Dual Messages: A Realistic Approach to Fantastical Princesses

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, an analysis of the following Disney films will be conducted: Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937), Cinderella (1950), Sleeping Beauty (1959), The Little Mermaid (1989), Beauty and the Beast (1991), Aladdin (1992). An analysis and discussion will also be conducted for Vancouver photographer Dina Goldstein’s 2009 Fallen Princesses exhibition. The depictions of the princesses in each work will be examined and contrasted.
Growing up as a child, many people are introduced to stories, fairytales, and legends that have an enormous influence on their imagination and perception of the world. Often, these fantasies seem very real appearing to be potentially attainable. However, not everything heard or seen is achievable imaginatively let alone accomplishable in real life. Fantasies can make it difficult to distinguish abilities from handicaps, especially with stubborn or uneducated ideas about what one is capable of. While many of the messages that are disseminated through children’s media are indeed quite positive, they can have a negative influence that can alter a viewers perspectives on reality. It is important for females (and males alike) to be aware of the reality behind self-image, gender roles, and the operation of power and control in patriarchal societies.

The purpose of this paper will be to examine the victimized young Disney princesses and how their roles as females can be unbalanced, send false ideals about body image and how patriarchal power functions. This paper begins by discussing the physically unattainable beauty that is portrayed by Disney as improving the lives of the princesses. The ideal beauty suggested by Disney will then be contrasted against the self-image realism of Goldstein’s photographs. Next, the “happily-ever-after” relationships the Disney princesses attain will be compared to Goldstein’s examples of unequal gender roles common today. Finally, the control of those in power in patriarchal societies will be examined between the representations to demonstrate how women’s equality.

HYPOTHESIS

Within the Disney films, I expect to see that the princesses are significantly more appealing to the eye than any other female in the film and their ability to overcome obstacles with ease and facility. I think that these women will defeat their problems with
the help of others and not independently. In comparison, I believe that Goldstein’s princesses will also be beautiful, but will address their personal troubles on their own. Also, I think that Goldstein’s princesses will encounter struggles placed by men with power instead of women.

METHOD

Six films produced across the past 73 years by the Walt Disney Company were viewed to identify similar ideas about self-image, marital beliefs and initiative of those in power. Then, exhibited in 2009 by photographer Dina Goldstein, representations of these same women were examined to analyze current issues that women deal with. After the viewing of each representation, similarities and differences between the princesses were analyzed to draw connections to past and modern sociological issues (see table 1.1 in appendix).

RESULTS

Body Image (Disney)

In each of the films by Disney, every princess has similar physical shape and traits that help to define their “attractive” figure. In every film, each princess has: large round eyes, long flowing hair, voluptuous breasts, thin waist, wide hips and carry themselves with fragility and grace. The two princesses that exemplified this “beauty” the most were Belle (see fig. 3.1) and Aurora (see fig 2.1). Their names alone suggests that they are gorgeous, and these qualities predetermines their journey in the film. Belle’s initial reaction to the Beast is horror (that he is a monster), which immediately sends messages to the viewer that there are specific requirements to be regarded as handsome. Because Belle is beautiful, the film suggests that the “ugly” Beast does not deserve her.
These kinds of messages can have a huge impact by subliminally scorching the viewer’s ideas of what is attractive. Furthermore, although the Beast is reverted back to human form, their happily ever after is dependant on his transformation into a handsome prince.

Likewise, this idea of beauty as the most important factor in a relationship plays an enormous role in Sleeping Beauty as well. In this film, Aurora – the sleeping beauty in reference to the title – falls in love upon first sight of the prince. Although this is possible in real life, the cartoon sends the message to its viewers that this is common and okay to judge someone based on their looks. Although she is awoken from the sleeping spell cast upon her by an demanding witch, it is assumed that the prince would have waited for her forever if she ever woke up. Despite the prince and princess knowing nothing about each other, the prince is determined to wait for Aurora simply for her beauty. Again, this sends the idea that one’s appearance is the most important requirement to fall in love.

Body Image (Goldstein)

While maintaining that both Belle and Aurora are still beautiful, Goldstein takes a different approach to the post-fairytale princesses (2009). Belle, now getting slightly older, decides that plastic surgery and beauty-enhancement procedures are necessary (see fig. 3.2). Mocking the Disney film, Goldstein demonstrates that being pretty just isn’t enough; the princess must be absolutely perfect (2009). Belle receives a face-lift, and undergoes lip enhancement surgery to create the image of an “ideal woman”. Although aging is a part of everyone’s life, some people feel they just are not ready to age physically. However, altering one’s appearance does not suggest beauty, for it only demonstrates insecurity with one’s appearance.

On the other hand, Aurora never woke up from her enchantment, yet the prince
stayed by her side all the way to a retirement home in Goldstein’s future rendition of the sleeping beauty (see fig. 2.2). Again, the absurdity to fall in love with someone at first sight is revealed as the prince waits hopefully in anticipation of a “happy life” with beauty. This juxtaposition between youth and old age demonstrates how, realistically, we all grow old and only in fairytales could one ever stay young and beautiful.

Gender Roles (Disney)

In both *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (see fig. 6.1) and *Cinderella* (see fig. 4.1), Snow White and Cinderella fill roles of “cleaning lady” within their residences. Snow White is responsible for cleaning the old cottage she is sharing with the dwarfs. Immediately it is evident that, due to the absence of a female in their lives, the cottage is filthy, and it is neither tidy or sanitary until Snow White arrives. This sends the message that women are supposed to be in charge of housekeeping while the men are out making money at their day-jobs. After cleaning, Snow White cooks dinner for the men, and must make sure they are clean enough to eat at the table. As she does chores joyfully, viewers are subliminally told that it is the women’s duty to perform these tasks as the men are above them.

Secondly, Cinderella is responsible for doing all the household chores. However, instead of a man in charge, orders are received through her demanding step-mother and step-sisters. Although she isn’t controlled by a man, it is immediately evident that there is not a man to clean or cook, so a woman must be in charge of doing it. These traditional roles suggest that this attitude of leaving chores for women to do is acceptable when there instead should be equal effort by both genders in a household. The lack of chores for men is reinforced in the castle where the prince lives leisurely alongside the king and any
other men residing there. When the prince is mentioned in the film, he is shown as a handsome young man with the kingdom under his and his father’s control. This subliminally sends messages to the viewers that men have a role of superiority over women.

*Gender Roles (Goldstein)*

Instead of succumbing to the traditional household roles, Goldstein’s Snow White and Cinderella address their problems in two different ways. First, seven dwarfs and a wealthy Prince Charming are replaced by four young children and an unemployed Prince Charming (see fig. 6.2). Snow White appears exhausted and stressed from the pressures of working a double-shift. The Prince sits lazily watching television in the background with no apparent motivation to help out or even move himself. Here, Snow White is again cornered by a male into taking care of all the household chores.

Cinderella on the other hand deals with her stress differently. Drinking in a dingy bar, Cinderella sits alone but under the gaze of several men also drinking. The focus of the pub is on her, and the men look at her with interested eyes. The picture, (see fig. 4.2) does not reveal why she is without Prince charming but instead shows she is alone with possible struggles with drinking she is confronted with. This demonstrates her weakness to the addiction to alcohol, but also the strength she has to leave a situation she was unimpressed with. Perhaps here, love at first sight does not prevail as suggested in the Disney version.

*Patriarchal Power (Disney)*

Jasmine (see fig. 5.1) of Aladdin and Ariel (see fig. 1.1) of The Little Mermaid are subjected to the control by their father’s wishes for them, and are left with few other
options. Although Jasmine’s father is acting under the control of Jafar, a powerful sorcerer, he intends for his daughter to be married to a man of his choice. Although it is her own life, Jasmine has little voice in the matter and is thus controlled by the male in power. The film sends the messages that females are to be obedient to men in power, particularly when Jasmine is trapped by Jafar in his hourglass.

Additionally, Ariel is subjected to extreme control put on by her father, King Triton, who does not want his mermaid daughter to travel onto land. Again, Ariel’s freedom to do what she pleases is in jeopardy because of a dominant male. While Ariel possesses a small fragile build, her father is enormous, strong and powerful in comparison. Not only does King Triton control and command Ariel, but her six sisters as well. This is a prime example of a patriarchal society where a male is in charge, and females have little to no opinion when choices are to be made.

*Patriarchal Power (Goldstein)*

In these pictures, Goldstein’s representation of the trapped princesses is very similar to Disney’s. Jasmine is consigned to the army and fighting in a modern day war (see fig. 5.2). However, while Disney’s Jasmine was controlled by her father, this time it is the government who controls and institutionalizes her. With a tragic look on her face, Jasmine is not only forced to fight for her country, but her own life. Although it can be for the well-being of their country, the government can decide to control one’s individual freedom to make their own choices. This is an example of internalization of patriarchy, where the woman is subjected to danger from the choices made by men.

Ariel’s freedom is also confined by the aquarium in an institution that appears to be similar to that of a zoo. Here, she is treated as a lesser-being, trapped by her unicity.
Captivity gives one the impression of helplessness due to permanent confinement. This emotion must be amplified when it is for the monetary gain of others. Because of commodity Ariel has been reduced to, she can be seen as a euphemized example of prostitution which further reinforces the patriarchal control of modern society. Prostitution or the marketing of sex for money is a prominent issue women face today as views on sexuality are slackened.

**DISCUSSION**

*Body Image*

Within each of the Disney films, beauty is a recurring theme, and those less attractive play roles that are considered less important or lacking value. Disney places beauty among the highest regard and without it, success and love can not be achieved. Also, those with beauty face superficial issues such as not being able to run away with a handsome prince upon their first encounter. Disney sends the message that love is “at first sight”, placing appearance over personality. Contrarily, Goldstein demonstrates that while being beautiful promotes a distinct focus on a particular individual, their self-image is taken for granted or abused in a way that lowers the value of each princess. While in most cases the princesses beauty is exploited by others, Belle exemplifies her own insecurity, which is determined by society’s standards.

*Gender Roles*

Disney demonstrates in all six films, that women are of a lower status than men, as women are subjected to roles of inferiority. In the cases of Snow White and Cinderella, the princesses are made responsible for looking after household chores, which should be shared tasks between genders. Also, in all films men play roles of power and are in
charge of the women in the film. While it was unexpected that Cinderella was going to be ordered around by women, it is evident that the Prince Charming and his father rule the land. In Goldstein’s pictures, women were seen fulfilling the typical roles that Disney portrayed, however did not act as if they enjoyed them. While Disney’s Snow White sung and danced around as she cleaned, Goldstein demonstrates Snow White’ stress and exhaustion with her facial expressions and a lazy Prince Charming. Also, Jasmine took on a role in the war, which would have been unheard of during WWI and WWII. With the exception of Jasmine, Goldstein gender roles remain the same, but how they are dealt with has changed. Cinderella shows her independence and split from obedience when she is alone at the pub.

*Patriarchal Power*

In five of Disney’s films, the community is ruled by a King who does not have a queen present. The exception is within Snow White, however the Queen is not kind one, but a hideous witch that tries to control everyone she encounters. The Prince or King in each film is tall, strong and handsome, with the exception of Jasmine’s father. However, Jafar is controlling the kingdom in *Aladdin*, not Jasmine’s father. Goldstein portrays women being exploited for their beauty in each of the films as well. Ariel demonstrates an example of being trapped by a higher power for monetary gain not unlike the methods of prostitution. Jasmine is controlled by a government in the middle east seeking war instead of peace.
APPENDIX

(1.1) Ariel by Disney (1989)  
(1.2) Ariel by Goldstein (2009)

(2.1) Aurora by Disney (1959)  
(2.2) Beauty by Goldstein (2009)

(3.1) Belle by Disney (1991)  
(3.2) Belle by Goldstein (2009)
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(4.1) Cinderella by Disney (1950)

(4.2) Cinderella by Goldstein (2009)

(5.1) Jasmine by Disney (1989)

(5.2) Jasmine by Goldstein (2009)

(6.1) Snow White by Disney

(6.2) Snow White by Goldstein (2009)
### Table 1.1: Similarities and Differences Between the Two Depictions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Disney Princesses</th>
<th>Goldstein Princesses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Physical Appearance</strong></td>
<td>Large eyes, thin waist, luscious hair, large breasts, wearing make-up, happy</td>
<td>Wearing make-up, large breasts, thin waist, wide hips, unhappy or troubled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender Roles</strong></td>
<td>Filling the traditional delicate, fragile female roles, and are gentle and sweet.</td>
<td>Filling traditional roles, tougher attitudes, stronger, unhappy with their situations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Distribution of Power</strong></td>
<td>King or Prince in charge, i.e. Jafar, Triton, Beast</td>
<td>Women are in control, except for Jasmine and Ariel who are trapped by higher authority</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REFERENCES

Disney’s Aladdin (1992)
Disney’s Beauty and the Beast (1991)
Disney’s Cinderella (1950)
Disney’s Sleeping Beauty (1959)
Disney’s Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937)
Disney’s The Little Mermaid (1989)

(http://www.fallenprincesses.com)