The Power of Disney: History, Gender & Disney Princesses

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Abstract: Walt Disney has been argued as the most influential American entertainer in the 20th century. Disney has been critiqued on their representations gender and gender roles in each of their films. The five films I will be looking at in order are Snow White (1937), Cinderella (1950), Sleeping Beauty (1959), Beauty and the Beast (1991) and Frozen (2013). I focus on the structure of the films and how both the themes and representations of females have changed over the last 60 years. I have explained simulacra, simulacra and hyperreality to analyze the films and show that representations of gender shown may affect our gender performance in everyday life. I have also found that there is a connection between feminist critiques of gender and the changes Disney's has made in their gender representations over the years. As well, I have found that we can trace gender norms through analyzing Disney Films.

Walt Disney began The Walt Disney Company in 1923 and has since had an influence on many people all around the world through his film productions. Watt's explains:

> Walt Disney has been, arguably, the most influential American entertainer of the twentieth century… Walt Disney himself has become encrusted in myths that diverge sharply. On one hand, his disciples [worship] Saint Walt as a beloved purveyor of innocent imagination, uplifting fantasy, and moral instruction. On the other hand, his denouncers bitterly [criticize] Huckster Walt as an artistic fraud, an imperialist, a cynical manipulator of commercial formulas, and a saccharine sentimentalist. (Watts, xix).

Despite the various critiques of Disney, his work remains popular and influential and his legacy continues to flourish even today. The Walt Disney Company has been critiqued on many of the productions, in particular, their Disney princess films because of their representations of

gender and gender roles. For the purpose of this paper I am focusing on the five Disney princess

films: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959),

Beauty and the Beast (1991) and *Frozen* (2013). I use various theorist in Folklore, Cultural

Criticism and Feminism to analyze the films. Through my research I propose that the

representations of gender have gradually changed in these films over the last 60 years, and that

the changes made can be linked to feminist critiques of previous films they have made. I have

also found that there may be a relation between the doing of gender in everyday life and the

doing of gender in Disney films in the context of the time they were produced. Furthermore, I am

arguing that we are able to trace the changes in gender norms in everyday life through analyzing

Disney films. To begin the paper, I discuss Walt Disney, and his Company to give a better

understanding of how the Disney princess films have become so popular. Then I have explained

Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and simulacrum, as well as hyperreality which I will use to

analyze these films and show that the representations of gender shown may affect our gender

performance in everyday life. I then move into feminism to explain the historic social context of

when the films were produced and use critiques of Disney films by feminist critics (Coltrane

2010; England, Descartes and Collier-Meek, 2011; Fouts, Callan and Piasentin, 2006; Towbin,

Haddock and Zimmerman, 2008; Greenhill and Matrix, 2010; Swan, 1999) to back up my

argument, that we are able to trace the changes in gender norms, and the movements feminist

have made over the years through analyzing these Disney films.

Walt Disney

To begin, Walt Disney was born in 1901 to Elias and Flora Disney. Walt was the fourth of five

children (three older brothers, and one younger sister). Throughout Walt's life, he had many

struggles, from moving from place to place with his family, to his two eldest brothers leaving (allegedly due to their fathers abuse), then his other brother (Roy) leaving shortly after, leaving only Walt to help his father keep their family going. He also struggled as he got older, in school and trying to become successful as a cartoonist. (Bryman, 1995)

As an adolescent, Walt showed very little interest in school, but as he got older he began to grow an interest for drawing (which was frowned upon by his father). Once he reached his teenage years, and his desire to draw got stronger he decided to take an art course. Even though Walt's drawing got interrupted when he was sent to France for WWI in 1918, when he returned in 1919 he picked his drawings back up once again. He began to work as a cartoonist for various companies still struggling to make it as an artist, but that all changed in 1923. (Bryman, 1995)

In 1923, Roy encouraged Walt to continue drawing cartoons and together the two brothers began the Disney Bros Studio (with the help of a distributor named Margret Winkler) that we now know as The Walt Disney Company. Even after the brothers began the company, they still struggled to become successful, creating cartoon after cartoon, until their first feature film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937. After Disney's first princess film, the company began to grow significantly. After Snow White, Walt also created two other princess films, *Cinderella* in 1950 and *Sleeping Beauty* in 1959. In 1966, Walt Disney died, but Walt Disney Productions still continue today in his name. (Bryman, 1995)

After Walt's death, there was major concerns for the company and what would happen. The operation of Walt Disney Productions after Walt's death can be explained in three phases: the first, was the Disney troika, where Roy and two other men ran the company. When Roy died, phase two started where they looked for suitable management and the third phase where Michael Eisner and Frank Wells took over. Wells died in 1994 and Eisner continued to run the company

until 2005 when Bob Iger (the president at the time) took over the chief executive. In between these phases, it was questioned whether or not the company would survive, and if it would be how Walt would have wanted it. Many employees came and went through these phases. (Bryman, 1995)

When Eisner took over, he associated himself with Walt and wanted to create the same things that Walt and his colleagues had created. He began to focus on the films himself, and to create what he thought would reflect Walt and Walt Disney Productions. He made films such as *The Lion King* and *Beauty and the Beast* and Walt Disney Productions began to rise once again in the film sector (Bryman, 34).

The Disney Princess films proved to be the most profitable. In 2001, Disney princesses became even more popular when Disney began their Disney Princess line "as an advertising and marketing campaign targeted toward young girls" (England, Descartes & Collier-Meek, 557; Orenstein 2006). Their marketing aimed to "[encourage] children to personally identify with the characters so … they [will] purchase associated products" (England, Descartes & Collier-Meek, 557). Disney's Princess line has also influenced "children's media and product consumerism, contributing to a new "girlhood" that is largely defined by gender and the consumption of related messages and products" (ibid). Therefore, the Disney Princess line is a marketing and advertising phenomenon that gives young girls ideologies about gender roles and gender performances (ibid). Because this marketing influences children so heavily, it is possible that they see these images of gender represented in the films, and act them out in their real life. As I will discuss later, performing gender, Disney Princess films and Baudillard's theory of Hyperreality are all related.

Simulation, Simulacra and Hyperreality

Simulation and Simulacra is a theory developed in 1981 by Jean Baudrillard that examines

reality and the representations of reality. Baudrillard's theory argues that there are imitations

produced of the real. These imitations become understood as the real and can be continuously

recreated; they are recreated so many times that the real dissolves into an unrecognized imitation.

Baudrillard argues that the danger of this process is that the recreated imitations can become so

detached from the original that no association to the original can be found, thus "[threatening]

the difference between the "true" and the "false," the "real" and the "imaginary" (3). When we

can no longer decipher between what is "true" and "false" and what is "real" and "imaginary"

hyperreality is produced. One example that Baudrillard uses to explain hyperreality is

Disneyland. Baudrillard explains that Disneyland is a place that represents true American life,

and hides that it is doing so. Disneyland allows people to have a place where they can go to, to

escape from "reality". Disneyland was created for children, but is experienced by adults as a way

for them to avoid the "real world" and "adulthood". Baudrillard states that "Disneyland exists in

order to hide that it is the "real" country … [It] is presented as imaginary in order to make us

believe that the rest is real … [and] that [everything surrounding] it [is] no longer real, but

[instead belongs] to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation" (12). When Baudrillard

discusses hyperreality, he states that:

> The real is produced from miniaturized cells, matrices, and memory banks,
> models of control—and it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times from
> these. It no longer needs to be rational, because it no longer measure itself against
> either an ideal or negative instance … it is no longer really the real, because no
> imaginary envelops it anymore. It is a hyperreal, produced from a radiating
> synthesis of combinatory models in hyperspace without atmosphere. (Baudrillard,
> 2)

Therefore, Baudrillard's theory suggests that it is impossible to know the real from the false

because the two have been blended together by simulations. As Baudrillard also states, "it is no

longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting

the signs of the real for the real … never again will the real have the chance to produce itself…"

(2).

Baudrillard believes that the process of hyperreality happens through four "phases of the

image." In these four phases, "it" refers to the imitations of the original:

> It is the reflection of a profound reality;
> It masks and denatures a profound reality;
> It masks the *absence* of a profound reality;
> It has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure
> Simulacrum. (Baudrillard, 6)

To further explain these phases, I will use an example to demonstrate how the transition from the

original to hyperreality occurs for oral folktales. At phase one we can think of the simulation(s)

of oral folktales. Oral folktales are spread through word of mouth over and over from person to

person and are changed and altered depending on who and where the tale is being told (Oring,

1986). At the second phase we have the Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's written version of the

folktales, the *Kinder und Hausmaerchen* (1812, first edition). Between collecting and publishing

the Grimm brothers edited the oral folktales, excluding erotic and/or sexual elements, adding

Christian references and "emphasized specific role models for male and female protagonists

according to the dominant patriarchal code of that time; they also endowed many of the tales

with a "homey" or *biedermier* flavor by the use of diminutives, quaint expressions, and cute

descriptions (Zipes, 14). Thus, they constructed a folktale of "their own". At this point the

Grimm's version of the folktales masks that it is a simulation (edited version) that, in reality, is

actually several oral folktales blended together that include and exclude particular parts and that

it is *not* an original folktale itself. Then in Baurillard's third phase we have these Grimm's tales

transformed into film; for example, Disney's princess films. Disney used several of the Grimm

Brothers folktales for their adapt screenplays including Snow White and Cinderella. Disney has

"Americanized" the Grimm's version of the folktales, representing the "innocence of male

power" and women as domesticated, innocent and passive (Zipes, 24). Disney masks that their

princess films are reconstructed folktales that are inspired by the Grimm Brothers' version of

oral folktales; Disney's films are not an original of the tales. Then when we get to the fourth

stage we have the Disney version of the fairy tale becoming understood as the "original tale" and

thus the "image" is completely disconnected from the "real" all together— thus producing

hyperreality. Because Baudrillard's theory suggest that at the fourth phase the simulation

becomes the "real", we can expand on his theory using Disney's film folktales to see how

simulation is a part of everyday life; I will also go further in depth later when I analyze the five

specific Disney princess films. For now we can see that Disney princess films are a replication of

the "real" tales: a simulation. At the second stage we have the film masking that it is displaying

representations of American people, their values, and certain aspects of their lives. At stage

three, we have the absence of the reality where certain members of the audience view the

representations of American life shown in the film as transferable ideologies taken as a real life

model for gender roles, gender performance, and relationship scripts. At the fourth stage, we

have Disney's version of the fairy tale (that is a "false reality") become its own reality where

viewers aspire to have this ideological fantasy life. Some viewers becomes unable to see the line

between what is real, and what is not real, and begins to live their life through a hyperreality of

models that Disney has created (Baudrillard 6-7). Other authors, working in cultural criticism

and feminism, including Kay Stone (2008), Pauline Greenhill and Sidney Eve Matrix (2010), and Jack Zipes (1988) have argued similar points. In the next section I will explain feminism and discuss various feminist critiques of Disney princess films, using the critiques to show how the representations in Disney films have evolved to become models for action for some of Disney's audiences.

Feminism

Feminism can be traced back to at least 1792 with work done by Mary Wollstonecraft (Gedalof *et al.* 2005). For the purpose of my research I am only discussing a small portion of feminism that relates to the historical social context when *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937), Cinderella (1950), Sleeping Beauty (1959), Beauty and the Beast (1959)* and *Frozen (2013)* were produced. This is important for my argument that Disney is, and has been, responding to feminist critiques of their films throughout the years, and has changed the representations of females, and changed particular themes that will be discussed below. The actual word "feminism" was brought to the English language from the French in the 1890's, and at that time "feminism" had a negative connotation (Walters, 2006). Even though Wollstonecraft's book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was written in regards to the French Revolution, it covered similar problems that women in the United States faced: that "women had not previously "existed" because political and social ideologies … either did not acknowledge their equity with men or took their existence for granted, and thus, worse, did not need to acknowledge their existence" (Gedalof *et al*. 25). Women were viewed only as "biological creatures", they were passive, submissive, overlooked, and only needed for reproduction purposes, child rearing, and domesticity (Gedalof *et al*. 25) – the fight to change the tradition gender roles lead to feminism.

The history of Feminism is broken down into waves: first wave, second wave, and third wave. First-wave feminism:

> [A]rose in the context of industrial society and liberal politics but is connected to both the liberal women's rights movement and early socialist feminism in the late 19th and early 20th century in the United States and Europe. Concerned with access and equal opportunities for women, the first wave continued to influence feminism in both Western and Eastern societies throughout the 20th century. (Krolokke & Sorensen, 1)

The first wave in the United States "was characterized by diverse forms of intervention that have continued to inspire later feminist movements" (Krolokke & Sorensen, 3). The fight for feminism in the United States can be dated back to at least 1848, when 300 men and women met in Seneca Falls in New York fighting for "natural equity of women and outlining the political strategy of equal access and opportunity" (Krolokke & Sorensen, 4), which gave rise to the women's suffrage movement. Gedalof *et al*. state that it was not until "the suffrage movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries that the United States … did the long process of emancipating … "the second sex" –from its lower status in the social hierarchy…" (Gedalof *et al*. 25). First wave Feminism can also referred to as "equal-opportunities feminism" or "equity feminism" (Krolokke & Sorensen, 6); it aimed to show patriarchy as a problem, and to gain equal rights between both men and women—giving women access to "the same resources and positions as men … [as well as being acknowledged] for their contributions and competencies]" (Krolokke & Sorensen, 5-6). Three of the films I am discussing were produced during the tail end of the first wave of feminism, *Snow White, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty;* each reflect the expected gender norms during that time. There are also slight changes seen in the 1959 film *Sleeping Beauty* which will be explained further in the feminist critique section.

Second wave feminism "emerged in the 1960's to 1970's in post war Western welfare societies, when other "oppressed" groups such as Blacks and Homosexuals were being

defined…" (Krolokke & Sorensen, 1-2). Second wave feminism fought for women "politically and in their own private lives" so women would have the right to make decisions based on their own personal situations, such as "abortion, divorce, and non-legislative partnership—and against sexism both in bourgeois society and within the socialist movements" (Krolokke & Sorensen, 1-2). Second-wave feminism

> refers mostly to the radical feminism of the women's liberation movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s … [that] generated an explosion of research and teaching on women's issues, which has now grown into a diverse disciplinary field of women's gender, or feminist studies (Krolokke & Sorensen, 15).

The second wave of feminism, like the first, fought for equality, but it also fought against gendered oppression and gender inequalities, both culturally and politically, fighting to change the stereotypical traditional gender norms, and giving women the right to make decisions in their own private lives; this lead to the third wave of Feminism.

Third wave Feminism is the result of the fights and movements of both first and second wave Feminism. *Beauty and the Beast* was produced during this wave. Women were now empowered and were able to "generally see themselves as capable, strong, and assertive social agents" (Krolokke & Sorensen, 15). The third wave:

> [S]eeks to overcome the theoretical question of equity or difference and the political question of evolution or revolution, while it challenges the notion of "universal womanhood" and embraces ambiguity, diversity, and multiplicity in transversal theory and politics. … It marks a move away from thinking and acting in terms of systems, structures fixed power relations, and thereby also "suppression" toward highlighting the complexities, contingencies, and challenges of power and the diverse meanings of goals and agency. (Krolokke & Sorensen, 1-2; 21)

Third wave feminism includes a diversity of women, and allows them to perform outside the "gender norms" that were once expected of them.

In the 1960's and 1970's, Feminist began to criticize media for their misrepresentations of women. They criticized the gender role stereotypes shown on television and film that "normalized the dominant cultural values and customs that legitimate male domination of women" (Watkins & Emerson, 152). During the second wave in the 1970's, there were several studies done on the portrayal of women in popular media, and many found similar results "The studies found that women tended to be depicted in subordinate roles (for example, housewives, secretaries), whereas men were often portrayed in roles of authority (for example, household breadwinners, professionally employed)" (Watkins & Emerson, 152; c.f. Dominick and Rauch 1972; McNeil 1974)). Therefore, the representations of women in popular media reflected the traditional stereotyped gender norms (Watkins & Emerson, 152). It is no surprise that Disney has been a target of various feminist critique due to their representations of gender in their Disney Princess films. I will discuss the various feminist critiques of Disney films, applying them to the five Disney films I have chosen.

Feminist Critiques

There are several common themes criticized in Disney Princess films by various feminist Towbin, Haddock, Zimmerman, Lund and Tanner, 2008; Kay Stone, 2008; Pauline Greenhill and Sidney Eve Matrix, 2010; England, Descartes and Collier-Meek, 2-11; and Cheung, 2005; for the purpose of my research, I am only discussing the feminist critiques of gender, and gender performances seen in the five Disney films I have already listed. I will later use these critiques to discuss how the images of gender in the films can influence the viewers in their everyday lives. As stated by Towbin *et al.* "given Disney's dominant position in children's media, it is important to examine the messages contained in these films that relate to gender …" (21).

Towbin *et al.* (2008), critique four themes found in Disney films, three of which apply to my research: "a woman's appearance is valued more than her intellect, women are helpless and in need of protection, [and] women are domestic and likely to marry" (Towbin *et al.* 30). Other scholars who have critiqued Disney on similar themes.Towbin *et. al*. found that in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Cinderella,* and *Sleeping Beauty,* there is a clear reference that "a woman's value was determined by her appearance rather than her abilities or intellect" (30). Just to give a brief outline of these three films: *Snow White and The Seven Dwarfs* is about a beautiful princess named Snow White; she is so beautiful that her step-mother, the evil Queen wants her dead. The Queen sends her huntsman to kill her in the forest, but he cannot do it, so he fakes her death, bringing back the heart of a pig to the Queen, and Snow White lives with seven dwarfs as she hides from her step-mother—who later finds her and tricks her into eating a poisoned apple putting her in a deep sleep that only "true love" can wake her from; *Cinderella* is about a woman who is raised by her evil step-mother, and has two evil-step sisters. The king host a ball one night in hopes of finding his son a wife, with the help of a Fairy God Mother, Cinderella is able to attend the ball but only until 12 o'clock. When 12 o'clock comes, Cinderella rushes out of the ball losing her glass slipper. The prince picks up her glass slipper and has the Kings men search the whole Kingdom for the girl who owns it. When they find out that the slipper belongs to Cinderella, they take her back to the castle for her to marry the prince; *Sleeping Beauty* is about a princess named Aurora, who is cursed to prick her finger on a spinning needle and fall into a deep sleep on her 16th birthday by an evil fairy named Maleficent. For Aurora's safety, her three Fairy Godmothers take her to live in the forest giving her the identity of Brier Rose. When it comes time for Aurora's 16th birthday, the Fairy God mothers get a party ready for "Brier Rose" and tell her who she really is. Aurora, very upset, heads back to the castle to return to being

princess. While she is there, Maleficent cast a spell to make her wander to the highest tower where she has put a spinning wheel. Aurora pricks her finger, and is put into a deep sleep. The Fairy God mothers cast a spell over the entire kingdom to keep them asleep until Aurora is awakened. With the help of the fairy God mothers, the prince finds his way to the highest tower, kisses Aurora, breaking the curse and they go to the ball with all of the kingdoms people. Returning back to the theme of beauty, it can be seen in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* when Snow White's stepmother/the evil queen attempts to kill Snow White to prevent her from exceeding the Queens own beauty; In *Sleeping Beauty* when Aurora's God Mother gives her the "gift of beauty", and it can also be argued in *Cinderella*, since the prince "falls in love" with her at the ball—falling in love at "first sight" because of her beauty. However, when we look at the later film *Beauty and the Beast*, the theme of beauty subtly changes.

Beauty and the Beast is about a rebellious girl who trades her father's imprisonment inside the Beast's castle for her own. While she lives there she gradually begins to like the Beast, and vice versa. The Beast lets Belle go because he falls in love with her. Belle leaves, but quickly returns to the Beast, and saves his life. In reference to the princess, Belle is represented as an independent woman who loves to read. She is shown often with books, and there are references made about her many visits to the library. However, even though she is represented as an intellectual, her beauty is still held at a high value (shown by Gaston's desire to marry her solely based on her beauty), and she is ridiculed by women in the town, said to be "rather odd" because of her love for books, and for having no desire to marry There is also a representation change in the theme of beauty shown through the character of the Beast in *Beauty and the Beast.* Through the Beast's representation in *Beauty and the Beast*, we see the idea that beauty comes from within. In order for the Beast to change back to his human form, he must love, and be loved

while he is in Beast form. Because Belle falls in love with him for his inner beauty, he is granted his "outer beauty" back. Although *Beauty and the Beast* could arguably teach children that beauty comes from within, because it is the male who shows this representation, it still influences the ideal that women have to be beautiful to be loved – but *Beauty and the Beast* also adds the ideal that women can still be smart and can be valued for more than just their beauty alone.

The second theme outlined by Towbin *et al.* (2008) (that women are helpless, and need a man to save [or rescue] them) is also critiqued feminist researcher like Cheung (2005), Swan (1999) and Greenhill and Matrix 2010**.** This theme is also shown in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and Beauty and the Beast.* However, unlike the first three, in *Beauty and the Beast* we begin to see subtle changes. In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Snow White is awakened from the deep sleep her stepmother has cursed on her by the prince's kiss; in *Cinderella,* she is saved from her cruel stepmother's care and stepsisters torture by the "prince's love"; and in *Sleeping Beauty,* like *Snow White*, she is awakened too by "true loves kiss". In *Beauty and the Beast*, there is a subtle change in the "rescuing" theme. Although there is a scene where the Beast saves Belle from the wolves in the forest, the "big" rescue in the film is actually when Belle rescues the Beast through her love. After Gaston injures the Beast, Belle holds him and confesses her love for him over his dying body; this breaks the curse on the Beast, and he wakes, changing back to his human form

The third theme outlined by Towbin *et al.* that women are domestic, and need to marry was a common theme present in the first three Disney princess films (produced from 1930's-1950's)(Swan, 1999; Laying 2001; England *et al.*, 2011); found that there were more traditional gender role representations (England, *et al.* 2011). The domestication theme can only be seen in

only two of the films I have studied, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs,* and *Cinderella.* Given that these films were produced in 1937 and 1950 when patriarchy was still predominant (although it was being fought against), it is no surprise that women were represented in the film as passive, submissive, and domesticated. Both Snow White and Cinderella were shown as maids for their step-mothers. We can also see domesticity represented in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* when Snow White finds the Dwarfs cottage and they make a deal that Snow White can stay as long as she cooks and cleans. Both *Snow White* and *Cinderella* are often seen cooking and cleaning for the household. The theme that women need to marry can be seen in all four films, but in *Beauty and the Beast*, Belle shows no desire to marry until *after* she has fallen in love with the Beast—the representation of "love at first sight" and "waiting for love to find them" is changed. In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty,* there is no process of falling in love, the princesses meet the prince's and instantly fall in love; Snow White and Aurora even manage to "fall in love" while they are in a deep sleep. As Towbin *et al.* suggest, love appears to be "easy", but in Beauty and the Beast, we see that love takes work, understanding, and patience. Belle is the first princess who does not fall in love "at first sight" (Henke & Umble 326-327).

The theme of women needing to marry that Towbin *et al.* (2008) discuss can also be expanded on, to include a theme Cheung (2005) discusses: that love leads to a "happily ever after". This is seen in all the Disney films I have discussed, including Frozen. The first four princesses, Snow White, Cinderella, Aurora, and Belle, live "happily ever after" *after* their marriages to the prince, which depicts an ideal that in order to be happy, one needs to get married. Although in Frozen there is a theme of love leads to a happily ever after, the representation of love is shown differently, which I will explain further later.

Another theme Cheung (2005) found was good versus evil, and of course, good always trumps evil. In Snow White, her evil step mother fails to kill her, thus, "good" wins. In Cinderella, despite her stepmothers and sisters best efforts to prevent her from trying on the glass slipper, they fail, and Cinderella gets to live "happily ever after" with the prince. In Sleeping Beauty, Malificent fails to kill Aurora. Aurora is awaked, and goes on to live happily ever after with the prince. In Beauty and the Beast, both Belle and the Beast get to live happily ever after, despite Gaston's efforts to kill the Beast and convince Belle to marry him. In every case, the characters who represent "good" win, and the characters who represent "evil" lose; the outcome for some "evil" characters includes death. Disney's representation of characters as good and evil influences an ideal that if you are a good person, you will win and if you are a bad person, you will lose. This theme also becomes more complex in Disney's Frozen, which I will explain shortly.

There are also critiques on the character representation itself, not just the themes in the film. England *et al*. also found that the princesses were represented as "affectionate, helpful, troublesome, fearful, tentative and described as [beautiful]" (562). They also found that the princesses were described as "assertive" (which is usually attributed to stereotypical male traits) but it was only in relation with animals and children. England *et al*, also discussed how stereotypically, women were expected to be housekeepers and mothers (Coltrane and Shih 2010) which is represented in the films *Snow White* and *Cinderella* . Both of *Snow Whites* and *Cinderella's* worth is based on their homemaking, and beauty because they have no other "attributes". Aurora's only attribute is her beauty because she is not domesticated like *Snow White* and *Cinderella.* This theme begins to change in *Beauty and the Beast.* When we look at Belle, we see her starting to reflect what second wave feminism fought for: for women to be

more than a housewife. Despite the changes made from the first two Disney princess films to *Beauty and the Beast* and *Frozen*, the princesses still remain "thin, beautiful, kind … and headed for the alter" (Henke & Umble, 1996);

When we get to Disney's film Frozen (2013), we see a drastic change in both the themes, and the characters. Given that there is six films in between BaTB and Frozen, it is important to note that the changes are evident through the six films in between. In Disney's Frozen, there are two princesses, Elsa, and Anna. Both are very different from one another. Their personalities are represented complexly very complex. Elsa (who later becomes Queen), is timid, and sheltered, yet she is dangerous and powerful, but also caring. Elsa was born with the gift of creating ice and snow. In the film, there is a scene of Elsa and Anna as children, playing. Elsa is using her powers to make snow banks and Anna gets carried away. Elsa cannot keep up with Anna's jumping, and she accidently hits Anna with her ice powers. Anna falls from the snow bank and is hurt. Elsa's parents (the King and Queen at the time) hurry to get Anna to the trolls so they can help her. The trolls help Anna, and also erase any memory she has of Elsa's powers, (leaving only Elsa, and her parents with knowledge of them). Because of her powers, she isolates herself away from everyone, living in fear that she will never be able to control her powers, and that she will do harm to others. Elsa sees no one besides her mother and her father for several years. When Elsa finally comes out of isolation after her parent's sudden death for her crowing to become Queen, there is an incident where she loses control of her powers. Anna frustrates Elsa, causing her to lose control and she freezes all of Arendelle. This is not the only incident when Elsa's powerfulness and dangerousness is reveled; there is also a scene where Elsa accidently strikes Anna, freezing her heart and almost kills her. But then, Elsa saves Anna.Elsa's character is shown to be powerful, scared, and caring throughout the whole plot.

In contrast to Elsa, Anna is a very playful and guidable princess. She is imaginative, and hopeful, yet she is brave, and fearless. Anna has this innocence about her through the film. She is always singing, trying to get her sister, Elsa to come out of the room. She makes her own fun, talking to pictures on the wall and playing alone while Elsa isolates herself. Anna is shown as gullible when Prince Hans asks her to marry him, and she says yes right away, believing that he actually loves her. But despite Anna's young, innocent ways, when Elsa flees to the mountain to isolate herself from everyone after the incident at her coronation, it is Anna who runs to rescue her, braving the snow storm to save not only her sister, but all of Arendelle's people. Not only are the characteristics of the Elsa and Anna dramatically different from Snow White, Cinderella, Aurora, and Belle, but the themes in Frozen are complex as well.

In *Frozen*, unlike the previous films I have discussed, the theme of "love at first sight" is absent; not only is it absent, but is also challenged In *Frozen,* when Anna comes to Elsa for permission to marry Prince Hans, Elsa does not only just say "no" she also states that she cannot marry someone she has just met – thus, showing that love at first sight does not exist. . Although Anna believes she is in love in the film at first, it is shown as the film goes on that she realizes that Prince Hans is not for her, and he only pretended to be in love with her so he could become King. In the end, Anna actually falls in love with Kristoff, who she has gotten to actually know. This is dramatically different from the other Disney films. In the other films, romantic love is represented as being an asset in order to live "happily ever after". Although the theme of "true love" is still in the film, the "true love" is the love of family: the two sisters. When Elsa becomes Queen, she does not need a prince to do so. There is no element of domestication, of the princesses needing a male companion to be happy, nor is there a representation that the princesses are submissive or passive in any way. Disney's *Frozen* seems to respond to the

feminist critiques that I previously listed above, and created a film that represents women more so in the third wave of feminism, rather than depicting women in the first and second wave. . Although the theme of beauty still prevails in each film, Disney has produced a Disney princessfilm: where the princesses characters are not shown as domesticated, passive, or submissive, but rather shown with complex personalities; they left absent the theme of "love at first sight"; as well, a princess needing to be saved/rescued and needing romance to live happily ever after; and the theme of "good" versus "evil" was challenged.

The goal of feminist criticism is to make people aware of misrepresentations of women, as well as to change the representation of females in mass media, and to fight for equality, and against oppression because of gender (Laying, 2001). Through these feminist critiques on the representation of gender, and gender roles, in Disney princess films, Disney has gradually reformed how the female characters in their films have been shown.. As the films have developed over time, some aspects of the gender representations have changed and although it may only be subtle changes, there are still changes nonetheless. O'Brian states that: "films are cultural texts produced within historically specific economic and social conditions to communicate some meaning to audiences … Disney has adapted fairy tales to appeal to the society within which its films are made" (O'Brian, 181Further, I will discuss how these representations that various feminist have critiques have become a model for gender performances in everyday life, thus allowing the viewers to participate in Baudillard's theory of hyperrelaity.

Disney's Representations of Gender in the "Real World"

Various studies have been conducted that suggest when viewers watch Disney princess films, they are influenced by the depictions of women shown, with a particularly strong influence on

children. The influence Disney films has on its viewers is important, because it supports my

argument that Disney films could possibly influence models of gender norms and performances

in in everyday life (Greenhill and Matrix, 2010; Towbin *et al*. 2006; England *et al*. 2011;

Padilla-Walker *et al* 2013; Fouts *et al*. 2006). Greenhill and Matrix (2010) analyze and critique

the themes and motifs that are transformed from written fairy tales onto films, for example,

themes that can be linked to gender representations like the character of the princesses, as well as

the theme of romance and the female characters being rescued. Greenhill and Matrix suggest that

child audiences who watch Disney films see "the story line [as] minimized and replaced with

enhanced images, songs and dances that reaffirm the moral lessons" (45) and this replacement

with enhanced images, songs, and dances allow children to "to escape from reality". Hence,

Disney films can possibly generate a "hyperreality" through the images they project, where

children "escape from reality", using the images in the films for models of their everyday morals

and actions.

Towbin *et al*. make a similar argument to Greenhill and Matrix (2010), stating that

"children learn about [social constructions like gender] from many sources, but media [is a]

powerful source for learning" (21); they also suggest that "media portrayals influence children's

developing beliefs and values … [and since] research shows that many stereotypes based on

gender … are portrayed in media" (21), thus, children's beliefs and values are being influenced

by the stereotypes shown in these Disney films. England *et al*. state that the "Disney films

specifically have been shown to portray some stereotypical depictions of gender" (556).

Additionally, other research also indicates that watching gender portrayals has an effect on

viewers real-world gender-based attitudes, beliefs and behaviors, thus it is possible to say that

these Disney princess films can transmit attitudes and beliefs about gender. (Morawitz & Mastro

131) If the values and beliefs of gender are traditional, stereotypical roles of women like those in

Snow White, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty it is possible that children are watching these

films, and performing traditional gender roles in their everyday life. In the article *The Animated*

Woman Laying states that:

> Real (1989) contends that media provides role models for children that influence
> personal identity. Barry Brummett (1991) argues that this occurs through the
> process in which "the bits and pieces of everyday life, popular culture, participate
> in and influence the management of meaning (Laying, 2)

Thus, the representations shown in Disney princess films act as models of action through the role

models (the prince and princesses) in the film. Children see these representations and consume

gendered meanings, which influences their gender performances in everyday life.

Although many suggest that the representations of gender in Disney affect children

negatively, Padilla-Walker, *et al* (2013), argue that animated Disney films produce prosocial

behavior, "broadening the definition of prosocial behavior to include a range of prosocial

behaviors that are reflective of real-life … behavior" (394). Their research states that Disney

films have been criticized for their stereotypical gender role representations (among other

representations) which portray Disney films in a "negative light"; but results from their study

suggest that children who watch Disney films participate in more prosocial behavior and that

"Disney movies reflect actual behavior". Their findings suggest that Disney films actually

"reflect reality quite well which … suggest that these acts would be more likely to be attended to

and be remembered (and subsequently imitated) by children" (407).

There have also been studies such as *Demonizing in Children's Television Cartoons and*

Disney Animated Films by Fouts *et al*. that found Disney to have a negative influence on

children. Fouts *et al*., studied "evil" words such as "monster", "devil", "demon", and "wicked"

used in reference to the characters in Disney films and television cartoons. Their findings suggest

that over half of the children they studied picked up on "evil" words, and that children are

influenced by it. Their study also suggest that children may learn labels and stereotypes through

the films they watch, suggesting that when children watch Disney films there may be certain

stereotypes of gender and what gender roles should be like projected, which establishes certain

ideals for gender expectations in everyday life. Although only a small portion of this study

relates to my work, Fout's *et al*. work is important because it suggest that children are influenced

and learn certain ideals from these films. As well, it relates indirectly to gender portrayals in

Disney films since it is often a woman in control/power that is portrayed as "evil".

In O'Brian's article, *The Happiest Films on Earth: A Textual and Contextual Analysis of*

Walt Disney's Cinderella and The Little Mermaid, she states that:

> Fowler and McCormick (1986) argue that the introduction to fairy tales at an age when
> the distinction between fantasy and reality is blurry leads readers to accept the
> stereotypical conventions of fairy tales: stepmothers are wicked, princesses are
> mistreated, and everyone lives "happily ever after," In addition elements of realism that
> otherwise would be questioned remain unchallenged because the audience believes that
> fairy tales should be "accepted, not analyzed" (O'Brian, 177).

Because Disney's princess films are such a success, O'Brian suggest that audiences are willing

to accept Disney's version of the fairy tales they have recreated in their films, approving of the

representations because the representations are "societies dominant ideology" (O'Brian, 181).

Disney's sanitization of various fairy tales has created a sort of "filmic fantasy". In the first three

Disney Princess films, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Cinderella,* and *Sleeping Beauty*, we

see representations of the traditional gender roles for the most part. But n *Beauty and the Beast*,

we can see the representations of the female characters changing because, despite the efforts to

return to patriarchy, feminist fought against, giving us new representations of women from

Disney's 1991 films *Beauty and the Beast*, to *Frozen.* (Swan, 1999). We can see from the studies above that the representations of gender in Disney films influence children and affect their ideals of gender, and gender performances in everyday life. If children are affected by Disney's gender representations during childhood, this may also affect their ideals of gender once they reach adulthood, and reference gender and gender performances by the representations they have seen through media outlets. These films affect the child audiences who watch them, arguing that when Disney began creating their films, it was to escape the reality of the war. Because of this "the story line [was] minimized and replaced with enhanced images, songs and dances that reaffirm the moral lessons" (pg. 45) and this replacement 'to escape from reality' has projected into contemporary films.

Conclusion

Through my research, I have found that Disney films both reflect gender norms and create gender norms that are performed everyday life. It seems from analyzing the feminist critiques, and the films that as feminist reject particular representations of women and themes in shown in Disney princess films, Disney begins to gradually re-evaluate the representations and themes and subtly changes from one film to the next. My research also suggest that since media has a strong influence on viewers, (especially children), it is possible that gender role representations could be understood through these Disney Princess films, and could be used as models of gender performance for everyday life.

O'Brian states that "the Disney myth is so strong that the story in each of the company's instantly "classic" feature length animated films tends to be perceived as the original version of the fairy tale" (O'Brian, 179). Stone refers to Disney's version of these fairy tales as the "Americanized" fairy tale; and because Disney has "Americanized" these fairy tales, the

company has been able to reflect representations of American life and American values through the films, allowing viewers to see these representations as a representation of their lives (or how the want their lives to be).

The representations of gender in Disney princess films have sparked much criticism because of gender portrayal of the princesses. Disney was criticized for the first three princesses the most. More recently, Disney seems to have followed feminist critiques and gradually changed their representations of the princess and various themes. If we consider the timeline of Disney films, from their 1937 film Snow White to their 2013 film Frozen I propose we can see a timeline of feminist progress. The portrayal of gender in Disney has changed drastically from their first film Snow White to now, as have the role of women in everyday life from 1937 to now. The gender representations in Disney seem to mirror gender performances in real life. This becomes an issue when people are mirroring the earlier Disney films that portray the traditional gender roles from first wave feminism, and not the gender roles of contemporary time. Though the theme of beauty is still persistent in each film, we see moving from *Snow White* to *Frozen* that the princesses become represented as brave and powerful women, who do not need a man/prince to rescue them, nor do they need a man to live "happily ever after".

When people begin to see Disney princess films as a reflection of their own lives, and start modeling the representations they see, they become engulfed in this hyperreality where they are unable to recognize that the life in the film is only an imitation of American life. The American life within itself is a symbol that has been recreated time and time again through different outlets such as the Disney princess films. Hyperreality is when the imitations seen in the films become more real to the viewers than their real life itself. The inability to distinguish between reality and hyperreality creates a barrier for people from the concrete world, blurred

with imitations where the real can never be truly identified. As Zipes discusses, fairy tales make us feel like we are a part of a universal community where everyone shares the same norms and values. Since Disney Princess films are a replication of these fairy tales, I am arguing that viewers see the gender norms and values in these films and believe that they are the gender norms and values that everyone shares and begins to perform in everyday life based on the models they see (Zipes, 1988).

The connection between the feminist critiques of gender, Disney Princess films and Baudillard's theory of Hyperreality is that the gender performances seen in the film do not always reflect where feminist progress is at the time; this causes the viewers to see the representations of gender in Disney, and still perform in that way believing that the representations shown, whether it be representations of first, second, or third wave feminism are the common norms and values of everyone which in turn influences how women are seen – when the viewer's perform the representations of gender and gender roles seen in Disney princess films in their everyday life, they become a part of a fantasy life – a hypereality.

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