Disney’s Fashionable Girls

Signs and Symbols in the Costume Dress of Disney’s Female Characters

Written by:

Bianca van Dam

Centre for Fashion Studies
MA Fashion Studies 120ECTS
Magister’s Thesis
Spring Term 2014
Supervisor: Andrea Kollnitz
ABSTRACT

Disney’s princesses and heroines have long captured the minds and hearts of young girls with their magical dress. This thesis researches the fashion symbols in a chosen set of animated movies and relate this to children’s reception, sexuality and gender issues and narrative identities. A semiotic analysis of the movies and relating them to read literature will shine a new light on this subject.

Keywords:
Disney, princesses, children, girls, body ideals, sexuality, gender, innocence, film, animated movies, narrative identities, semiotics.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .............................................................................................................. 4
AIM & QUESTION ............................................................................................................. 6
OUTLINE .......................................................................................................................... 7
MATERIAL & METHOD .................................................................................................... 8
SEMIOTIC FILM READING .............................................................................................. 8
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK ....................................................................................... 10
CHILDREN’S RECEPTION ............................................................................................... 10
NARRATIVE IDENTITIES ................................................................................................. 10
SEXUALITY, GENDER AND BODY IDEALS ....................................................................... 11
PREVIOUS RESEARCH ................................................................................................... 14
FASHION IN THE CINEMA ............................................................................................ 14
MOVIE IMPACT ON CHILDREN ...................................................................................... 15
FEMINIST JUDGEMENTS ................................................................................................. 16
DOMESTIC SITUATION AND MOTHERS ....................................................................... 17
LOVE AND RELATIONSHIPS ......................................................................................... 17
ANALYSIS ....................................................................................................................... 18
DISCUSSION ................................................................................................................... 36
CONCLUSION .................................................................................................................. 40
BIBLIOGRAPHY .............................................................................................................. 41
APPENDIX ...................................................................................................................... 44
INTRODUCTION

Walt Disney started his cartoon studio in the 1920s. Not long after the company grew to become one of the largest well-known entertainment businesses for family leisure throughout the world. In the past century many animated movies have been released and Disney quickly fulfilled the role of all-time favourite brand in terms of arts and entertainment. Most of Disney’s stories have been reproduced from the original fairytales by the brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen, and adapted to modern day versions to relate to.

Fashion was not on an evolved level for me at a young age, but I was aware of a certain feeling the Disney movies conveyed through their use of dress. Unique in their own way and representing different ways to live a life. I played my videotapes over and over to sigh at the heartwarming catchy stories of princesses dressing up to find their prince on a white horse. The urge to copy the dresses they wore and crawl into their dreamworld was grand. At the amusement park Disneyland identical clothing to what the heroines wear is sold in gift shops. Young girls persuade their parents into buying them a dress to make them feel as special as their favourite characters. Interesting is that young girls, who can be quite judgemental of eachother, are attracted to the Disney styles regardless of how different it may look from their own wardrobe. “Fairy-tale tropes are transformed into iconographies of dance, popular culture and film that ultimately ‘crack’ the painted Disney idealizations of feminine goodness and wickedness.” 1 Disney movies have become a steady item in many young girls’ upbringings and can be considered iconic.

This thesis will research the fashion and dress of female characters in four Disney movies throughout a timeframe starting in 1937 and ending in 1991. The girls in these movies all originate from a Western background and are portrayed in their own sceneries and stories. Male heroes and princes will not be researched, first of all because the subject would become too large, but also since they are not the main focus of the movie and play a secondary role. Male characters seem to be more drawn on the story and are not such outstanding and attractive individuals as the princesses

1 Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, Laura Sells, From Mouse to Mermaid. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995, 10
have become, as well as their clothing fulfilling a rather practical role. The range of clothing offered as merchandize is very select for boys, whereas there is an immense amount of clothing available for girls. This goes to show with the release of the ‘Disney Princess’ merchandize line in 2000, which has been the most succesfull merchandize for the themeparks and Disney Stores since. While not being marketed and simply depending on the “power of its legacy” the initiator of it all, Andy Moorey, says: “We simply gave girls what they wanted, although I don’t think any of us grasped how much they wanted this.”

As fashion studies usually focuses on ‘grown-up fashion’ and seems to have a tendency to leave movies – especially animated – to the knowledgeable area of cinema studies, this thesis is written to lay a bridge between the two and research a subject that is so wide, untouched and yet so high of influence in the fashion identities of young girls. A point in life where it all starts, before we make sense of fashion on a more researched and experienced level.

---

The aim of this thesis is to develop an understanding of the female fashions and costume dress in the Disney movies Snow White & The Seven Dwarfs, Cinderella, The Little Mermaid and Beauty & The Beast. Their symbolic meanings will be researched to create a deeper knowledge and relate them to body ideals, gender and sexuality issues in relation to children’s reception. Watching the Disney movies and investigate them in a semiotic way can collect new views on meanings and reasons that the symbols create in a social and empirical way. The way the female characters are portrayed with certain bodies, gender behaviour and their dress will be the focus of research.

What are the fashion symbols behind Disney’s animated movies? How can they be understood in relation to body ideals, gender, sexuality and children’s reception.

This can be divided into the following subquestions:

1. What are noticable fashions in Disney’s animated movies?
2. How do Disney’s fashions relate to body views or ideals?
3. Where do Disney’s movies bring up sexuality or gender issues displayed through fashion?
‘Disney’s Fashionable Girls’ has been written and created in a timespan of three months for the magister’s course in Fashion Studies at Stockholm University. By looking into the fashionable side of certain Disney movies and outlining the methods and material that this thesis works with, a set of views and theories has been established in relation to the fashion. The project then went on to narrow down the specific movies and a semiotic analysis has been conducted to create a deeper knowledge about the fashion of the relevant princesses and heroines.

This thesis will start with a chapter on the methods and material used, including an explanation of the specifics for the semiotic film reading and what is understood from children’s reception. The chapter after that will outline the theoretical framework in which narrative identities, sexuality, body ideals and gender are being described in relation to how they are comprehended and used in this thesis. The chapter on previous research will touch upon literature that has been read and describes several subjects that have been inspiring, such as fashion in the cinema, movie influence on children, and issues on the domestic and love and relationship situations which are significant to take note of. The analysis will then focus on the four Disney movies which describe each of the movies’ fashion symbols with the help of semiotics and sign systems which are also related to social phenomena and the theories mentioned. In the conclusion a summary will be formed as well as new lessons that can be drawn from the analysis in relation to the studied literature.
MATERIAL & METHOD

The analyzed material consists of four Disney movies listed below. A selection has been made considering the size of this thesis, as well as a difference between decades, stories, characters and a combination of Western princesses to relate to each other. To answer the research questions signs, symbols and meanings are drawn from their fashion shown in these movies. They have greatly influencing main female characters, especially the latter two, as they became a part of popular culture in the 90s through a phenomenon known as the ‘Disney Renaissance’. Considering the different timeframes of the movies, certain styles and trends can be related to their era’s as well as in relation to the story which often depicts social issues that are highly discussed topics in society at that time. The fashion focus in these Disney movies is visual, shows iconic dress and portrays their fairytale stories through the use of attractive and influencing fashion, which is why a study on this subject could be a great addition to the research field of fashion studies on several levels.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Movie</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Princess/Heroine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Snow White &amp; The Seven Dwarfs</td>
<td>1937</td>
<td>Snow White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cinderella</td>
<td>1950</td>
<td>Cinderella</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Little Mermaid</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Ariel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beauty &amp; The Beast</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Belle</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SEMIOTIC FILM READING

A semiotic analysis of the Disney movies is conducted to discover the relation between symbols of the defined dress in a certain story and the young girl exposed to this. Levi Strauss’ concept of bricolage explains that we collect signs, symbols and meanings and relate these to our cognative system to understand them. Examples of this are colours, shapes and forms that show us how to interpret the function or reason of clothes, but also social relations and issues in the form of behaviour, interaction and other situations involving clothes as a manner of communication.

---

“Sign systems, in which costume and fashion are included, manifest their functional mechanisms as curators of relations between individuals, devices for shaping the world and sources of meaning and value. It is in this sense that sign systems may be called communication systems.” ⁵ This means that through reading these signs and perceive them by relating it to meanings, conclusions can be made about the influence towards children and their narrative identities. Fashion can in this way also be seen as a “clothed thought” ⁶ - as mentioned in ‘The Clothed Body’ - meaning that language does not only involve words but is also expressed through clothing. Disney’s animated movies have been one of the most popular media exposed to children, and bearing in mind the fact that they are extremely visual and narrate their stories through a visual culture in terms of fashion and beauty - where this often even is the main message - it becomes almost unanimously important to interpret its symbolics to create a different outlook from the general.

The analysis is conducted with the use of the mentioned animated movies and studying them from a perspective in which focus lays on dress, gender, sexuality and their related issues and connecting these to come to a proper film reading. First off watching and observing each of the movies from beginning to end to note important appearances of dress in relation to the story is conducted through a visual culture study. Following this these symbols are related to a semiotic approach, and a deeper connotation has been established from the scenes and specific dress costumes of the princesses and heroines. After each movie a short summary gives an overview of the dress in relation to the theories and the female character, and after watching all of the four movies analyses have been made to create general findings of all these movies combined. The findings are empowered and understood by read literature and studies on fashion, film, Disney and social issues.

⁵ Patrizia Calefato, The Clothed Body, 10  
⁶ Ibid, 5
Theoretical Framework

Children’s Reception

Often children receive their first experience with Disney at a very young age through their parents, family members or other relatives. In the study ‘The Psychology of Life Stories’ by Dan P. Brown it is mentioned that children gather experiences and develop them into stories to turn them into particular memories. This way of reading narrative identities in a psychological way is an interesting concept to work out how young girls receive Disney movies and how it can trigger their behaviour into aiming to relate to the princess characters. Fashion in film becomes an influence through being the easiest way to reproduce a certain part of the identity of the character. Since stories are unquestionably linked to costume and children make sense of themselves in a storytelling system, it is logical that fashion evolves into the main tool to narrate the character in question. Disney has come up with a description of what they believe innocence means and explains this as a personality trait of children who watch Disney movies, saying that their lives are defined by spectacle. In a sense it could be called naïve to believe in an unexistable thing as magic and it translates itself as trying to remain inside a bubble of innocence and undeveloped knowledge. However, “if children are born innocent, they are quickly acculturated and rapidly moved away from that initial innocence under the impetus of the various social stimuli to which they are exposed, such as movies.”

Researching the effects of media towards children is a quite untouched area, as Amy M. Davis mentions in ‘Good Girls & Wicked Witches’; political issues such as race and class have slightly overshadowed the research topics as of late.

Narrative Identities

When it comes to fashion children of a young age are dressed to the preference of their parents or care-takers, and at some age reach a point where they develop a taste in style for themselves, take matters in their hands and start going against being

---

8 M. Keith Booker, Disney, Pixar and the Hidden Messages of Children’s Films, Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, LLC., 2010, 6
9 Ibid, 31
dressed by others. Disney’s fashion and costume dress can influence this process, as well as their identities being shaped in terms of how they set out to perceive gender and its related issues. Socialist Henry A. Giroux writes in his essay that movies are “teaching machines”\footnote{Henry A. Giroux, Animating Youth: the Disnification of Children's Culture. (1995)} It is not just usual sources such as schools that teach children about existence and life, but in this case the animated Disney movies can stimulate a great deal of how they learn about society, themselves, fashion and the approach to growing into adults. “Children's media can be a powerful mechanism by which children learn cultural values. Through the proliferation of fairy tales in the media, girls (and boys) are taught specific messages concerning the importance of women's bodies and women's attractiveness.” \footnote{Lori Baker-Sperry and Liz Grauerholz, The Pervasiveness and Persistence of the Feminine Beauty Ideal in Children’s Fairy Tales. \textit{Gender and Society}. Vol. 17, No. 5 (2003): 724} Since fashion is one of the most visual spectacles in the selected Disney movies it is reasonable to assume that young girls pick up on this rapidly and begin to make sense of the princesses and heroines by their dress through a level of admiration for them. Young girls’ experiences with the primarily playful stories of Disney can teach them about social constructions or behaviour expected in certain situations, and is thus not to be underestimated. Children differ relatively and will pick up dissimilar influences but the fact that Disney – if watched - plays a part in their narrative identities can almost be a given. Since narrative identities are an outcome, it is important for this study to grasp the impact of fashion coming from the medium of Disney’s animated movies and comprehend how this could influence young girls’ identities outside of daily fashion and usual ways in which fashion reaches them.

SEXUALITY, GENDER AND BODY IDEALS

Sexuality issues are a significant part since with fashion comes along gender dressing and certain rules or standards. Clothing holds a fine line between being considered too sexual, and especially children’s movies are in a complex situation since children are not supposed to be advertised to any indication of sexuality. Since the love stories between princesses and their princes is the traditional main goal in Disney’s movies, their fashion as well as their physical beauty in some way exhibits a sexual role and it is interesting to research how exactly Disney has paved its way into doing so while still maintaining a child-friendly image.
Certain female characters on screen are portrayed through seductive traits such as having a decolleté, being supplied with either magical or physical destructing tools, catching the gaze of the viewer and having hypnotizing features. In Disney the witches, queens, stepmothers and evil women possess this set of traits, as well as all of them are provided with heavy accents of cosmetics, jewelry and often black dress.  

Numerous times they also change their outfits in relation to a situation or their expressive mood. This look is usually displayed by a swiftly changing appearance where the wardrobe turns into a synonym for her unreliability.  

Sexuality is here displayed as a character trait of the evil, but the princesses show certain symbols of evolving sexuality through their dress as well.

Body ideals are a largely debated issue and in Disney movies it is a main subject that has been surfacing in different forms. A psychoanalytic theory by Jacques Lacan is mentioned in the book ‘What Is Film Theory?’ which explains that babies at a young age create a “split” between how they think their body looks and how it really looks at the moment they are starting to make sense of themselves.  

By the time children start processing body ideals, their thoughts and beliefs are considered to shape around the effect of movies as well. In the book ‘From Mouse To Mermaid’ it is mentioned that the fairytales where Disney’s stories originate from have altered a lot in their retold versions, especially in terms of explaining women’s physiques. Most of the princesses are perfectionized to fulfill a wish or longing for a certain look and are often depicted through a male gaze that can be best explained as that “good women are domesticators and resources; bad women are evil, greedy, individual perversions of natural orders; and men ultimately hold procreative and productive dominion as civilizing forces in these worlds.” This clarifies the visual and bodily representation of characters almost as a set of standards used to popularize and dramatize the stories. The looks of the princesses and heroines have been enduring a thoughtful process before eventually ending up on the screen. Disney’s illustrators changed their

---

16 Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, Laura Sells, *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender and Culture*, 10
17 Ibid, 11
“folktale templates with contemporaneous popular images of feminine beauty and youth, their sources ranging from the silent screen to glossy pin-ups.” 18 Many of them were even depicted being of such a young age that changes had to be made to be able to relate to the topic of love as acceptable. The heroines are usually portrayed having fair skin, perfectly shaped eyes, Western features and significantly relating to Hollywood’s restrictions and wishes in terms of beauty and looks. 19

Gender comes along since specific dress is often intended to create a stereotypical look for a female or male. Disney has created movies over a long span of time and the fact that dressing standards and trends have transformed throughout time can explain preferences of young girls in the way they interpret or create rules on how to dress themselves. A great amount of our personal habits and preferences, such as what we appeal to and how we communicate in certain situations, is influenced by gender roles we have been portrayed to in which one of the earliest educators is film. 20 Theresa L. Tonn mentions “sex-typing” in her study ‘Disney’s Influence on Females Perception of Gender and Love’ where she states that women and men have certain roles that they always seem to fulfill through characters on screen. “Females tend to be depicted as more attractive, happier, more sociable, more peaceful, and more useful while males tend to be represented as smarter, more rational, more powerful, more stable and more tolerant; and in children's programs women tend to be depicted as being affectionate, submissive, forgiving and fragile, but as having low amounts of self-confidence, ambition, dominance, and individualism.” 21 Gender roles here become vibrant and Disney seems to be one of the perfect examples in using this so-called ‘sex-typing’. As these roles also alter with time it is interesting to compare a movie such as Snow White, searching for her prince charming and produced in 1937, with a movie like Beauty & The Beast from 1991 where the leading lady is focused on personal ambitions. Disney recognizes that gender roles are important to adjust to the current status in the real world and how these heroines can therefore continue to be modern role models.

18 Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, Laura Sells, From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender and Culture, 109
19 Ibid, 110
20 Ibid, 149
21 Theresa L. Tonn, Disney’s Influence on Females Perception of Gender and Love. MsC diss., University of Wisconsin Stout, 2008, 6 & 7
PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The main literature for this thesis consists of combining the topic of Disney as a production company and the methods and theories chosen to come to conclusions and use in the movie analysis, as well as taking in mind certain basic subjects one should recognize. The book ‘Good Girls & Wicked Witches’ by the American film studies lecturer Amy M. Davis has been a particular inspiration to this thesis as the writer looks into the wide topic of female characters in the animated Disney movies between 1937 and 2004. She outlines certain personality traits as well as comparing these to the storylines, mentioning Disney’s history and giving a good overview of the company’s status. ‘From Mouse To Mermaid’ by Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas and Laura Sells writes about gender and culture inside Disney’s movies through several essays by different writers, each with an attention-grabbing outlook on how to envision these films below the surface. ‘Disney, Pixar and the Hidden Messages of Children’s Films’ by M. Keith Booker is also an example of how to study Disney’s movies from another point of view and looks into children as an audience and in what way they are influenced. ‘The Clothed Body’ by linguistics and fashion scholar Patrizia Calefato provided this thesis with the woodworks for a semiotic methodology, which is highly connected to fashion as well as ‘the clothed body’ which the writer also links to film. ‘What is Film Theory?’ by Richard Rushton and Gary Bettinson is important for a basic understanding on how to analyze films and what to take in mind when doing so. ‘Undressing Cinema’ by film and television professor Stella Bruzzi dives into the area of clothing and identity in movies by using several theories to explain phenomena such as gender and sexuality which is important for this thesis’ theoretical framework. Below is looked into several general subjects with use of the literature, which are of high influence for comprehending the characters in the Disney movies as well as how fashion in film functions and how it relates to children.

FASHION IN THE CINEMA

Where movies can be seen as a “sense-making machine” that produces beliefs, sentiments and wishes it is more than logical that clothes are used as objects to influence all these senses in a way that we relate to on a real life foundation as well.

22 Patrizia Calefato, The Clothed Body, 93
Movies are extremely visual and the characters in them provide us with reflections that we take with us on an everyday basis as well as influencing our taste and trends we can find in the high street or famous fashion houses. Characters in general (real life and on screen) represent tangible symbols such as dress, cosmetics and hairstyle, which create identities starting from bodily form. The use of visual tools to represent stories through clothing is of major use as it is the first layer of personality that we ‘put on our body’. “Every sign on the body of a character has a precise meaning, linked to social characterization, historical identity, grotesque emphasis, transformation in terms of personality or feeling, and so on.” Patrizia Calefato here perfectly explains the often-underestimated importance of fashion on the screen and how it relates to the construction of a character. In the book ‘Fashion in Fiction’ by Peter McNeil, Vicki Karaminas and Catherine Cole – all professors in fashion and culture – it is explained that fashion cannot exist without “dreams, desires and idealizations” and that it is actually an ‘unreal’ phenomenon when comparing it to dress, the actual clothing we wear, as the real opponent of fashion. Fashion literally can be seen as the creative side of clothing, not the practicality of fabrics and the items itself, and clothing does not serve as fashion without the narrative of the wearer. Movies can be explained similarly as “fashion is also fictive”. ‘Undressing Cinema’ indicates this as well, and describes that we can draw conclusions on story and character development through analyzing single clothing items and the way they are visualized in the movie simply by unraveling the meaning of the item itself. “Cinema ‘thinks’: it invents stories, narrative techniques, human types and bodily forms; it explores territories at the limits of experience, feelings and passions from the most banal to the most eccentric.”

**MOVIE IMPACT ON CHILDREN**

In the book ‘The Sociology of Childhood’ the sociologist William A. Corsaro writes about a “symbolic culture that children bring with them as they enter communal life with peers drawn from cultural myths and legends.” He mentions that these characters

---

23 Patrizia Calefato, *The Clothed Body*, 91
24 Ibid, 91
26 Ibid, xv
27 Stella Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema*, 3
28 Patrizia Calefato, *The Clothed Body*, 91
are usually very intertwined within childhoods through the effort of parents to keep children entertained. From an early age we start to see ourselves as individuals and use these myths and legends to develop a certain understanding of life. By creating stories around our experiences they become the starter points of narratives that are connected to the procedure of creating our identities. As Amy M. Davis writes in her study ‘Good Girls & Wicked Witches’, when young children start their “movie-watching lives” they are only making sense by then of what they are seeing and enfold this into their daily play routines or behaviour by copying events or storylines to process this cognitively. Several phenomena are seen throughout animated movies that are directly used to make them succesful for children. The literature and film studies professor M. Keith Booker lists several in his book ‘Disney, Pixar and the Hidden Messages in Children’s Films’; animals as sidekicks that can take the role of the innocent and friendly character of the child itself, catchy musical songs being played, the use of magic, slapstick violence by silly characters, and violence that ends in a good and happy way.

FEMINIST JUDGEMENTS

Feminist organizations have long debated the role of the Disney princesses and heroines, as they claim “they have no other choices but submit themselves to male power in each of the ‘ever-after’ narratives.” The ‘ever-after’ narratives meant here is the ‘happily ever after’ concept that feminists use to explain their views and standpoints in regards to female characters in the Disney movies. Oppression is one of their main concerns, which explains women are dominated by a certain standard such as marriage, should be inferior and obey to people of higher power. Through time and evolving the standards on these subjects displayed in Disney movies are nowadays considered out of the norm. In the 20th century a major change of female roles in society occurred, such as a “sexist backlash” which put a lot of focus on gaining succes through being seductive and which seemed to turn into a trend. A change of views towards women to be succesfull in what they could do in terms

31 M. Keith Booker, *Disney, Pixar and the Hidden Messages of Children’s Films*, 2
32 Cheung Ting Yan, *Reading Beyond “Happily Ever After”*: Refiguring Disney Narrative of Femininity*. MA diss., University of Hong Kong, 2005, 13
33 Ibid, 15 & 16
of work and career, but by what they “could achieve in terms of their beauty, their ‘accomplishments’ and their appearances” rose. 35 Or so to say how far women could get by exploiting looks and superficiality. This has unquestionably left its traces and influenced Disney’s female characters as well.

DOMESTIC SITUATION AND MOTHERS
When considering all the different social influences on the princesses’ lives the domestic situation is very intriguingly depicted. Cheung Ting Yan describes the domestic situations in her philosophy thesis ‘Reading Beyond Happily Ever After’ as “families were constituted as non-biological, either as stepfamilies or adoptive ones. Stepfamilies present a place of horror from which the heroines must flee, while adoptive families provide shelter.” 36 The princesses are in a very different domestic situation than most of their young admirers. The fact that the stepmother or caretaker is often illustrated as a bad influence or even the dark force throughout the story withholding the princess from living her dreams is a typical fairytale storytelling when compared to real life. Fathers on the other hand are often seen as heroes to the heroines and are depicted as strong, masculine and suitable caretakers.

LOVE AND RELATIONSHIPS
Another example of a social influence is the way love plays an important (if not the most) role in each of the movies. The princess is consistently looking for her ‘happily ever after’, usually falls in love at first sight and ends up together with her prince towards the end of the movie when all that is standing in the way is defeated. Many women nowadays would admit that they are strongly prejudiced in their views of love by having read or watched fairytales and mythical stories. The ‘happily ever after’ concept comes back in nearly every movie and it does not “indicate that love, even when it lasts, can change, or lose its intensity without losing its strength”. 37 Love is considered a delicate subject and still deals with many issues and can be very diverse for different people, but Disney always maintains the heterosexual love between a good-looking man and woman which is instant and steadily works out.

35 Amy M. Davis, Good Girls & Wicked Witches: Women in Disney’s Feature Animation, 116
36 Cheung Ting Yan, Reading Beyond “Happily Ever After”: Refiguring Disney Narrative of Femininity, 30 & 31
37 Amy M. Davis, Good Girls & Wicked Witches: Women in Disney’s Feature Animation, 21
**ANALYSIS**

*Snow White & The Seven Dwarfs* is the first animation movie Disney released in 1937. The story evolves around princess Snow White and ‘the vain queen’ who wants to get rid of her. The first scene shows the impressive looking queen requesting her magical mirror for an opinion on ‘the prettiest one of all’. She wears an outsized golden crown, a long blue dress, black and purple cape with a high-cut white collar and a black tight fabric covering every part of her body except her face which has heavily applied cosmetics and her eyebrows are very outlined. (Fig. 1) The contrasts in her dress transform her into a strong and overwhelming image that portrays a lot of power while still showing certain femininity, which is mainly through the use of cosmetics. The black cover makes her face come out in a heartshaped form, which visualizes her physique as strong and dark, regardless of the shape of a heart meaning something more loving. The colour black represents a symbol of mourning, or “associating the nothingness into which the body of the defunt has passed with the meaningless state in which the bereaved person finds him/herself”. 38 Implicating that the queen could feel meaningless when she is not the prettiest one of all and does not reach her goals, which then puts her in a mourning state. She is thus bitter and the black cover morphs her into a ‘dying version of herself’. It is immediately clear that the queen is extremely concerned with beauty and holds hatred towards Snow White.

In the next scene Snow White is seen working hard. She wears a dress in extremely pale colours - nothing that seems to be standing out - and has rips on the lower part of her skirt that suggest she has been performing hard labour of which these traces are the result. Her physique is pretty and tiny, she is noticeably smaller than the queen and her skin is indeed white as snow. (Fig. 2) The “wasp-waisted” beauty ideal of the early 20th century is evidently visible as Snow White is thin and has an “underdeveloped body, typically found amongst pre-or early pubescent girls, promoted as an ideal for adult women.” 39 She is depicted as a young innocent girl who feels content in life, does not have strong opinions and drifts along with the mainstream. White skin in the 1930s was a beauty ideal, considering black people were still oppressed and the fascination towards tanned skin only rose after the war.

38 Patrizia Calefato, *The Clothed Body*, 9
Snow White’s short black hair lays a strong contrast against her skin, but her rosy cheeks, red lipstick and dainty eyes all bring out the softness of her character and here rearranges the meaning of black as a symbol of mourning into a symbol of fashion purely through Snow White’s physique and her character. The bow in her hair makes her look younger than she is. Considering bows are multipurposed and can be used to wrap gifts in, it could be seen as a sign of her being worthy to get married to a man and in this case she almost serves as a treasure or gift in human form. In the study ‘The Princess and the Magic Kingdom’ Snow White is described as “a 1920s/30s starlet with a flapper’s haircut, rosebud mouth and high pitched marble. She matures in the Depression and is happy to pitch in with the working class dwarves in times of high unemployment poverty until she is found once again by her prince.” In this way it seems Snow White was ought to be a visual representation of women living in the time the movie came out and in which she symbolizes an entire social change.

Snow White sings about ‘the one she loves to find her’ and a prince on a white horse appears. Frightened by his visit she runs into the castle and gazes at her dress in shame; this action implies that clothing is obviously taken in mind as an important part of impressing the prince. The next scene shows her going into the woods in a more colourful dress, which has a blue bodice, pale-yellow skirt and expanded round sleeves with small sliced openings. The bow in her hair has transformed to a red colour and seems more visible. Since red is used as a colour to attract an opposite gender in nature and animal kingdoms, she here aspires to lure attention to herself as a representation of a primal instinct. The fact that Snow White dresses up when she leaves the castle suggests that she only feels safe to do so when being outside of the vain queen’s eyesight and feels that she has to dress up in order to be visible for a possible man she might run into. She looks decent, happy and fresh, and wears this dress with verve throughout the rest of the movie. (Fig. 3)

After an unsucceeded murder attempt by a servant of the queen, Snow White runs deep into the darker parts of the forest and becomes trapped in several branches by this suddenly not so comfortable dress. When stumbling upon the dwarfs’ house she immediately feels the need and pressure to clean. The seven dwarfs initially try to kill

her until the moment they realize she is a very beautiful girl. This makes them overlook that she is in fact an intruder. It is fascinating that beauty, clothing and being a girl have great impact to an extent where it does not matter what behaviour you express. Snow White has a tendency of taking care of the dwarfs, even though she has no clue whom they are and whether their intentions are good. “Snow White’s relationships with the seven, an exemplary array of Disney’s mutant masculinity, befits its era, the 1930s, and can be seen to prefigure Belle’s love for Beast. Tolerance of grossly unattractive masculinity is inherent in the quality of ‘feistiness’ that defines Disney heroines.” 41 Meaning that Snow White shows a certain level of likeability through taking interest in men that find themselves visually below her own level of attractiveness. In this approach Snow White is portrayed as a beautiful yet humble woman who innocently lowers herself for the sake of others. The dwarfs show silly behaviour, have their own typical personalities and are dressed in slightly mundane clothing in dull colours - very different from Snow White’s remarkable dress. (Fig. 4) Noteworthy is the large contrast between the seven dwarfs and Snow White – in terms of features as well as their behaviour - which intensifies the power of her looks and her positive identity exposed towards the viewer.

The clothing is animated with movement, such as it catching the wind, being pulled on or swepted by dancing and this clearly brings a certain grace into the movie. Interestingly Snow White’s dress only changes once, which is very different in later movies where the female character changes dress often. The colour palette of Snow White’s dress is extremely similar to that of the vain queen. Bodywise it is the differences in size, shape and physique that is the only visual difference between the ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ that we can perceive in them. In this way “the queen’s jealousy is actually directed at a younger version of herself, now ready to succeed her.” 42 By drinking a potion the queen later transforms into a smaller, older and scarylooking women with a bend back and a large nose with pimple – the stereotypical look of an evil witch. Snow White has no clue and innocently falls for the ‘poor old woman’ act, takes a bite of the poisoned apple and remains into a long sleep that can only be undone by a first kiss.

42 Rebecca-Anne C. Do Rozario, The Princess and the Magic Kingdom: Beyond Nostalgia, the Function of the Disney Princess, 39
The forest animals at the same time attempt to urge the dwarfs to go back home to save Snow White from the evil queen by pulling on their clothes, a way of persuasion without words which Disney seems to use often.

Snow White gets laid to rest in a glass coffin in the woods, serving as a see-through conserving space for anyone who wishes to glance at her. The next scene illustrates the text: “...so beautiful, even in death, that the dwarfs could not find in her heart to bury her. They fashioned a coffin of glass and gold, and kept eternal vigil on her side.” (Fig. 5 & 6) The quote seems sweet and of good intention, but at the same time very superficial since even in death Snow White has to serve her beauty to those who would like to savor. Allison Craven quotes Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar – feminist literary critics - in her study ‘Beauty and the Belles Discourses of Feminism and Femininity in Disneyland’ by saying it can be seen as “to be driven inward, obsessively studying self-images as if seeking a viable self.” 43 Snow White transforms into an art object and suddenly loses touch with all human respect people should have towards her. The fact that she remains dressed in the same outfit throughout all this - even when she is kissed and released from her death by the prince - concludes that her beauty is the serving purpose of the story and that she does not necessarily go through personal growth. When she lies in the glass coffin focus has been put on her facial features by surrounding her head with white little flowers, indicating as well that this is the most important part of her being. The movie Snow White is very focused on beauty ideals and brings about the message that those who are not as gifted with ideal looks will project jealousy. Even in the most unpowerful position, in this case death, you have to operate as a sight for others. The story is “a tale of feminine power conflicts and the fear and enticement of maturity as women move from one age to another” 44 which is portrayed by a family relationship between two women where the older is bitter and the younger naïve, with the use of an almost exactly similar wardrobe to connect the two. Snow White and the vain queen here almost morph into the same person but are only divided by character of evil and character of good. When it comes to clothing and their symbols Snow White & The Seven Dwarfs is therefore a unique and complex constructed movie.

43 Allison Craven, Beauty and the Belles: Discourses of Feminism and Femininity in Disneyland, 128
44 Rebecca-Anne C. Do Rozario, The Princess and the Magic Kingdom: Beyond Nostalgia, the Function of the Disney Princess, 41
**Cinderella**, released in 1950, is clearly a more colourful and advanced animated movie. The palette used includes a lot of pastel, bright colours and more varied colour use than in *Snow White & The Seven Dwarfs*. Cinderella has shoulder-long blonde hair, light skin, blue eyes and is a very typically Northern-looking girl. Her stepmother has grey hair, the stepsisters red and black, and all are whiteskinned. Cinderella is evidently the prettiest one of all with her soft features, small nose and gorgeous blue eyes. She believes that even though she finds herself in a cruel situation and her stepfamily uses her as a slave, she has to keep wishing and someday ‘her dreams will come true’. She is mostly shown in a casual workerstyle dress with a dark brown bodice, light blue long sleeves and a beige knee-length skirt with an apron, clearly displaying it is meant to be worn during labour. She wears a light blue bow in the lower part of her hair with this outfit, which - as later explained in *Beauty & The Beast* – indicates that at this point she is not occupied with the quest to find a man. (Fig. 7) Her stepsisters’ features are anything but pretty; their noses are small, round and puffy, their eyes are crossed and placed close to each other, and they seem much older than they undoubtedly are. “Anastasia and Drizella, with their flat chests, huge bustles, and awkward curtsies, could as well be read as comic drag acts in this balletic fantasy. The stepsisters serve as animated commoners to Cinderella’s royal body, gender benders to Cinderella’s enactment of ballerina.”

These strong features instantly provide the viewer with an uneasy feeling and an unconscious preference for Cinderella. The stepmother is often shown in the shade and wears a veil over the back of her head, indicating that she is ‘living in the shade’ and which brings up negative associations for the viewer. Her face is long-shaped, she wears dark cosmetics and has heavy dark eyebrows as well as a considerably tall length, similar to the vain queen in *Snow White*. (Fig. 8) The veil in this case could be explained as it covering her “knowledge” and “yet, when unveiled, gives no access to its own particular truth”. She appears to be hiding from real life and takes a blind eye on what is going on between the stepsisters and Cinderella - even when she is unveiled – from what is visibly a tense jealousy on beauty and smartness from the side of the stepsisters and an innocent obeying from Cinderella’s side.

---

45 Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, Laura Sells, *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender and Culture*, 112

46 Patrizia Calefato, *The Clothed Body*, 63
Cinderella’s sidekicks are animals – mostly mouses and a few birds. They are seen wearing miniature outfits with hats (dresses for the girls and trousers and shirts for the boys) that are brightly coloured. (Fig. 9) Cinderella is very fond of them and they have a mutual interest in dressing each other, as they help Cinderella to get up in the morning and she gifts the new mouse Guss a nice shirt. When the royal prince holds a ball and wishes every maiden to appear, Cinderella questions her stepmother whether she can attend. The stepmother only allows her ‘if’ she finds a suitable dress to wear. Since Cinderella has no time to create herself a dress because she has to take care of laundry and other labour, her mouse and bird companions decide that they can adjust a dress Cinderella was given to by her biological mother. They sing the catchiest song of the movie and are seen running around with fabrics, scissors and sewing tools. Some of the mouses have stolen items from the spoiled stepsisters who threw out certain accessories that they ‘got sick of’ and referred to as trash. The final dress is soft pink and white and has an unadorned style that does not draw much attention. Cinderella is very content with it and once again we see many bows being used; on the bodice as well as on the lower rim of the skirt and a bow in her hair which is now replaced to the top part of her head. (Fig. 10) Since Cinderella is going out to possibly find the man she will marry, this excess of bows could mean that the prince should see her as a treasure or gift – as explained in the analysis of Snow White & The Seven Dwarfs – and that she is aiming to be seen by him. The stepsisters attack Cinderella when they see she is wearing their accessories and Cinderella ends up sad and alone in a torn dress. A thought provoking happening, since at one point the stepsisters’ relationship with these items was lost as they tried to command for something more expensive and prettier, but as soon as Cinderella is seen wearing it this importance and jealousy increases and makes them want the items in return. This is a very clear sign that the stepsisters look up to her and see her as an example of what they are ought to be, even though their behaviour is expressed as if they look down on her and think she is unworthy. The stepsisters have impractical looking unornamented dresses and extraordinary big bustles that move as they walk. (Fig. 11) These bustles, which are “a cloth pad or wire frame attached to the waist and wrapped with fabric to enlarge the back of skirts”, used to be popular in the 1880s 47 but since Cinderella came out in 1950 the popularity of the bustle must have already been long gone.

The bustles here are a throwback in history, which could be seen as a negative association since fashion changes rapidly. The fact that these stepsisters are ‘behind in fashion’ and think that the prince would find it attractive is an act of foolishness.

A magical fairy godmother appears and helps to make Cinderella’s dream come true. The fairy godmother looks kind and wears a light blue non-tailored dress, which seems quite big in size. The bow around her neck is drawn in a more loose way with its ribbons pointing towards the ground, which in relation to the story indicates that the fairy godmother outgrew her own attractiveness, accepted this and is now simply concerned with helping others and not out to catch attention or find a man. The godmother changes Cinderella’s ripped dress into a white, virtually see-through, sparkling, princess-worthy dress with gorgeous pearl accessories and glass slippers on her feet. Her dress doubles as a “garment of light” which is a “classic example of costume replete with ritual significance, through which magic is reproduced in everyday practices.” It is in this way very symbolic as the light of the dress is also a “metaphor for the magic-religious illumination of body and mind”. 48 Her clothed body changes through the spell into something magical and religious through which the white, as usually related to virginal innocence, combined with the light makes an almost perfect picture for the prince. (Fig. 12)

While at the ball - which is clearly an exhibition of women for the prince to choose from - the prince spots Cinderella. What follows is a magical night until the clock strikes midnight and Cinderella has to leave before the spell runs out and all will return back to normal. In her rush one of her glass slippers remains stuck behind the stairs. Patrizia Calefato’s explanation for this in ‘The Clothed Body’ is that it is “a metaphor whereby the shoe…represents the young girl’s rite of passage from puberty to sexual maturity.” 49 Shoes are also seen as a fetishist item, which is perfectly matching with the fact that the prince holds a ball and invites maidens to present themselves to him and of whom he would choose his bride to be. In ‘Undressing Cinema’ by Stella Bruzzi it is also mentioned that the shoe is a sign of the “transition from girlhood to womanhood…involved in extreme physical restriction.” 50

---

48 Patrizia Calefato, The Clothed Body, 18  
49 Ibid, 154  
50 Stella Bruzzi, Undressing Cinema, 44
In this case the transition and restriction is even made literal as Cinderella loses her entire appearance by the time the spell breaks. She re-emerges from being a princess to being nothing but a slave for her family. However, the prince has fallen in love and arranges a search for the girl who wore the slipper – another sign that proves the fetishism symbol and importance behind the slipper. Every maiden gets to try on the slipper and the one who fits it is ought to marry him. As the evil stepmom realizes it was Cinderella, she locks her up in her room and her daughters get to try on the slipper. Both have significantly too big feet to fit and appear foolish while trying it on. Big feet in this case are anything but a beauty ideal for women, another undesirable feature for the stepsisters. The animals help Cinderella escape and while the stepmom purposely breaks the glass slipper, Cinderella pulls out the other one from her pocket to verify that she is ‘the one’. She then gets married to the prince in another white, virginal dress - almost identical to her earlier magical dress - and they live ‘happily ever after’.

*Cinderella* might be one of the most applicable movies for feminist critique, as the heroine gets oppressed in numerous ways. She is first of all used as a slave to her family, then sees a way out by the possibility of being with a prince, and then gets chosen by this prince simply for her looks which are not even authentic but a magical temporary appearance. None of this shows any of her free will or goals in life. It also shows the heroine in the story as being held back by this in terms of self-development and a happy life. “It is impossible to manage major tasks of adulthood – developing intimate bonds with others, caring for future generations and coming to terms with one’s life as lived – without a clear sense of identity.” 51

In ‘*Disney, Pixar and the Hidden Messages in Children’s Films*’, M. Keith Booker states that for a successful animated movie “children must be protected from any hint of sexuality, up to and including the virtual elimination of parents from the lives of the characters.” 52 The fact that the parents are generally missing or exist in a single form – only a father or only a mother - will not bring up thoughts about conception in children’s minds. It is thus an even more magical and unrealistic perspective they

---

52 M. Keith Booker, *Disney, Pixar and the Hidden Messages of Children’s Films*, 2
obtain through watching these animated movies. *Cinderella* is an extreme example of this where the female character is provided with a horrible stepfamily, which is the absolute opposite of parents and a loving biological family.

“Cinderella becomes a princess because she was an aristocrat all along, signaled by her delicate feet.” 53 Her feet here are the ultimate sign of why she is the perfect princess, in a sexual way as well as in her beauty for her feet are such a major difference from her stepsisters’ feet and the slipper has created an erotical agency.

The fashion in *Cinderella* plays a large role in the story, as she changes into several dresses – all aimed towards catching the attention of the prince as a way of escape from her real life – and shows many symbols. She is the exemplification for the growth of a girl to a woman, with the changes of dress and the lost slipper symbolizing this change. The fact that the story is mainly told through fashion and dress indicating status and success is noteworthy; *Cinderella* seems to be the number one Disney movie in doing so. This is considerably different from *Snow White & The Seven Dwarfs* where the focus mainly lays on beauty and where the heroine does not change dress often nor puts much attention to it, as well as not exhibiting change in terms of growth. Cinderella’s dress becomes an extremely important part of the story and most focus and situations are evolving around her dress, summed up as: the ‘creating the dress’ scene, the ‘ripping apart the dress’ scene, the ‘magical fairy dress’ scene and the most important fashion item being her lost slipper which is accomodated with the main goal in the movie; finding a man, escaping her slave life and getting married. *Cinderella* has become a classical movie for young girls and the use of clothing – and especially the glass slipper – has done its part to impress. It is also a typical example of fairytales that “convey messages about the importance of feminine beauty not only by making ‘beauties’ prominent in stories but also in demonstrating how beauty gets its rewards.” 54

53 M. Keith Booker, *Disney, Pixar and the Hidden Messages of Children’s Films*, 22
The Little Mermaid was released in 1989, nearly 50 years after Cinderella, and tells the story of a red-haired royal mermaid named Ariel who lives in the ocean. In a way, one can view the undersea world as realistic and the world on land as imaginary as well as connected to the “white male system”.55 This story is remarkably different from Snow White & The Seven Dwarfs and Cinderella, since Ariel is a mermaid and therefore possesses none of the standard ‘princess symbols’ as the previous characters do in terms of fashion, since she can not wear clothing as we know it. Ariel is also quirkier, livelier and does not seem very obeying or feeling unworthy of her being. The Little Mermaid was the leading successfull animated movie since Walt’s death in 1966 and also endorsed Disney’s status as a great manufacturer of suitable role models for young girls.56 Much had also happened fashionwise between Cinderella and The Little Mermaid, as the 1960s “has seen petticoats and corsets dissapear, skirts get shorter, necklines plunge, colours get b"righer and the advent of women’s trousers”57 which is interesting to keep in mind with Ariel’s dress in this movie.

Ariel’s father King Tritan is portrayed as a man with abundant power and has an extreme physique with muscles in his upperbody, a long white beard and golden accessories. Ariel is a young girl who enjoys exploring the human world by swimming to the surface and collecting human items. She has bright red long hair which waves gracefully in the water, big blue eyes, a tiny waist and a wonderfully good singing voice. Since she is a mermaid all she wears is a purple bra of two shells and her lower body is accomodated with a green flipper. (Fig. 13) When she bumps into a boat full of sailors and notices Prince Eric she falls in love at the sight of him. The boat however gets into a storm and sinks, but Ariel manages to save Prince Eric from his death. She sings to him on the beach and disappears, which leaves Eric with fascination and the quest to find this woman and marry her. Note-worthy is that it is not the looks of the princess that makes the man in this particular movie want to marry the heroine, but simply her voice.

---

55 Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, Laura Sells, From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender and Culture, 177
56 Ibid, 176
57 Patrizia Calefato, The Clothed Body, 21
Ursula is the evil character in the story who looks rather terrifying. Her body is overweight, her skin grey/blue and her hair short and white. Her face has heavily applied blue eyeshadow and red lipstick. It is theatrical as she wears so many cosmetics that it nearly covers her whole face and comes across unnatural – this can be seen as a sign of “female beauty with a mixture of chastity and obscenity, containment and immoderation.” 58 This matches perfectly with her extravagant personality. The lower part of her body is decorated with octopus tentacles that are black and give a frightening look. Since octopusses spray ink towards predators to scare them away and defend themselves, this is a symbolic body construction as well as the fact that it “physically manifests the enveloping, consumptive sexuality of the deadly woman”. 59 It is also an image that brings up similarities to Medusa - an evil mythological figure exhibiting snakes on her head instead of hair - as Ursula’s hair is shown moving in a snake-like way. 60 (Fig. 14) Ursula is out for domination of the entire sea and sings about helping ‘poor unfortunate souls’ by giving an example of an overweight woman and silly looking skinny man who she transformed into stereotypical attractive people. Her performance expresses sights of what it is like to be a woman on the main land and teaches Ariel “that gender is performance; Ursula doesn’t simply symbolize woman, she performs woman. Ursula uses a camp drag queen performance to teach Ariel to use make-up, to ‘never underestimate the importance of body language’, to use the artifices and trappings of gendered behavior.” 61 She offers Ariel a life change; she can become human and walk on legs in exchange for her beautiful voice. She must however obtain Eric’s love and only a kiss of true love will make her become human forever. Since love is usually influenced by a strong extraordinary attribute it here involves Ariel’s voice, which Ursula turns into a tradeable item to make Ariel lose her profits. 62 Ariel is in doubt, but Ursula is convinced that she does not need her voice, since her appearance is so good-looking and has everything going for her. The Little Mermaid here goes back in time and does not take note in the feministic improvements made before its release. 63

58 Patrizia Calefato, The Clothed Body, 69
59 Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, Laura Sells, From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender and Culture, 117
60 Ibid, 184
61 Ibid, 182 & 183
62 Ibid, 133
63 M. Keith Booker, Disney, Pixar and the Hidden Messages of Children’s Films, 53
When Ariel turns human, she is seen on the beach wearing a beige fabric held together with ropes, the only time and also first time her body is more or less covered, which indicates that the human world involving bodies with legs requires her to cover up and dress in a different way of which she took notice. Disney however never seems to add sexual tension to the fact that Ariel is so scarcely clothed throughout the movie. It is excused for the fact that she is a mermaid. The stereotypical look of a mermaid is after all quite naked in most myths, but also often depicts them as seductive, which is not the case in *The Little Mermaid*. The fact that Ariel gives up her legs is a sign of “compliance with the beauty culture, rather than her desire for access, mobility and independence.”  

Eric runs into her, thinks she is a survivor of a shipwreck and takes her home. His maids assist to dress her in a white and pink dinner dress with a large crinoline, expanded shoulders and a white underskirt. The dress has no accessories, nor bows. It is plain and can be described as a mature dress in which Ariel does not need bows or eccentric details to woo Eric. She simply wants to be her inexperienced self. The dress is an exceptional outfit for Ariel and she evidently feels uncomfortable in it. She misuses certain items and is seen behaving slightly rough and tomboyish, which can be seen as a gender-crossing moment to portray the differences of the undersea world and that of the land. (Fig. 15) Romantic moments happen between Ariel and Eric such as a boat ride on a magical lake. Ariel here wears a light blue dress with long sleeves and a dark blue bodice, a big bow in her hair and she swoons Eric with her smile. The symbol of the bow here comes back in large physical form as Ariel gets slightly tense about her time running out to make Eric fall in love with her – and so she starts using the bow signalling that she is available. (Fig. 16)

Ursula is frightened that Ariel might accomplish her goal. She decides to morph herself into a pretty young girl with nearly identical features to Ariel; it is even challenging to differentiate the two at first glance. She posesses the same body shapes - but has black hair and dark eyes as well as a more tanned skin colour - and uses Ariel’s voice as her tool to seduce Eric. The first scene where Ursula is seen in this shape shows her wearing a dress with a cape, which indicates that she is on the hunt.

64 Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, Laura Sells, *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender and Culture*, 180
and out to get what she wants. With success, as Eric thinks she is the one that saved him from the shipwreck and decides to marry her. There is an interweaving of identities between Ursula and Ariel, only divided by the fact that Ursula has black hair with dark eyes and where Ariel looks softer with her red hair and blue eyes. Body features – or personality - are however not motivating for the male character, as he just wants to marry whoever saved his life and has the amazing singing voice. This occurrence basically tells that “women do not need to speak to men to engage in building human-to-human relationships, but only need to seduce and serenade them into a male-female cultural order.”

The story then changes for the worse as Ursula goes on a rampage and grows into a larger version of herself looking even obscurer than she already did, while exploding out of her bewitched body and turning back into her old self. Here the frightness and monstrousness of her original body becomes even more accentuated. Prince Eric manages to kill her with his ship. King Triton sees Ariel in a sad state for the fact that she lost Eric, and realizes that she is very much in love. He transforms her into a human and sets her free while she is seen wearing a sparkly simple dress. Ariel and Eric get married on a boat and Ariel here wears a white wedding dress, which looks extremely identical to the dress Ursula wore at her disguised wedding with Eric as well as having similar shapes to her earlier white and pink dinner dress. (Fig. 17) This wedding dress displays details of older fashion trends than the time of the movie’s release, and reminds of Princess Diana’s wedding dress which she wore at her wedding in 1981 – it is considered a very legendary and iconic dress. Disney here provides Ariel with an extremely similar characteristic to that of Princess Diana and symbolizes this with her dress. Ariel takes a look back into the past and she “enters a mental state of those times and relive history” or “experience some of the values from those times and compare them to the present”. This can have a symbolic meaning since Ariel wears this dress because she is going to leave her old life in the sea behind. The young viewer nowadays can often in no way relate to these styles, as many of them have completely dissapeared, but this tends to add to the magicality.

---

Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, Laura Sells, *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender and Culture*, 133

Patrizia Calefato, *The Clothed Body*, 125
The Little Mermaid is an interesting movie in terms of fashion, as the leading woman is a mermaid and does not seem to know or care much about fashion. It is fascinating to look at the use of fashion in this movie, as there has not been much opportunity to portray Ariel through her clothes in nearly all of its parts. Depicting Ariel as collecting human items and constructing her hair and body features to stand out has changed this into a new approach. It is however the going to land that makes her get in touch with dress and its symbols and where she slowly starts realizing that it is essential. This is signalled for example by the use of a bow in a moment of despair. Ariel is also depicted as a very materialistic girl, collecting human items in her own secret room. This is very different from the earlier princesses, as they usually do not seem to care about materialism and are rather concerned by the images other people have of them and they way they are ought to behave along the lines of this. Both in Snow White, Cinderella and The Little Mermaid the evil women of the story have been provided with an extra terrifying cinematic trick: “The face and background fade to black and the eyes are painted as gold, glowing orbs, narrowing tightly on the intended victim/heroine.” This effect is aimed to enlarge the “women’s evil natures”. However, they are not just out for the heroine but also tend to expose these characteristics to gain domination over the entire society or the male characters such as the kings and fathers. Ursula is the exemplification of the general evil woman in this story in which she possesses the entire outcome for Ariel’s life by showing her power. The Little Mermaid tends to be a story on beauty and singular traits, but also shows the viewer that desiring different outcomes in life and changing your habitat or social class is possible if you only long for it enough and are willing to obey to change and differences in life standards. The fashion here becomes a tool to these differences and is very well used to portray character.

67 Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, Laura Sells, From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender and Culture, 116
*Beauty & The Beast* was released in 1991, and starts with a story about a prince being offered a rose and denying because the giver is an old ugly woman. Since he is so vain she transforms him into a beast and puts a spell on his castle that transforms all his maids and workers into living furniture. A very visual representation of “a consumerist worship of commodities.” 68 The spell can only be broken if the beast can learn to love someone and earn her love in return before the last petal of the magic rose falls off. Belle is a French young girl who lives a village life and is different from most people in her community – she enjoys reading and learning. She is considered the most beautiful girl in town but people are not fond of her since she is ‘quite odd’. The fact that she takes effort in brain matters such as reading is seen here as a big dissimilarity. An interesting change from *The Little Mermaid*, which focuses on superficial subjects such as materialism, *Beauty & The Beast* was the first Disney movie to be “a statement against the shallowness of a society in which status is often based on looks and would thus seem to be something of a departure from Disney tradition, in which beauty is consistently touted as the ultimate virtue.” 69 It is clear that Disney wanted to make several changes with *Beauty & The Beast*.

Belle has brown soft-looking hair, big nutshaped brown eyes and soft features such as rosy cheeks and a pleasing smile. She wears a light blue and white dress with long sleeves and has a bow in her hair. (Fig. 18) The bow, which almost all the Disney princesses wear, comes back here in a form that does not serve the same purpose as in previous movies. It is placed away behind Belle’s hair and is a sign of her longing for attention of a man being non-existing or hidden deep down, instead of expressing it on the surface. The fact that Belle wears the bow on the lower part of her head is also explained as a sign that she “is not interested in men” as written in LIFE magazine in an issue released in 1944. Whereas wearing a bow on the top of your head, such as Snow White, indicates that she “is out to get herself a man”. 70 Even though *Beauty & The Beast* was released in 1991, this rule has apparently still stuck to Disney and is no surprise since the company more often goes back in time to pick up fashion trends and reuse them.

68 M. Keith Booker, *Disney, Pixar and the Hidden Messages of Children’s Films*, 55
69 Ibid, 54
70 High School Fads. *LIFE Magazine*. Vol. 16, No. 20. 15-05-1944, 70
Belle’s outfit looks proper, seems valuable for labour and yet has a certain grace. Her neckline shows a hem often used on blouses, and gives her outfit a little androgynous touch, signalling that she does not aim for a very seducing and feminine look but prefers comfort. Brown hair could in this case be seen as an intensifying symbol for this, as well as mainly pointing out her intelligence.

Gaston, one of the men in her community, has set sight on Belle. He comes across as a vain, arrogant and selfish man who believes a woman has to fulfill a caring role. This muscular guy thinks Belle should feel lucky that he chose to marry her and tells her it is immoral to read books, because she ‘might start thinking and get ideas’ – mentioning this as if it is a negative development. Belle’s father gets lost in the woods and stumbles upon the beast’s castle where he gets captured. The beast is in this movie portrayed as a monster, with large amounts of hair, big brown eyes and predator teeth and is often seen wearing a cape and mundane clothing. Belle rushes to the castle and offers herself up to the beast to take her prisoner instead of her father. A herioc deed that shows a lot of good character trait in Belle. As the furniture realizes they now have the possibility of breaking the spell, they try to turn the beast to soften up and control his temper, for Belle may be the girl who he could fall in love with. The beast starts softening up and Belle starts to appreciate his efforts to be a gentleman.

Belle wears more dresses by the time passes, such as a pink dress for breakfast with the beast which has a more open neckline than her blue pinafore dress and to which she wears a fur cape while going outside to teach the beast how to feed birds. (Fig. 19 & 20) “A hooded cape and pinafore” are explained as having a “nurse-like” connotation as well as a sexual one where her fur cape gives her an animalistic look and where she uses her “large eyes” in a hypnotic manner to express her behaviour. 71 The green dress is used for a scene in which Belle teaches the beast how to read. It is longsleved, has round enlarged shoulders and a low chest part that shows a lot of neck. The green colour here can be read as her relating to her nature of being clever and educated through the reading of books.

71 Allison Craven, Beauty and the Belles: Discourses of Feminism and Femininity in Disneyland, 130
Accompanying all dresses Belle wears a matching bow that is continually tied low in her hair and is small and hidden – at no point the bow grows in size, which indicates that Belle stays true to herself and does not try to impress the beast by her dress. (Fig. 21) All colours of the dresses fit very well to her physique and brown hair and eye colour, which makes it a very visually stimulating movie to watch. When the evening of the last day of the spell falls, the beast plots to tell Belle that he loves her. Belle wears a yellow/golden ballroom dress, which has a very large skirt with crinoline and looks practically like a wedding dress. It has numerous details and gives off an expensive air. The dress is off-shoulder, has a pleated skirt and the almost silk-like fabric shows a magical sparkle. Belle wears round-buttoned earrings, her hair is tied up into a bun with a golden band and she wears elbow length gloves all in the same yellow/golden colour. “The glove sometimes, and at very early times, also made the pledge of a promise”. 72 Judging from this it symbolizes that Belle intends to make a promise to stick with the beast and that she is worthy of his trust. Belle’s appearance is princesslike and shows a lot of grace and dignity. She feels comfortable in her dress and shows no signs of excessive attention-seeking behaviour. (Fig. 22)

In a later scene the beast and Gaston fight, which then turns into a fight over Belle, and Gaston stabs the beast to his death. Belle falls down at his side and cries. She tells him she loves him and these words break the spell. The beast turns back into his real identity as well as the castle and the furniture going back to who they used to be. The former beast is now a handsome and attractive prince with long blonde hair, blue eyes and a strong muscular physique. “The beast is the New Man, the one who can transform himself from the hardened, muscle-bound, domineering man of the 80s into the considerate, loving and self-sacrificing man of the 90s.” 73 A change in stereotype towards men here comes up by the fact that the beast has turned into a better and evolved version of himself. However, “it is beast who is advertised to be the possessor of ‘beauty’ and Belle must learn its nature, and beast (actually the student of Belle’s improving influence) is positioned as moral instructor; Belle’s fate is his. It is Belle who is being instructed in how to elicit beauty from beastliness.” 74

73 Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, Laura Sells, *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender and Culture*, 170
74 Allison Craven, *Beauty and the Belles: Discourses of Feminism and Femininity in Disneyland*, 133
This underlying message in the movie is not very clearly depicted as it intends to show the exact opposite from a surface level of interaction. All is good in the end and Belle and the prince hold a ball while wearing the same clothes as they wore for their final dinner. (Fig. 23) A little boy who used to be a teacup asks his mother if they will live happily ever after, to which the mother replies: “Of course.” A very clear proof of the ‘happily every after’ concept Disney continually spreads.

As mentioned in ‘Beauty and the Belles: Discourses of Feminism and Femininity in Disneyland’, Belle’s clothing is quite symbolic for the many situations in the movie. She starts out with a “blue pinafore followed by transformation into a Cinderella-like ball gown (also a Queen Antoinette-style crinoline).” Many changes here are seen and they all help Belle transform to a “semi-ritualized coming out as sexual debutante and possible wife for beast” as well as that “Belle’s Disney feistiness is a carefully scripted concept of pop femininity, constructed to be acceptable and entertaining to both children and adults.” 75 The fact that Belle is portrayed as an intelligent woman is quite new for the Disney princess concept and the dress being used helps a great deal into visualizing Belle’s smartness. Her dresses are carefully adjusted to the situations, as well as in colour as in style, and the hair bow here takes on a completely new level of symbolism by being placed in a different and more strong position than many of the princesses before.

The fact that she looks very feminine in the last scenes while wearing a yellow/golden ballroom dress goes perfectly hand in hand with the goal the movie worked towards to; a lesson of love and acceptance outside vain and social standards. In Beauty & The Beast it is however a male who plays the role of evil counterpart, divided into the beast and a desperate villain who is in love with Belle. The latter makes the beast look much more friendly. The villain is portrayed in a very vain and shallow but strong way – different from the sexualized witches of the female evil characters who tend to turn out weak. Beauty & The Beast is in this way much more of a lesson on looking below the surface of physical beauty.

75 Allison Craven, Beauty and the Belles: Discourses of Feminism and Femininity in Disneyland, 130
DISCUSSION

The dresses the princesses wear are carefully selected to accompany each of their situations and adventures in terms of colour, practicality and meaning. It is clear that their dresses mean more than the surface expresses and do not serve just for visual satisfaction, but are particularly conformed to social matters. One of the most obvious and frequently used symbols of fashion in the researched Disney movies has been the hair bow. This item reappears in each of the princesses’ looks and completes nearly all of their outfits. Since the Disney movies are known for their ultimate goal to be love and living ‘happily ever after’ the fact that this bow has been used as an indicator for attraction and availability is very evident. As mentioned, the symbolic meaning of a bow can serve several purposes but in the Disney movies seems unquestionably connected with an intention of sexuality and mating. Young girls are often innocently dressed with a bow to make sense of their gender and to give them a youthful look. Nowadays it is not very obvious that a bow can have a sexual meaning, although in earlier times this used to be a non-written rule as mentioned in the analysis from an issue of LIFE magazine of the 1940s. Colour is also a clear symbol seen elaborated into the dress, with certain colours being used for certain personality traits. Most of the evil women in the stories have black hair symbolizing their dark personalities. Cinderella is blonde and has pale skin and light coloured eyes symbolizing her goodness and innocence. However, Snow White, Ariel and Belle – who are all depicted as Western white girls as well – are black, red and brown haired. Snow White being an example of a 1930s flapper girl here is therefore depicted extremely obeying and serving in her personality to make up for her initially dark symbolized hair and shows off a certain trend of that time, whereas Ariel’s red hair stands for her fire, feistiness and ‘going against the stream’, and Belle’s brown hair for her smart brain as the opposite, blondes, are usually stereotyped as unintelligent which relates back to Cinderella.

Sexuality in the researched movies has been mostly found in the portraying of evil characters. Their clothing is often revealing and their bodyparts are much more developed than those of the princesses who are usually smallbreasted and childlike. “The witches are not only agents of evil but represent erotic and subversive forces that are more appealing both for the artists who drew them and the audiences. The
young women are helpless ornaments in need of protection.” 76 Cosmetics, sexual movement and their features are used to portray their power, which is usually destroyed and stopped by a combined act from all the other characters in the movie to turn back to a peaceful state in culture as well as nature. 77 Opposite the evil women are the fairy godmothers and female caretakers – usually provided with the right amount of magical knowledge and power. They are helpfull to the princesses and heroines and fulfill the role of “feminine nurturing and sacrifice” and “wear no cosmetics, jewelry or adornment.” As well as that these caring characters are not sexual in any way but are usually middle-aged and “in the postmenopausal script of asexuality.” 78 The fact that these stereotypes in the movies are very clearly depicted as ‘being sexual is bad’, and ‘being asexual is good’, is a strong message that is being sent to the young girl as a watcher. As questioned in ‘Disney’s Influence on Females Perception of Gender and Love’ it is mentioned that children learn about love and relationships through taking note of their own families, but as parents usually do not discuss love, marriage or sexuality with their children, media becomes the first source of experience. 79 The writer also states that the Disney princesses all seem to have in common the fact that they are silenced, restricted and “are saved or succeed only through the help of men”. 80 The princesses do everything they can to present themselves as ‘the perfect girl’ and even resign parts of their identities throughout the process, showing no doubts about the relationship. It is almost a given that it will be free of problems, change or possible break-ups. Children are manifested to these messages while not comprehending the concept of love as adults do and who can relate to experience.

Body changes come into the picture through a division of certain women as well; it is shown that women’s bodies are emphasized by character and “are rooted in a physical timeline that decrees that these bodies will change: from the tentative strength of youth, to the confident carriage of middle age, to the aplomb of old age.” 81 This

76 Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, Laura Sells, From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender and Culture, 37
77 Ibid, 118
78 Ibid, 118
79 Theresa L. Tonn, Disney’s Influence on Females Perception of Gender and Love, 4
80 Ibid, 11
81 Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, Laura Sells, From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender and Culture, 121
represents the general idea of growing into distinctive ages with its accompanying pros and cons in a more overdramatic and accentuative way, meaning that it is acceptable to go through phases where you might relate to the bitter stepmother, as the stepmother will also evolve into the wise godmother. Often this is related to a sense of the past through the use of fashion, as the princesses wear clothing containing certain symbols of even earlier styles than the times in which the movies have been released. In this way the young girl can watch the Disney movies by relating to it but also not relating to it, which creates a healthy distance from the movie in psychological terms. We can however very much relate to these styles through our visual culture and because these trends or iconic items have been doing its part to impress and are interwove into our memories.

Men’s dress in the movies is usually quite uniform and, as quoted from the costume historian James Laver in the book ‘Undressing Cinema’, is not very much involved with change as well as having the role of “being functional rather than decorative” which makes it almost an extreme form of stereotyping. Also, “‘real men’ are not supposed to be narcissistically preoccupied with their clothes and appearance” 82 denoting that it is not the main point of focus into portraying their characters towards the viewer when considering Disney is portraying a stereotype of ‘real men’. A “dissasociation of men from narcissistic self-admiration” has been the focus for most male characters. 83

A returning phenomenon in the researched Disney movies is the message of individuality. This is not surprising since Disney is originally an American company and individualism is an important part of the ‘American dream’ that has been played out in the country. The movies show that the princesses and heroines all have their own characteristics that provide them with certain individuality and takes them through the ups and downs in their stories. Individuality in this approach is like a lesson that attempts to influence the child viewer’s narrative identity. In each of the movies a certain rise to a goal has been portrayed; the character is occupied in a bad situation and has to go through certain stages of life to climb up the ladder of success, which eventually leads them to marriage and living ‘happily ever after’. “It is when
the princess is on the brink of womanhood and has found her lover that the femme fatale moves from simply victimizing the princess to actively seeking her destruction.” 84 This personal growth from being a girl to becoming a woman – which can bring about certain individuality issues - here becomes exaggerated in the movie in the form of an evil female character. These teachings almost all go hand in hand with a change of clothing, from typically a workerstyle dress to a magical, shining and ‘princess worthy’ ballroom wedding dress in which the character outshines all other characters. The fact that this continuously happens within a certain social class can be particularly upsetting for children who are poor and not provided with grand life opportunities. “Up to a certain age, at least, children have little or no opportunity to improve the social and economic status in which they have been born. Thus, children who are poor are in danger of interpreting that situation as a sign of their own personal inferiority.” 85 By simply constructing and understanding their identities through watching the Disney movies, this feeling of inferiority then becomes influenced.

Innocence in the Disney movies has been a largely incorporated topic with different sides to it. Henry A. Giroux explains in his essay ‘Memory and Pedagogy in the Wonderful World of Disney’ in the book ‘From Mouse to Mermaid’, that it has become the perfect instrument to rewrite history and erase any unpleasant details, as well as the Disney company reinventing it as a “pedagogical and political tool to secure its own interests, authority and power.” 86 Innocence here is being sold as a retelling of myths in a way in which Disney created their own closed off so-called ‘wonderful world’ or simply put childlike bubble. Young girls will comprehend the Disney movies by linking it to their real life and react to it in an emotional level, therefore it is no surprise that fashion has become the easiest way into literally crawling into the skin of the princesses. Disney quickly played towards these girls’ needs by offering them the chance to be a princess themselves through merchandize and the Disney Princess concept.

84 Rebecca-Anne C. Do Rozario, The Princess and the Magic Kingdom: Beyond Nostalgia, the Function of the Disney Princess, 43
85 M. Keith Booker, Disney, Pixar and the Hidden Messages of Children’s Films, 177
86 Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, Laura Sells, From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender and Culture, 46
CONCLUSION

Disney’s dress is impressive and visual; the princesses show an abundant wardrobe and their evil counterparts tend to dress darkly with shock value. The dress is exaggerated to portray their characteristics and young girls’ reception of fashion must hereby be influenced. When it comes to gender and sexuality the Disney princesses and heroines are often depicted as ‘typical women’ through the use of stereotyping – explained as ‘sex-typing’ in the analysis. Their bodies are fashioned with small waists and round shapes which is also known as an hourglass figure, their hair is permanently healthy-looking and their faces are applied with cosmetics regardless of their quite young age. Fashionwise it is the continuous use of skirts and dresses that demonstrates the character’s femininity, and where we do not see them wearing any characteristic male clothing items or details that could suggest the slightest symbol of the opposite gender. In this way Disney very much eliminates any mannerism or fashion preferences that are external to these feminine stereotypes - such as androgyny or cross-dressing - and certainly does not put any consideration to the possibility of being homosexual, since the princesses always search for a male partner. Concluding from this the young girl as a viewer is fundamentally being taught that this feminine stereotype is the standard expectation of what they are ought to be in their adolescent and adult life.

The fashion in the researched Disney movies seem to represent growth and it is indeed this that we can conclude from that each of the princesses are looking for a sense of selfhood. Overdramatic problems make them become the heroes of their stories and this is in a way why young girls are eager to relate. Through the use of symbols in their rapidly changing fashion, the situations the princesses find themselves in are amplified from a real life situation, that young girls are in the starts of becoming familiar with, into a ‘fairytale edition’ that teaches them how to reach a solution with the use of a layer of magic and fitting fashion. The semiotic symbols hereby transform the young girl’s thoughts and influence their narrative identities without a real conscious effect.

Beauty & The Beast, dir. Trousdale, G., USA, Walt Disney Pictures, 1991 [Movie]

Beck, S. W. *Gloves, Their Annals And Associations: A Chapter of Trade and Social History*. Hamilton, Adams & Company, 1883


Cinderella, dir. Geronimi, C., USA, Walt Disney Productions, 1950 [Movie]


Snow White & The Seven Dwarfs, dir. Hand, D., USA, Walt Disney Productions, 1937 [Movie]

The Little Mermaid, dir. Clements, R., USA, Walt Disney Pictures, 1989 [Movie]

Ting Yan, Cheung. Reading Beyond “Happily Ever After”: Refiguring Disney Narrative of Femininity. MA diss., University of Hong Kong, 2005

APPENDIX

SNOW WHITE & THE SEVEN DWARFS

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 6

...so beautiful, even in death, that the dwarfs could not find it in their hearts to bury her...

...they fashioned a coffin of glass and gold, and kept eternal vigil at her side...
CINDERELLA

Figure 7

Figure 8

Figure 9

Figure 10

Figure 11

Figure 12
THE LITTLE MERMAID

Figure 13

Figure 14

Figure 15

Figure 16

Figure 17
BEAUTY & THE BEAST

Figure 18

Figure 19

Figure 20

Figure 21

Figure 22

Figure 23