will, stand up for their beliefs and may behave in a manner which others deem improper. Belle, as discussed earlier, loves to read and dreams of adventures and faraway places, much to the displeasure of the other villagers. Particularly, Gaston is disgusted by the idea of women doing such a thing: "The whole town's talking about it. It is not right for a woman to read, soon she starts getting ideas and thinking" (*Beauty and the Beast* 1991 00:08:46). Here, Gaston's male chauvinism shines through as he clearly states that women, firstly, have no thoughts or ideas of their own and should not engage with things that might help them obtain such concepts. He also physically shudders at the thought, as though repulsed by the very idea of it. Belle seems entirely unfazed by his remarks and carries on reading anyhow, clearly showing that she cares not what anyone in the town thinks of her. Later, when Belle discovers her father has been imprisoned, she offers to take his place despite her father's protests. By offering to switch places, Belle not only shows her stubbornness and drive to protect her father, she also shows bravery, particularly when she commands the Beast to step into the light and looks him in the eyes. As the film progresses, Belle continues to stand up to the Beast, which is vastly different from both Cinderella and Aurora, who never contradicts anyone human, be it villain or love interest. Belle's intelligence, curiousness and love for literature is a continuing topic. Such is exemplified, when Belle declines going to bed, as "it's my first time in an enchanted castle!" (*Beauty and the Beast* 1991 00:42:43). The staff asks who had told her about the enchantment and Belle simply states, "I figured it out for myself" (ibid. 00:42:53).

Lastly, there is Mulan, who arguably seems to be the most active of all the princesses. This assumption is based on the fact that Mulan outright defies her parents in a much larger sense than any of the other women, which she does because of her own moral compass and need to protect her father. Mulan is also the newest addition to these four animated princesses, as she was created in 1998, during the third wave which featured empowered, strong women at the forefront (Rampton "Four Waves of Feminism"). Once again, the threat of losing a father propels the woman into action. Mulan takes his place in the upcoming war, even though she knows it is

wrong and must surely expect grave consequences for doing so. If one were to weigh the consequences of Belle and Mulan's choices, both are willing to put their father before themselves, but because Mulan's decisions could directly lead to her death, her actions must be considered the greatest sense of defiance and bravery. Belle is risking eternal imprisonment, but at no point is it hinted that she would die at the hands of The Beast.

Mulan is also seen interrupting male authority figures. As she claims it to be unfair that Fa Zhou needs to enrol twice, the Emperor's advisor cuts her off with a reprimand: "Silence! You would do well to teach your daughter to hold her tongue in a man's presence" (*Mulan* 1998 00:15:28), signalling that a man and his word holds power far greater than anything a woman could say and she should not dare to interrupt. Her father later berates her for publicly humiliating him and urges her to learn her place, as he knows his (ibid. 00:17:13). By using the term 'knowing one's place', Fa Zhou undoubtedly refers to conventional, strict gender roles and family dynamics in the current time period, which *Mulan* is based in. These roles are made clear in the beginning of the movie, as it is stated that a woman's role is to be "quiet and demure, graceful, polite, delicate, refined, poised, punctual" (ibid. 00:03:20), as well describing men as wanting "girls with good taste, calm, obedient, who work fast-paced, with good breeding and a tiny waist" (ibid. 00:07:00).

All of these expectations on women are introduced as Mulan prepares for her visit with the matchmaker. The above-mentioned criteria for a "good" woman are all directed towards pleasing men, as none of them seem to have a function outside the marital life: The assets serve to either directly please her future husband or the husband's family, which, of course, is an extension of the man, so it will benefit him regardless. It is emphasised that, in order to secure a good match, young women need to be able to please their future husbands. If the young woman is successful in finding a good husband, she will bring honour to her family. Thus, a young woman's very life and future happiness all relies on the ability to maintain every one of these traits simultaneously, because women's primary purpose in life is to be good wives. If a woman fails, she will not secure a favourable match, thus making her unable to bring honour to her family and instead resulting in shame.

Interestingly, Mulan is portrayed as lacking several of these crucial traits: She is late to her appointments and chores, she speaks out of turn, talks with her mouth full of food, seems uninterested in physical appearances and she is clumsy. Simply put, she seems to be the complete

opposite of the ideal woman, which is ironic considering that Mulan is the main character and an official princess, so by Disney standards, she *must* be considered the ideal girl. However, Mulan never hints as being interested in marriage, she is solely focused on not making a fool of herself. If she were to do so, it would lead to her entire family's embarrassment, as the women are not only a reflection of themselves, but their family name as well. Her main priority before the meeting is to memorise the requirements, as if it was simply an exam she needs to pass and not the start of finding a suitable husband to spend her life with. It is intriguing that this monumental event seems not to be of importance to Mulan in itself; it is more so the fear of disappointing her family that scares her. By only highlighting Mulan's desire to make her family proud, it hints to her as not really being interested in finding love at all.

To expand upon the concept of agency and defiance, Mulan not only goes against her family's expectations and rules, she goes against her whole culture and the societal structures which are shown to preside in China. By disguising herself as a man and joining the army, Mulan is breaking the law and, if exposed, she will be executed. Mulan defies her culture's strict power structures both in terms of gender roles, laws and societal expectations, and this results in her changing China's whole military power structure after she saves the emperor. As the first woman to be allowed into a male-dominated field, even though she initially does so in disguise, Mulan effectively transcends the current hegemony both placed within the military forces and the whole kingdom. Earlier, such an act of defiance would result in a woman's death, as both Mulan's father and the emperor's advisor states throughout the film. Instead, Mulan is spared and named a war hero. Therefore, it seems plausible to assume that Mulan may have paved the way for future generations of women to be able to achieve roles in the military after she proves that a woman can be a soldier. Furthermore, Mulan also speaks up against the double standards portrayed by General Li Shang. When Mulan is disguised as a man, Shang shows trust in her, because she saves his life. However, after the truth is discovered about Mulan's gender, he refuses to listen to her, stating that she "does not belong here" (*Mulan* 1998 01:06:23). Mulan interrupts him and asks, "You said you'd trust Ping. Why is Mulan any different?" (ibid. 01:06:23). Here, she brings up the double standards within the culture, as she has already proved her worth in the army. After her gender is revealed, however, the trust is gone, even though Mulan's abilities remain the same. It cannot be denied that she did lie about her identity, and this seems to have hurt Shang, as he considered her a trusted friend before and perhaps his cold tone towards her is more out of hurt

than disbelief. Nevertheless, Mulan points out the gender stereotypes that are at play in her society, because if she had still been perceived as a man, her words would hold power and authority. But after she is seen as a woman, she no longer has the right to speak up amongst the men and be a part of the very same army she trained with for months.

Is the princess's portrayal changed in the modern version?

this paper deals not only with the original animated Disney film, but their remake as well, there is a need to understand whether the modern remakes of these princess films have changed the female protagonist. When using the term “change”, this section wishes to delve further into whether Disney has tried to incorporate a more contemporary view of women into the films, or if they have chosen to keep the original portrayal of the princesses intact. As it progresses, this section will briefly explain what type of remake it considers each of these films to be, according to the terminology presented by Leitch and Hill. Beginning with *Cinderella* (2015), both this film and *Beauty and The Beast* (2017) could very well be interpreted as being adaptations, according to Hill. However, *Beauty and The Beast* (2017) adheres very closely to its predecessor. Almost every scene, song and costume are closely replicated and out of all the remakes included in this paper, *Beauty and The Beast* (2017) is the one most similar to its animated version. Based on this, Hill would possibly define it as simply a remake, as she explains that “remakes imply a sense of replication... while adaptations suggest a greater license in terms of both form and content” (Disney, Nostalgia, and Adaptation: Who’s Watching Watson’s Belle). *Cinderella* (2015) is not much different, but it does take some liberties in altering elements, less like the animated film. *Cinderella* could potentially also be regarded as Leitch’s idea of readaptation, considering that it adds elements from the tale written by the Brothers Grimm, such as Ella wanting her father to bring back the first branch his shoulder touches on his journey (Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm *Cinderella*); (*Cinderella* 2015 00:12:29).

The live action *Cinderella* looks further into her childhood and how she came to be the maid of the house. As such, there seems to be a much more gradual transition than what the original movie showed, as the original indicates that *Cinderella* became a maid very suddenly. In the remake, the stepmother slowly but surely steals away Ella’s life under the guise of being the kind new wife, even if she has an underlying firm tone, which indicates that her well-meaning advice is not to be questioned. Considering Ella, as she is named in the remake, is described to be kind, caring and “saw the world not always as it was, but perhaps as it should be” (*Cinderella*

00:00:59), she takes most of it in stride. However, the audience witnesses both Ella standing up to the stepmother and stepsisters' daily abuse, as well as her emotional reactions, which never happens in the original. As Ella prepares dinner and sets the table for the family, her stepmother asks who the extra seat is for. Ella tells them it is her place, and they mock her for thinking she is welcome. Furthermore, upon noticing the ash on her face, the stepsisters dub her Cinderella and strip her of her actual name. Afterwards, Ella breaks down in tears. This reaction is very far from the Cinderella in the original that appears entirely unfazed by every demeaning comment and act towards her. The modern version of *Cinderella* provides us with a more fully fledged personality of Ella, as we actually get to see her discontent, which allows the audience to feel a greater deal of sympathy with her. Furthermore, Ella has a purpose as to why she tolerates the abuse: This house contains the last memories of her parents, who died fairly early in the film. After her father dies, the stepmother becomes the head of the house and inherits everything in it, including guardianship of Ella. By giving the main character a reason to stay in a terrible environment, it makes the audience understand more of who Ella is. Not only is she the kind, good-natured girl that was already established in the original film, but she is also resilient and cares about protecting and upholding the home, where her family's memories remain. By allowing us to see Ella in her most emotionally vulnerable moments, we understand why she chooses to stay in spite of her sorrows, as we are given subjective access to her mind and actions. Furthermore, because Ella's emotional breakdown very clearly shows that she is suffering, it is not up to the audience to simply assume that Ella is unhappy. The original film hints at Cinderella's situation being tragic, however, she never reacts strongly to the degrading behaviour towards her. If anything, Cinderella merely seems mildly bothered by her stepfamily's eternal complaints and demands. The only moment where Cinderella cries is when they ruin her dress and chance of attending the ball. Ella, on the other hand, has many emotional reactions as a direct result of the torment inflicted upon her, thus making her character seem more human, which enables us to relate further to her and she thereby becomes more likeable to the audience. Thus, these added character traits help us gain allegiance with her. There is no room for wondering if and how much she suffers, because Ella never hides it. In turn, we suffer with her and root for her to survive and protect herself and her family's home from the stepmother's negative influence.

Moving onto *Sleeping Beauty*, or as the remake is called, *Maleficent*. This film could fit into the subcategory of Leitch's idea of the 'readaptation', which Frank Kermode defines as

being reliant on the contrast between story and discourse (143). Here, the readaptation strives not for fidelity with the written fairy tale that came before Disney's animated adaptation, as the general readaptation does, but instead tries to relate the story to a new generation's preferences. The overall story remains the same: Aurora is cursed, but will be saved by true love, however, the discourse surrounding it has been altered to create a new meaning of true love being vastly more nuanced than simply that of romantic love. This film could also be argued as being an update, because it is overtly revisionary (143). It changes the system of values completely: No longer is the man the ultimate and only possible saviour, instead it is only the mother who is capable of saving her child. This film even informs the audience that it is a retelling, but quite a different one: "Let us tell an old story anew, and we will see how well you know it" (*Maleficent* 2014 00:00:33). None of the other modern versions hint at their status as a retelling of an older film, which further supports the notion of *Maleficent* possibly being an update.

As mentioned, the story is completely changed. Aurora is not the main character, instead the villain, Maleficent, serves as the protagonist. In the case of the readaptation/update's Aurora, as she is now a secondary character, we are not as exposed to her as we were in the first film. We get to see much more of her childhood and how she navigates life in the cottage, far away from her kingdom. She is still ever kind and befriends all animals she meets, much like the first Aurora, but there is a much livelier spark to the readaptation/update's princess. This Aurora seems more childlike in her gleeful mannerisms and excitement than in the original, where she is very calm and composed, both when dancing with the animals and meeting Prince Philip. This makes the first Aurora seem more mature, even though they are both 15 in their respective stories. The 2014 Aurora seems to have a larger sense of independence, considering she practices how she will inform the three fairies that she will move out of her home with them. When they protest and tell her the truth about her heritage, she takes matters into her own hands and rides towards the castle. The original Aurora was denied her chance to see Philip again and accepted it, whereas the modern film's Aurora follows no one's orders. Even before she learns the truth about her life, she is actively planning to move out of her home. Later, Aurora tries to protect Maleficent from the guards after they trap her in an iron net. Aurora is the one that gives Maleficent the power to defeat the guards, when she frees her wings, which were stolen by Aurora's father, King Stefan. This is the most action we see from either of the Auroras, considering that the animated one is in an enchanted sleep for most of the final battle and only

wakes after Philip kills Maleficent. Therefore, it seems safe to state that the newer version of Aurora has obtained more agency than her predecessor, who hardly makes any independent decisions throughout her story and never takes any active role in saving herself, the love of her life or the kingdom.

In the modern version of *Beauty and The Beast*, Belle's modern counterpart is very similar to the original one, which furthers the notion that this thesis considers it closest to Hill's definition of a remake. However, here Belle is the inventor, not her father. Belle creates a washing machine in the village's fountain, so she can read instead of manually cleaning her clothes. By adding the trait of Belle being an inventor, it further cements her intelligence and forward-thinking mind, which expands upon a character trait that was already established in the original. Although, it does seem slightly contradicting that her only invention, as far as the viewer can tell, is a washing machine. Belle could potentially have invented whatever she wanted, as the film alludes to her having several blueprints for future inventions at hand. The idea of a woman creating something to wash clothes indicates that the act of washing garments is a female occupation, as her father is never depicted doing any housework. So, even though the act of giving Belle her father's former character trait must be assumed to have been done in order to portray her as even more progressive, it does contradict itself by letting that be her one and only invention in the whole movie. Nevertheless, Belle's modern way of thinking and behaving is still in stark contrast to the other villagers, who ruin her contraption and admonish her. As her father, Maurice, tells her: "this is a small village you know, small minded as well. But small also means safe. Even back in Paris, I knew a girl who was so ahead of her time, like you. So different. People mocked her until the day they all found themselves imitating her" (*Beauty and The Beast* 2017 00:12:52). By having her father add this comment, the remake creates a deeper layer of understanding and acceptance between Belle and her father, as well as signalling that who she is, is completely fine and acceptable. Simultaneously, Maurice's comment also serves the purpose of showing that being unsupportive of Belle's action and beliefs is small minded and dated, which indicates to a young audience that one should think like Belle, not the villagers. To compare this scene with the original, we see that the outcome of this conversation has been changed. When Belle complains that she has no one to talk to, her father initially seems supportive of the idea of Belle marrying Gaston, "a handsome fella" (*Beauty and The Beast* 1991 00:10:34) and he suggests that she should talk to him. By removing any mention of Gaston and

adding additional support for Belle's person, it creates a more meaningful conversation between them. Here, her father simply reassures her, without ever suggesting that Belle should try to talk to any man as a way to indicate that she is normal and worthy of respect, regardless of how handsome the man in question might be.

Lastly, there is the modern version of *Mulan*. While *Maleficent* still remains the film to have changed the most regarding plot and characters, *Mulan* has been altered as well. As this project will discuss further in the chapter regarding *The subject of remakes and fan reception*, creators have stated that they wanted to stay true to the original *ballad of Mulan*. This live action film could be considered a 'true remake', because it follows Leitch's notion of updating and transforming any material that made the former film dated. The general Disney vibe is absent here, as it lacks the merry sidekick in the form of Mushu, as well a number of well-known musical numbers from the original. The reasoning behind doing so was that creators believed it to be insensitive towards the source material and they wanted to tell the story in a more real, mature way without having to hide behind songs to explain serious subjects (Ford "Inside Disney's Bold \$200M Gamble on 'Mulan': 'The Stakes Couldn't Be Higher'"). This resonates well with Leitch's notion of the true remake's purpose to never become outdated, as it appears to be fully congruent with its story and thus timeless and updated to fit a current discourse.

Generally, the film appears to have adapted a more serious note, which makes sense given that the filmmakers wished to appeal to a more mature audience. In this film, Mulan seems more aware of her role as the young daughter in her household and appears more stoic than the original Mulan. She is still hinted as being a clumsy and slightly wild child, but gone is the mischievous and cunning young woman, who saw the act of meeting a marriage counsellor as nothing more than a tedious test to get through. Moreover, Mulan has an added skill set in this film, as she is very talented in the art of chi. In *Mulan* (2020), chi is presented as a mystic power that she possesses an extraordinary amount of. This is a problem, because the wielding of chi is described as a skill that only men are pre-dispositioned to obtain, but Mulan's father cannot bear to discourage her. "Could you tell her that only a son could wield chi? A daughter would risk shame, dishonour, exile? Ancestors, I could not" (*Mulan* 2020 00:01:12). Here, the very act of a woman wielding chi is perceived to be shameful, thus making the matter of Mulan excelling in it very complicated. She is seen flying across rooftops and jumping onto high buildings, clearly extraordinary in her abilities, much to the displeasure and judgement of the other people in her

village. By giving Mulan almost supernatural gifts in the remake, it changes her entire character. In the original, Mulan excels in both her training and the war with the Huns by being smarter and more persistent than the others, often finding her own solution to problems. In the remake, she has an advantage that places her above everyone else from the very beginning, and her largest struggle is fully accepting herself and the gift she is born with. Mulan has to unlearn her father's remarks about "hiding your gift away and silencing its voice" (*Mulan* 2020 00:05:51) in order to fully wield her chi. As such, the theme of a normal girl overcoming obstacles and learning to be a great warrior is removed from context, because, clearly, she already is the best warrior in the whole army; she just has to stop repressing her true self. Because Mulan is born with exceptional powers, the whole story loses some meaning. She is not a normal girl and has the power of chi inside her, simply waiting to be unleashed to its full potential. In the original, there was a sense of any woman being able to overcome the odds and show that she has the same amount of potential as any man. Here, Mulan's success rides on her being borderline supernatural from the very beginning, meaning that no one else would be able to do what she does, as they are "normal" women, not born with the power of chi inside them. This is cemented by Mulan's sister, another addition to the remake. She is a normal girl, not born with the gift of chi and the story insinuates that she will end up being married and have an ordinary life.

To conclude upon the section regarding the princesses, there seems to be a general beauty ideal with the princesses being depicted as having the preferred outward appearances. Women who are meant to be unimportant or bad characters lack the natural beauty, kind nature and demure facade that the princesses naturally possess. The films create a 'us vs. them' dichotomy, where the main characters are inherently different, and thereby better, than the other women.

All the princesses show some degree of agency, with Mulan undoubtedly portraying the largest, highly contrasted to Aurora, who makes very few decisions on her own. Cinderella, who seems to have been passive most of her life, finally decides to defy her stepmother and indulges in a night out. As such, she still achieves a higher sense of agency than Aurora, but not enough to ever speak up against her stepmother. While Belle is undoubtedly shown to be a resilient, independent woman, who dares to speak up for herself, she does not manage to change any societal power structures around her. Even though Belle breaks the spell placed on the castle and village, there is no mention of anyone accepting her any more than before. Thereby, it must be assumed that the villagers still deem her behaviour of refusing the love of Gaston and her reading

habits to be inappropriate for a woman. Mulan is the only one who manages to completely transcend the current hegemony placed upon China, both in terms of gender groups, family dynamics and societal expectations. Therefore, she is the woman with the largest amount of agency and is shown to be the most outspoken woman of all the princesses.

In the live action versions, all the princesses appear to have a deeper insight into them as a character in order to make them appear more complex. Ella is shown to struggle with the abuse she endures and reacts emotionally, completely opposite from the animated Cinderella. Aurora is depicted as being closer to her actual age and appears as more independent and adventure seeking than her predecessor. A major change here, however, is that her character is no longer considered the main protagonist. Belle seems to gain some skills in the form of inventor. The addition of her being an inventor seems to have been implemented in order to further Belle's intelligent and modern mindset, because otherwise, she appears largely the same as the 1991 animated version of her. Lastly, 2020 Mulan has been changed as well, as she also receives a new skill. However, as the analysis discusses, this added supernatural level of chi does seem to hinder the idea of any woman being able to overcome the odds and stand beside the men as an equal.

The topic of love and the prince himself

Disney's focus on everlasting, true love

In every original Disney film chosen for this paper, the story ends with true love prevailing and the princess finding her 'happily ever after'. Two of the remakes do not outright show her ending up with her love interest, they only hint at the possibility of them coming together off-screen. By including a love story in every original princess film, Disney shows that one's true happy ending includes a man and that obtaining a marriage is the end goal for young women. Considering that The Walt Disney Company is a hugely successful entertainment conglomerate with a massive audience across the globe, it cannot be denied that Disney has the ability to teach and influence their mostly younger consumers about norms and values. Disney is a "teaching machine" (Giroux and Pollock 2016 xiv) and the values that Disney promotes in their films will be adopted by viewers as a way to understand the world and themselves. By showing that true love equals happiness, Disney not only furthers the idea of women needing to find a marriage partner, which is already deeply ingrained in Western culture (Davis *Good Girls & Wicked Witches* 7), they simultaneously signify that love is one of the most important

achievements to obtain before one can truly be happy. Therefore, young girls will undoubtedly consider the aspect of finding love to be something they dream of as well, because they want the same happy ending that their princess role model does. As such, love is a major aspect of all the films in this paper and its relevance must be discussed further. This section of the analysis will look into the concept of ‘happily ever after’, the princess’ love interest and how their love story is portrayed, as well as whether or not the prince’s relevance may change in the live-action remakes.

The purpose of the prince

Beginning with the original film’s prince or love interest, there is one for each of the princesses. All of them are depicted as handsome, tall men with a good physique. Cinderella’s prince is only known as Prince Charming, as his true name is never mentioned, and Sleeping Beauty’s prince is called Philip. Belle’s prince is not given a name either, much like Prince Charming. He is merely known as The Beast. Mulan’s love interest, who, like her, is the only character on this list that is not and will never be actual royalty. He is instead a Captain in the Emperor’s Army, named Li Shang.

Prince Charming is introduced when Cinderella goes to the ball. She instantly captures his attention, and they spend the whole night dancing, until Cinderella has to leave before the stroke of midnight. Afterwards, with only her slipper as a memory, the King declares that the woman who fits into the shoe will be married to Prince Charming. This initiates a quest to find the unknown girl by letting every young woman in the kingdom try on the shoe. By needing every single woman in the kingdom to try the glass slipper, it seems that Prince Charming would not recognise Cinderella by her face alone. It is not even him that leads the search, meaning that virtually any woman could, technically, be lucky enough to marry the prince, if they happened to fit into the shoe. As a character, Prince Charming has very few lines of dialogue, in fact, he hardly speaks at all. We only see him when he and Cinderella meet, and then when they get married. Considering that the act of Cinderella marrying a prince and finally leaving her abusive household is the movie’s climax, it is interesting that Prince Charming takes such a small part in the movie’s overall storyline. He is a very small secondary character, who does not partake in many active decisions regarding his life or future. Nevertheless, Cinderella’s happy ending could not come to be without him. Regardless of how small the character may be in terms of given screen time and spoken lines, his presence and ‘true love’s kiss’ is necessary for Cinderella to

achieve her 'happily ever after'. As a character, one might even deem Prince Charming to be uninteresting, because the viewer knows nothing about him, except for what is told by his father. We are never given any alignment or insight into Prince Charming's thoughts; we only recognise him as the main character's interest. Therefore, his most important trait is the fact that he is a prince, who needs to marry an eligible woman. Luckily for the story's narrative, he instantly falls in love with Cinderella: Prince Charming is needed to save Cinderella, it is a vital part of the film, even though he himself seems very irrelevant in terms of being a fully-fledged character and he almost seems like a necessary tool more than anything else (Orenstein *What's Wrong With Cinderella?*). In fact, the audience is more aligned with the King, who actively dreams of grandkids and seeing his son finally marrying. The King is given a purpose, one he passionately seeks to fulfil, while Prince Charming never really expresses any dreams of his own. When he meets Cinderella, he is instantly smitten with her and all the King's aforementioned complaints of him being resistant to marriage suddenly disappears. However, even though it is evident that he is romantically interested in Cinderella, Prince Charming himself never speaks of his desire to marry her, the King simply stops complaining of his son's refusal to marry anyone. Therefore, it must be assumed that Prince Charming no longer actively voices his disapproval of marriage, but he still makes no move to search for Cinderella himself.

This topic of secondary male characters being vital to the film's happy climax seems to be a pattern throughout Disney's princess films. Most of the princesses' way out of their current situation is by marriage. Even though the woman is at the centre of the film, a man is often needed to help the woman achieve her happy ending, as she would be unable to on her own, regardless of how significant or insignificant his role may have been throughout the film. As this is most predominant in the two earliest films, it must once again be assumed that conventional gender roles during the first wave of feminism (Rampton "Four Waves of Feminism") had a significant role in how Disney chose to portray these characters. Regardless, most viewers may not even be able to remember what the men are called or name any character traits associated with them (Davis *Handsome Heroes & Vile Villains 2*), as there is very little focus on them, besides the fact that they are often crucial to the film's happy ending. In addition to the example of Cinderella being saved by her prince, Belle, stuck in a small-minded city with judgemental townsfolk, is saved by falling in love with The Beast, who happens to be a prince. Sleeping Beauty is doomed to rest in an enchanted sleep forever but is saved by Prince Philip's 'true

love's kiss'. Mulan is the only woman who needs no man to save her, instead she saves him. Later, Disney would go on to create more women like Mulan, but in the case of this particular paper, she stands alone.

Another aspect with the love interests is that some of them, namely Prince Charming and Prince Philip fall in love with their princesses almost immediately. There is no build-up of them getting to know one another first, a dance with the princess is enough for the princes to fall in love with them. Prince Philip even fights Maleficent in her dragon form to save Aurora, despite only having met her once. Interestingly enough, it is the prince-type characters in the oldest films who fall in love instantaneously and are fully devoted the second they get the chance to be with their princesses. Both of these relationships follow the traditional Disney interpretation of love: Hero and heroine meet, fall in love, go through a separation and hardship (which no doubt serves in some sense as a test of their devotion and pureness of heart), are reunited, marry, and live happily ever after" (Davis *Good Girls & Wicked Witches* 21). The love is instantaneous and seemingly unwavering.

Li Shang and The Beast, on the other hand, spend a much greater deal of time getting to know Mulan and Belle, which makes it more realistic that they end up falling in love. They get to know each other in a setting, where it is not completely expected of them or insinuated from the start that they are meant to fall in love. By the end, they, too, follow this traditional representation of how love functions, but it seems much less obvious that true love will be the end goal. In *Beauty and The Beast* (1991), Belle starts out as The Beast's prisoner, hardly a romantic setting, and they have a slow-burn relationship akin to the enemies to lovers trope, which is very popular in young adult modern fiction. Shang and Mulan start out having an apprentice and teacher relationship with each other, because Shang is the commanding officer tasked with teaching the men how to be soldiers. Furthermore, Mulan is disguised as a man, so when she excels and gains his respect, Shang considers Mulan to be a friend, worthy of standing beside him in war. When the truth is revealed, Shang's entire foundation of friendship with Mulan is shaken and his trust with her is betrayed. Later, as he forgives her, we begin to see hints of romantic feelings between them, even if Shang seems slightly challenged in the area of flirting with a woman. "Um... You... You fight good" (*Mulan* 1998 01:18:09) Shang stammers, while awkwardly patting Mulan on her shoulder. They both look away, as Mulan appears to be disappointed by his impersonal compliment. As Mulan walks away, planning to go back to her

village, Shang groans and looks after her longingly. As we come to discover later, Shang follows Mulan home, much to the happiness of her family. “[Grandmother] Great, she brought home a sword. If you ask me, she should have brought home a man!” (*Mulan* 1998 09:19:30). After Shang appears, Mulan’s grandmother exclaims, “WOO! Sign me up for the next war” (ibid. 09:19:39). As Shang finds Mulan, he is again very shy and explains that he came, because she forgot her helmet, presumably hiding that he really came to see her once more. Being bold, Mulan then takes the lead and invites him to stay for dinner, thus hinting that they will become an item off-screen and confirming that they have feelings for each other.

The relationships between Belle and The Beast, and Mulan and Shang not only seem to be the most realistically depicted ones, they also portray more equal gender roles. Mulan goes after Shang when he is too shy to court her, thus the woman is pictured as doing the courting alongside the man. It is not a one-sided quest for the princess’ heart, which is especially evident with Prince Philip in *Sleeping Beauty* (1959). After seeing Aurora in the woods, he insists on talking to her and follows her until she begins to sing and dance with him, additionally making her promise that they will see each other again tomorrow. He is also the one that saves her life, aided by the fairy godmothers, and gives her the kiss that awakens her from the curse. Prince Charming courts Cinderella in the sense that he never leaves her side the whole night at the ball, dances only with her and when she is found, they are instantly married. Again, he never participates in searching for her, but neither does Cinderella. From what is shown, she seems content with having created some wonderful memories at the ball, and now she can reminisce about them fondly while going about her daily chores. However, the decision of pursuing the owner of the glass slipper is made by a man, so it is still a male act, albeit not on the love interest’s part. With Belle and The Beast, they begin to form an unlikely friendship after they both save each other. First, The Beast fights off the wolves attacking Belle, and when he is left lying in the cold snow, utterly exhausted, Belle takes him back to the castle, instead of fleeing back home. After this interaction, their relationship shifts from that of a prisoner and capturer to a budding friendship, where both of them have to learn to accept one another, which, in turn, changes each of them for the better. As they dance together in the castle, Mrs. Potts sings about their timid sparkle growing, describing their relationship:

Barely even friends

Then somebody bends

Unexpectedly

...

Tale as old as time (ooh, ooh, ooh)

Tune as old as song

Bittersweet and strange

Finding you can change

Learning you were wrong. (*Beauty and The Beast* 1991 00:58:32)

At the end, love has blossomed, and Belle admits to The Beast that she loves him, thus lifting the spell placed upon him, the castle and all the servants. The woman lifting the man's curse is a direct contrast to Prince Philip lifting Aurora's curse, thus indicating that not only women may need saving, men do too. To elaborate further on The Beast and Belle's relationship, this is the only film where the man actively tries to learn more about the woman's interests and seek to give her something to make her feel happy and seen. After realising that he is developing feelings for Belle, The Beast confides in the servants: "I've never felt this way about anyone. I want to do something for her. But what? [Cogsworth] There's the usual things. Flowers, chocolates, promises you don't intend to keep" (*Beauty and The Beast* 1991 00:52:12) he mockingly states, hinting that men make a great deal out of showing off for women, but fail to come through with all the grandeur they promise them. The Beast knows about Belle's love of books, so he decides to gift his library to her. This is the only instance of any love interest doing something purely to woo the princess and make her happy. Of course, Prince Philip and Prince Charming dance with their princesses and enjoy a romantic time with them, but The Beast is the only man, who decides in advance to make a grand gesture in order to show how much he appreciates Belle, again giving the audience a sense of deeper meaning into their relationship and making it seem more deeply developed, in contrast to the princes who fall in love without getting to know the women beforehand. By having the oldest princes fall in love with the princess instantly, it implies that his feelings are largely based on outward appearances alone, and not a deeper connection, as is the case with Shang and The Beast, who spend time getting to know Mulan and Belle before hinting towards any romantic connection.

Rewriting the prince

After analysing how the prince-type character functions in the animated films, this section wishes to see whether or not he remains the same in the modern versions. This will be done to

understand if the purpose of this character is changed in order to fit a more current, modern discourse. As has already been established, the princes fall into two distinct categories: The oldest princes have an instant love story with the princess without much narrative needed and their feelings seem largely based on attraction alone. Contrarily, the love interests from the 90's films both spend a much greater deal of time with the princesses before falling in love with them, thus signalling a deeper emotional connection between the pairs.

Once again beginning with *Cinderella* (2015), their initial meeting is changed completely. Instead of only meeting at the castle, Cinderella meets Prince Charming, here named Kit, in the woods, completely unaware of his status. She admonishes him for hunting a stag and begs him to save it. Kit pretends not to be royalty and leaves the woods mesmerised by Ella. By now, Kit and Ella have already spoken more words to each other than Cinderella and Prince Charming ever did in the original. The aspect of their love being based solely on physical attraction is also changed. “[The King] You sound as if you’re the first fellow ever to meet a pretty girl! [Kit] She wasn’t just a ‘pretty girl’, well she was a pretty girl, but there was so much more to her” (*Cinderella* 2015 00:31:34). By inserting this line, Kit seems to become more developed as a character. Besides the obvious addition in spoken lines, which naturally provides this prince with more attention from the camera and thereby the audience, we also get to hear what he thinks about Ella. Furthermore, he defends his interest in her as something more than simply attraction, which was never done in the original.

While Kit is allowed more development and more screen time, the modern version of *Cinderella* strips Prince Philip of his heroic acts and status as the saviour. In this film, Maleficent is the one who saves Aurora. Beginning with Prince Philip’s and Aurora’s meeting, it is much shorter than the 1959 scene. They meet as Aurora is practicing her speech about moving out and they both seem slightly nervous and shy around each other. The original Prince Philip saw Aurora and pursued her with passion, continuing to sing and follow her until Aurora relented and joined him. Here, Prince Philip asks for her forgiveness for scaring Aurora and simply asks how to find his way to King Stefan’s castle. He seems lost for words and only looks at her, and it is Aurora that initiates a conversation with him. As Philip prepares to leave, she is the one who runs after him and encourages him to come back and meet her once more, making Aurora the pursuer, not him. After Aurora pricks her finger on the spindle, Maleficent is desperate to save her, so when she spots Prince Philip, she renders him unconscious with her magic and transports him to

the castle. There is a comical element in watching Philip being dragged uselessly on a horse behind Maleficent, while she is the one that bravely charges towards the castle.



(*Maleficent* 2014 01:07:45)

When he arrives, Maleficent lets Philip wake up and the three fairy godmothers eagerly drag him into the room, where Aurora is sleeping. They more or less force him to kiss her, which Philip seems reluctant to do, because he “wouldn’t feel right about it. I hardly know her, we’ve only met once” (*Maleficent* 2014 01:13:42). In *Sleeping Beauty*, Philip hesitates not, he kisses her after defeating Maleficent and she wakes up. However, here he seems wary of doing such an intimate act with a girl he hardly knows, which sparks the debate of consent that could be evident from Prince Philip kissing an unconscious Aurora in the animated film. Aurora never even has the chance to indicate whether or not she feels comfortable with someone kissing her. The issue of whether or not Aurora would be comfortable is not brought up at any point by 1959 Prince Philip, but for the 2015 version of Philip, it causes him to hesitate. Perhaps Philip might not even feel comfortable with it himself, as he is also very young and could potentially not be ready to perform such an intimate act. The modern version seems to portray both Aurora and Philip as what they truly are, young adults, still technically children, while the animated *Sleeping Beauty* made both of them seem like adults.

Kit and Philip's character development seems like a positive addition, because they are now more than the one-dimensional characters who end up marrying the princesses. Besides being love interests, they have gained some personality traits that were not present before. Kit has a larger part in his own fate and allows Cinderella herself to make the decision on whether or not she wants to marry him. In the original, it was announced that the young woman who fit the glass slipper was to marry the prince, but here, the royal decree states that "if she be willing, he will forthwith marry her" (*Cinderella* 2015 01:20:31). Once again, much like *Maleficent*, the topic consent is added to the film's plot and gives Ella the opportunity to choose for herself if she wants to marry Kit or not.

With *Beauty and The Beast* (2017), The Beast's character still remains largely the same, much like the rest of the film. However, he seems a bit more aware of what is masculine and feminine in this version, considering he frequently makes fun of Belle's favourite books, particularly when he discovers that she loves Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. "(GROANS) Why is that not a surprise? Well, all that heartache and pining and... (RETCHING) Sooo many better things to read" (*Beauty and The Beast* 2017 01:09:02) Afterwards, he shows Belle the library more as a demonstration of his superior taste than as a heartfelt gift, which was the intent in the 1991 film. When Belle sees him reading *Guinevere and Lancelot*, he tries to hide the book and corrects her: "Well, actually, *King Arthur and the Round Table*. Knights and men and swords and things" (ibid. 01:15:12). It seems as if The Beast feels a need to defend his book, quickly stating the obvious 'manly' parts of it, ignoring the fact that the book is also a romance. By having The Beast mock Belle's fondness for romance and cover up his own interest in them, The Beast appears to have some need to prove his masculinity and distance himself from all things that could be perceived to be feminine. This is a radical change from 1991 The Beast who eagerly asks Belle to keep reading aloud to him and gifts her the whole library as a grand romantic gesture. It is interesting that the newest version of The Beast is the one to harbour ideas of traditionally feminine things, such as romance stories, being negative. The 26-year older version of him had no need to prove or defend his masculinity by only showing interest stories, which would be considered more masculine and thereby acceptable for a man to invest interest in, ie. weapons and men fighting each other. However, in this film, the audience is provided with a larger backstory on how The Beast became the cold, distant and ill-tempered man he is, blaming it on his father's negative influence over The Beast as a young boy. Thus, his father's view of

how a man should and should not act would have been adopted by his son, who relied solely on him after it is revealed through flashbacks that The Beast's mother died while he was still very young, and that he was not allowed to properly grieve her. He has to unlearn this toxic and dated view on gender and gender coded things, such as emotions and hobbies, when Belle, as the forward thinking, intellectual she is, actively challenges his views and opens his eyes for a more modern, gender neutral way of perceiving the world. Once again, Judith Butler's idea of gender being performed comes into play, considering that The Beast seems to have been conditioned to display his masculine side much more than what his father would have considered to be feminine, and thus bad.

Lastly, there is the love interest the audience used to know as Shang. In this version of Mulan, however, he does not exist. Instead, Chen Honghui is introduced as another army recruit, not a ranking officer. By placing them as equals, it provides them with possibilities of getting to know one another much better in this version, causing them to become close friends. Mulan and Shang did not have the same opportunity, purely because Shang was an authority in the camp, a mentor for the new recruits and it would not make sense for him to fraternise with them as friends. Once again, Mulan saves her love interest, but it is not hinted that they end up together in the end. As Mulan leaves, Honghui stops her and insists she does not leave without saying goodbye and he is much less shy around her true self as a girl than Shang was in the 1998 film. Honghui seems confident and takes her hand, stating that they will meet again, but he never follows her home. In general, the whole scene is much more romantic than any scene between them in the original Disney film.



(*Mulan* 2020 01:37:33)

They are alone on a bridge at dusk, with none of Mulan's family members or soldiers around, which makes it that much more intimate when their hands briefly touch, even though they never outwardly confess any feelings for each other. Warm, pink hues surround them, and it seems to be the picture-perfect spot for a romantic confession. Instead of Mulan taking the lead, as she did in the 1998 film, it is the man that confidently implores them to see each other again someday, while Mulan says very little, appearing timid and shy in her mannerisms, the complete opposite from the 1998 outspoken and confident version of her.

To summarise, this chapter has looked at the love interests in order to see what their roles are in these films, and whether or not those roles may have changed in the live action films. This section found that love is portrayed differently in the two oldest Disney animated films than it is in the 90's films. In *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) and *Cinderella* (1950), they fall in love instantly without needing much time nor conversation beforehand. This is changed radically in *Beauty and The Beast* (1991) and *Mulan* (1998), both of which allow the princesses and their princes to get to know one another and slowly build a relationship from which love blooms in the end. Thus, the subject of love in Disney itself seems to have evolved from the highly idealised instant 'true love' that once was into something more nuanced and realistic, which the newer live action films

reflect as well. Furthermore, love becomes more than simply a romantic matter in the live action *Maleficent*, where the main love story is that between a mother and daughter, not the one between Aurora and Prince Philip, which was prioritised in the animated version. In general, the princes serve mostly as secondary characters, however, their presence and love are often paramount in order for the princess to be saved and achieve her 'happily ever after'. Only Mulan succeeds in saving herself and her prince as well, without needing any man to do the same for her. The other women's happy endings would not be possible without the men they end up with, except for the 2014 Aurora, who, as mentioned, is saved by her mother's love. The other princesses' men, regardless of how insignificant their characters may otherwise be, such as Prince Charming, are the reason why many of these princesses become, well, princesses and the impending marriage gives them the new life they so desperately want.

The villains

In order to tell any of these stories, an antagonist is needed in order to provide a conflict in the film's plot. The antagonist serves as the direct adversary to the protagonist, and they produce the conflict that the film's main character, or protagonist, needs to overcome before the happy ending can be achieved. Half of the villains here are female, while Gaston and the Huns serve as the two male antagonists. After carefully describing the princesses and their portrayal, as well as the princes and their purpose in aiding the princesses, the villains will now be delved into. The reason for doing so is to better understand how they function as the evil contrast to either the princess herself or the prince. Furthermore, as has been crucial to the other subtopics in the analysis, this section will once more research how the villain's character may change in the remakes of their respective films and what consequences this change has for the villain and the overall storyline.

The villain's purpose

Any story focused on good winning over evil would never function without a villain, who tries to ruin the hero or heroine's happy ending. All of the fairy tales in Disney have a plot point that is driven by some sort of battle between good and bad, where the good, often in the form of princes and princesses, always wins. It is a concept easily understood by young children and adults alike and serves as a way of teaching us about moral ideas (Davis *Handsome Heroes & Vile Villains* 1) and how to conduct ourselves in society. Tales of heroes and villains, or good and evil are very clear-cut concepts that leave little up to interpretation. The way Disney presents

such topics of love, morals, good and evil change over time and how they are changed is significant when trying to understand how Disney's own moral values and narrative priorities may have shifted (Davis *Good Girls & Wicked Witches* 13). The villains, particularly in Disney's older films are very unequivocally evil: Cinderella's stepmother is abusive, Maleficent wishes for Sleeping Beauty to die and curses her as an infant and The Evil Queen in *Snow White* asks a hunter to slaughter the young girl, because she is too beautiful. This obvious sense of evil is challenged in Disney's remakes of *Sleeping Beauty*, *Cinderella* and *Mulan*, where the villain is given some sort of redemption arc as a way of explaining how they came to be the evil women we know from the first Disney films. By providing the audience with a sympathetic view of the villain, who is otherwise known as purely evil in earlier films, it changes the way viewers have coded these villains, thus hinting that Disney's own concepts of good and bad may have changed.

Before delving into how the villains are changed, one must look closer at how they are depicted in the animated films. As mentioned, all the animated villains are very clearly coded as evil. So, what do these films define as 'evil' or 'good' character traits? "Many of the female characters from this period are counterbalanced within each one's story by some evil, obsessive, and (most likely) sexually-unfulfilled older woman: the evil queen, the wicked step-mother, the evil fairy" (Davis *Good Girls & Wicked Witches* 20). The villain-type character in both *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty* is an older woman, hellbent on ruining the princess' life, without any clear indication as to why this exact girl has earned the villain's hatred. Maleficent's grudge on Aurora is based on the fact that she was not invited to her christening but considering that Aurora was an infant at the time, it can hardly be considered her fault. Cinderella has evidently done nothing to Lady Tremaine or the stepsisters. Regardless, both of the villains consider them the rightful target of their hatred and harbour ill will towards the princesses consistently throughout the films.

As a character, the female villain in particular is the direct contrast to the main character. For every 'good' trait the princess has, the female villain has the complete opposite, which are thus deemed 'bad' or 'evil' qualities. As described earlier, the princesses are often kind, demure, forgiving and modest, whereas villains like Maleficent and Lady Tremaine are cold-hearted, rude, brash, unforgiving and vindictive to the point of obsessiveness. Another contrast between the protagonists and antagonists, is that the evil woman is the one who displays the most agency. As Davis describes, "They actively seek to control not only their lives but their circumstances.

They are strong, fearless, and often very creative. They are mature, powerful, and independent. In short, they are everything their female victims are not” (*Good Girls & Wicked Witches* 107). Interestingly, most of the women who display the highest sense of independence are the women we are taught not to root for. The independence of the villain character is vital, considering that none of the villains in this paper have a significant other, or even an equal ally, which all the protagonists do have. The villains rule alone and only they are the masters of their plans and anyone associated with them is treated as being beneath them. The original Maleficent is content with ruling her kingdom alone, only assisted by all her evil henchmen and her pet crow. Lady Tremaine, both the 1950’s and the 2015 character, never indicates any desire to actually be with Cinderella’s father, but merely uses him for the wealth and security that a marriage will provide. After his death, she rules as the head of the house, completely unbothered, despite obviously being very poor at managing the family’s finances. While it must be assumed that Lady Tremaine loves her own daughters, it is very clear that she is much more intelligent and cunning than them. They follow along with her plans, but rarely seem to understand the deeper meaning before she explicitly explains it to them. Some may even go to the lengths of agreeing with Davis that these villainous women could be considered bitches. “The evil women — the bitches— who are the strong, active, no-nonsense people who stop at nothing to get things done” (*Good Girls & Wicked Witches* 107). Mulan inhabits several of these traits, but she is never considered evil or a bossy bitch. Of course, she uses these character traits for good, which the villains do not. The good women’s agency seems to be brought on by the intent of good actions, like saving one’s father, while the female villains’ agency is spurred on by negative feelings of jealousy and their own miserable states of discontent. Hence, Disney signals that active women, who do selfish things with their independence are not good women, while women who only use their source of will and agency to do good, selfless deeds are good women. Nevertheless, in Disney’s older animations, the idea of the passive, good woman as being deserving of good persists, while the evil women who try to take their happiness into their own hands is undeserving of anything resembling ‘happily ever after’ (ibid. 108).

The male villains are shown as being fairly one dimensional as well, perhaps even more so than the women. Gaston’s only priorities in life are himself and his appearance, and he constantly wishes to be admired by the other villagers. Regarding independence, Gaston does not seem to have an actual need for a wife, but more so a living trophy that he can parade around in

the form of the “most beautiful girl in town” (*Beauty and The Beast* 1991 00:06:59). He is excessively vain, chauvinistic and unintelligent, which becomes evident as Gaston is perplexed that Belle is able to read a book without any pictures. As he enters Belle’s home while she is home alone, he comes off as almost threatening and predatory towards her. Gaston repeatedly tries to corner Belle against walls and furniture, hinting at a lack of boundaries and care for consent, even as Belle attempts to put obstacles like tables and chairs between them.



(*Beauty and The Beast* 1991 00:18:35)

Belle seems visibly uncomfortable, but Gaston cares not. The shot also accentuates his threatening demeanor by having Belle look at him from a frog’s eye view, making him appear much taller than her small form. No matter how Belle tries to discreetly reject his advances, Gaston carries on, treating her as prey or an object. Coincidentally, he even refers to Belle as “that one” (ibid. 00:06:42) as he exclaims that she is the lucky girl he is going to marry. It is evident that Gaston sees a wife as little more than a trophy who must worship him and take care

of the home. Love is hardly a concern for him, and he never speaks of romantic feelings towards Belle.

Shan Yu, the leader of The Huns has no backstory in *Mulan* (1998), in fact we rarely see him on-screen, unless it is during a fight with the Chinese army. Gaston seems to have a purpose with his action throughout the course of the film, however wrong it may be, whereas Shan Yu indicates that the only reason he invaded China was because he saw it as a challenge. His apparent lack of reasoning behind the choice of invading China makes his character stand out as particularly evil and vile, as it must be assumed that he does it solely for the thrill of overthrowing others and the lust for war. Nonetheless, Shan Yu serves not as the direct antagonist to Mulan specifically, but more so to the whole of China and he has no personal vendetta against her as an individual until the very end of the film. Therefore, he will not be discussed as extensively as the other villains, even though this thesis does regard him as a villain-type character overall. Instead, this analysis will include the newer version of *Mulan*, which introduces a completely new, female villain, the witch Xianniang. While she is described as an ally to the ‘main’ villain, Böri Khan, the newer film’s version of Shan Yu, it becomes apparent very fast that she is much more powerful than him, even though he considers her to be beneath him.

Aside from their personalities, the colour green is used, when Disney wants to show us that something malevolent is present. In all the films, except the two versions of *Mulan*, green is in the frame when a villain is either introduced, actively performing evil acts or even as an ongoing part of their appearance.



(*Sleeping Beauty* 1959, *Cinderella* 1950, *Beauty and The Beast* 1991, *Cinderella* 2015, *Maleficent* 2014)

Whenever Maleficent uses her magic, it is shown as bright green, which happens again in the 2014 film. Here, however, it only glows green when Maleficent is performing evil magic, thus further strengthening the coding of green being associated with villainous traits. Both Lady Tremaine and her loyal cat Lucifer have glowing green eyes and the very first image the audience sees of her is her and Lucifer's bright green eyes, glowing in her otherwise dark bedroom, thus introducing her character in an ominous way, making it obvious for the audience that this is not a good character. In the 2015 live action version, Lady Tremaine's character trait of green eyes is instead switched to a completely green wardrobe that becomes more and more brightly green as the movie and her wicked demeanour progresses. As Gaston, seemingly bested by The Beast, pleads for his life in *Beauty and The Beast* (1991), a green lightning bolt strikes the moment Gaston promises to do anything, if only The Beast spares his life. This, of course, is a lie, as Gaston tries to kill The Beast as soon as he becomes distracted

Any audience familiar with Disney may know and recognise, whether consciously or unconsciously, that green is a sign of something amiss, so by making a green lightning strike the

second Gaston seems to find a sense of humanity and remorse, it is a sign that he still cannot be trusted. By continuing to include a specific colour in scenes associated with evil, the colour green becomes a semiotic sign (Kress 20). The colour green is not in the frame to represent something like the colour of grass, which holds no deeper meaning in itself. Instead, it is specifically used to indicate an evil presence in *Cinderella* (1950), *Cinderella* (2015) *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *Beauty and The Beast* (1991) and *Maleficent* (2014), thus making it meaning based. While green may not indicate something evil at play outside of the fictional world of Disney, it does so within the context of these films, thus becoming a semiotic sign of green equalling wicked demeanour, ill will and untrustworthiness.

Remaking the villain

The original villains all seem fairly one-dimensional in the original Disney films and leave no doubt about their status as evil, even after good prevails in the end. However, this model of evil being nothing more than evil is changed in the modern versions of the Disney films chosen for this thesis. Maleficent, Lady Tremaine and Xianniang all achieve some sort of redemption.

Lady Tremaine in the 2015 film is first and foremost much younger and more fashionable than her 1950's predecessor. In the newest film, she is portrayed as a socialite, eager to invite other upstanding members of the community to the house, who she drinks and gambles with, something that might be considered a traditionally manly act. She is still, however, very poor in managing her late husband's finances, and the lush lifestyle seems to be the catalyst behind the family's loss of their finances, which was never properly explained in the 1950's *Cinderella*. She remains as cruel as the older version, continuously trying to achieve a royal marriage for her daughters, while enslaving Ella and keeping her away from the prince for as long as possible. However, the original *Cinderella* never provides any deeper backstory on Lady Tremaine and her daughters, nor a scene between Ella and her stepmother after the truth behind the owner of the glass slipper is discovered. Lady Tremaine tells her story of how she once was "a beautiful young girl, who married for love.... All was well... But, one day, her husband, the light of her life, died. The next time, she married for the sake of her daughters. But that man, too, was taken away from her. And she was doomed to look every day upon his beloved child" (*Cinderella* 2015 01:20:02). While nothing is able to undo the abuse she inflicted upon her stepdaughter, it does reveal a much more humane side of Lady Tremaine that was never shown before. She, too, had been

young and in love, much like Ella, but lost him and had to remarry to protect her daughters' futures. That man, however, died as well, and she became forced to look upon his offspring as a constant reminder of not only one, but two dead husbands, and the chances of any promising future lost forever. It is clear that Lady Tremaine chose to fight for what she wanted, stating to Ella that nothing is ever given freely, there needs to be a price for everything (ibid. 01:22:34), once again reaffirming the female villain as a woman who actively seeks to control her own circumstances and not lacking any agency. If anything, luck seems to be the one component Lady Tremaine is not in possession of, because Ella happens to obtain everything that her stepmother wants for herself and her daughters, despite Lady Tremaine's abundance of determination, cunning and intelligence. In this version, it is implied that the world's unfortunate circumstances turned Lady Tremaine cold and calculated, as she used to be a happy, loving woman. Ella, good and kind throughout the whole story, states that she forgives Lady Tremaine and every act she committed and Lady Tremaine crumbles to the floor, seemingly speechless and hinting at remorse.



(*Cinderella* 2015 01:37:27)

However, neither her backstory nor her show of regret change the fact that she started out and ended as a villain. The framing of Lady Tremaine clutching the railing also conveniently resembles her behind prison bars, signalling that while Ella may have forgiven her, she is not

deserving of absolution from her deeds and still considered a villain.

Completely different from Lady Tremaine, there is the case of Maleficent. In the 2014 film, she is now the protagonist, not the antagonist. Instead, Aurora's father Stefan, the King, who used to be a secondary character takes her place as the main antagonist. As children, they fell in love and shared their first kiss, but as an adult, he became desperate for power. The old King, resentful of Maleficent and her magic kingdom's power, ordered his men to kill her. If successful, they would inherit the throne after his death. Stefan lures Maleficent to spend the whole night with him and after she falls asleep, he tries to murder her. However, he cannot bring himself to do so, and he chooses to cut off her magical wings instead, which is enough for the aging king to believe that she is dead. The scene resembles something akin to date rape, as it becomes clear that Stefan drugged Maleficent in order to assault her after the camera zooms in on a flask lying beside him, providing the viewers with exponential knowledge of how he managed to trick her, something Maleficent herself is not aware of.



(Maleficent 2014 00:17:00)

Stefan is then named king and Maleficent realises he has assaulted her, which fuels her rage against him. The premise for the whole movie is Stefan's betrayal in his search for power. As the voice over describes in the beginning, "she had never understood the greed and envy of men" (ibid. 00:09:20), thus explaining the whole reasoning behind her deep hurt and anger as a product of the betrayal from the man she once loved. Now a scorned woman, Maleficent grows cold and bitter, changing her outfit to an entirely black ensemble and moving from the happy forest into a dark, abandoned fortress. Her magic, once pure and coloured gold becomes green, completing her transition from a good to an evil fairy.

As Stefan's daughter is born, she carries out her revenge: Aurora will prick her finger, just as it happened in the original. However, here Maleficent herself states that a true love's kiss will break the curse, further mocking the relationship she had with Stefan, who gave her a 'true love's kiss' on her sixteenth birthday. As we will learn, Maleficent does not believe that such a thing as true love exists, because Stefan was willing to sacrifice her in order to become king, despite all his promises. Aurora is taken into the forest by the three good fairies, but Maleficent is quite aware of her hiding spot and watches her frequently. As Aurora grows up, Maleficent ends up becoming a caretaker for the young girl, saving her from falling over a cliff, making her loyal crow feed her and keeps an eye out for her, as the three fairies are depicted as being completely incompetent at childcare. Slowly but surely, Maleficent begins to care deeply for Aurora and when they meet, Aurora calls her her godmother, a role which Maleficent hesitantly, but gladly accepts. They form a mother and daughter relationship stronger than any other relationship in the whole story and when Aurora inevitably pricks her finger on the spindle wheel, Maleficent is the one who saves her with the true love's kiss. Other modern animated Disney films touch upon this type familial of love as well, but in the older Disney films, this sort of love was never in the forefront, which makes it all the more significant that *Maleficent* relies upon it in order to achieve the happy ending. The love between a mother and daughter is the tool needed to help good overpower evil, and the evil itself seems much more unclear than before. While Maleficent acted out of anger and hurt, she came to regret her actions as she began to love Aurora, and she was the one to save Aurora, not the prince in shining armour. The happy ending is not a wedding or the promise of so, but the reunion of mother and daughter, now finally living together. Aurora's love interest, Prince Philip, is still there, but his presence merely hints at them ending up together, their love is not the climax.

Lastly, the newest addition to the female villains is Xianniang. She is a sorceress, desperate for a place to belong. Initially believing she has finally found her place as a member of Böri Khan's army, she soon learns that he sees her as a slave and nothing more. "[Xianniang] Now I know I serve you. I am the slave. [Böri Khan] And you would do well to remember it" (*Mulan* 2020 00:45:27). Clearly, she is not yet in a place where people fully accept and welcome her for who she truly is, she is being used and enslaved for her skills. Afterwards, she breaks down and cries, showing that she merely wants a home, not the war that she has been coerced into joining. As she meets Mulan, Xianniang says that they are the same and that they should join forces, because Mulan, too, has almost supernatural powers and is rejected by the army after they discover her lie. Mulan, however, refuses. But as they meet later during the final battle, Mulan still tries to convince Xianniang to join forces with China, promising that she will be accepted. Xianniang doubts it, believing that any redemption and dreams of having a home is too late for her. Even though she may see herself as lost, Xianniang sacrifices herself to save Mulan, thus redeeming herself and proving that her powers can be used for good and that she is not the evil witch that people have made her out to be her whole life. Once again: The women who do good deeds with a selfless heart will be redeemed, but clearly, the 'happily ever after' will not come unless one was good from the beginning. While Xianniang saves Mulan and proves that she is not beyond hope, her previous evil acts still become her downfall and she dies.

Much like Maleficent, Xianniang is not depicted as simply being evil. The treatment and betrayal of others throughout her life has made her cold and desperate for any sort of justice that she believes she deserves. After realising what their actions have caused, they both seek to redeem themselves and help good overpower evil, even if it is at the expense of their own lives. By including such characters in an otherwise known villain role, it changes the former narrative in Disney films from being very straightforward and one dimensional to a much more nuanced view of the traditional villain. While these women perform evil acts, they seem to have a reason for doing so and are able to regret their decisions and actively try to better themselves, using the agency often provided for female villains for good, instead of bad. Lady Tremaine never truly redeems herself or performs any 'good' act to make up for the years of abuse inflicted on Ella, but she does explain how she came to be the villain and allows the viewer some insight into understanding her character on a deeper level. Undoubtedly, she is still a villain and while it seems safe to assume that most viewers will not obtain allegiance with her, it still creates a basis

for understanding her and possibly achieving at least some form of sympathy for her.

Lastly, the live action version of *Beauty and The Beast* also features Gaston. Unlike the female villains, Gaston has hardly changed. He is still as vain and unintelligent as before, but he does seem able to feign interest in Belle's hobbies in order to spark a conversation with her. He seems less threatening in the live action version, instead his approach to wooing Belle is done by giving her 'well-meaning' advice about indulging in 'bad' habits such as reading and warns her of the fate spinsters face. It comes across as manipulative that Gaston constantly tries to tell Belle that being unmarried is a terrible fate, indicating that she may either marry him or be forced to beg for scraps later in life. Moreover, it is demeaning that Gaston believes Belle to be in need of his help in order to have a better life, considering that he never does anything even remotely helpful for her. It is an interesting addition to the live action film that Gaston refers to himself as a hero, which is very humorous considering that he is anything but. "[LeFou] A certain damsel is in distress. [Gaston] Ah. It's hero time" (*Beauty and The Beast* 2017 00:16:14). Ironically, Gaston only finds Belle after she has been told off by the villagers who ruin her invention, meaning he did not even make it to 'hero time'. Gaston does nothing to help Belle in her time of need, nor is he ever seen helping anyone else, not even his loyal friend LeFou. Gaston's evil ways seem to be unfolding at a slower pace in general: In the animated film, Gaston handed Belle's father over to the asylum almost immediately after he tried to warn the town of The Beast, but this time he actually heads into the woods to go look for The Beast and Belle, albeit it seems evident that he has little fate in the mission. However, true to the animated Gaston, all he ever does is intended only to favour his own interests in the end and Gaston never receives any form of redemption. Only the women become more fully fledged characters who signify remorse at the end of their films or even become good before the film's climax.

To conclude upon the chapter on villains, there seems to be a general development from one dimensional, traditionally 'evil' characters in the animated films to the complex, humanised versions of them that we see in the live action films. All the female villains' backstories are expanded upon as a way of explaining to the audience why this villain has become evil, there is no longer any aspect of them simply being evil 'bitches' for no reason. This furthers the possibility of the audience feeling sympathy for the villains, which can end up in forming allegiance with them. Some more than others perhaps, considering that Maleficent is fully changed to a sympathetic protagonist, while Lady Tremaine merely shows small signs of

remorse, but is still considered a villain. The men, however, still appear to be very similar to their animated predecessors, there is no deeper emotional development, and they appear to be completely stuck in their evil ways. Gaston, Shan Yu or Böri Khan obtain no redemption arc, which makes it impossible for any viewer to gain any sort of true alignment with them, which also means that gaining allegiance with them is virtually impossible.

The topic of remakes and fan reception

Thus far, this paper has been primarily focused on analysing the textual layer of these films, which is the first level of Norman's Fairclough's three-dimensional model of discourse. Therefore, this last section of the analysis will move towards the two last levels, namely the discursive practice and social practice level. In order to do so, the opinions of the audiences who watch and rewatch these Disney films will be delved into by looking at comments in online fan forums on the website Reddit. This will be done to better understand how audiences have reacted to the modernisation of the Disney films' well-known stories and beloved characters. Furthermore, the concept of why remaking these films may either work and become a success or fail and be considered a fiasco by fans will also be brought into question. This will be combined with a look at what a reproduction of an already well-known film would need in order to have the best chance of becoming a success. By combining the analytical knowledge from the previous chapters with actual audience receptions, this paper hopes to achieve a better understanding of exactly how Disney shapes and reshapes structures of gender and gender roles, as well as how audiences receive and interpret these structures.

To begin with, it is apparent that fans have several opinions concerning Disney remaking their classic films. Mostly, from what can be gathered after scouring 10 Reddit subforums, the attitudes towards the newer films are primarily negative. The commenters criticise Disney's need to capitalise on remaking successful, beloved films, instead of producing new, original material which adds to the Disney universe. Furthermore, Disney is assumed to be reproducing tried and true material in order to produce a film that is expected to do well, because the first one was a success. If it was anything less than a success then, according to Leitch's theory concerning remakes, Disney would never bother remaking. As Leitch elaborates, the remake of any successful former film strives to be "just like the original, only better" (142). Despite this, several fans make note of the production feeling cheap and uninspired, lacking the magic of the original films, and thus being anything but better than the original films they are based upon.



IntrepidCase 8 months ago

I wish Disney would stop remaking animated classics into live action. They're all horrible. Guess they've run out of original ideas and creativity.

7 Share Report Save

(“Reddit.com/r/movies/OfficialDiscussionMulan(2020)”)



Additional-Speaker26 4 months ago

I was highly disappointed in this movie, knowing that it was a Mulan movie. It really was a disaster. I really hope this ends the live action thing

3 Share Report Save

(ibid.)



Utherrian 3 years ago

Every single Disney live action remake of their animated features has been absolute garbage to me. Maleficent, Cinderella, and Beauty and the Beast. I haven't watched the Jungle Book live action yet, but even if it's amazing I still won't have much faith in Disney adaption their animated features...

1 Share Report Save

(“Reddit.com/r/movies/AmICrazyForThinkingBeautyAndTheBeast”)



ReservoirDog316 8 months ago

One thing that bothers me of it is like all Disney live action remakes, there's something very cheap about it. The lighting gives everything a feeling of a stage play or something. Same for Beauty and the Beast and Maleficent and more. They look incredibly expensive but also weirdly cheap.

1 Share Report Save

(ibid.)



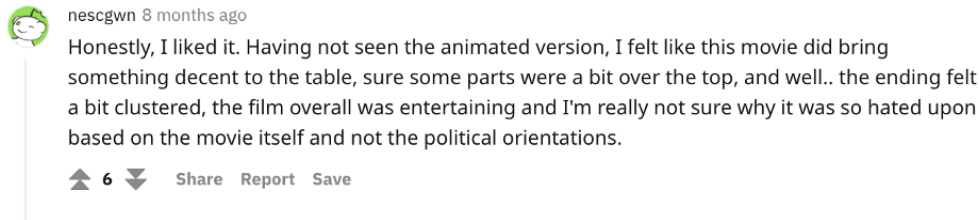
jokimiko 4 years ago

I was holding my breath the entire Belle sequence. Was it the lack of "choreography"? (Not necessarily dancing). Or the cinematography, which I honestly expected to be a bit more sweeping and...a little more creative? I dunno.

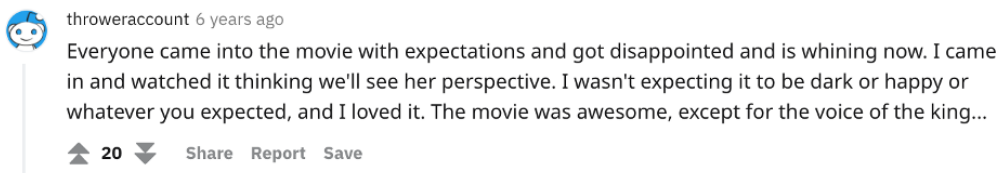
(“Reddit.com/r/movies/OfficialDiscussionBeautyAndTheBeast(2017)”)

As the above-mentioned comments display, the expectations for these movies were high in several cases, thus causing immense disappointment for the fans, who had hoped to relieve the nostalgia of their favourite Disney films in a slightly different, but just as glorious format. Interestingly, a considerable number of supportive comments for these live action films come from viewers who either went into the theatre with little to no expectations or had never even seen the original, meaning they had nothing to compare it with. By emphasising that these

viewers never expected it to surpass the original in the first place, there is a contrast between their levels of expectations towards Disney's abilities of recreating the exact same feeling in their live action versions as they managed to create in the Disney animated ones.

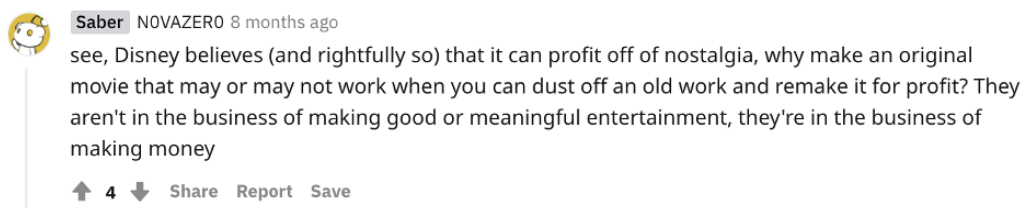


(“Reddit.com/r/movies/OfficialDiscussionMulan(2020)”)



(“Reddit.com/r/movies/OfficialDiscussionMaleficent”)

Regardless of one's expectations before watching the movie, according to Leitch, the very success of any remake is dependent on its ability to please all sorts of audiences with varying expectations (141). Considering that many fans express disappointment or even outright anger towards Disney's live action films, then these films cannot truly be regarded as successes, at least not according to his theoretic structure. However, as one commenter points out in the screenshot below, Disney is very aware that the feeling of nostalgia is an assured way of making a profit. Because most audiences are bound to watch the live action films due to their pre-existing knowledge of the animated films, it matters not whether their reception of the films are positive, Disney will make money from them going to watch the films alone. If they happen to enjoy it and thereby rewatch the film later, that will only further the movie's success and increase Disney's profits.

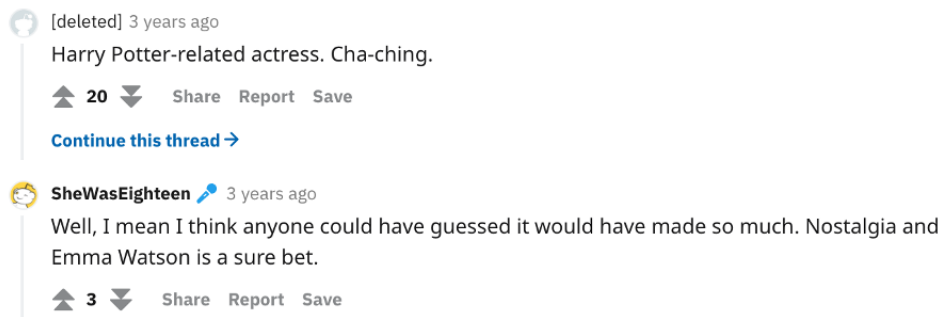


(“Reddit.com/r/characterrant/Mulan2020IsSoDumb”)

While fans may hope for more new, original content such as *Frozen* (2013) or *Brave* (2012), these were not a guaranteed success while in production, considering they had nothing to compare it with. Reproductions of older movies, however, have a much larger chance of succeeding, because Disney already knows that this particular plot works. By updating them to fit the current socio-cultural needs, as described by Hill (Disney, Nostalgia, and Adaptation: Who's Watching Watson's Belle), it modernises the format, both in terms of technological advancement and societal ideologies, while still luring in crowds, who recognise the stories. The commenter's attitude towards Disney's inability to create meaningful or good entertainment may be up for interpretation, considering that many people may disagree and see these films as a valuable part of their childhood and now-adult life. Disney's very status as a continuously successful corporation contradicts this comment, as it signifies that they *do* succeed in making meaningful content, or at the very least content that appeals to most. As Davis says, "The Disney studio is currently one of the most successful multi-media corporations in the world because of its ability to create entertainment that appeals to a wide audience and resonates with its viewers... Based on its status as a powerful and widely successful conglomerate, it can only be concluded that Disney films play a very important cultural role in modern society (*Good Girls & Wicked Witches* 16). Nevertheless, it cannot be disregarded that as a major entertainment conglomerate, Disney *is* creating content to make a profit, while simultaneously working to entertain masses of audiences spanning across various age groups. If their content was repeatedly unsuccessful flops, then they would not be able to earn any money from it and would presumably be out of business eventually. Of course, this is not the case and one cannot deny that, no matter how audiences react to Disney recreating old material, The Walt Disney Company remains successful and continues to update their product in order to satisfy modern audiences, such as their newest instalment of an online streaming service, known as Disney+. After creating their own website, Disney simultaneously removed all its content from other streaming websites, such as Netflix.com, in order to become the sole provider of all Disney related entertainment, giving the streaming site an exclusive appeal to all Disney fans (Castillo "Disney Will Pull Its Movies From Netflix And Start Its Own Streaming Services"), furthering its hegemonic status as a major provider of children's animated and live action films.

Another strategic move on Disney's part is that they hire famous actors and actresses in the live action films. The appeal of the "elusive star charisma" (Smith 193) can influence the

audience's perception of a character, because they know the actor from other projects already. By giving the role of a princess to a popular actress, Disney uses our pre-existing knowledge of these famous people as a way to ensure that we will achieve sympathy for this character from the beginning. Furthermore, by casting actors in roles similar to those they may have portrayed in earlier productions, it supports our perception of these actors as being able to portray the role successfully. In the case of Belle, Emma Watson was cast as the book loving main character. One of Watson's arguably most known roles is the intelligent, booksmart Hermione Granger in the *Harry Potter* franchise, which is very similar to that of Belle. The *Harry Potter* series is a majorly successful book-and film franchise, which many people have grown up with, similar to the works of Disney. This furthers the feelings of nostalgia and recognition when seeing Watson in the live action Disney film (Hill Disney, Nostalgia, and Adaptation: Who's Watching Watson's Belle), though not all the viewers applaud her acting skills. Clearly, the use of a well-known actress has increased the interest for the film, which increases profit as many people will watch it either based on Disney nostalgia or a pre-existing knowledge of Emma Watson, or perhaps both, but it still may not have been enough to convince these viewers of the film's success.




(“Reddit.com/r/movies/AmICrazyForThinkingBeautyAndTheBeast2017”)



(ibid.)

This paper has spent a major part in analysing how Disney has portrayed and later reinterpreted gender roles in relation to the princesses, their love interests, often known as the prince, and the villains. Therefore, the search for online comments has been intent on finding evidence of how these portrayals are received by audiences. Some fans praise the original films for their representation of topics such as feminism and female agency. To show a few examples:

 Rosebunse 5 years ago

I was thinking the same thing. The movie is actually pretty feminist and is actually a lot better than I remember, really. Those fairies kick ass!

↑ 3 ↓ Share Report Save

(“Reddit.com/r/movies/SleepingBeautyIsOneOfTheBestDisneyMovies”)



acetominaphin 2Δ 1 year ago

I know you've already given a delta, but I just wanted to add that the 90s Disney animated movie is actually considered to be one of the better handlings of women in media from that era and honestly even into today. I can't explain it as well as others, but the basic idea is that bell wants nothing to do with the beast until he changes. She isn't some dopey pretty face with no depth or drive. She defies many of the "women" roles of the setting and more importantly she expects more out of breast than being a mokey angry dick. I agree it's not exactly a healthy relationship, but as far as women in media is concerned its actually better than most. And it does so in a way that doesn't fall into the cringey "girl power" pandering sp many movies do. It's just matter of fact, bell doesn't put up with no shit.

(“Reddit.com/r/changemyview/BeautyAndTheBeastIsAnIncrediblyCreepy”)



♀ GanjaBaby2000 1 year ago

I think she's strong because she was about to stay kind and sweet despite her environment. I always felt she showed not only that you can stay a wonderful person even if the people around you aren't but that eventually it pays off

↑ 5 ↓ Share Report Save

(“Reddit.com/r/askwomen/DoYouConsiderACharacterLikeCinderellaToBe”)



nicokokun 8 months ago

It's basically a superhero movie.

And there's one of the major reasons why people hate it.

Mulan is supposed to be this ordinary girl who forcibly joined the army so that her father wouldn't have to go. She then started training with the others but realized that she doesn't actually have the strength or endurance to actually finish said training. She then decided to use her wits to overcome said challenges.

(“Reddit.com/r/movies/OfficialDiscussionMulan(2020)”)

Particularly the portrayal of the 1990's princesses, Mulan and Belle, is praised for their depiction of independent women, which corresponds with this paper's subsection in *the princess* that

discusses those two women as having the most agency. Others, however, critique Disney for initially creating passive women in its earlier stages of animation, complaining of their lack of agency and less than positive status as role models for young girls.



Nerdn1 5 years ago

Aurora wasn't a character in *Sleeping Beauty* as much as she was a plot device. She had pretty much no agency. She was cursed to go into her death-sleep before birth, she was compelled to fulfill the prophesy, then she slept until she was rescued. Most damsels in distress at least get to throw insults at the villain or try to escape. She didn't even do anything much to get the prince to like her since it was love at first sight.

↑ 1 ↓ Share Report Save

(“Reddit.com/r/todayilearned/SleepingBeautyHerselfOnlyHas18LinesOfDialogue”)



childfree_IPA 1 year ago

I think she's a weak character. Sure she's able to be a functional adult human, but she's still looking for a dude to rescue her from her shit family.

I guess she's a product of her time, though. Nowadays she'd probably just tell everyone to fuck off & she'd do her own thing in her own home and she'd meet a dude that she doesn't need but she does love.

↑ 3 ↓ Share Report Save

(“Reddit.com/r/askwomen/DoYouConsiderACharacterLikeCinderellaToBe”)



wobblebase 1 year ago

No, she has no personality in the original Disney stories.

She's a paragon of always being positive and giving despite people treating you like shit, which is unrealistic and not a great message for kids. That might be a strong character or good message if combined with other traits, but she has no other notable traits.

Nor does she actually get herself out of her situation - she doesn't display much agency or action on any important problem. She does some thing to facilitate going to the ball, but she doesn't actually do anything to get out of her abusive home situation or facilitate the relationship with Prince Charming.

↑ 0 ↓ Share Report Save

(ibid.)

As has been discussed previously, Cinderella and Aurora were princesses created in the 1950's, a time period that idealised the stereotypical notion of women as being demure and kind homemakers or the all-American kind of girl (Davis *Good Girls & Wicked Witches* 20). While particularly adult audiences watching these films today may notice the outdated stereotypes, it cannot be disregarded that Disney portrayed certain gender roles that were predominant in that time period, referred to by Davis as “the Classic Era” (ibid. 102), and both Aurora and Cinderella resided in the first wave of feminism (Tasmin 1). Notwithstanding how that idea of women can

be seen as outdated today, Disney must be assumed to have followed past power structures that resided in the classic era's ideologies concerning gender roles. Decades later, following the three waves of feminism and equality debates around the world, those power structures have since been transcended and changed in modern society to better reflect equal and more gender-neutral roles in Western society, which has slowly been embraced by Disney as well (Davis *Good Girls & Wicked Witches* 167-170).

With that being said, are viewers, who criticise Disney's original portrayal of these princesses, then satisfied with the updates Disney has made by remaking these fairy tales into live action films? The short answer is both yes and no.



[deleted] 6 years ago

3.5 out of 5 stars. An acceptable adaptation. Still remains very close to the original disney movie. I liked the additions of a prince that has emotions and is willing to show them, instead of the faceless male figure the prince usually is. However, cinderella is still the biggest mary-sue in fairy tale history and Lily James was the weakest actress of the bunch. Can't hold a candle to Ever After, as far as fairy tale movies go, but still worth seeing. The best scene, IMO, was seeing Kit lie next to his father as he died.



Share Report Save

(“Reddit.com/r/movies/OfficialDiscussionCinderella2015”)



conancat 6 years ago · edited 6 years ago

Saw this movie last night, I absolutely loved it! Lily James is charming, and you feel and root for her every step of the way. Absolutely perfect for the role. That final "I forgive you" is intensely satisfying.

(ibid.)



iwishiwereyou 7 months ago

it empowered me either way.

How, though? The message isn't "girls can do anything boys can do, and this girl had heart, strength, and brains, and used them to be better than all the badassest boys I the movie!" Like the original.

Now the message is "ancient Chinese Jedi women can do anything boys can do when they use their super powers!"



Share Report Save

(“Reddit.com/r/movies/OfficialDiscussionMulan(2020)”)



Rosebunse 3 years ago

I don't think it's a horrible movie, but it definitely didn't improve on the original. In fact, I think them trying to "fix" Belle and the narrative from the original just made things worse. The film did too much to make Belle the perfect feminist hero she never was in the original and all the little story details they tried to push in to justify the Beast's behavior came out like bad fanfiction.

(“Reddit.com/r/movies/AmICrazyForThinkingBeautyAndTheBeast2017”)



konoiche 8 months ago · edited 8 months ago

Disney, you need to give your female characters back their vulnerability!

Not only is a perfect character like this new *Mulan* (and *Rey* and *Captain Marvel*) completely flat and boring and makes character development near impossible, but as a female filmgoer myself, I find it incredibly insulting. I'm sure this wasn't the intention, but focusing so heavily on such unrealistic characters makes it feel like the message is this: the only way for a woman to be strong is for her to be talented at everything, instantly powerful, stoic, better than every male character in every conceivable way and above all, never shown as vulnerable.

Disney's original *Mulan* struggles a lot. She is way out of her depth at training, is unsure of herself, has trouble making friends at first, does things wrong, gets injured, cries, relies on her friends (whose trust she has to earn) etc, etc...In short, she feels like a real human being.

By constantly shoving Empowered Gurl Bosses/Mary Sues, Disney is accidentally showing that women can't be actual human beings. It's an awful trend and I really hope it ends soon.

Caro really dropped the ball on this one. I remember liking her other film *Whale Rider*.

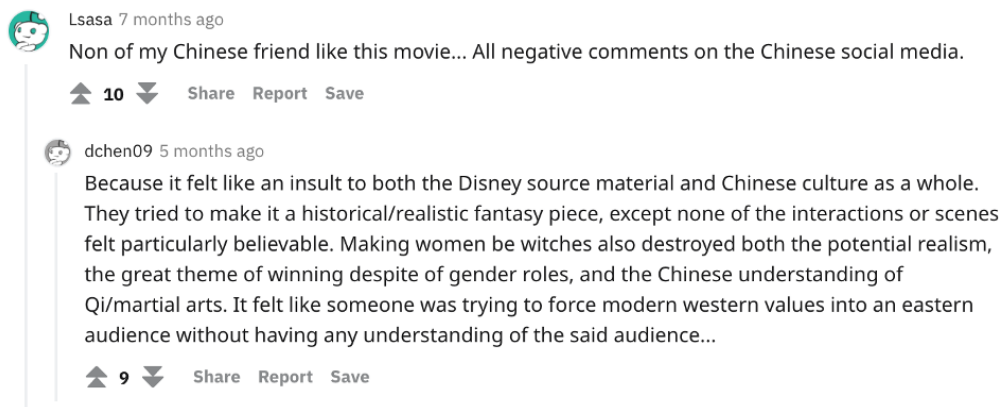
56 Share Report Save

(“Reddit.com/r/movies/OfficialDiscussionMulan(2020)”)

As is evident with these comments, the opinions are fairly mixed. While some praise the live action films for faithfully following the well-known stories or updating the characters and plot, others denounce them for ruining the character development of the women who they considered powerful already. The subreddit for *Mulan* (2020) is filled with negative reactions, most of whom are disappointed with *Mulan*'s supernatural abilities. What made her relatable to several of these fans was that she was like everyone else and had to rely on creativity and will to make it in a male dominated field. By giving her a supernatural advantage, the character becomes almost impossible to connect with, as *Mulan* hardly needs to overcome any hardship before succeeding. As the user 'konoiche' remarks above, *Mulan*'s humane side is essentially removed by having her be perfect in virtually everything she does, causing her to become unsympathetic and flat. This insinuates that the live action version of *Mulan* fails to create a character most audiences can relate to and thus obtain allegiance with. This statement is echoed with *Belle*, as user 'Rosebunse' describes her as trying too hard at being the 'perfect feminist hero', once again creating a narrative of the perfect 'empowered gurl boss' that few can see themselves in, thus stripping these characters of their relatability, and thereby likeability, which is interesting considering that they are the main characters and, according to Smith, should thereby be likable to the audience in most cases.

Referring back to Fairclough's second level in his three-dimensional model of discourse,

the intended meaning of creators may differ greatly from recipient interpretation. The changes to the live action versions of *Beauty and The Beast* (2017) and *Mulan* (2020) seem to have come from a well-meaning point of view from the creators. The new *Mulan* changed many aspects from the original in order to stay true to *The Ballad of Mulan*, the original poem that the first animated Disney movie from 1998 is based upon. As the director of the 2020 film describes to *The Hollywood Reporter*, they wanted “to tell this story in a way that is more real, more relatable, where we don’t have the benefit of the joke to hide behind things that might be uncomfortable, and we don’t break into song to tell us the subtext” (Ford “Inside Disney’s Bold \$200M Gamble on ‘Mulan’: ‘The Stakes Couldn’t Be Higher’”).



(“Reddit.com/r/movies/OfficialDiscussionMulan(2020)”)

Striving for historical accuracy and a more serious tone may have been the intended meaning, but several fans consuming finished product clearly did not interpret it this way and instead consider the new Hua Mulan to be a regression from the first Disney film. The intended meaning becomes irrelevant for viewers and conflicts with the audiences’ reception, considering that their overall lasting impression of the live action films seems to be mostly negative.

To summarise, audiences seem to have divided opinions on whether or not Disney’s current trend of remaking their popular animated films into live action ones is a success. Most of the fans criticise the changes made to *Beauty and The Beast* and *Mulan* in particular, condemning the creators’ intent of making Mulan more historically accurate and attempting to give Belle a higher sense of feminist ‘girl power’, stating that the characters have become unrelatable, which ruins the viewers’ ability to garner sympathy for them. Thus, the intended meaning is lost, as the viewers are left with an overall impression of their favourite characters losing what made them relatable and important to begin with. Regardless, these films were still watched by several of the

users in these ten Reddit forums, thus indicating that Disney has a hegemony over both the now-adults today and newer generations of kids, because they have enough of an influential sense of power to lure crowds in to rewatch well-known stories in slightly new format. As some comments mention, star power and nostalgia does affect the level of interest concerning the live action films, but even though many seem displeased with them, the films have gathered praise as well; particularly in updating characters many saw as dated, which have made them seem more three-dimensional and evolved than the earlier versions portrayed them to be.

Discussion

This thesis has spent a great deal of time discussing the princesses in four films, each of which has a newer live action remake created in the past ten years. A major aspect in each of the original Disney films is that each of these princesses end up with a love interest, either directly indicating a wedding or at the very least hint that they will end up together post-credits. Therefore, the discussion wishes to look beyond the world of Cinderella, Aurora, Belle and Mulan to explore the modern animated princesses who do not end up with a love interest at any point in their stories. The specific princesses here are Elsa from *Frozen* (2013) and Merida from *Brave* (2012). The reasoning behind not including these princesses in the analysis itself is that the scope of this thesis was centred around films who had a remake, in order to discover differences between the two. These princesses are some of the newest original Disney princesses, which would have helped in answering how female portrayal and agency has changed throughout time, they were still not within the scope. This is based on the fact that they have no live action remake, most likely due to their very recent creation, and thus have no other similar Disney work to compare them with in order to investigate changes made to the stories and characters. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that their portrayal seems much more modern, which is why this discussion wishes to include them as a perspective.

None of these women show any desire of marrying and Merida actively voices complaints of having to accept a husband based on who wins a series of challenges with her as the prize. The concept itself of the male suitors winning her hand by merely being the best at a series of games seems to signal that Merida is nothing more than an object. In defiance, she insists on fighting for her own hand and, as Merida is shown to be highly skilled with a bow, she easily bests the suitors, showing that a woman is every bit as capable as a man and should be allowed to decide her own fate. To expand further on Merida, she maintains that she is not even

ready for such a thing as marriage, indicating that she is still innocent and not much older than a child. “[Merida] The princess is not ready for this. In fact, she might not ever be ready for this, so that’s that. I don’t want my life to be over. I want my freedom!” (*Brave* 2012 00:15:36). This is a stark diversion from the thoughts of other princesses, such as Cinderella, Aurora and even Belle, who find their man while still being teenagers. Merida views the whole notion of marriage as a prison and begs for her freedom, while, interestingly, other princesses like Aurora and Cinderella only truly become free by marrying their princes, which they do so happily. Only at their impending marriage can they consider themselves free, safe and happy. While Cinderella, Belle and Aurora all seem happy at the prospect of marriage and everlasting love, Merida and Mulan consider it nothing more than a business contract. As was discussed in the analysis, Mulan practices for her meeting with the matchmaker, and Merida and her mother discuss the idea of marriage as a possibly unfair but necessary duty. There is no indication in *Brave* that Merida might find her true love eventually, it is consistently referred to as a negative thing that she is not ready to commit to.

In *Frozen*, Elsa reacts with anger when her younger sister Anna insists on marrying Hans, a prince whom she met the very same night. “[Elsa] You can’t marry a man you just met. [Anna] You can if it’s true love. [Elsa] Anna, what do you know about true love?” (*Frozen* 2013 00:26:44). Elsa mocks the notion of marrying someone one barely knows, hinting that the idea of true love is nothing more than an ideal, because how would Anna even know what love was, considering this is the first man she has ever laid eyes on. Interestingly, by criticising Anna, Elsa places other fairy tales concerning the subject of instant ‘true love’ in a similarly negative light, such as *Cinderella* (1950) and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), who both fall in love with their princes immediately after meeting without much conversation or knowledge of the men beforehand. Anna is pictured as naïve, while Elsa, older and hardened by her experiences, knows better than to simply believe that the first man her sister meets is her true love. There seems to be a contrast between the two sisters with the youngest having idealised well-known tropes often shown in older Disney films of instant ‘true’ love, hinting at the notion of this magical sense of immediate, heterosexual love as being a stereotypical parody. When Anna later meets the man, who ends up becoming her love interest, Kristoff, he reacts with similar shock as she informs him of her fast-paced engagement to Hans. Both the older female role model and a man seem to subvert this idealised portrayal of true love, which is miles apart from the men of earlier Disney films who

seemed supportive of instant ‘true love’. Anna and Kristoff share the same slow getting-to-know-one-another relationship that is evident with Belle and The Beast, meaning that *Beauty and The Beast* (1991) might have been the initial start of Disney romances evolving more slowly and naturally, considering that the love story in *Frozen* is very similar. The movie’s climatic, happy ending is born out of an act of sisterly love between Anna and Elsa, *not* romantic love, akin to that of *Maleficent* (2014), further cementing the notion that motherly, sisterly and platonic, friendly forms of love are equally important and relevant as the love between romantic partners. *Brave*, too, tackles the topic of love between a mother and daughter as the driving force that propels the film towards its happy ending, along with an emphasis on understanding one another as well as accepting one’s true self, another aspect which can be found in *Frozen*. At the film’s conclusion, Elsa rules Arendelle by herself, while Anna and Kristoff end up together. One of the young women ends up finding love, while the other is content not to, signalling to the young girls watching that there is more than one available option for a ‘happily ever after’. In *Mulan* (2020), it is indicated that only the special, magical daughter becomes a war hero and frees herself of the time period’s constricting gender roles. Her normal sister carries on with an arranged marriage, still bound by conventional expectations upon young women, having no extraordinary power to enable her to become equal with men.

As is evident by both the analysis and discussion of this thesis, the topic of love is a major part of Disney’s fairy tale films. While the films chosen for this paper all end up with a hint of romantic love at the end, Disney has branched away from ‘true love’ as being the only way to achieve one’s ‘happily ever after’. Both Merida and Elsa are free to live their lives as they please without becoming betrothed to anyone, while Elsa’s sister, who *is* interested in finding a husband, ends up with a man on her own accord. Furthermore, the concept of instant love is not idolised to the same extent in these newer films, as it was in many of Disney’s older fairy tales. Instead, it is subverted and even parodied as being slightly outdated and unrealistic, presumably paving the way for more stories involving women who may or may not find their true love, but if they were to do so, it would be in a much more realistic manner. While love may always continue to be a vital part of Disney’s storytelling, it seems plausible that Disney will continue to evolve along with current socio-cultural in a society where there exists many types of love, identities and genders.

Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to examine how The Walt Disney Company has adapted, revised and re-revised their princess fairy tales, specifically *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Beauty and The Beast* and *Mulan*. The theoretical approaches used for this thesis were Norman Fairclough's critical discourse, Lisa Hill and Thomas Leitch's definitions of adaptations and remakes, as well as Murray Smith's Structure of Sympathy. This, combined with a methodology consisting of Fairclough's three-dimensional model of discourse and Gunther Kress' concept of multimodality as this paper uses both film and online fan comments have formed the analysis.

The project has observed a general development of the princesses from the first two films, both of whom were written in the 50's, to the 90's princesses and the newest princesses from the live action films in the 10's. There is a recurring tendency for the princesses to become more independent and three-dimensional. This notion of them becoming more three-dimensional means that their personalities have become more complex and expanded upon throughout time. A major aspect of this thesis was the issue of female agency in relation to which characters received the most or little. There is a clear connection between the social context and the amount of agency given to these women, as the oldest characters were a reflection of society's values or women being demure homemakers. Regarding the waves of feminism, *Cinderella* (1950) and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) both reside in the first wave, before the second wave began to raise issues of women's roles as dutiful housewives. *Beauty and The Beast* (1991) and *Mulan* (1998) were born in the third wave, where images of the strong, independent woman were beginning to emerge. As such, the live action versions all seem to embrace the idea of a more contemporary princess, as it becomes evident that all the films have tried to give their princesses a larger sense of personality and independence. However, as this paper discovered, some of the live action films have added changes to their princesses. These changes seem to regress some of their story lines and agency. It became clear in the chapter *The subject of remakes and fan reception* that the intended meaning from creators of the live action films became lost as viewers criticised the changes that made them unable to relate to the new characters. Concerning the topic of live action reproductions of Disney's animated films, fans seemed to primarily consider them mistakes and several voiced their disappointment at the lack of magic, character development and overall production value. This is not to say that there were no positive reviews on the films and many of the positive comments came from viewers who made it clear that they never expected the live action films to surpass the animated originals. This contradicts Leitch's notion on what exactly

makes a remake successful, as the premise for any remake is that it will be ‘just like the original, only better’. Considering that a majority of audiences seem to believe that these live action films are neither just like the originals or better, it seems as if Disney’s recent streak of reproducing their original films as live action ones is not the major success as was perhaps expected. As Hill described, reproducing old material is a safe way to expect a certain level of success which is not guaranteed when creating completely new works, because Disney already knows that this specific narrative works. Even though the success level of these live action films may be up for discussion in regard to fan opinions, it is still evident that all of these audiences did indeed see the films. It cannot be denied that these live action films would have gained profit solely on fans who either bought tickets because of nostalgia for the animated predecessor, the promise of famous actors inhabiting these iconic roles or simply for the lure of seeing how Disney may have adapted these narratives to fit a more current discourse.

Another aspect that became apparent in the section regarding the Disney princesses is the topic of beauty ideals. It is evident that all the princesses are viewed as the ideal women, beautiful, kind and friendly to all. Other women are used as a contrast to further signify how different the main character is from the other girls and the others seem to symbolise everything that the princesses are not: Rude, mean, excessively flirtatious, vain or unimportant. Therefore, this project deduced that the Disney princesses all fall into a category of ‘not being like other girls’, which further cements the princesses’ status as the main characters and purest vision of the ‘good’. Considering that Disney is a majorly influential teaching machine, they are teaching children how to carry themselves and perform gender by showing that such characteristics are supposed to be strived for, and that ‘good’ women inhabit such feminine qualities.

The opposite of good, naturally, is ‘evil’, a category which all the villains fall into. This thesis deemed it significant to discuss the villains as well, considering that more than half of the villains in all eight films are female, and one of the focal points of this paper is female agency and gender roles. What makes the villains interesting is that they, similarly to other female characters, are also contrasts to the princesses. While audiences are taught that these villains are not supposed to be rooted for, it begs the question as to why the ‘bad’ characters have the most agency. None of the villains are shown to *need* a romantic relationship to obtain their goal.

Contrastingly, all the princesses, except Mulan are saved by a man’s love in the end. By having the majority of these women needing to be saved by a man, Disney seems to indicate that

one's salvation is dependent on men swooping in to save the day, regardless of how insignificant some of these men seem to be, characterization wise. It is the promise of 'true love' and impending marriage that culminate in the films' happy endings. This perception of love equalling happiness and fulfilment is upheld in all the live action films except for *Maleficent*, the only film that completely changes the original's narrative and paves the way for other types of love than a heterosexual, romantic relationship.

Something that is similar with both the villains and princesses is the development of their characters in the live action films. While the princesses seem to achieve a greater sense of independence and more fully fledged personalities, the female villains, too, are allowed a larger backstory. In the animated films, it was implied that these women simply were evil and chose to cast their hatred onto these young girls without much explanation behind it. By allowing these previously evil women some form of redemption or positive change, the earlier hegemony of 'evil' women being outspoken, independent and vengeful bitches appears to have been transcended and transformed. Now, both 'good' and 'bad' characters can have positive and negative traits, and the display of agency is not limited to either one of these female character types. This further confirms that one thing all the live action films have in common is a desire to have their characters evolve to a degree that never did in the animated ones, as well as provide audiences with more detail into the stories and what the characters' motivations behind their actions may be.

As such, this thesis has seen a change in Disney's portrayal, which only became more apparent as the discussion regarding modern Disney animated films unfolded. However, certain ideologies surrounding love, beauty ideals and gender roles appear to persist. Audiences do seem aware of these ideologies being dated though, thus signalling that the current hegemony residing in Disney as a major producer of children's entertainment is beginning to be transcended or at the very least challenged by viewers, who crave more modern and original gender-equal narratives.

Bibliography

- Beauty and The Beast*. Directed by Bill Condon, Walt Disney Pictures, 2017.
- Beauty and The Beast*. Directed by Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise, Walt Disney Pictures, 1991.
- Brave*. Directed by Brenda Chapman and Mark Andrews, Walt Disney Pictures, 2012.
- Butler, J. (1999). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Tenth Anniversary Edition (2nd ed.). Routledge, doi:10.4324/9780203902752.
- Castillo, M. "Disney Will Pull Its Movies From Netflix And Start Its Own Streaming Services." *CNBC*, 8 Aug. 2017, www.cnbc.com/2017/08/08/disney-will-pull-its-movies-from-netflix-and-start-its-own-streaming-services. Accessed 10 May 2021.
- Chandler, Daniel, and Rod Munday. (2011). "Multimodality." *A Dictionary of Media and Communication*. : Oxford University Press, January 01. Oxford Reference. Accessed 30 May 2021.
<<http://www.oxfordreference.com.zorac.aub.aau.dk/view/10.1093/acref/9780199568758.001.0001/acref-9780199568758-e-1806>>.
- Cinderella*. Directed by Clyde Geronimi, Hamilton Luske and Wilfred Jackson, Walt Disney Productions, 1950.
- Cinderella*. Directed by Kenneth Branagh, Walt Disney Pictures, 2015.
- Davis, Amy M. *Good Girls and Wicked Witches: Women in Disney's Feature Animation*. John Libbey Publishing, 2011.
- Davis, Amy M. *Handsome Heroes & Vile Villains: Men in Disney's Feature Animation*. Indiana University Press, 2014.
- England, D.E., Descartes, L. & Collier-Meek, M.A. Gender Role Portrayal and the Disney Princesses. *Sex Roles* 64, 555–567 (2011). <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1007/s11199-011-9930-7>
- Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and Social Change*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Frozen*. Directed by Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee, Walt Disney Pictures, 2013.
- Giroux, H. A., and Grace Pollock. 2010. *The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Gobé, Marc. 2001. *Emotional Branding*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Grimm, J. & W. "Aschenputtel," *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* [Children's and Household Tales -- Grimms' Fairy Tales], 7th edition (Göttingen: Verlag der Dieterichschen Buchhandlung, 1857), no. 21, pp. 119-26. Translated by D. L. Ashliman, 1987.

- Harwood, D., et al. (2019). “Multimodality”. *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Out-of-School Learning*. Ed. Kylie Peppler. Vol. 1. Thousand Oaks,: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2017. 510-512. SAGE Knowledge. Web. 2 May. doi: 10.4135/9781483385198.n198.
- Hill, L. (2017). Disney, Nostalgia and Adaptation: Who’s Watching Watson’s Belle. www.blog.animationstudies.org/?p=2063
- Janks, H. (1997). Critical Discourse Analysis as a research tool. In: *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 18:3, 329-342, DOI: 10.1080/0159630970180302
- Kress, Gunther R, and Taylor & Francis. (2010). *Multimodality: a Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication*. Elektronisk udgave ed., Routledge.
- Leitch, T M. (1990) “Twice-told tales: the rhetoric of the remake”, *Literature/Film Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 3, pp. 138-149. www.search-proquest.com.zorac.aub.aau.dk/docview/226995488/fulltextPDF/ECF88DBB112C41C6PQ/1?accountid=8144
- Maleficent*. Directed by Robert Stromberg, Walt Disney Pictures, 2014.
- More, M. “The Problem With Saying You’re “Not Like Other Girls””. *Medium’s Write Like A Girl*, 19 june, 2020. medium.com/write-like-a-girl/the-problem-with-saying-youre-not-like-other-girls-8ce0bf94d768
- Mulan*. Directed by Barry Cook and Tony Bancroft, Walt Disney Pictures, 1998.
- Mulan*. Directed by Niki Caro, Walt Disney Pictures, 2020.
- Northup, T & Carol M. Liebler (2010). The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful, *Journal of Children and Media*, 4:3, 265-282, DOI: 10.1080/17482798.2010.496917
- Orenstein, P. “What’s Wrong With Cinderella?” *The New York Times Magazine*, 24 dec. 2002, www.nytimes.com/2006/12/24/magazine/24princess.t.html?pagewanted=2&_r=0&ei=5088&en=8e5a1ac1332a802c&ex=1324616400&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss. Accessed 28 April 2021.
- Rampton, M. (2008) “Four Waves of Feminism” *Pacific University Oregon*, 15 Oct. 2015, www.pacificu.edu/magazine/four-waves-feminism. Accessed 20 May 2021.
- “r/movies/AmICrazyForThinkingBeautyAndTheBeast2017”. *Reddit*, www.reddit.com/r/movies/AmICrazyForThinkingBeautyAndTheBeast2017/.

- “r/askwomen/DoYouConsiderACharacterLikeCinderellaToBe”. *Reddit*,
www.reddit.com/r/DoYouConsiderACharacterLikeCinderellaToBe/.
- “r/changemyview/BeautyAndTheBeastIsAnIncrediblyCreepy”. *Reddit*,
www.reddit.com/r/BeautyAndTheBeastIsAnIncrediblyCreepy/.
- “r/characterrant/Mulan2020IsSoDumb”. *Reddit*,
www.reddit.com/r/characterrant/Mulan2020IsSoDumb/.
- “r/movies/OfficialDiscussionBeautyAndTheBeast(2017)”. *Reddit*,
[www.reddit.com/r/movies/OfficialDiscussionBeautyAndTheBeast\(2017\)/](http://www.reddit.com/r/movies/OfficialDiscussionBeautyAndTheBeast(2017)/).
- “r/movies/OfficialDiscussionCinderella2015”. *Reddit*, www.reddit.com/r/movies/OfficialDiscussionCinderella2015/.
- “r/movies/OfficialDiscussionMulan(2020)”. *Reddit*,
[www.reddit.com/r/movies/OfficialDiscussionMulan\(2020\)/](http://www.reddit.com/r/movies/OfficialDiscussionMulan(2020)/).
- “r/movies/OfficialDiscussionMaleficent”. *Reddit*,
www.reddit.com/r/movies/OfficialDiscussionMaleficent/.
- “r/movies/SleepingBeautyIsOneOfTheBestDisneyMovies”. *Reddit*,
www.reddit.com/r/movies/SleepingBeautyIsOneOfTheBestDisneyMovies/.
- “r/todayilearned/SleepingBeautyHerselfOnlyHas18LinesOfDialogue”. *Reddit*,
www.reddit.com/r/todayilearned/SleepingBeautyHerselfOnlyHas18LinesOfDialogue/.
- Sleeping Beauty*. Directed by Clyde Geronimi, Eric Larson, Wolfgang Reitherman and Les Clark, Walt Disney Productions, 1959.
- Setoodeh, R, and Jennie Yabroff. "Princess Power: Your Daughter has a Royal Crush. so do Barbie and Dora. if Disney has its Way, Women Will Become the Next Subjects Kneeling before its \$4 Billion Throne." *Newsweek*, vol. 150, no. 22, Nov 26, 2007, pp. 66. *ProQuest*,
<https://www-proquest-com.zorac.aub.aau.dk/magazines/princess-power/docview/214255116/se-2?accountid=8144>.
- Smith, M. (1995). *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Tasmin, T. (2020). "You Only Have to be Brave Enough to See it: Evaluation of Gender Role Portrayal in Disney Princess Movies in View of Waves of Feminism". *Communication*. 1.