‘The Fairest One of All’: Appearance and Body Images in Disney’s Feature Films

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Introduction

“Magic Mirror on the wall, who is the fairest one of all?” (Hand 1937: 0:02:51) – this famous question from the classic fairy tale *Snow White* is first posed by Disney’s Evil Queen in the 1937 feature film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*. The wicked woman is jealous of her stepdaughter for being the most beautiful woman in the land. Ever since, she has asked her question again and again on the TVs of children and adults alike due to dozens of re-releases of DVD’s, the ever-present and ongoing popularity of Disney films, its merchandise, and Disney’s dominant cultural role in societies all over the world. In 1989, the wicked sea witch Ursula tells the little mermaid Ariel, that, in order to impress her love interest, she should not “underestimate the importance of body language” and rely on her “looks” and “pretty face” (Musker 1989: 0:41:28). In 1991, Belle, “the most beautiful girl in town” (Trousdale and Wise 1991: 0:06:46) from *Beauty and the Beast*, has to teach a prince who was turned into a hideous, aggressive beast due to his unkind personality that “beauty is found within” (0:01:58) – however, as soon as she successfully did so, the monster changes back into a handsome prince and his now appealing character is visualized through his appealing looks.¹ The common denominator of all these examples is their emphasis on and importance of physical appearance and beauty². In Disney movies, where a clear distinction between good and evil, morality and immorality, is represented, a beautiful appearance tends to be equated with a kind personality and is thus assigned to heroes and heroines, whereas villains are largely portrayed as undesirable and repulsive. These visual representations are highly idealized and exaggerated and resonate with common ideals of beauty which are dominant during the times the films are produced.

¹ Significantly, the prince’s kind and good servants are ‘only’ turned into cute, talking household items rather than hideous monsters (disregarding the illogicality that they are transformed into something in the first place, since they are neither responsible for, nor supportive of their master’s rude behavior).

² Since ‘beauty’ and what counts as ‘beautiful’ or ‘ugly’ is highly subjective and susceptible to individual preferences, it is impossible to offer a satisfying, all-encompassing definition of the term. What is possible, however, is to examine which beauty standards are popular at a certain period in time by looking at the media and corresponding merchandise – in this case, Disney films and their respective franchises – that commercially exploit them. For a detailed discussion about beauty and beauty standards, see *The Beauty Myth* by Naomi Wolf.
This master’s thesis will examine western beauty standards and body images through the lens of Disney productions. I will demonstrate that visual representations of Disney characters largely correspond to the personalities they assume within the narratives. Moral characters’ bodies are depicted as unrealistically beautiful and hyper-heterosexual, whereas villains are exaggerated and unattractive, even bordering on transgenderism. Since Disney films are ‘morality plays,’ portraying virtues and vices through their characters, the audience is supposed to clearly understand who personifies which of the two. In marking them as either virtuous or vicious, it is not enough to depict their personalities as good or despicable, but their beautiful or ugly appearance reflects these traits. I will show that the usage of shapes and colors is largely responsible for this effect, as well as distinct formulae for males and females. I will further argue that the narratives themselves make beauty and appearance central themes and are to be situated on a tightrope walk between the messages ‘true beauty comes from inside’ versus ‘looks do matter.’ I will also show that the representation of body images and the prevalence of physical appearance in Disney has changed over time, and that nowadays, a move from stereotypical to more diverse and ambiguous body images and beauty discourses can be observed.

For this analysis, seven main films – *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), and *Frozen* (2013) – were chosen. The reasons for choosing them are manifold: First of all, they are from different time periods and thus allow for a comparison of how beauty standards and body images have changed over the decades. In the upcoming arguments, I will employ Davis’ (2006) categorization of the films made during Walt Disney’s lifetime, in this case *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* and *Cinderella*, as belonging to the “Classic Period.” *The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, Aladdin, and The Hunchback of Notre Dame* fall into the prolific

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3 I understand body images as how bodies are perceived and how we feel about sexuality and physical attractiveness in comparison to others and in relation to the standards set by society at a certain point in time.

4 This does not imply the existence of a linear development from ‘worse’ to ‘better,’ however. With growing interest in more diversified representations, the film industry has also reflected those societal tendencies (cf. Davis 2006: 17-31; Pinsky 2004: 264; Rustad 2015: 184-187). Still, exceptions and ‘aberrations’ have always been there and will most likely continue to be there. *Dumbo*, for instance, from the year 1941, even though centred around animals rather than humans, is an early example from Disney’s repertoire which appears to endorse a ‘do not judge a book by its cover’-message.
“Eisner Era” (1989-2005), named after Michael Eisner who was the manager of the Walt Disney Company during this time. While Davis’ analysis stops here, I will refer to the films made post-2005 as ‘postmodern,’ as they are characterized by an increasing self-awareness, self-reflexivity, and self-irony. Established tropes Disney was famous for regarding romance, villainy, and beauty – such as the equation of appearance and personality or the fairy tale cliché of fast-paced, idealized ‘love at first sight’-relationships – are more and more disregarded and parodied in recent productions. Furthermore, the films chosen take different stands on physical appearance – while the theme is particularly prominent in some of them (Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Cinderella, The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, The Hunchback of Notre Dame), it is more backgrounded or even ridiculed in others (Aladdin, Frozen). While an analysis of physical appearance and body images is most obviously linked to gender roles, the films also feature people of different ages and Aladdin and The Hunchback of Notre Dame include characters of ethnicities other than European. This allows for an intersectional approach of this paper that includes race and age alongside the most prominent category – gender. Except for The Hunchback of Notre Dame and Frozen (which has its own franchise, however), the movies chosen are representative of the incredibly popular Disney Princess line launched in 2000. These princesses, Snow White, Cinderella, Ariel, Belle, and Jasmine, respectively, as well as Elsa and Anna from Frozen, are among Disney’s most well-liked and most marketed characters, which is why they exhibit a particular influence on viewers, especially young children, who are avid consumers of Disney Princess products and still form their visions on beauty and establish their body consciousness. The Hunchback of Notre Dame and Frozen were also included because they stray away from the traditional equation of beauty and goodness commonly found in Disney films, as they feature a moral, but ugly main protagonist, and a handsome villain in disguise, and thus offer a more variegated perspective on the topics ‘physical appearance’ and ‘body images.’

5 As Ward (2002: 125) correctly observes, the films of the 1990s “reflect Disney’s growing awareness of multiculturalism and its embrace of a more politically correct stance regarding racial diversity.”

6 Intersectionality means the simultaneous occurrence of multiple forms of discrimination. For example, a woman of color, who is over 70 years of age could be discriminated because of her sex, her skin color, and her age, separately. However, she could also be discriminated as an ‘old black woman,’ experiencing a different form of discrimination than if she was only discriminated based on one of the variables (gender, race, age, in this case) – this would be a case where intersectionality comes in (cf. Hill Collins and Chepp 2013).
I have not chosen any films from the “Middle Era” – which Davis (cf. 2006: 137) defines as the time between the “Classic Period” and the “Eisner Era,” encompassing the years 1967-1988 – as they are not applicable to the subject of this study. Most movies made during this period were no box-office hits and are thus not as widely known and as entrenched in the ‘Disney consciousness’ as the ones I have chosen. Even those that were successful and are well-known up until today, such as *The Jungle Book* or *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh*, predominantly feature child or animal characters. Beauty standards for human adults cannot be applied to animals or children. Thus, such films are not useful for the purpose of this paper. What is more, I attempted to choose productions which focus on romantic narratives – something many movies of the Middle Period lack or only include marginally – as beauty being linked to romantic outcomes is one of my core interests for this thesis.

When applicable, references to other Disney and even non-Disney productions will be made throughout the paper in order to provide a broader perspective and draw comparisons. Since they are often the most famous and most memorable characters, my analysis will primarily focus on the main hero(es), the main heroine(s), and the villain(s) of the respective stories. The general guideline of the paper will be a chronological survey from old to new Disney productions to outline the representational changes that have occurred over time in their respective historical contexts.

As gender will be the major analytic category upon which this paper resides, it is also vital to mention that the “male gaze” plays a central role in films where the physical appearance of a woman is emphasized. As Rustad (2015: 9) defines it, the

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7 It should be noted, though, that, even though the Middle Period marks a lack of Disney’s classic ‘princess films,’ the company did not stray away from their trademark formula. The protagonist of the 1970 film *The Aristocats*, for example, is an anthropomorphised, well-groomed (‘beautiful,’ if you will) cat named Duchess, her name already signalling her ‘royal’ status. Over the course of the movie, she, despite their class differences, falls in love with the tough, but kind stray cat Thomas O’Malley – a theme similar to the one in *Lady and the Tramp* in 1955, and in *Aladdin* in 1992. The absence of sophisticated, ‘classic’ Disney films – that is, Princess films – during this period was most likely a result of Walt Disney’s death in 1966, the unsuccessful attempts to replace him, the studio’s financial problems, and the fact that most supervising animators of previous films were also no longer working for the studio. These events left a void behind that needed some time to be filled again (cf. Davis 2006: 136-146; Johnston and Thomas 1993: 169).

8 For a detailed discussion of the male gaze, see E. Ann Kaplan’s *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze*. 
male gaze induces that [...] the audience is [...] made to identify with male characters, while women are there for the audience to gaze at. [...] The problem [...] has [...] to do with what the female characters contribute to the film. [...] [T]he lead female [...] is there only because the affection of a beautiful woman is a standardized element of the dominant story structure in Hollywood film. By contrast the male lead usually achieves something great and remains active throughout the film, making him seem capable and powerful.

For the films chosen, the male gaze is particularly applicable to Beauty and the Beast, Aladdin, and The Hunchback of Notre Dame, as they feature female protagonists who are the ‘objects of desire’ of multiple (active, plot-driving) male leading characters.

It is relevant that the movies chosen encompass a broad period of time, as they reflect the contexts they were produced in and thus the beauty discourses present during these respective times. Still, it has to be noted that many young people grow up not only with the Disney films released during their childhood, but with the entire ‘Disney catalogue,’ since Disney’s productions have proven themselves to be timeless and are often passed on to each new generation. Children growing up in the 21st century will thus most likely be just as familiar with Disney’s first feature film Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, as they will know contemporary productions such as Frozen or Moana. While visuals, modes of storytelling, or gender roles employed in films obviously change over time, it is important to bear in mind that children – the prime audience of Disney films – will probably not be aware of those changes or of the historical contexts surrounding the films while consuming them (cf. Rustad 2015: 16). To situate the beauty discourses which are present in the chosen films in their proper context, brief connections to their historical backgrounds and origins will be made throughout the paper.

It must also be said that Disney films have a history of being based on traditional fairy tales, legends, folk tales, or myths, and then being ‘appropriated’ for contemporary audiences. Notable here is that older productions like Snow White and the Seven Dwarves or Cinderella still stay fairly close to their origins, whereas newer films like Frozen, which is based on the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale The Snow Queen, tend to stray far away from their source material. This is relevant as fairy tale-like stories often rely heavily on stereotypical depictions of gender and beauty and on the
correlation between looks and character. As more recent Disney films no longer stay close to their stories’ origins, the stereotypes and tropes prevalent in those origins are also more easily broken.
1. Creating Life at the Stroke of a Pen – The Power of Animation

Since Disney mainly transmits its messages and meanings through animated features and the main films of this study are also solely animated, a brief discussion of the power of animation as such is crucial before diving deeper into the subject matter. The ‘key ingredient’ of animation is the creation of an illusion of motion, mostly equipped with sound, in order to bring characters to ‘life.’

First, artists draw a vast number of images, which are then photographed. Once on the film reels, these individual photographs, which are referred to as frames, are linked together and arranged sequentially to create what the viewer perceives as a moving image (cf. Davis 2006: 42). The characters of those moving images “reveal their personality through the rhythm of their walk or the way they [their creators] manipulate their facial expressions” (Griffin 2000: 69).

When Disney released its first animated feature film, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, in 1937, the possibilities for animators were still rather limited compared to the countless options computers and especially CGI effects offer nowadays. Consequently, earlier films were more simplistic not only in their visual styles but also in their plots, since the animation process was particularly time-consuming as every frame had to be drawn by hand (cf. Davis 2006: 19-20; Rustad 2015: 18). The main advantage that the Disney studio already had in the 1930s over other film companies was that it made use of the storyboard. The storyboard allowed the producers and animators to visualize the basic concepts of a film, and to roughly sketch scenes and characters which helped them save plenty of time. If an idea was discarded, they did not waste thousands of drawings – and therefore, a huge amount of time and money – which is why Disney was able to create animated feature-films more efficiently than other studios (cf. Davis 2006: 44).

What mainly distinguishes animation from other modes of filmmaking is the artistic freedom it gives to its creators. As Artz (2004: 118) phrases it, “animation has more technical opportunities and less creative obstacles” than, for example, fantasy or science fiction films. “With the stroke of a pen or key” (Artz 2004: 118), shapes, colours, and other “visual metaphors” can be altered in order to deliver a completely new, desired meaning. This desired meaning is only susceptible to the exact ideas of the director and cannot be altered by actors or actresses, as it is the case with
live-action films. While Mena Massoud, who plays Aladdin in the remake of 2019, can add his personal ‘touch’ to the character simply by the way he looks, moves, and talks, the cartoon Aladdin of 1992 will appear on the screen exactly the way the Walt Disney Company designed him to, as “there is nothing in the portrayal of an animated character – not a blink of an eye [...] – which is not decided upon in advance” and “carefully mapped out” (Davis 2006: 41). Voice recordings are mostly done before the animation process starts, which means that the producers have the chance to manipulate the voice acting by adjusting the visuals to either support or counter the vocal performances. This means that the directors of animated films have much greater control over their final products than those who work with actors and actresses, whose performances might be different than what the directors originally had in mind (cf. Davis 2006: 41-42).

Another advantage animation has, is that it can easily cross borders and appeal to different cultures. Animated characters speak various languages, no matter their fictional background. Aladdin is just as fluent in his ‘native tongue’ Arabic, as he is in German, English, French, or Turkish. Also, cartoon figures are immortal and ageless – unlike real actors and actresses, their physique will remain the same even if a sequel is released 30 years later. Furthermore, since animated films are often primarily targeted at children, they tend to deal with ‘plain,’ yet ‘universal’ topics, such as love, understanding, coming-of-age, and jealousy. Also, as animation tends to tackle these themes in a rather simplistic way, the movies are easy to understand and appealing at the same time to cultures all over the world. The reason why animated films are particularly popular among very young audiences is that they stimulate their fantasy and emotions. In these movies, fantastical things and characters can come alive and appear as if they were real, which is something that children are not able to experience elsewhere (cf. Artz 2004: 119, 123).

As Artz (cf. 2004: 121-123) rightly argues, Disney animation has its own unique style that sets it apart from its competitors. The author (123) explains that “Disney develops its films according to a strict artistic and corporate protocol” with “an identifiably consistent naturalistic style, with richness of colour and shading” and “depth of detail in background.” The smooth, juvenile forms, extra-large eyes, button noses, and flowing manes of good characters have become just as iconic as the dark, sharp, and angular features the villains are famous for. That this specific “Disney style”
(121) is indeed part of the company’s recipe for success became visible in 1997, when the movie *Hercules* was released. For this project, Disney worked with artists who were not part of the usual team of animators and thus used different techniques and forms for the film’s characters. The female protagonist, Megara, for example, is drawn in much pointier lines, with an overly exaggerated slim waist that almost appears grotesque, and with particularly angular eyebrows normally reserved for villain characters. As a result for ‘violating’ their regular, unique animation style, *Hercules* was a box-office failure and Disney has refrained from working with outside artists ever since.

While animated characters are usually exaggerated (for example, their eyes are significantly bigger than human eyes, or their overall proportions do not correspond to those of living beings), the basics of anatomy have to be adhered to. “[I]lustrations” must be “consistent with animal and human physiology” in order to “come alive” (Artz 2004: 119). Furthermore, the composition of animated characters, as well as the use of light and shadow must conform to real-life humans and animals so that they can evoke the illusion of ‘authenticity’ in the viewer. *The Lion King*’s Simba is recognized as a lion because he has the basic features of the real-life equivalent (paws, fur, tail, and so on) and *Cinderella*’s titular heroine is perceived as a human because she has the bodily features of an actual woman. Her eyes are part of her face and not drawn on her head or her belly, her hair grows out of her head and not her cleavage, and she walks on two feet – in short, she adheres to the basic principles of human anatomy. Already in the Classic Period, Walt Disney himself placed significant value on his characters looking realistic, so that the audience would not dismiss them as simple cartoon figures, but identify with them and get involved in their stories (cf. Artz 2004: 118-119; Davis 2006: 84-88).
2. Beauty and the Biz – Disney’s Animated Features, Cultural Values, and Body Esteem

The legitimate question one might ask now is: Why bother? Why bother how some cartoon characters’ looks and bodies are depicted? The very simplistically sounding, but fitting answer is: Because they are not just some cartoon characters. Disney characters have functioned as cultural icons and as role models for generations already, and they continue to hold their influential and prevalent position and will most likely do so for many more generations to come. Disney has established itself as more than a brand name or a film studio – it has become a central part of entertainment culture worldwide. Artz (2004: 124) even calls Disney products “effective propaganda,” since they have proven themselves to “be seen, understood, and remembered” for decades. With its countless films, toys, clothes, theme parks and even cruise ships, Disney and the characters it creates have become deeply entrenched in cultures all over the world. That is why the studio does not simply produce innocent family entertainment, but ideologies, and with those ideologies come specific characters that represent them. Those characters, in turn, become the role models of people across the globe and the ways they are visualized have the power to influence their vast fan base (cf. Cheu 2013: 2; Davis 2006: 16-19; Golden and Jacoby 2018: 299).

Disney is, however, also much more than just a highly successful entertainment provider and its films are more than just films and cultural icons – they operate on a highly educational level and often provide viewers with their first and most powerful instances of moral education, allowing them to learn about right and wrong. Researches even claim that this form of moral education that children experience via the media and particularly via watching Disney films is equal to, if not even more powerful than more traditional forms of education communicated in schools, churches, or by caregivers (cf. Giroux 1995: 43-48; Pinsky 2004: 1-12; Ward 2002: 128-135). As Artz (2004: 116, 119-120) puts it, Disney possesses a certain “pervasive efficacy” by “presenting narrative and imagistic fictions as if they were or could be reality.” What is important is that children are not only Disney’s prime audience, but also, they are a “unique” and “vulnerable audience,” as they are still “forming their moral vision” (Ward 2002: 4, 5). Children are thus particularly prone to be influenced by images they see on the media as “they are only beginning to learn that what they are watching
is only ‘make-believe’” (Davis 2006: 27). The potential for youngsters to mistake what they see on
the screen as uncontested truths is thus very high, and they are likely to use the messages they
absorb “for testing the truth of other stories later in life” (Ward 2002: 5).

Now given that visual media functions like a “key socializing agent” (Hine et al. 2018a: 2) and Disney
operates as a “moral educator” (Ward 2002: 2), it is fair to assume that not only its stories, but also
its visual representations and body images exhibit a strong influence on its vast audiences. Setting
characters clearly apart via their appearance by making moral characters look desirable, equip
them with love interests, and reward them at the end of the story, while villains are ugly or
transgendered, remain alone and are eventually punished, sends pivotal messages as to which
looks are ‘good’ and ‘desirable’ and which are ‘repulsive,’ ‘bad,’ and should be avoided (cf. Ward
2002: 5-9).

Many researchers have already expressed concern over Disney’s prevalent role in forming the body
consciousness of its viewers by examining how the looks and body images presented in the films
are commonly perceived. Particularly the Disney Princess line has come under severe criticism for
fostering unrealistic beauty standards for girls and women that thrive on propagating a thin-ideal,
as well as an exaggerated hourglass-figure and doll-like faces with big eyes and tiny button-noses.
The fact that Disney Princess films are arguably the company’s most popular and successful
productions, and that the female protagonists, especially in earlier movies, are rather passive and
their good looks are what eventually ensure their happy ending, is raising even greater concern as
to which ‘role models’ these films actually produce (cf. Bruce 2007: 2; Rustad 2015: 2-3).

Bruce (2007) has conducted interviews with American college students to find out whether and to
what extent the physical appearance of Disney princesses stands out to viewers. Significantly, the
responses his test subjects – especially the male ones – gave, highlighted the princesses’ looks.
Their personalities were disregarded in favor of their appearance – if the students mentioned any
positive character traits at all, they linked them to their physical ‘qualities’ by calling them “‘nice,
caring, child bearing’” and thus emphasizing their “function as sexual beings” (11). It was shown
that they think of them in unified terms, not distinguishing between the individual characters. For
example, they noted that they are all “‘thin,’ “‘hot,’” “‘desirable,’” “‘like Barbie dolls,’” and  
“‘attractive, you know mainstream attractiveness of what an American person supposedly should  
look like’” (10).

While Bruce’s study deals with the perceptions held by adults in their Twenties, Coyne et al. (cf.  
2016: 1909-1913) are more concerned with how body images presented in the media might  
influence people during their early childhood, as this is the time where children tend to form their  
own body esteem and where their understanding of gendered behavior – which is always related  
to physical appearance – is developing. The authors are particularly concerned by the thin-ideal  
the Disney Princess line embodies. They argue that vast exposure to media forms that endorse a  
‘thin-is-good’-message, as well as playing with dolls that similarly display a thin-ideal (such as  
Barbie dolls or Disney Princess dolls) are related to preferring a thin body shape over others, fears  
of being ‘too fat’ or not ‘pretty enough,’ poor body esteem, and eating disorders even in very young  
children. Furthermore, they explain that children tend to primarily learn from appealing, salient  
same-gender models who are rewarded at the end of a story. Thus, why boys are more influenced  
by the ‘muscular ideal’ men in films often exhibit, girls are more likely to try to imitate the beautiful,  
overly slender princesses Disney portrays which can lead them to the conclusion that being  
attractive is a central and necessary part of being a ‘proper woman.’ This notion, in turn, has the  
power to exhibit a significant amount of pressure particularly on very young consumers of films  
that endorse the importance of beauty, as they are not yet able to neatly separate fiction and  
reality the way adults do (cf. also Golden and Jacoby 2018: 300, 309-310).

While many researchers (cf., for example, Davis 2006, 2013; Ward 2002) claim that Disney  
*somewhat* does influence its viewers, their arguments are largely based on speculations, not on  
actual surveys. Golden and Jacoby (cf. 2018: 299-313) attempted to fill this gap and conducted a  
study with girls between three and five years of age to find out how they perceive Disney princesses  
and the gender roles they represent, and how they might incorporate those representations into  
pretend play, which is where they develop their social skills and express their ideas of how they  
see themselves in society. The authors elaborate that
Social cognitive theory explains that children reinforce and learn these gendered behaviors [they see on the media] in part through the process of modeling, reenacting the actions of admired people and characters and taking up their expressions, gestures, and attitudes as a child might do through pretend play (301).

For the experiment, the test subjects were given princess dresses and props they could but did not have to use. The results the study has revealed are telling: During their pretend play, the participants placed emphasis on imitating their favorite princesses physically, and not by her personality traits or by reenacting her respective story. Most of their play time was dedicated to dressing up and trying to look like the princess. They showed that they associated being a princess with being beautiful as they were overly concerned about their appearance and mostly focused on the provided dresses and accessories in order to become ‘more beautiful.’ In the interviews the researchers conducted, the girls stated that a major reason for why they would want to be their favorite princess is because of the way she looks. Similarly, test subjects between 7 and 11 years old, who Garofalo (2013: 2828) questioned about their perceptions of Disney’s villains mentioned their ugliness as a decisive factor as to why they do not like them. Both studies’ participants also established connections between the personalities of the princesses and villains and their appearances – they claimed that the princesses’ kindness ‘results’ from their good looks, while being mean was connected to being ugly. Also, Golden’s and Jacoby’s test subjects modelled their idols via their body movements – for example, they practiced graceful hand gestures and twirling, which are common among the Disney princesses – and they expressed that boys could not be princesses, showing implicit awareness of the gender stereotypes the media transmits.

Apart from medial beauty discourses affecting one’s own body esteem, as shown in the abovementioned studies, they can also influence the way we treat our peers. Especially children – the prime consumers of animation – can be most cruel to their fellows and bully them based on their physical appearance. When the media they consume permanently propagates “aesthetic perfection, something unattainable for most” (Pinsky 2004: 147), casting those out who are not ‘flawless’ and who do not conform to dominant beauty ideals becomes implicitly ‘justified.’ After all, when fictional heroes and heroes are all beautiful, it must be some sort of welcomed standard everyone should adhere to. These implications are significant as they justify how important an
awareness of messages propagated through children’s media is, which might otherwise be dismissed as being ‘innocent’ and ‘harmless’ – not ‘worthy’ of critical scholarly attention.

In existing literature about Disney (cf. Pinsky 2004: 263-265), it is often the case that authors judge its productions by either praising or condemning them – they take “a stand on Disney as being either beneficial or detrimental” (Garofalo 2013: 2825). This is not the intention of this paper, however. I argue that it would be wrong to accuse a giant media company of ‘inventing’ and ‘producing’ conservative, unrealistic, and ‘unhealthy’ body images. What is perceived as beautiful and desirable and what is not is always subject to the beauty standards present at a certain time. The images Disney delivers cannot simply be taken out of context and be evaluated on a scale of how ‘reactionary’ or ‘progressive’ they are.

My approach is that that huge media conglomerates like the Walt Disney Company operate as a ‘cultural mirror’ and reflect ideologies which are already present in society. In order to always remain successful, the studio needs to adapt to current values and sensibilities so its movies can always resonate with its audiences. I stick to Davis’ (2006: 17) statement that

> in Hollywood, both in the past and in the present, what decides whether or not a film will be made, ultimately, is whether or not it is believed that the film will make money. If a film is to make money, it must appeal to a mass audience. If it is to do this, it must contain ideas, themes, characters, stories, and perceptions to which it can relate. It must, in other words, be relevant to the audience’s world view if it is to be successful.

One of the most salient examples from Disney films that proves how culture mirrors society can be detected when taking a look at how the representations of women have changed over time (cf. Davis 2006). In the Thirties, Forties, and Fifties, when Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty were released, women were not yet as emancipated as today and the prevailing ideal was that of a demure, domestic woman who will find fulfillment through her marriage and family life. Men, on the contrary, were the ‘active’ ones, the breadwinners, who ‘protected’ and ‘guarded’ their wives. Consequently, the three princesses of these movies, Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora, respectively, are rather passive and do not pursue any real goals other than finding the man of their dreams and living happily ever after with him. The princes of
these films all eventually come to rescue their princesses, the ‘damsels in distress,’ from the misfortunes they find themselves in. The women of the Eisner Era, on the other hand, become a lot more self-reliant and actively take matters into their own hands. They are also equipped with dreams and ambitions that no longer (solely) revolve around finding a perfect match and marrying their ‘Prince Charming.’ The most recent Disney Princess film, *Moana*, which was released in 2016, does not feature any romantic narrative at all. In accordance with the modern view that women should be independent, strong, and – most importantly – equal to men on all levels, this movie tells the story of a princess who sets out on a dangerous journey on her own to save the world. As the idea of womanhood has changed over time, so have the representations of women in films also changed in order to resonate with current beliefs and values.

For the topic ‘appearance and body images,’ this means that films are likely to present something as beautiful or ugly which is also commonly recognized as such at the time the film is released. If movies that feature unrealistically beautiful main characters sell better than those with ‘ordinary’ ones, it is comprehensible that a company that is interested in marketing its products will opt for the former. So even if a lesbian, overweight Disney princess with skin problems and bad hair days might account for more diversity and realism, the big question is: Would such a film sell? Would its corresponding merchandise be marketable? If the answer is oscillating more towards ‘no’ than ‘yes,’ then it is likely that the Walt Disney Company will not produce such a movie anytime soon.

When a live-action remake of Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* was released in 2017, it featured, contrary to the cartoon version of 1991, a positive portrayal of a homosexual character. As a result, the movie was banned or not shown to people under the age of 12 or even 16 in several countries. In order to always remain successful and relevant to contemporary audiences, Disney has to react to such responses. Even though online fan activism demanded a girlfriend for *Frozen*’s Elsa in the sequel, the idea was not realized as such a portrayal might have cost the movie its giant success since the mass audience seems to not (yet?) be in favor of LGBTQ-Disney characters. Thus, the main disclaimer prevailing in this analysis is that what Disney shows in its productions is a reflection of what society wants to see at a certain time.
What is important to note, however, is that the road of culture shaping media is never one-sided. Instead, culture and media are in constant relation with each other and even though I argue that the influence of societies on what is represented in the media is stronger, the media also at least partly shapes and reinforces values and beliefs. Hine et al. (2018a: 3) describe this interdependency fittingly:

Importantly, as media forms both shape and reflect the current state of society, the models presented in such media change both as part of, and in response to, changing societal norms. [...] [M]edia forms [...] operate to both help construct and mirror [...] developments.

Since images in the media can and do have the power to strengthen and alter our perceptions, it is vital to be a ‘literate’ consumer and questioner of these representations rather than just a passive receiver. Understanding and unearthing potential meanings and ideologies in films coming from Disney – one of the most influential providers of medial images in the world, which is also operating on a highly educational level – is one step towards developing more “critical media literacy.”

Garofalo (2013: 2823) explains that “[c]ritical theory promotes examining and critiquing society as a whole by unearthing the underlying ideologies by which society is governed. [...] CML [critical media literacy] allows viewers to become agents in in the construction of their own interpretations of media texts. The importance of this theoretical framework is that it enables children to gain power over and knowledge from their culture rather than being passive recipients of media [...] The understanding of the social construction of knowledge through media interpretations enables students to expand critical inquiry into all outlets of information and communication.”
3. Beautiful Princesses, Dashing Heroes, and Ugly Villains — The Equation of Appearance and Character

3.1. The Beauty-Goodness-Heterosexuality Stereotype in Disney Films

One way of discovering hidden meanings in films is paying close attention to recurring patterns and stereotypes — one of those classic stereotypes in Disney is the beauty-goodness-heterosexuality stereotype. With the exception of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and postmodern films, the looks of Disney characters and the personalities they assume within in the narratives correlate. The heroes and heroines are always beautiful and desirable while the villains are either ugly or exaggerated to a point where they look grotesque. By equating goodness with beauty and evilness with ugliness, strong messages are delivered as to which body images are supposed to be ‘imitated’ as those good and attractive characters, who are always rewarded, exhibit a role model function especially for young viewers. Being both appealing and sympathetic, audiences more easily get involved in their stories, relate to them and side with them. The ugly, evil ones, on the other hand, are always punished and the viewer is visually invited to feel distanced from them. What is problematic, apart from equating appearance and character, is the fact that the representations of beauty are idealized and highly unrealistic. The heroines of Disney films usually have over-sized doll eyes and extremely slim waists, while the heroes are athletic and always taller than their respective love interests (cf. Artz 2004: 124-126; Johnston and Thomas 1993: 21; Sharmin and Sattar 2018: 53).

Disney furthermore seems to promote a thin ideal, as heroes and heroines are always particularly slender, whereas those characters who are overweight are either villains, such as the Queen of Hearts from *Alice in Wonderland*, Ursula from *The Little Mermaid*, or Governor Ratcliffe from *Pocahontas*, or highly incompetent, comic figures. Eccentric or child-like fathers, for example the sultan in *Aladdin*, or Belle’s father, who is a wannabe scientist and creates more trouble than good, are chubby, whereas King Triton, father of Ariel and the stern, competent ruler of the sea-kingdom in *The Little Mermaid*, has a muscular physique and emphasized abs (cf. Leo 2016: 196-199; Towbin et al. 2004: 28, 30).
The beauty-goodness metaphor is further extended to the narratives themselves, particularly to the romantic outcomes presented in the films: The pretty heroines and the handsome heroes often engage in fulfilling, heterosexual relationships or get married, whereas the villains are never presented with mates. In fact, they are often portrayed as gender-bending loners, who, at best, assemble some equally evil minions around them and dedicate all their time and energy to destroying the good, hyper-heterosexual characters. These representations resonate with commonly held beliefs about physical attractiveness as Bazzini et al. (cf. 2010: 2688-2707) have found out: According to them, “[p]eople expect attractive individuals, relative to those who are less attractive, to be more socially adept and popular and to have similar positive characteristics (e.g., be fun loving)” (2688). Furthermore, a higher level of intellectual competence is assigned to attractive people as well as lower social anxiety. As the authors point out, studies have shown that many women tend to hold the belief that models – who are supposed to be particularly attractive, as well as thin, – are more likely to experience happiness and positivity than ‘normal’ women. Also, individuals rated as ‘attractive’ have reported to feel more popular and less lonely than less attractive ones. Bazzini et al.’s study highlighted that tested children would rather be friends with someone attractive, as they associate a kinder, less troublesome personality with a pleasing outer appearance. This correlates with the depictions found in Disney movies, where good-looking characters are portrayed as morally superior, happier, less aggressive, and more likely to display intelligence, engage in romantic activities, and achieve more positive life outcomes than those who are not as beautiful. That, in reality, such expectations and equations of physical attractiveness with goodness and happiness are often highly unrealistic was also addressed by Bazzini et al. (2010: 2698) as “attractive women have […] been shown to experience higher levels of narcissism and have higher rates of divorce than do less attractive women.” Still, their study has revealed that both children and adults alike show a preference for attractive individuals over unattractive ones. The authors claim that this preference is partly “innate.” Even infants of only a few months of age, who have not yet been exposed thoroughly to persisting stereotypes or media discourses regarding appearance, and who have not been ‘formed’ by their surroundings yet, have paid more attention to photographs of attractive people in relation to those of less attractive ones.
To realize the beauty-goodness stereotype in Disney films, precise shapes and colors and have to be employed by the animators in order to trigger certain associations in the viewer and influence the overall perception of a fictional figure. Thus, for the moral characters, bright colors are chosen, both for their attire and the settings they are introduced in, whereas villains are mostly dressed in dark robes and appear in eerie, shadowy scenes. The association of roundness and smoothness with goodness is also used in the designs of Disney’s characters. Mickey Mouse, the emblem of Disney, for example, is drawn in three round circles, which suggest comfort and harmlessness. Villains, on the contrary, often have sharp, angular features signalizing danger and threat (cf. Artz 2004: 118).

That a mismatch of appearance and personality could indeed lead to confusion and incorrect perceptions of the characters, especially in young children, was also touched upon in the study conducted by Bazzini et al. (cf. 2010: 2698-2701, 2706). Infants and toddlers are prone to encounter difficulties in processing media which does not support the beauty-goodness stereotype. If an ugly woman who resembles a classic witch, performs a kind act, they are likely to conclude that she must be doing this for some low reason and that she is actually not kind at all. It was even revealed that very young children would rate “an ugly-kind woman as nominally more mean than an attractive-cruel woman,” which illustrates “a clear demonstration of difficulty in processing counterstereotypical information” (Bazzini et al. 2010: 2706). As they grow older, however, children tend to pay more attention to information about the behavior of characters and not only their looks, which is why the beauty-goodness stereotype is particularly influential when people already consume visual media at a very early age.

The implications of Bazzini et al.’s findings are thus that films that do not employ the beauty-goodness-stereotype might not resonate with the viewers’ existing schemas and thus challenge their overall perception and understanding of morality. This, in turn, is likely to result in such movies not being as successful as those that cater to the audience’s expectations. The most fitting example from the Disney repertoire for this is The Hunchback of Notre Dame. Its main protagonist, Quasimodo, is no handsome, tall Prince Charming, but a child-like, deformed, boyish character. Even though he is eventually accepted by the fictional society, he is not, unlike most Disney heroes
and heroines, rewarded with a love interest – something that is commonly reserved for attractive couples, as discussed above. In fact, the woman he desires, the beautiful Esmeralda, chooses the dashing Captain Phoebus over him. As this ‘happy end’ was not satisfying for a Disney film, where the moral characters usually ‘have it all’ in the end, a sequel was produced where Quasimodo also engages in a fulfilling romantic relationship with the non-deformed circus artist Madellaine, signaling that not only those of equal attractiveness can form a union. Yet, the first encounter with his future girlfriend is far from romantic as it is normally the case with classic Disney couples. In fact, upon seeing Quasimodo for the first time, Madellaine is horrified because of his appearance and takes flight. Later, however, she learns to value his personality over his looks. Significantly, both movies, not adhering to the classic beauty-goodness-romance stereotype, were no particular success for the Walt Disney Company. Still, the very existence of the two *Hunchback* films, but particularly the sequel and its poor reception, allow for an important implication: Disney is far from being ‘too conservative’ or ‘unwilling’ to publish movies not adhering to dominant stereotypes. Instead, it is the audience not enjoying these films as much as the more stereotyped ones, which result in the ‘alternative’ films not being produced as frequently.

### 3.2. Real-Life Models for Disney Characters

Disney characters not only commonly exhibit a connection between their designs and the personalities they are given within the stories, but when taking a look at the people who served as the characters’ inspirations, a further correspondence between the fictional and the real-life personae becomes visible. Snow White and her prince, for example, were modelled after a Hollywood romance between the actress Janet Gaynor and Douglas Fairbanks Jr. Snow White is a child-like, very naïve, young princess who dreams about true love and sees the good in everyone. Significantly, Janet Gaynor was famous for playing very naïve characters. The sea witch
Ursula from *The Little Mermaid* was designed after the drag queen Divine. As it is common for drag queens, Ursula has a very de-feminized body and face, as well as a particularly deep voice provided by Pat Carroll which sounds ‘unusual’ for a woman (cf. Bell 1995: 109).

*Aladdin*’s titular hero is, even though he is shown in many fast-paced, action-packed scenes, not particularly tall or muscular, which corresponds to the dominant beauty ideal for males in the 1990s when the film was released. He was modelled after Tom Cruise, the star of many action movies, who is also no muscleman and only 1.70 metres tall. Aladdin, as the protagonist of the story, is portrayed as handsome and appealing, which corresponds to his kind personality. Interestingly, two years before the release of the film, in 1990, Tom Cruise was awarded the title “Sexiest Man Alive,” which means that by modelling Aladdin after him, Disney could ensure that their character was equipped with a physical appearance that was likely to appeal to a large audience. The villain of *Tangled* – an adaptation of the fairy tale of Rapunzel – Mother Gothel, is one of the newer ‘Disney witches,’ who no longer fulfils the appearance-mirrors-the-character-stereotype to the same extent as her predecessors. With her long, curly black hair and exotic looks, her design was inspired by ‘Pop-Goddess’ Cher, who is known for her ageless appearance. Mother Gothel is obsessed with staying forever young and beautiful – so again, Disney establishes a connection between the fictional persona and the real-life model.

4.1. Pretty Princesses and Gentle Ladies – Body Images of Disney Heroines

4.1.1. The Three-Women-Model

When it comes to female characters, a ‘three-types-of-women’-model, which exhibits a large portion of ageism, can be detected across Disney’s repertoire, primarily in older films which are based on traditional fairy tales. On the DVD cover of Cinderella, the three versions of womanhood in Disney are clearly illustrated: The heroine, in this case Cinderella, is young – which adds to her perception as ‘innocent’ and not powerful like a more experienced woman would be – and adheres to classic Western female beauty standards. She has big blue eyes, blonde hair, a slender build, and is highly feminized. Bell (1995: 109-110) notes that Cinderella, with her “sophisticated elegance” is reminiscent of Grace Kelly, also a “girl next door destined for royalty.” The aforementioned color symbolism is also visible, as she is drawn in bright colors which enhance her positive perception. Her stepmother, Lady Tremaine, exemplifies the ugly, middle-aged10, wicked woman. She is drawn in dark colors, with hard, androgynous, and angular features. With her pointy nose and chin and her extremely arched eyebrows, she stands in direct contrast to the Fairy Godmother, the old, grandmotherly woman, who functions as a ‘surrogate mother’ for Cinderella. She is round and chubby – her physical features accentuate her gentle, calm, and comforting personality (cf. Bell 1995: 107-122; Garofalo 2013: 2826; Ruzycki O’Brien 1994: 73-74).

10 Aging has long been equated with “the immediate erasure of their [women’s] identities as vibrant, sensual women, worthy of love and high style” as Wolf (2002: 7) lines out.
Nine years after the release of Cinderella, *Sleeping Beauty* makes use of body images that almost appear as replica of their predecessors’. The main protagonist, Princess Aurora, is, like Cinderella, an epitome of Western beauty, resembling a classic Barbie doll. She has a youthful appearance, long, flowing golden hair, a moderate bust, and very slender waist. The evil fairy Maleficent, with her extremely angular facial features, her ‘updo’ (in this case consisting of horns, symbolizing her devilish nature), and her androgynous build is basically Lady Tremaine’s doppelganger. The three good fairies, Flora, Fauna, and Merryweather, fulfill a similar function as the Fairy Godmother in *Cinderella*. They are Aurora’s caretakers and protectors, as well as assisting figures to ensure the happy end of the prince and the princess. Similar to Cinderella’s guardian, they are portrayed as chubby and grandmotherly, best exemplified by their greyish hair. The characters are also equipped with the same personality traits: Cinderella and Aurora are kind and gentle, dream of true love, and are the victims of jealous witch-characters, personified by Lady Tremaine and Maleficent, respectively. These two women are both vindictive, reckless, and cruel. The Fairy Godmother, as well as Flora, Fauna, and Merryweather are all good-hearted, but also forgetful and silly at times (cf. Elnahla 2015: 119-120).

This pattern of the young, good woman, the middle-aged wicked witch, and the old, nurturing mother-figure is also applicable to many other Disney productions, even if it does not always appear in this most evident form. The spot of the young, beautiful, and kind woman can be filled by any Disney princess. Other examples for the middle-aged witch persona would be Snow White’s Evil Queen, Cruella de Vil from *One Hundred and One Dalmatians*, The Little Mermaid’s Ursula, or Mother Gothel from *Tangled*. The latter, however, is no longer as de-feminized as her predecessors, neither is she portrayed as ugly. Other examples for the nurturing surrogate mother...
figure would be Mrs. Potts from *Beauty and the Beast*, who gives the young, beautiful heroine Belle, who, like many Disney princesses, has no biological mother, advice and comfort, or Carlotta from *The Little Mermaid*, who helps Ariel get dressed and impress Prince Eric (cf. Bell 1995: 108, 118-119).

**4.1.2. The Disney Princess Line and the Feminine Beauty Ideal**

In a discussion about body images of women in Disney movies, and given that six out of the seven main films of this study feature corresponding characters, the Disney Princess line must not be left out. Officially launched in 2000, this franchise comprises all the protagonists of Disney’s so-called ‘Princess films.’ Princess films are those with a female lead who is either royal by birth (Snow White from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, Aurora from *Sleeping Beauty*, Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*, Jasmine from *Aladdin*, Pocahontas from *Pocahontas*, Rapunzel from *Tangled*, Merida from *Brave*, Moana from *Moana*), by marriage (Cinderella from *Cinderella*, Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*, Tiana from *The Princess and the Frog*), or whose achievements made her ‘worthy’ of being part of the Princess line (Mulan from *Mulan*). Alternatively, Elsa and Anna from *Frozen*, also princesses by birth, are considered part of the franchise occasionally, but as *Frozen* also has its own franchise, they are often left out.

Given that Disney is famous for appropriating classic fairy tales which often feature princesses, it is no surprise that the Disney princesses, who are based on those traditional characters, became the company’s most iconic figures. They also quickly rose to some of the most popular characters Disney has ever created, and their intense marketing via the Disney Princess line has only contributed to that popularity. By launching their own franchise and providing their fans with toys, dresses, make-up, and games, the Walt Disney Company ensured that children are not only able to watch their idols on screen, but to feel ‘close’ to them on a daily basis. By playing with toys related to them, or by even ‘becoming’ the characters themselves by dressing up in their costumes, the Disney princesses have the power to not only be cartoon figures, but ‘playmates’ and – most importantly – role models who can “teach us how to have a body” (Leo 2016: 195).
Like the Barbie franchise, the Disney Princess line has been severely criticized as to what images and ideals it presents particularly to young girls who are its most avid consumers. The Disney princesses are often largely defined by their beautiful looks and the romantic relationships that result from those beautiful looks (cf. Rustad 2015: 2-3). Even though they represent different ethnicities and exhibit some variation in their hair and skin color, their basic features are all very similar: They have oval faces, very large eyes, flowing voluminous hair, and an extremely slender, curvaceous, graceful body, propagating thinness and extensive stereotypical femininity. In Coyne et al.’s (2016: 1911) words, “[t]he typical princess is portrayed as young and attractive with large eyes, small nose and chin, moderately large breasts, prominent cheekbones, lustrous hair, and good muscle tone and skin complexion.”

Naomi Wolf (cf. 2002: 1-19, 270-291), in her book The Beauty Myth, declares that this obsession with feminine beauty had its start approximately in the mid-20th century as women slowly gained more political rights. Its roots, however, are already found in the 19th century, when, as a result of the Industrial Revolution, Western middle-class women were no longer needed as much in the workforce and were thus confined to their homes – the cult of domesticity was born. The notion of ‘separate spheres’ emerged, whereby men would be active in public and be the breadwinners, while women would stay at home and become avid consumers of newly expanding magazines with photographs, instructing them on how a ‘proper’ women was supposed to look. The growing political emancipation of women in the 20th century went hand in hand with a denigration based on their looks, which was “a violent backlash against feminism that uses images of female beauty as a political weapon against women’s advancement” (10). Pressure started to be exerted on them that, if they want to make it in the modern world, they needed to look young and ‘flawless.’ While women were previously politically inferior to men, they are now inferior because of beauty ideals they are supposed to adhere to. Those ideals again put them in a subordinate position where they are subject to men’s approval and primarily have to express themselves via their appearances, rather than their accomplishments. The “social limits to women’s lives” were transposed “directly onto” their “faces and bodies,” as Wolf (2002: 270) declares, and the abundance of medial images the 20th century brought about, along with frequent beauty advertisements – “a representation of men’s desires” (Wolf 2002: 287) –, only contributed to the feeling instilled in women that their
physical appearance is their defining quality – a pressure not exerted on men. Furthermore, the increasing importance of a woman’s appearance directly countered feminist goals, as it did not unite women, but rather played them off against each other through competition – a theme particularly prominent in earlier Disney films like *Snow White* and *Cinderella*, where the aged, ugly women compete with the youthful, beautiful heroines.

Beauty ideals, as Wolf also asserts, do not come from nowhere, but they emerge out of financial considerations and are distributed by those who try to make profits out of their commodities. Those commodities, in turn, are advertised through the media, which thus creates these ideals in the first place. Davis (cf. 2006: 6-7) also discusses how tabloid magazines, advertisements, and newspapers would constantly remind women of the importance of their good looks, which would put them in a position where their appearance is valued more than their intellect. Even when women were encouraged to express their sexuality more freely in the late Eighties and early Nineties, “this new sexual ‘freedom’” often “meant making themselves more available to men” (7). Wolf (2002: 10, 1) declares that “inside the majority of the West’s controlled, attractive, successful working women, there is a secret ‘underlife’ poisoning our freedom; infused with notions of beauty, it is a dark vein of [...] physical obsessions, terror of aging, and a dread of lost control.” Even still in the early Nineties, the dominant “ideal was someone tall, thin, white, and blond, a face without pores, asymmetry, or flaws, someone wholly ‘perfect’.” The idealized image the mass media propagated, of “gaunt, yet full-breasted Caucasian[s]” (2), could, understandably, not be lived up to by ‘ordinary’ women. These expectations weakened women yet again and only imposed new constraints upon them, which the political emancipation sought to dissolve. The author speaks of a “myth” existing about feminine beauty, which, in essence, is a male construct, as liberated women “destabilize the institutions on which a male-dominated culture has depended” (17). The author describes this “beauty myth” as follows:

The quality called “beauty” objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it and and men must want to possess women who embody it. This embodiment is an imperative for women and not for men [...] because it is biological, sexual, and evolutionary. Strong men battle for beautiful women, and beautiful women are more reproductively successful. [...] [T]his system is based on sexual selection, it is inevitable and changeless. None of this is true. “Beauty” is a currency system [...] determined by politics, and in the modern age in the West it is the last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact. In assigning value to women in a vertical hierarchy according to
a culturally imposed physical standard, it is an expression of power relations on which women must unnaturally compete for resources that men have appropriated for themselves (12).

Only as a result of the Third Feminist Movement, which had its starts in the early 1990s and reached far into the new millennium, positive portrayals of emancipated women of various body shapes, ages, and skin colors slowly became more visible in the media. The Barbie doll, too, comes in more variegated shapes and colors since the late Nineties (cf. Wolf 2002: 6). This does not mean, however, that the obsession with beauty simply came to a stillstand. What it means is that what counts as ‘beautiful’ today is more variegated than some decades ago (cf. also Davis 2006: 116-118). The growing inclusion of non-Caucasians also in Disney films of the Nineties thus goes hand and hand with the reorientation of the media in general.

Garofalo (cf. 2013: 2824-2825) discusses this “feminine beauty ideal” prominently embodied by the Disney princesses and describes it as a social construct that implants the idea in women that physical attractiveness is a female’s most powerful ‘weapon’ and something she ‘must’ have in order to become socially and psychologically rewarded. This notion is only encouraged by the media – as it is the case with the Disney princesses – which also distributes narratives where the beautiful characters are rewarded over the ‘ordinary’ or ‘ugly’ ones with better life outcomes, romances, or the fulfilment of all their dreams – again a phenomenon that is in tune with Disney’s productions. As discussed above, attractive characters are generally perceived more positively and people tend to assign good personality traits, such as kindness, understanding, and helpfulness to them, which is why they are more likely to become role models and figures that audiences want to relate to. The problem of presenting beauty as an essential trait of ‘proper’ womanhood, however, is that it objectifies women and puts them into the position of objects of desire in a patriarchal world. Beautiful women on screen are often there for the (male) audience to gaze at them as they tend to be reduced to their outer qualities at the expense of their personalities and achievements – something that is not the case with male characters. Significantly, considering that Disney primarily bases its stories on legends, folktales, fairy tales, and myths, the plot elements are often changed drastically, but the pleasing physical appearance of the female lead characters that the source material also endorses remains untouched. The original cruel and bloody parts of the Cinderella story – such as cutting off the stepsisters’ heels and toes to fit into the slipper – are
completely omitted in the Disney version, in order to deliver a ‘cute,’ comforting tale to its audiences. The beauty of the main character, however, and her stepfamily’s jealousy of it, as well as the prince’s instant fascination with Cinderella because of her appearance, are maintained.

To enhance the feminine beauty ideal represented by the Disney Princess line even further, changes in their designs have been made over the years. As can be seen in the picture below, their hair has become even more voluminous, their dresses glitterier, and accessories and ornaments have been added to make them even ‘prettier’ and more stereotypically feminine. Their garments are now decorated with seams of gold, and Jasmine, the only princess to wear pants, looks as if she was wearing a tulle dress. Jewelry has been added to characters like Pocahontas, and the rather simple dress of Mulan has changed into an adorned gown.

What is most significant is that the Disney Princess line does not present its characters in their original or most iconic form, but in their most feminine and ‘princess-like’ one. The mermaid Ariel, for example, whose trademark is her fishtail, and who stands out as the only non-human Disney princess, is marketed in a greenish-turquoise gown she never once wears neither in her main film, nor in the spin-offs. Belle, who spends most of the film’s running time as a commoner in a simple white and blue dress, is depicted in the flowing princess gown she only wears briefly. Pocahontas, who is the only Native American princess and who does not wear shoes or accessories in the movie, is equipped with boots, earrings and ornaments, and Rapunzel, who actually has short brown hair at the end of Tangled, got her long, blonde mane back for the Disney Princess line. What also stands out is that less hyper-feminine characters were adapted for the franchise. Mulan, for example, who spends most of her film disguised as a warrior and whose story of going to battle and saving her home contains empowering messages for women, is represented in a feminine dress she only wears in one scene at the beginning of the movie.

Merida from Brave, however, underwent the biggest change in the Disney Princess line and the Walt Disney Company had to face a lot of criticism for her redesign. The criticism, in fact, became so pressing that Merida was eventually portrayed in her original form again. Brave’s heroine is undoubtedly one of the least gender-stereotyped characters in the Disney catalogue. She is the first Disney princess to not have a love interest, appearing in the first princess film where the story is not dealing with romance. When her mother tries to marry her off by force to the man with the best archery skills, Merida steps in to shoot for her own hand and wins. Her bow and arrows, however, which were her trademarks and the symbolization of her tomboyish nature, were removed for the Disney princess franchise. Her wild, untamed red mane was turned into flowing, groomed curls and her round, natural face was made more oval and heavily equipped with make-up. Her waist became smaller and her dress was ornamented with gold and glitter. This thorough ‘feminization’ made her fit better into the group of the other hyper-feminine Disney princesses (cf. Coyne et al. 2016: 1910; Leo 2016: 193-195).

Research conducted by Hine et al. (cf. 2018a: 5-7) has indeed shown that the way the characters are dressed has an influence on whether they are being perceived as princesses or not. The authors
Lisa Buchegger

provided children with pictures of the Disney princesses and then asked them to tick whether they think the character is a princess or not. Those characters with more stereotypically feminine gowns such as Aurora, Cinderella, and Belle, received significantly more “yes”-answers than those in less typical ‘princess’ dresses, such as Pocahontas or Ariel in her mermaid form. The latest Disney princess, Moana, who, like Merida, is not as heavily gender-stereotyped as her predecessors and who wears no dress or glittery accessories at all, but a simple top and skirt, received the most “no”-answers. Thus, a clear association between physical appearance and the status of characters as princesses could be shown among the participants.

4.1.3. From Chaste to Seductive to Practical – The Changing Bodies of Disney’s Heroines

Not only have the princesses’ designs been subject to changes over time, but also the overall portrayal of womanhood and femininity has not remained constant. The women in Disney’s Classic Period are depicted as chaste and demure young girls who seem particularly innocent and unaware of their sexuality and the effect their beautiful looks have on other characters like their love interests. When the three princesses, Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora dream of their happy endings, which involve getting married to their respective princes, and when those princes in turn admire the women, their romances are portrayed as idealized ‘courtly love’ instances, rather than ‘real’ relationships.

Even though the physical appearance of the characters is central to the narratives and the women’s beauty is emphasized throughout, the women are by no means sexualized. According to Bell (cf. 1995: 109-115), Disney’s earliest heroines were modelled after professional dancers of classic ballet, which accounts for their graceful body positions and movements. These Classic Period princesses are never portrayed as seductive or as if they consciously made use of their appealing looks. Their dresses are high-cut and cover their bodies almost fully – the viewer never sees exposed legs or an accentuated cleavage. This resonates with the common attitude towards ‘proper’ women during the times these films were released. As Wolf (2002: 13-14) states, “[t]he qualities that a given period calls beautiful in women are merely symbols of the female behavior that that period considers desirable.” In the Thirties, Forties, and Fifties, the ‘ideal’ woman was a
decent and modest wife and mother whose sexuality was confined to her marriage and who did not display her physicality in public. Especially after a brief ‘emancipation’ during World War II, when women were needed in the workforce and could not afford to stay at home, the Victorian notion of the ‘angel in the house’ became more prominent again, and the previous conception of ‘separate spheres’ discussed above — women being confined to taking care of the home and the family — reigned supreme again (cf. Davis 2006: 5-6, 117-118, 123; Rustad 2015: 24; Ruzycki O’Brien 1994: 62-64, 75-76).

Significantly, in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* and *Cinderella* (as well as in other productions of the Classic Period), this Victorian ideal of the chaste and devout woman is embodied by the main female characters both via their looks and their personalities. Their innocent beauty is closely linked to their passivity and their dependence on a male authority figure. Both Cinderella and Snow White are victims of their cruel stepmothers — yet, they do not show any real attempts to change their fates, let alone rebel against their suppressors. They suffer quietly and rely on their dreams of true love to eventually lighten up their lives. This allows the respective male character, their ‘Prince Charming,’ to take on the active part and win their hearts. The men fall in love with the women because of their beautiful appearance, save them from their tragic fates, and the ‘damsels in distress’ finally find happiness and true love without ever appearing as seductresses or ‘sexual predators’ (cf. Bell 1995: 111-112; Davis 2006: 20-21, 100-104, 135).

With characters like Snow White and Cinderella, beauty and romance that results from it are thus linked to chastity and female passivity. The other ‘good’ women, the gentle grandmothers, are not as passive as the main heroines, but they are still never sexualized nor are they equipped with romantic narratives at all. Their entire purpose relies in assisting the female protagonists and, at best, making them ‘more beautiful’ and appealing to their love interests, as it is the case with the Fairy Godmother who dresses Cinderella up for the ball, or the three fairies from *Sleeping Beauty* who gift their fosterling Aurora an elegant gown (cf. Bell 1995: 118-120; Ruzycki O’Brien 1994: 74-75). Ugliness, on the other hand, is attributed to powerful, active female characters like the Evil Queen and Lady Tremaine, who “bespeak a cultural trepidation for unchecked femininity” (Bell
1996: 121), which will be discussed in more detail below. In later Disney films, however, the notion that a ‘good’ woman had to be asexual, demure, and inactive began to change drastically.

*The Little Mermaid* is the first film of the Eisner Era and also the first product of the “Disney Renaissance,” marking the studios return, after an absence of 30 years, to their most successful and iconic creations—the Princess movies. Rustad (2015: 44) remarks that “*The Little Mermaid* largely created the Disney film as it is understood today. It takes the conventions of the classical Princess films and magnifies them to modern cinematic proportions.” Consequently, its protagonist, the ocean princess Ariel, “is really responsible for the idea of the Disney Princess as she stands in the popular consciousness today” (Rustad 2015: 50), and introduces the beginning of a new ‘era’ of Disney females, both by her appearance and by her character. Not only is Ariel equipped with more agency than her predecessors Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora, but she is also the first heroine to be drawn in the classic ‘Disney Princess formula’ with large, doll-like eyes, smooth, round curves, and an extremely thin waistline smaller than the width of her eyes and forehead (cf. Rustad 2015: 41).

After two Feminist Movements, the third being in full swing, legal gender equality, and the official abolition of any forms of discrimination against women in the Western world, the Disney films of the Eisner Era have also come to represent a ‘new’ woman. The innovative paradigm of “political correctness” (Davis 2006: 171), including “multi-culturalism […], tolerance of those who are different […] and […] ideas about equality” demanded the inclusion of more variegated characters. Goodness and seductiveness were no longer mutually exclusive and female protagonists could now be both moral and voluptuous. What mainly distinguishes the women of the Disney Renaissance from their predecessors is that they are much more sexualized.\(^{11}\) Characters like Ariel, Jasmine

\(^{11}\) Significantly, the 1990s marked a time where breast implants became increasingly popular among women—apparently a means to appear ‘sexier’ (cf. Wolf 2002: 4).
from *Aladdin*, or *Pocahontas*’ titular heroine show a lot more skin than the chaste females of the Classic Period. They are also equipped with clothes that emphasize this sexualization. Ariel’s upper body is, due to her mermaid form, only covered with a seashell bra. Jasmine wears harem pants and a short top that leaves her entire stomach uncovered. Esmeralda from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and Pocahontas are particularly eroticized and have a much more voluminous cleavage than other Disney women. Significantly, these two are non-Caucasians and their intense sexualization adds to their perception as ‘exotic.’ While viewers maximally caught a glimpse at Cinderella’s bosom during her morning routine, the décolleté and belly of Disney princesses and their exaggerated hourglass figures are now shown. It is also during the 1990s that the home video market expanded drastically, which means that young girls were now exposed to both the older, more ‘chaste’ princesses, as well as the new, sexualized ones on a regular basis (cf. Bell 1995: 114; Davis 2006: 169-173; Rustad 2015: 51-52).

Characters from non-European ethnicities are not only the most sexualized ones, but they are also heavily ‘westernized.’ While Disney signaled the inclusion of more racial diversity in its films during the Eisner Era – *Aladdin*, for example, takes place in Arabia, *Pocahontas* thematizes Native Americans, and *Mulan* depicts a Chinese society – to expand its market\(^\text{12}\), it is striking that the protagonists of the respective stories still look like Europeans, whereas the villains or insignificant side characters are racially stereotyped. *Aladdin* and *Pocahontas* serve most salient examples: The titular heroines are portrayed as ‘sex objects’ with voluminous, long hair, full seductive lips, slim waists, and charming doe-eyes – in short, epitomes of Western ‘male fantasies’ (cf. Ward 2002: 45-46). Jasmine’s love interest, Aladdin, is also light-skinned, as well as the only male character in the film with no facial hair. The other, ‘evil’ Arabs, like Jafar and his minions, are depicted with dark skin, large, bulbous noses, and thick beards. In 2009, Disney attempted to counter the criticism it received for its ‘racism’ with the film *The Princess and the Frog*, which features the company’s first African American protagonist, Princess Tiana. Unlike her predecessors, she is not sexualized or

\(^{12}\) As Davis (2006: 128) notes, “in the first half of the Hollywood film industry’s history, American society as a whole tended to assume that its members were white and middle-class,” which explains why earlier Disney productions also primarily had white, middle-class people as their intended audience and thus barely presented intricate characters of other classes or ethnicities.
‘Europeanized.’ It is the first film in Disney’s repertoire to propagate the message that ‘black is beautiful.’

*Pocahontas* is one of the few Disney films that, despite its racial stereotypes, presents viewers also with young, non-ugly characters other than the main protagonists. Both Pocahontas’ best friend, Nakoma, as well as the Native American warrior, Kocoum, are not as obviously set apart visually from the titular heroine and her love interest, John Smith, as it is the case with the villain of the story, the overweight, effeminate Ratcliffe. Still, their designs make it clear that Pocahontas and Smith are the stars of the film. Not only does Pocahontas have lighter skin than the other Native American characters and appears as a classic Western beauty, but she is also taller and has a more voluminous cleavage than Nakoma, which puts her on the same level with the equally stunning John Smith, who outshines Kocoum by far, propagating the message “that people are right for each other when they are equally attractive,” as “Kocoum and Nakoma were not drawn to look as dramatically beautiful” (Ward 2002: 46).

Within the stories, the focus on the women’s physicality and their seductive bodies also becomes visible. They tend to play around with their sexuality and use it as a ‘tool’ to achieve certain goals, such as infatuating their love interests or distracting the villains. After Ariel has become a human, her sea friends quickly make her a dress out of fabrics, in which she poses and displays awareness of her now human body. While doing so, one of her friends whistles and compliments her on her good lucks, emphasizing her status as a sexual being. The Disney women of the Eisner Era appear as characters who are aware of their feminine charms and have no intentions to conceal them. They bat their eyes, swing their hips, and beguile others with their sensuality.

One of the most erotically connotated scenes probably occurs in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, when the beautiful Esmeralda appears as a show act at the city’s festival. Dressed in a shoulder-free, blazing red garment, she presents her curvaceous body to the citizens of Paris who watch her in awe as she pole-dances and performs several acrobatic feats. She pulls the self-proclaimed ‘virtuous’ and gypsy-hating villain Claude Frollo to herself, suggests a kiss and then quickly withdraws, leaving him to grow infatuated with her. A heroine like that, who is both ‘lewd’ and
righteous would have been unthinkable just a few decades ago in the Classic Period. What is also striking about Esmeralda is that, because of her expressive sexuality and the frustration Frollo experiences because of it, he accuses her of witchcraft. While, in earlier films, the narratives rendered sexuality as improper by attributing it to the female antagonists – the actual ‘witches,’ who were eventually defeated – it is now the villain of the story – whose words and views the audience is not supposed to share – who treats female sexuality as if it was dangerous and something that must be controlled and constrained. Like this, The Hunchback of Notre Dame directly comments on Disney’s own history and the changing roles of women in society. Now, a good woman, Esmeralda in this case, can be sexy and seductive, and someone narrow-minded enough to call her a witch because of it is made the story’s villain who will be destroyed (cf. Davis 2006: 207-208).

Not only became Disney’s women in the Nineties ‘sexier,’ but they also started to be tougher and more active, which was reflected in their designs. The sweet, delicate princess of the Classic Period, who is dressed in a flowing, elegant gown, and whose physical activities are restrained to dancing or strolling through the woods has become a dying breed by this time. The Eisner Era women are shown to participate in much more ‘masculine’ tasks and more action – those more active characters were thus also animated in a different way, as they were equipped with more agilely moving bodies and with more practical clothes. Belle from 1991’s Beauty and the Beast, for example, is the first Disney princess who is seen riding a horse, an activity more commonly associated with the classic strong and heroic prince-characters. She is wearing a simple, blue-white dress which does not cover her legs fully. Not only is she showing more skin than earlier females, but she is also more physically active. This new, agile, and unconventional princess is perfected in Disney’s hit film of 1992, Aladdin. Jasmine, who is the first – and, so far, only – female lead to not wear a dress, but baggy pants as her regular attire, has ever since jumped and climbed across
screens worldwide, no longer displaying physical inferiority to male characters. In 1998, this representation of corporal equality between males and females reached its peak in *Mulan*, where the titular heroine was not only portrayed in men’s clothing, but also performed identical activities such as shooting, sword-fighting, and hand-to-hand-combat.

With postmodern Disney heroines, like Anna from *Frozen*, or Moana from the movie of the same name, princesses engaging in physical activities in the same manner as male characters have become a standard. Consequently, their bodies are depicted as more agile and stronger in order to convincingly show them in action-packed scenes. What also stands out in these recent productions is that “power and kindness/beauty” are no longer “mutually exclusive in women” (Garofalo 2013: 2826). Heroines like Elsa and Moana are portrayed as attractive, and as no inactive, reserved damsels in distress like the Classic Period princesses. Still, they are no vicious *femme fatale*-personas like the Evil Queen, Lady Tremaine, or Ursula. Rustad (2015: 157) therefore calls Elsa “a very effective deconstruction of Disney’s evil spell-casting Queen formula.” The studio is now showing its audiences that a woman can be powerful and appealing at the same time.

Relating to Rustad’s abovementioned statement, Elsa’s portrayal is, in fact, contradictory at times and adds an aura of ambiguity to her character. In some of *Frozen*’s movie posters, as well as in the film’s corresponding merchandise, and at the end of the Ice Queen’s signature song “Let It Go,” Elsa directly sneers at the audience. This is misleading since, throughout the story, Elsa, even though originally imaged as the movie’s villain, is depicted as a character genuinely concerned about others and the harm she accidentally causes with her magic. She never makes fun of someone or looks down on others as her sneer would suggest. What this contraction does, however, is challenging the audience’s perception of good and evil which they are familiar with from earlier Disney films. Elsa’s scoffing facial expression, along with casting her as a powerful, potentially destructive queen, alludes to Disney’s classic evil witch-characters, but turns the traditional association of looks, along with agency and character on its head. Elsa possesses magic with the potential to cause harm, she is not weak and passive, and her expressions do not always neatly match her otherwise genuine, polite personality. This, however, does not automatically imply she is dangerous, let alone a witch, but instead, an intricate, ambiguous figure who disallows
for her identification as either heroine or villain at first sight (cf. Hine et al. 2018a; Hine et al. 2018b; Rustad 2015: 160-161).

The postmodern female protagonists are, apart from being more androgynous and ambiguous, also not as heavily sexualized as the females of the Eisner Era. Elsa, for example, is shown to change into a form-fitting dress in which she exposes her legs, but she does not do so in order to impress a love interest, but to free herself from self-imposed constraints. In fact, she does not have any romantic interactions throughout the entire film. As Rustad remarks, her dress “sexualizes Elsa just enough to play into the subtext of casting off puritanical notions of femininity, but is subtle enough that such a theme stays in the subtext.” Similarly, while Moana’s outfit does reveal a lot of skin, she is never depicted as seducing another figure or as using her physical charms in order to achieve what she wants. Rather, she is dressed in a practical top and skirt, which allow her to efficiently perform her heroic, ‘mannishly’ connotated acts like climbing, sailing, and ‘saving the day.’ Still, despite those evolutions, also some postmodern heroines like Anna and Elsa have extremely thin and unproportioned bodies. Also, their eyes have become even bigger in relation to the rest of their faces – a phenomenon that started with Rapunzel in Tangled. After being criticized for decades for propagating an unrealistic beauty ideal, Disney released Moana in 2016 and offered the audience a more ‘human’ Disney princess for the first time. While its titular heroine can, by no means, be called ‘realistic,’ the difference to her predecessors is quite striking. Moana’s waist is broader, and her arms and calves are significantly fuller. Also, compared to the slender, graceful ones of former princesses, Moana’s fingers appear a lot shorter and ‘chubbier,’ and her eyes are not as huge as Anna’s, Elsa’s, or Rapunzel’s.

The portrayal of less ‘idealized’ figures stands in direct correlation with a growing awareness of the negative influences such medial images can have on people’s body consciousness. This awareness slowly started to emerge in the late Nineties, as Wolf (2002: 3) mentions in the preface to her new
edition of *The Beauty Myth*, which was originally published in 1991. During this time, much has changed, the author states. The later Nineties marked the presence of the first plus-size models in the media and a decade later “you would be hard-pressed to find a twelve-year-old girl who is not all too familiar with the idea that ‘ideals’ are too tough on girls, that they are unnatural, and that following them too slavishly is neither healthy nor cool.” Another 14 years later, when *Moana* was released, these sentiments have developed even further and thus, it appears only logical that the Walt Disney Company reacts to them to cater to their contemporary audience’s beliefs (cf. Hine et al. 2018a; Hine et al. 2018b; Wolf 2002: 6-8).

**4.2. Handsome Princes and Athletic Leaders – Body Images of Disney Heroes**

**4.2.1. Body Images and Double Standards**

When examining body images and corresponding personalities in Disney from a gender perspective, it becomes visible that the characters are subject to double standards – not the same ideals apply to the sexes equally. Even though the representations of masculinity in Disney have also changed over the years, men have always been more androgynous and complex to begin with. While women tended to be portrayed as either delicate and good or powerful and evil, men could always be strong and soft at the same time. Corresponding to these broader possibilities for males, Disney’s men also always took on active roles, as passivity and goodness were only connected with regard to women, while men could be both mighty and kind (cf. Hine et al. 2018b: 1, 4, 7).

Ageism in Disney is also restricted to (evil) women (cf. Elnahla 2015: 114-125). The three-women-model I discussed in the section about representations of femininity in Disney is not transposable to men as they cannot be as neatly and distinctly grouped but exhibit more variation. Men of various ages are to be found in the roles of protagonists, supporting characters, and villains. While the princes and love interests of the female leads are all portrayed as young, the antagonists are not solely middle-aged as it is the case for women. Gaston from *Beauty and the Beast* or Hans from *Frozen* are striking examples for young (and handsome) villains. Frollo, the ‘baddie’ from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* is depicted as an aged man, while Disney’s old females are solely cast
as nurturing, grandmotherly figures. Examples for middle-aged male villains would be Jafar from *Aladdin* or Ratcliffe from *Pocahontas*.

What is also significant is that within the narratives, the physical attractiveness of women is much more emphasized. Occasionally, the male heroes are admired by their female counterparts or referred to as handsome, but their appealing looks operate more as a means for providing a ‘matching’ partner for the female, rather than being of importance for the stories themselves. In *Cinderella*, for example, the prince is undoubtedly portrayed as good-looking and desirable, but it is never stated that the women attending his ball would want to impress him because of his looks, but simply because he is royalty. Cinderella, on the other hand, who is of no aristocratic status and who is unknown to the prince upon her arrival at the ball, is singled out by him because he is smitten by her beauty. In *Pocahontas*, when the dashing John Smith and the alluring Native American meet for the first time, the audience witnesses how they gaze each other, being startled and fascinated with the other’s appearance. However, it is John who refrains from shooting Pocahontas upon her beautiful sight – thus, the importance of her looks is even more heightened and valued.

The greater value placed on the appearance of women also correlates with Bazzini et al.’s (cf. 2010: 2705) assertion that the beauty-goodness stereotype is more entrenched with regard to female characters in relation to males. The confusion viewers can encounter when being confronted with counter-stereotypical information was also assigned to female figures more strongly. This tendency is reflected when taking a look at the greater variation found among men in Disney’s productions. Both good-but-ugly (e.g. Quasimodo) and handsome-but-evil (e.g. Gaston, Hans) male characters have been portrayed since the Nineties.\(^{13}\)

\(^{13}\) Significantly, the first ‘do not judge a book by its cover’-character, Dumbo, from 1941, is also male. While one could argue that Disney’s first villainess, the Evil Queen from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, is not portrayed as ugly and repulsive as some of her successors – she very much has “a cold, classic beauty which never quite hid her inner fury” (Johnston and Thomas 1993: 15) – the beauty-goodness-stereotype is still applicable to her persona. Not only does she have sharp, androgynous features, which stand in stark contrast to the round and smooth lines Snow White is drawn in, but also, upon carrying out her ultimate scheme – killing Snow White with the poisoned apple – she disguises herself and is henceforth depicted as an eerie, nightmarish hag with piercing eyes and a giant wart on her crooked nose. Even though mitigated through her former appearance, she still falls into the large group of characters whose ugly personality is visualized by her hideous looks. While male characters have thus been more variegated
Even though they are more variegated overall, the handsome main hero of each story is clearly set apart from other male characters by exaggerating the latter’s bodily features. While Prince Eric from *The Little Mermaid*, for example, is drawn with moderate proportions, his friend and advisor Grimsby is unnaturally thin and has a bulbous, hooked nose, which emphasizes and heightens Eric’s handsomeness in comparison. Similarly, the other male characters apart from the prince in *Cinderella*, the King and the Grand Duke, are turned into comic figures with uneven proportions and unattractive features. While the former is short and overweight, the latter is skinny and, like Grimsby, has a crooked nose.

4.2.2. Plain Stock Figures, Soft Heroes, and Postfeminist Men

Up until *Beauty and the Beast*, Disney’s men were rather plain and underdeveloped. The dominant paradigm was simply that of an athletic, handsome, moderately tall young man with broad shoulders, drawn in smooth lines, with slight muscles. This simplistic design was extended to the heroes’ almost non-existent characterization – neither Snow White’s nor Cinderella’s love interest even have a name. The former is simply called “the Prince,” while the latter is known as “Prince Charming.” Their designs are not significantly different, neither are the functions they carry in their respective films. Both serve mainly as the happy-end-provider for the female protagonists, as the dashing hero to sweep the mistreated, innocent damsel in distress off her feet and ensure her a better future. Significantly, even though the princes barely appear on screen and are not equipped with an actual personality like their female counterparts, they still take on the stereotypically masculine ‘active’ role of the rescuer who is the key to the woman’s happily ever after. While the male heroes from *Sleeping Beauty* and *The Little Mermaid* at least have names, Prince Philip and Prince Eric, respectively, and a more distinct personality than their predecessors, they are still very much the Prince Charming-archetype known from classical fairy tales. Their main functions in the films are to give Princess Aurora the resurrecting ‘true love’s kiss’ and to ensure Ariel’s happily ever after on land (cf. Davis 2013: 147-155; Griffin 2000: 148; Putnam 2013: 151).

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ever since Disney’s early years, females slowly move away from the appearance-character equation only in newer films like *Tangled* or *Zootopia.*
Ever since the Eisner Era, Disney’s male protagonists have started to become more fleshed out and intricate, both in their characteristics and their visual designs. This resonates with real-life developments explained by Naomi Wolf (cf. 2002: 7-8, 288-289): While women’s looks have been a topical issue ever since the Industrial Revolution, men’s physical appearances have only become more central since the last three decades. 14 “[D]riven by simple market opportunity” and “[p]arallel to the increase in women’s economic and social power, the power gap between the sexes has continued to close, dislodging men from their ages-old position as arbiters, rather than providers, of sexual attractiveness and beauty” (7-8). Fashion magazines for males, advertisements for beauty products, and cosmetic surgeries have thus become an integral part of Western culture much later than for females. This again plays in with the double standards discussed above, and it also explains why Disney’s earlier heroes all looked rather similar and their designs were not as detailed and distinguishing as the ones of their female counterparts. The lack of attention paid to men’s appearances for a long time also becomes visible with regard to the studies and literature existing

14 As Wolf (cf. 2002: 288-289) notes, if men continue to become the new target of medial images focusing on ‘male beauty’ as it was the case for women decades before, they are just as prone to fall victim to lower self-esteem or eating disorders. The ‘beauty myth’ is thus not something reserved for females only, but it is largely influenced by how society as a whole, as well as popular and consumer culture tackle the subject.
about Disney’s male characters. While scholarly surveys on the female ones, particularly the princesses, have existed in abundance for ages, those focusing on Disney’s men are spare and stem mostly from no earlier than the 2010s. Davis, with her compelling study, *Handsome Heroes and Vile Villains. Men in Disney’s Feature Animation.*, was the first scholar to come up with an all-encompassing analysis of Disney’s males from the studio’s beginnings until the present in 2013.15

Apart from slowly focusing more on men’s appearances, the 1990s marked another ‘trend,’ namely, the move away from ‘hyper-masculinity.’ The typical ‘action-hero’ of the 70s and 80s made way for a new ideal: The man who would be emotional, soft, and heroic without being an aggressive, vigorous war machine. As Jeffords (1995: 161) discusses in her article “The Curse of Masculinity,” the presidency of Ronald Reagan from 1981-1989 brought with it a growing “focus on the family” and “moral values” – a policy that was continued by his successor George Bush (1989-1993) during the 1990s, which coincides with Disney’s Renaissance. Jeffords (1995: 161) outlines that,

with the economy declining, the national debt skyrocketing, and the militaristic reason for many such expenses disappearing, the Reagan emphasis on family seemed to provide the only secure legacy of the Reagan ideology. [...] In such a context, it would seem quite logical that the hard-edged masculinity that had been so closely affiliated with the foreign policy angles of the Reagan era would now shift towards domestic policies, emphasizing the family and personal values [...]. [...] [T]hese new male heroes would thumb their noses at an economic superiority they did not have and return to the families they had neglected before.

This new masculine ideal, which placed focus on emotions and family values rather than action and physical strength was also reflected in Disney’s male heroes of this period. Particularly the Beast from 1991’s *Beauty and the Beast* and Aladdin from 1992 exemplify the ‘new man’ fittingly. Aladdin is by no means depicted as effeminate or weak, but he is also no ‘muscleman’ or hyper-masculine

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15 Significantly though, Davis’s oeuvre does not focus on the physical appearance of Disney’s male characters, but on the roles they play in the films in general. The author explains that the disinterest in the male figures could have various reasons: For one, Disney is associated with basing its stories on fairy tales or fairy tale-like origins. In this source material, the female protagonist is often more in the centre, something that was transferred to Disney’s adaptations. Also, Disney is commonly perceived as being entertainment ‘for women’ – a notion even Walt Disney himself shared – the reasons for this sentiment, however, are unclear. A third reason for the significantly higher interest in Disney’s female characters undoubtedly lies in their extensive merchandising – while the Disney Princess line has grown to be extremely popular, no equivalent for Disney Princes or males in general exists up to date (cf. Davis 2013: 4-6).
The most striking example for the ‘reformed’ man of the 1990s is to be found in Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*. Here, the audience is confronted with an ‘anti-hero’ whose sense of entitlement as a male authority figure has backfired and become his own curse – literally. The main protagonist, referred to as ‘the Beast,’ is described as a spoiled, emotionless prince who abuses the power he holds over his servants and people and is unkind to everyone. When he refuses to give an old beggar woman shelter because of her unappealing appearance, she transforms into an enchantress who turns him into a hideous beast, who has to learn to love and be loved in return in order to become human again. In his beastly form, the prince is unnaturally tall, corpulent, and equipped with supernatural strength (for example, he easily fights off a pack of wolves which tries to attack Belle with his paws). This story of the self-entitled, hyper-masculine Beast which has to transform into a softer, loving man directly conforms to the new ideal for men. *Beauty and the Beast* thematizes how “masculinity has been betrayed by its own cultural imagery: what men thought they were supposed to be – strong, protective, powerful, commanding [...]” (Jeffords: 1995: 171) is criticized and re-evaluated. While cursed, the Beast is trapped in the body of a hard, cold, and clinical figure, and it is this body which prevents him from being his true self and thus from being happy. He is portrayed to be domineering, violent, abusive, and aggressive – traits that are visualized through his threatening, hyper-masculine appearance. As Jeffords (1995: 164) explains, “[t]he body that the thought was ‘his,’ the body he had been taught to value as fulfilling some version of a masculine heroic ideal [...] was betraying the true internal feelings of the man it contained.” What the Beast needs is “a happy ending, where the betrayed body is transformed [...] into a body that is now in tune with the internal goodness that the film’s narrative has revealed.” This revelation of the Beast’s goodness and the transformation into his true – non-hypermasculine – self is facilitated by the movie’s female lead, Belle, who is the...
epitome of the growing family values that the 1990s placed value on. She is cast as the Beast’s future mate who has to nurture him and teach him manners and kindness in order to bring out the best in him and allow him to abandon his ‘toxic masculinity’ in favour of becoming a gentle, caring, and loving partner. The film thus also suggests that men are not hyper-masculine by choice, but because of the pressure and expectations of society. Their masculine bodies are burdens rather than the loci of their heroism. What they need is to be understood and cared for by a loving family, instead of being reprimanded or disdained (cf. Jeffords 1995: 165-171). This depiction of Beauty and the Beast’s lead character as the misunderstood, suffering ‘alpha male,’ who needs guidance and love in order to become softer is best achieved through contrasting him with the hyper-masculine villain of the story, Gaston. Unlike the hero, he does not undergo any transformation, but holds on to his self-entitlement and toxic masculinity, which eventually become his doom and which the movie ridicules.

Another film that thematizes masculine ideals and their deconstruction is 1997’s Hercules. Over the course of the movie, Hercules has to learn that not his physical strength, but his morality, kindness, and self-sacrificing nature are what truly make a man ‘strong.’ Unlike the Beast, the protagonist does not undergo physical, but only attitudinal transformation. In his visual design, Hercules is resemblant of the muscleman Gaston. Significantly, Hercules, where the appearance of the main character does not correspond to the dominant beauty ideal for males at the time of the film’s release, was a box-office failure.

As it is the case with women, body images of postmodern Disney heroes are more ambiguous and diverse and no longer conform to the stereotypical formula of the ‘flawless’ dashing hero, which already started to crumble in the 1990s and is now perfected. Heroes like Kristoff from Frozen or Maui from Moana are depicted as both strong and muscular and awkward and soft at the same time. They are neither the charming princes from Disney’s Classic Period, nor the delicate, sentimental heroes from the Eisner Era – but they are complex and multi-facetted, both in their personalities and in their visual designs. Kristoff is introduced as an ill-mannered, brutish, practical mountain man, who, over the course of the narrative, transforms into a caring companion for Anna, who assists her in her quest, helps her, and cheers her up. Compared to heroes of the 1990s
like Aladdin, he appears significantly sturdier and more muscular. Maui starts out as a self-entitled, arrogant demi-god who makes fun of Moana and belittles her, but eventually bundles his physical strength – which, unlike the Beast, he does not need to be deprived of in order to bring out his ‘true self’ – with Moana’s strong will and determination to restore peace and destroy evil. These postmodern Disney heroes can find happiness and elicit the best in themselves without giving up their bodily strength. With regard to body images, it is also worth mentioning that Maui is the first male hero to be heavily overweight – something reserved for villains or incompetent side characters so far. Significantly, both male and female moral characters of earlier films were always depicted as slender or even thin and no Disney film up to today has presented viewers with an overweight heroine. This again accounts for the double standards discussed above that men seem to enjoy the privilege of more variation and less strict beauty standards than women (cf. Hine et al. 2018b: 4).

In the context of men being portrayed as awkward in postmodern Disney films, Macaluso (cf. 2018: 1-8) mentions the concept of “postfeminist masculinity” and describes it as a trend that “represents straight masculinity as foolish or comedic, perhaps even immature or incapable, in order to highlight capable, independent women” (2). The author sees postfeminism as the result of apparently achieved equality of the sexes, rendering feminist discourses as no longer necessary. It thus signifies “the end, fulfillment, or passing of feminism – and hence, an era of post-feminism where traditional feminist goals of gender equality, equal rights, and collective action are replaced by discourses and depictions of female empowerment, choice, and independence.” As a result, postfeminist men in the media are depicted as inferior to women, vulnerable, suffering from emotional crises, and – most importantly – they are ridiculed in comparison to the strong, competent women. Also reading Disney films as a mirror of culture, Macaluso (2018: 8) concludes that “we live in an era of postfeminist discourses because we are the producers of postfeminist sensibilities.” These postfeminist sensibilities thus seem to imply that women have achieved full equality – which in itself, is anything but true (cf. Wolf 2002: 281-283) –, and that this ‘equality’ can now be played off against men, which only creates inequality yet again by simply turning gender hierarchies upside down.
While the author’s assumption appears logical that less gender-stereotyped men of postmodern Disney films might be a means of compensating for the rather dependent and passive female characters of earlier films (cf. Macaluso 2018: 5), I do not support his claim that those more recent productions propagate new inequality-messages such as “men must be weak in order for women to thrive” and “women and men cannot successfully coexist as strong, independent individuals together” (8). While it is true that characters like Kristoff and Maui tend to come across as immature, as comic relief characters, or “as the butt of jokes” (Macaluso 2018: 5) occasionally, the same could be said about their female counterparts. Postmodern heroines like Anna, Elsa, or Moana are by no means portrayed as strong and competent at the expense of men, but rather alongside them. Anna and Kristoff, for example, are both socially awkward and played for laughs. Similarly, they are both heroic and strong, and save each other multiple times during the course of their journey. Anna is able to find her sister in the mountains with the help of Kristoff’s expertise, while she saves him from falling off a cliff and helps him to become more open-hearted. When they are attacked by a pack of wolves – a scene reminiscent of the one in Beauty and the Beast, where Belle found herself confronted by wolves and the Beast fought them all off for her – Anna and Kristoff work together to re-establish their safety. They both exhibit typically feminine (for instance, being emotional and taking care of someone else) and typically masculine traits (such as possessing physical strength and being self-reliant and strong-willed). Those newer films thus indeed do show that men and women can and even must “coexist as strong, independent individuals together” to achieve their goals. Like Anna and Kristoff in Frozen, Maui and Moana can only be successful once they bundle their energies and strengths. The masculinity of the postmodern Disney heroes – both in their designs and characteristics – is thus maintained, while, simultaneously, they are also adapted to their empowered female counterparts, who, in turn, are less stereotypically feminine than their predecessors.

Notably, while characters like Kristoff and Maui stray far away from the traditional fairy tale-like ‘princes in shining armour,’ they conform to another male ideal prominent in American culture and society – the so-called ‘ruffian guy.’ This figure is no flawless, ‘polished’ prince, but a tough, sometimes ill-mannered, and ‘rude’ man, who does not conform to traditional male beauty ideals, but appears to have more ‘rough edges.’ Often, such characters learn over the course of a narrative
to become more gentle, while still maintaining their masculine charms. In the case of Kristoff and Maui, roughness is indeed coded with masculinity, which is portrayed through their sturdy appearances and resilient personalities. In fact, by depicting them this way, Disney avoids them being called ‘too beautiful’ – something easily connotated with a lack of masculinity and associated with ‘queer’ men.

4.3. Androgynous Witches, Hypermasculine Scoundrels, and Gender-Bending Mischief-Makers – Body Images of Disney Villains

4.3.1. The Villain as the Grotesque and Ugly ‘Other’

In Disney, the characters who stray away the furthest from traditional beauty standards are the villains. They are generally designed to look repulsive, signalling the viewer at first glance that they are dangerous forces to be reckoned with. Via their visual designs, the villains are drastically separated from their good-looking, moral opponents, and one can recognize them by their heavily exaggerated features. They are either overweight or unnaturally thin, they have oversized behinds or extra-long, pointy fingers, and in contrast to the smooth lines the protagonists are drawn in, villains have edged, angular faces and straight body shapes. While ugliness does not necessarily correlate with evilness when it comes to men – another double standard – their bodily features are exaggerated to a point where they look grotesque, as it is the case with Gaston and his over-emphasized muscles (cf. Sharmin and Sattar 2018: 54). Ollie Johnston and Frank Thomas (1993: 18) who had worked as leading animators at the Walt Disney Company for over 40 years, wrote in their book The Disney Villain, in which they provide insight into their work of crafting the famous villains, that “we preferred to depict our examples of vileness through a strong design which eliminated realism and kept the audience from getting too close to the character.”

In contrast to the bright colors used for the protagonists, villains are equipped with dark robes and are usually introduced in gloomy settings. For example, the first scene in which the audience sees Jafar takes place in the desert at night, while Aladdin’s narrator refers to him as “a dark man [...] with a dark purpose” (Clements and Musker 1992: 0:02:54). The color symbolism becomes even more striking with regard to Beauty and the Beast, where Gaston, the actual villain, is first seen on
a bright day, while the Beast, the anti-hero, who at this point is cruel and selfish, is seen lingering in the darkness. At the movie’s climax, when Gaston shows his true, vicious self most strikingly, the scene is set in a dark, stormy weather heavy with rain. As Arzt (cf. 2004: 130) correctly assesses, the antagonists are often the tallest characters in their respective stories, their graphic design mirroring the threat they exhibit over the smaller, harmless protagonists. In short, the villains are otheder
d and this ‘Othering’ can be achieved via a multitude of visualizations.

One of those methods is rendering the villains as ugly, undesirable, and ‘too powerful.’ In Snow White, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and The Little Mermaid, the unappealing, powerful, middle-aged women, drawn in angular and dark features (the Evil Queen, Lady Tremaine, Maleficent, and Ursula, respectively), are set in direct contrast to the hyper-beautiful, weak, and young female protagonists, who are depicted in bright colors and smooth curves (Snow White, Cinderella, Aurora, Ariel). This representation brings with it both a discrimination of older women, and it also renders female power as ‘ugly’ and dangerous. Compared to the domineering ‘evil witches,’ the ‘good’ women appear plain and extra powerless. Even though the latter ones eventually succeed, while their villainous opponents are destroyed, it is nonetheless them who set the narratives into motion and who dominate the screen with their over-the-top designs and dramatic personalities (cf. Bell 1995: 109, 116; Davis 2006: 107-108; Sharmin and Sattar 2018: 54). As Johnston and Thomas (1993: 186, 191) confirm about Ursula, she is designed to evoke fear, suspicion, and repulsion, since “[w]hen we first see her in the film, we are appalled at her appearance, and realize that here is someone to be reckoned with […].” Bell (cf. 1995: 109, 115-118) fittingly compares the aforementioned princess-characters to the ingénue stock figure found in film and theatre – an overly innocent, naïve damsel in distress –, who finds herself threatened by the vicious, vamp-like

16 ‘Othering’ is a process by which difference is evoked. An entity of unfixed size (an individual, a group, an entire nation, etc.) sets itself apart from what or who it is not in order to define its own identity. This differentiation is essential to generate meaning, as definition and identification works through contrasting one thing with another that it is not, which, in the process, can become subject to discrimination (cf. Hall 2013: 215-287). Hall (2013: 224-225) pointedly exemplifies this phenomenon: “We know what black means, Saussure argued, not because there is some essence of ‘blackness’ but because we can contrast it with its opposite – white. Meaning, he argued, is relational. It is the ‘difference’ between white and black which signifies, which carries meaning. […] This principle holds for broader concepts too. We know what it is to be ‘British’, not only because of certain national characteristics, but also because we can mark its ‘difference’ from its ‘others’ – ‘Britishness’ is not-French, not-American, not-German, not-Pakistani, not-Jamaican, and so on.”
femme fatale, a character type known from classic film noir. Disney’s evil women are resemblant of these femmes fatales, both in their looks and characteristics. They have overly arched eyebrows, blazing red lips and wear outstandingly colorful or smoky eyeshadow.

Like the femmes fatales of film noir, Disney’s wicked ladies are also the only characters who are depicted in extreme close-ups, visualizing the threat and danger they exhibit. As they watch their victims, the audience sees their eyes gleaming brightly as the background fades to black. Lady Tremaine, for example, has piercing green eyes that glow when she narrows her gaze at the innocent Cinderella. Her eyes and accentuated nails bear resemblances to her pet, the cat Lucifer, whose name is telling both for his and his mistress’ evil personality. Bell (1995: 116-117) states that this emphasis on their gleaming eyes is “an intensification of not only the women’s evil natures – their unknowable interiors – but it recalls primal fears and animal phobias, transforming their faces to the exterior icons of wolves and cats whose eyes glow in the dark.” The imagery employed for these women is thus put on the same level with predatory, ‘wild’ animals, which need to be tamed and controlled for the stories to have a happy ending (cf. Bell 1995: 116-118, 121; Johnston and Thomas 1993: 99; Ruzycki O’Brien 1994: 67).

Being obsessed with either power or beauty (or a combination of them), those femmes fatales not only pose a danger to the pretty, kind-hearted protagonists, but also to the male-dominated world they live in. “[W]ithin Disney’s patriarchal ideology, any woman with power has to be represented as a castrating bitch,” as Sells (1995: 181) puts it quite vividly. Her observation is correct as these ‘wicked witches’ all try to usurp power – something ‘naturally’ belonging to men – in one way or another, and do not conform to their ‘feminine’ role in society as passive and obedient, but appear as “transgressive” (Bell 1995: 118), disrupting the ‘natural’ order. The Evil Queen wants to reign supreme as the most beautiful woman in the land, Lady Tremaine tries to climb up the social ladder by marrying her daughters into royalty, Maleficent curses Princess Aurora to die as a punishment for not being acknowledged by her parents and invited to the princess’ christening, and Ursula wants to take over the sea kingdom from which King Triton has banished her. At the end of each narrative, they have to be defeated by a male persona who protects the innocent ingénue and restores peace and proper order (cf. Bell 1995: 117-118; Davis 2006: 121-127).
The villains of the 1990s are exclusively male, which Davis (2006: 217) explains by stating that “[i]n the ‘politically correct’ atmosphere of the 1990s in America, this focus on male villains may have been an attempt to steer away from sexist portrayals of evil [...] women.” Given Disney’s position as a cultural mirror and that the studio needs to produce what the audience can identify with at a given time in order to sell its films, Davis’ statement is absolutely plausible. The first and probably most unique antagonist from this period is Gaston from *Beauty and the Beast*. He is unique as he is neither depicted as old or ugly, nor is he motivated by lust for power. Instead, he is portrayed as the most desirable bachelor in his village, whose eventual doom is his self-entitlement and toxic masculinity (cf. Pinksy 2004: 144-145; Rustad 2015: 61). Keeping in mind how hyper-masculinity has come under severe criticism in the 1990s, and the ideal for men was now a soft, caring family person, it appears only logical that Disney casts the exact opposite as the main villain (cf. Davis 2013: 234-235). As Jeffords (1995: 169-170) summarizes fittingly,

> with his cleft chin, broad shoulders, brawny chest, wavy hair, and towering height, Gaston fulfills the stereotyped image of male beauty, the hard body that populated 1980s films. And with his pastimes of hunting, drinking, and male bonding, he fulfils a stereotyped image of masculinity as well. Gaston does not simply look the part of the hyper-masculine male, he holds all the opinions that are supposed to go along with it.

Gaston is thus ‘othered’ not by making him look repulsive, but by exaggerating his features to a point where he appears grotesque. Indeed, an entire song is dedicated to the ridiculing of Gaston’s hyper-masculinity. After Belle had refused him and his ego is crumbling, his sidekick LeFou and the other villagers push Gaston by assuring him that he is the best – that is, the manliest – guy anyone could want for a friend and mate. For example, they sing that there is “no man in town half as manly” and that Gaston is “perfect, a pure paragon” (Trousdale and Wise 1991: 0:26:45). They praise his thick, veiny neck and describe him as “burly and brawny” (0:27:35) with “not a bit of him scraggly or scrawny” (0:27:39). The scene emphasizes how this over-the-top masculinity is, in fact, not desirable at all, portraying Gaston as someone who feels superior to others because of his looks and abuses his ‘manliness’ and physical power to – literally – push his admirers around and bully them. When he flexes his muscles, his biceps is bigger than his entire face, which is both verbally
and visually highlighted: When Gaston exclaims “as you see, I’ve got biceps to spare” (0:27:36), he lifts a bench with three women on it with one arm, and when he explains that, as a result of eating “five dozen eggs” every day, he is “roughly the size of a barge,” his muscles fill up the entire screen, making them appear overly exaggerated and indeed grotesque. During the song, the audience is directly involved in Gaston’s presentation of his masculinity as he breaks the fourth wall, bragging that “every last inch of me’s covered with hair” (0:27.43). At the film’s climax, this hyper-masculine villain, who endorses his stereotypical manliness, and the reformed, soft Beast, who gave up on it in order to become a kind, ‘proper’ man, are put in direct opposition when they meet on the rooftop of the Beast’s castle. Realizing that the Beast has won Belle’s affections, Gaston challenges the former to a duel – a typically ‘masculine’ activity. When the now-mild Beast expresses reluctance, Gaston mockingly asks if he is “too kind and gentle to fight” him (1:14:43). The eagerness to demonstrate his physical prowess becomes Gaston’s doom, as he falls off the rooftop, while the Beast, who shows mercy and kindness, is rewarded with a happy ending.

Another method to ‘other’ villains, apart from making them look ugly or grotesque, is to racialize them. This is particularly applicable to Aladdin’s villain, the grand vizier Jafar, who, while the protagonists Aladdin and Jasmine are heavily westernized, is portrayed as stereotypically ‘Arabian’ with his dark skin, twisted beard, bulbous nose, and exaggeratedly narrow almond eyes. In this context, Edward Said’s (1977) concept of Orientalism should be mentioned, whereby a distance between the Eastern and Western world is created and the former tends to be romanticized or depicted as demonic and dangerous (cf. also Akita and Kenney 2013: 51-52). Akita and Kenney (2013: 51) pointedly sum up Said’s observations:

Said’s concept of Orientalism asserts that the West regards the non-Western world as the Orient: strangers and outsiders. Orient itself is a [...] Western construction. [...] The West occupies the privileged position of interpreting culture through Western eyes; of having control in defining the reality of the world; and – in the case of texts – of being the preferred reader. This interpreted knowledge of the Orient over time represents how the Orient has been treated as an object that
was collected, produced, and reproduced. [...] Thus, Orientalism is a representation of what the West thinks the Orient is. The West describes the Orient by romantic and exotic expressions [...].

While the authors (2013: 50-66) particularly discuss the Siamese cats Si and Am from *Lady and the Tramp* (1995), their definition of “Orientalist villains” consisting of “exaggeratedly slanted eyes, inscrutable grins, and heavily accented English speech – let alone their mischievousness” (50), is also applicable to Jafar. Considering how Aladdin and Jasmine are Europeanized, while Jafar is the archetypal ‘villainous Asian,’ it is fair to read his character as a “menace to the Western order of things” (61). As Akita and Kenney (2013: 62) observe, “[t]he equation of villain with Asian reinforces Western fear of and attempted dominance over the Other [...].” Jafar is, however, not just an ‘Orientalist villain’ – he renders himself fittingly for an intersectional approach, as he is not only racialized, but also queered, and designed to look ugly (cf. also Griffin 2000: 208-209).

### 4.3.2. Queering Villains Across Animation

Making villains appear queer is in fact a common phenomenon employed in animated cartoons. While female antagonists are de-feminized, men are depicted as effeminate – again, both the visual designs and their characteristics coincide. Along with their gestures and visual and verbal expressions being overly dramatic, villains tend to wear long robes that cover their bodies fully, rendering the exhibition of potentially masculine or feminine body shapes impossible. Heroes and heroines, on the other hand, wear form-fitting, or, in the case of the Eisner Era women, revealing clothes, which emphasize the women’s feminine curves and the men’s slightly muscular physiques. While female mischief-makers are often obsessed with attaining power and usurping male authorities, male villains are occupied with themselves and do not lift a finger, but let others work for them. Thus, while the evil witches are masculinized via their active, domineering roles they take on, evil men assume stereotypically passive roles, reminiscent of those displayed by princesses from earlier Disney productions (cf. Griffin 2000: 73-75; Sharmin and Sattar 2018 55; Putnam 2013: 147-162).
In comparison to the hyper-heterosexual ideals the heroes and heroines portray, villains are also queered as they always remain without a love interest. With many of Disney’s narratives revolving so strongly around romance, it indeed stands out that the protagonists either actively search for a partner or are eventually rewarded with one, whereas the villains are not even slightly occupied with the topic of engaging in relationships. Given how in many conventional Hollywood films, the rivalry between heroes and heroines on the one hand, and villains on the other, is often motivated by the latter’s jealousy of the former’s relationship and tends to revolve around the antagonist trying to split up the protagonists, this theme hardly ever occurs in Disney films.\textsuperscript{17} The Evil Queen is jealous solely of Snow White’s beauty, not of the interest the prince shows in her. She attempts to kill her to be the most beautiful woman, not because she wants to be with her stepdaughter’s mate. When Anastasia and Drizella in \textit{Cinderella} try to make Prince Charming marry them, they are motivated by their mother’s lust for power, rather than any actual affections for the man. Similarly, when Jafar in \textit{Aladdin} makes it his mission to marry Jasmine, he does not do so out of actual desire (in fact, he only considers this idea once his minion makes him aware of it), but he simply attempts to humiliate her and become sultan by killing both her and her father after the wedding (cf. Griffin 2000: 75; Putnam 2013: 147, 151, 157). As the Disney artists Johnston and Thomas (1993: 212) note, “Jafar had no love for the Sultan’s appealing daughter, Jasmine, but he needed to dominate her in order for his plans to succeed.”

From the seven main films of this analysis, \textit{Snow White}’s Evil Queen, \textit{Cinderella}’s Lady Tremaine and her stepdaughters, \textit{Sleeping Beauty}’s Maleficent, \textit{The Little Mermaid}’s Ursula – Disney’s classic witch characters – as well as \textit{Aladdin}’s Jafar, fall into the category of transgendered villains.\textsuperscript{18} All women are drawn in angular, androgynous features and do not have feminine curves like their moral opponents. Elnahla (2015: 120) notes for Maleficent that \textit{Sleeping Beauty} “was released in the late fifties, an age that idolized Marilyn Monroe’s bosomy beauty,” which means that, by covering the film’s antagonist’s body – and its potential femininity – up fully, “the extremely

\textsuperscript{17} Significantly, Gaston from \textit{Beauty and the Beast}, and Claude Frollo from \textit{The Hunchback of Notre Dame}, two villains who are not queered, do show interest in the female lead of the respective film.

\textsuperscript{18} Examples for other Disney villains who exhibit features of transgenderism would be Cruella de Vil from \textit{One Hundred and One Dalmatians}, Scar from \textit{The Lion King}, Ratcliffe from \textit{Pocahontas}, or Hades from \textit{Hercules}. 
slimmer and much less curvaceous body of the evil fairy would have repulsed the audience back then.” With her deep voice and drag queen-like appearance, Ursula is probably the most masculinized villainess – she is the ‘anti-female’ standing in opposition to the epitome of feminine beauty and heterosexuality visualized through Ariel (cf. Sharmin and Sattar 2018: 53-54; Putnam 2013: 151-155).

*Cinderella* probably offers the most evident contrast between the good, heterosexual protagonist, and the evil, transgendered, de-feminized villains: Cinderella’s moderate bust and subtly accentuated posterior, along with her graceful movements, are put in direct contrast to the flat chests, over-sized behinds, and non-delicate, boorish demeanor of her stepsisters. They also have particularly large feet – another ‘masculine’ trait, compared to the tiny, delicate feet of Cinderella. The grotesqueness of their over-sized feet is specifically visible when they try on the glass slipper: While Cinderella easily fits into the shoe, Anastasia and Drizella can barely fit their toes inside. They appear more like drag acts than young women, and as Putnam (2013: 152) argues, “their ugliness is really maleness costumed as female.” Also, compared to Cinderella’s graceful dancing movements and beautiful singing voice – two common traits of the hyper-feminine Disney princesses – the stepsisters’ singing is ear-shattering – even Cinderella chuckles at their inability to hit even one note correctly – and they also move awkwardly and clumsily, deprived of any feminine daintiness. As the animators Johnston and Thomas (1993: 101) remark, the stepsisters’ “role in the story was to show by contrast just how lovely Cinderella really was.” When Anastasia and Drizella are presented to the prince at the royal ball, the latter bows to him rather than practicing a curtsey which would be expected of a woman.19

While Cinderella is equipped with stereotypically female occupations – doing housework, dreaming of romance, showing affection for animals – Lady Tremaine, Anastasia, and Drizella are also de-feminized through their aggressive, violent, and ruthless behavior. While the stepmother is not as

19 Significantly, the same topic is brought up in *The Lion King*, when the homosexually connotated villain Scar mockingly remarks he will practice his curtsey to the king, when he, as a male, should actually take a bow.
heavily de-feminized via her appearance as her daughters, she is anything but a mother figure. Instead, she appears like a commanding patriarch. Not only does she mistreat Cinderella, she also never shows motherly affection towards her own daughters, but rather instructs them on how to impress the prince so they family’s status would improve. She does not treat them as family members, but rather as objects to use for her own, material gain. The stepsisters, in turn, trample on their clothes, push each other around, and tear down Cinderella’s dress in what Putnam (2013: 153) calls a “pseudo-rape scene.” With these characteristics, the Tremaines appear as stereotypically power-hungry, obsessive, and aggressive pseudo-men, while Cinderella retains the classic feminine ideal, both via her looks and her personality (cf. Elnahla 2015: 118-120; Putnam 2013: 151-154; Ruzycki O’Brien 1994: 62-79).

Male villains, on the other hand, are given feminine traits and features. Li-Vollmer and LaPointe (2003), who examined male villains across animation, state that Disney films employ a “villain-as-sissy”-stereotype. Among the characters they analyze is also Jafar, who even his lead animator, Andreas Deja, has conceived “as a gay man” (Griffin 2000: 141). As common traits of ‘sissified’ villains, Li-Vollmer and LaPointe listed the following: Their physical features evoke notions of femininity as they are often portrayed as slender and delicate, “with a narrow jaw line and high, prominent cheekbones” (97), along with “long, slender hands on thin wrists, usually with pointed

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20 From the Disney repertoire, their analysis included Aladdin (Jafar), Hercules (Hades), The Hunchback of Notre Dame (Frollo), The Lion King (Scar), and Pocahontas (Ratcliffe).
21 While Li-Vollmer and LaPointe also mentioned The Hunchback of Notre Dame’s antagonist, Frollo, in their list of ‘sissified’ villains, I argue that, in line with the overall unique composition of the film (consisting of a deformed main character, not equating beauty and goodness), Frollo is also unique and does not fall into the category of effeminate or queer male villains. What he shares with other antagonists is that he is dressed in a long, dark robe which hides his (judging by his hands and face) very slim physique, and that he is drawn in more angular, ‘delicate’ features than the protagonists and introduced in an eerie, gloomy setting, along with more restrained bodily positions and movements than the heroes. Other than that, he is by no means a feminized villain as Li-Vollmer and LaPointe assert. In fact, he is quite the opposite: Not only is he, compared to characters like Jafar, Ratcliffe, or Scar, a very active character, performing ‘masculine’ activities like horse-riding and handling a sword, rather than sitting and watching as some minions of his carry out his plans, but he also does not wear make-up like Jafar or is dressed in a pink suit with ribbons in his hair like Ratcliffe, which would give him a ‘transgender’ touch. Most importantly though, unlike the other villains who could potentially be interpreted as homosexuals due to their lack of interest in a character of the opposite sex, it is Frollo’s lust for a woman which drives the entire narrative forward. Infatuated by Esmeralda and making it his quest to have her solely for himself leaves no doubts about his obvious heterosexuality.
22 Ratcliffe’s physique, which is by no means slender, still gives him a feminine touch, as his “voluminous chest” and “much narrower waist and hips [...] create a silhouette resembling a corseted woman” (Li-Vollmer and LaPointe 2003: 98).
fingertips resembling long fingernails” (98). Their faces and hairstyles further emphasize their lack of masculinity, as they appear to be wearing make-up or have their hair decorated with accessories, as well as their lashes appearing thicker and their eyebrows neatly plucked in comparison to the male heroes. The clothes of those transgender villains are much more ornamented than the simple attire of the good, masculine men, and the long robes they wear appear like gowns, which make them seem even more androgynous since their muscles – given that they have them at all – are not visible. Adding to these appearance-related clues of transgenderism, the positions of their bodies, as well as the gestures and occupations of the sissified villains also influence their perceptions as gender-transgressive. With their “constrained movement, [...] their elbows and upper arms tightly pressed to the torso” and “their legs together or tightly crossed” when sitting “primly, with upright posture,” they “have the body positioning and movement of a well-bred lady” (100-101). Another trait they share with stereotypically feminine figures is their inactivity. While the heroes engage in physical challenges, male villains tend to stand and watch as their minions work for them instead of showing agency themselves. Thus, given their resemblances to women, these gender-bending mischief-makers, like the villainesses, come across as drag acts and deviant *femmes fatales* disrupting the ‘normal’ order.

Li-Vollmer’s and LaPointe’s observations are very much applicable to Jafar. He is drawn as extremely thin and has an exaggeratedly slender waistline similar to the film’s female lead, Princess Jasmine. His robe, which gives an illusion of broad shoulders, but then reveals his ultra-thin wrists and long, bony fingers, only adds to his perception as limp-wristed. Another feature he shares with Jasmine are his cat-eyes, which appear to be framed by black eyeliner, while his lids give the impression of being covered with eyeshadow. Significantly, no men in the film other than Jafar is equipped with make-up. His portrayal as overly ‘unmanly’ appears logical in the context of *Aladdin’s* release in 1992. As the heroes of the 1990s, in particular Aladdin, were drawn less stereotypically masculine, the villains had to be extra effeminate “to avoid heterosexual competition with the heroes” (Putnam 2013: 155) and to establish a boundary and make the villains clearly recognizable as the ‘Others’ (cf. Li-Vollmer and LaPointe 2003: 104-105; Putnam 2013: 155-157). His animators confirmed that they wanted Jafar to look elegant and to be restricted in his movement, which led to his extremely skinny design with a long robe resemblant
of Maleficent’s (cf. Johnston and Thomas 1993: 213). This “controlled movement” should add to the character appearing particularly “sinister” (Johnston and Thomas 1993: 213). While this effect is undoubtedly achieved, it also leads to the perception of Jafar as ‘sissy’ and effeminate. With his hands always close to his body and his slow, ‘graceful’ motion accentuated by his long cloak which touches the floor when he walks, he appears more like a restrained, delicate woman, particularly in contrast to the agile and athletic hero of the story. While Aladdin is physically active and adventurous, Jafar employs henchmen to carry out his mischievous plans. He gives orders to his minions and uses manipulation to find the magic lamp, rather than going after it himself (cf. Putnam 2013: 151).

Putnam (cf. 2013: 147-162), who evaluated both male and female Disney villains on the basis of the transgenderism they exhibit, has come to the worrisome conclusion that,

> [b]y creating only wicked characters as transgendered, Disney constructs an implicit evaluation of transgenderism, unequivocally associating it with cruelty, selfishness, brutality and greed. [...] when Disney creates [...] transgendered characters as the primary evil characters [...], then it crosses a line of attempting to show the polarity of good and evil to its youngsters, and becomes a disjointed misinformation telling young children that difference is not okay – in fact, that those who are transgendered are evil and to be avoided at all cost. [...] Disney willingly [...] accepts the crushing dominance of heterosexism within the larger community. [...] if [only] the villains [...] have complicated gender-bending identities, it suggests that viewers find [...] untraditional gender behavior and appearance unsettling, at best, and thus, that it’s okay to treat people who are different from the heterosexual norm as dangerous and disgusting because they will hurt you; after all, they are villains. At worst, viewers may feel they can be openly hostile to those who are different via transgendered appearance and behavior [...] (149, 155, 158-159).

This concern is justified since children, who are the prime target audience of Disney films, are still in the process of developing gender schemata and thus, they are particularly easy influenced by the media’s depictions of what is and what is not ‘acceptable’ gendered behavior. It is important to note, however, that directing the criticism Putnam expresses only at Disney would be misleading. The ‘queering’ of villains is no phenomenon exclusive to Disney, but in fact a well-established trope across children’s entertainment (cf. Li-Vollmer and LaPointe 2003: 93-94). The major studios DreamWorks Animation and Cartoon Network, which are also prolific producers of
animated content for youngsters, similarly employ the villain-as-transgendered stereotype, which is why an example from each shall be illustrated briefly.²³

In 2004, DreamWorks released the second film of their Shrek franchise, which became a major success, and which is one of the reasons why the studio is considered to be one of Disney’s biggest opponents. While the Shrek films display a more diverse take on gender and body images as do many Disney productions – for example, the princess is a self-reliant fighter and the main couple willingly lives in the form of hideous, scary ogres rather than as a handsome prince and a beautiful princess – it still relies on the “villain-as-sissy” stereotype that Li-Vollmer and LaPointe (2003) identify across animated films. One of the main antagonists in the Shrek films is Prince Charming, a clear parody of the traditional ‘handsome prince’-character from fairy tales and Disney productions. Anything but charming, this opportunist is cunning, superficial, and evil. While he might bear resemblances to Frozen’s Hans, who also is a mischievous usurper in the disguise of a dashing, charming prince, their character construction differs fundamentally. While Hans maintains his manliness throughout the story, Prince Charming is portrayed as a feminized ‘sissy.’ Hans is never shown as being overly concerned with his looks, in contrast to Charming, who shakes up his hair, plays with his nails, and even applies lip gloss – all typically feminine features. Also, Hans is seen performing ‘manly’ activities and takes care of Anna’s kingdom by himself in her absence, whereas Charming is the puppet of his power-hungry mother, the Fairy Godmother. When a conflict arises for him, he relies on his ‘mommy’ to fix the situation and does not participate in any combat himself. These features

²³ Warner Brothers and Illumination Entertainment are also two large Hollywood studios worth mentioning, particularly since the former has always been Disney’s mayor rival. For an analysis of how villains are queered in the animation genre, they are not applicable, though. This has to do with their productions straying away from the general formula employed by Disney, DreamWorks, and Cartoon Network, to draw a clear line between good and evil, ‘normal’ and deviant. Queerness and deviance are not restricted to plain ‘evil’ characters in Warner Brothers and illumination Entertainment productions – the emblem of the former, Bugs Bunny, for example, is a mean and nasty protagonist – something unimaginable in Disney. Similarly, the yellow minions – protagonists made famous by Illumination Entertainment – can very well be read queerly – something also missing from Disney, DreamWorks, or Cartoon Network productions, where the main heroes and heroines are clearly heterosexual.
are reminiscent of the gender-bending Disney villains like Jafar and Ratcliffe, who are also portrayed as effeminate and who rely on henchmen to carry out their schemes.

Cartoon Network is another famous and successful U.S. animation studio, which released the series *The Powerpuff Girls*, which aired from 1998-2005 and then got its reboot in 2016. Like *Shrek*, it contains positively portrayed powerful females and does not rely on the female-as-passive-stereotype found in Disney. The series revolves around the three girls Blossom, Bubbles and Buttercup, who possess supernatural powers and thus, even though they are only little kids, save their town and its citizens from the attacks of various monsters. One of those monsters is the ape Mojo Jojo, who, at the end of the episode “Bubbles’ Beauty Blog (but on Video),” is shown to be an avid follower of the beauty content Bubbles published and who has just been trying out her tips by applying make-up on himself. The most obvious gender-bending villain of the series, however, is the devil HIM, who is even referred to as “beautiful lady” (Jennings et al. 2016: 0:01:05) by the mayor of the fictional city that the story is set in. Even though he bears a male pronoun as his proper name, his feminine features clearly prevail. He speaks in an unnaturally high-pitched voice and wears pink ruffles and black boots with heels, which resemble the classic clothing of a cross-dresser. With this design, he is reminiscent of Disney villains like *The Little Mermaid*’s Ursula and *Aladdin*’s Jafar.

These negative portrayals of non-heterosexuality – men are feminized, while women are deprived of their femininity – resonate with the stigmatisation LGBTQ people had and still have to face. For a long time, depicting non-heterosexual relationships in film was completely prohibited, and even when those limitations were lifted, the portrayals remained rare, and, if acknowledged at all, heavily stereotyped. As Towbin et al. (2004: 23) note, “gay characters were not affectionate or open, but rather expressed their sexuality through exaggerated opposite-gendered behavior.” This also applies to the cartoon villains discussed above – none of them is officially labelled ‘homosexual,’ yet their looks and characteristics give them a ‘gay touch’ and set them in clear contrast to the openly heterosexual protagonists. Not only have LGBTQ people been heavily
underrepresented in film up until today, but they “have been disproportionately portrayed as psychotics or killers” (Towbin et al. 2004: 23), which is again applicable to Disney’s and other cartoon’s iconic villains (cf. Fan 2019: 123; Towbin et al. 23, 33-34). Given that Disney films ermerge from “a culture with firmly naturalized constructions of gender,” rendering the villains as embodiments of gender transgression is an effective means of “cast[ing] doubt on” their “competence, social acceptability, and morality” (Li-Vollmer and LaPointe 2003: 91).

The main function of presenting villains as the ugly, undesirable, racialized, or queer ‘Other’ undoubtedly lies in creating a distance between them and the viewer. Since humans are naturally drawn to both people and objects that they find aesthetically pleasing, and to characters to whose attitudes – even if they are only fictional – they can relate, it is no surprise when the antagonist of a story is constructed in a way that disallows identification with or sympathy for him or her. Also, by not only setting heroes and villains apart through their behaviour and actions, but also through their visual appearance and their gender identities, the contrasting lines within the narrative are strengthened and it is easier, especially for young children, to immediately understand who they are ‘supposed to side with’ and avoid confusion (cf. Putnam 2013: 155).

4.3.3. The Villain in Disguise

Confusion and ambiguity, however, seem to be exactly what Disney is heading for in its more recent productions. Villains are no longer recognizable at first sight, neither are they queered, racialized, or stereotyped otherwise in comparison to their good counterparts. For women, power and ugliness are no longer linked, neither is the beauty-goodness stereotype applicable to either sex. Instead, postmodern villains deceive viewers and challenge their established perceptions and expectations of ‘classic’ Disney films. This deception is already employed in the designs of the movie posters for the respective films.
The movie poster for *The Little Mermaid* from 1989, for example, informs the viewer at first glance about the character composition of the film. In the centre, we see Ariel and Prince Eric, the beautiful, romantically involved protagonists of the film. In a domineering, threatening position above them are Ariel’s father, King Triton, and the ugly, dangerous sea witch Ursula. While the former is not a villain per se, he is still a strict, authoritative figure Ariel has to disobey and persuade of her goals and dreams in order to live happily ever after. Ursula, with her eeriness and grim facial expression instantly strikes the viewer as threatening and evil. The poster for 2013’s *Frozen*, on the other hand, shows four humans of approximately the same age, along with a reindeer and a snowman. All of them have friendly expressions, smiling at the spectator. Eventually, the charming, handsome prince on the right, Hans, turns out to be a cunning liar – by simply looking at this image, however, the audience could never guess this twist. *Moana*’s movie poster from 2016 is even more misleading. While the woman – Moana – can be identified as the film’s good, main character, the portrayal of the man is highly deceptive. Being heavily overweight – a feature previously reserved for villains – along with his mischievous grin and his dominant, steadfast appearance, Maui is reminiscent of malicious scoundrels from earlier Disney films, while, in fact, he turns out to be the
male protagonist of the story, who, despite being arrogant and uncooperative, is not portrayed as a dangerous monster.

Still, the most ambiguous figure of postmodern Disney films remains *Frozen*’s Hans. Starting out as a traditional fairy tale Prince Charming – tall, strong, romantic, kind, incredibly handsome – he later reveals himself to be a cruel, cold-hearted plotter, whose only aim was to take over Anna’s and Elsa’s kingdom, rather than marrying Anna out of true love. Unlike most villains of earlier films, he is neither old, nor middle-aged, but of about the same young age as the protagonists. Drawn in bright colors and introduced in a light, colorful setting, nothing hints at Hans being evil just by evaluating his looks. He also has no sharp, angular features and, unlike Gaston, the other young and non-ugly male Disney villain, his features are not exaggerated into grotesqueness. As Sharmin and Sattar (2018: 54) fittingly note, “this character is outstandingly handsome, and for some extend more handsome and dashing than the hero of the story.” Hans is also not queered like most of the antagonists of earlier films – he has a moderately slender build with slight muscles, and he engages in ‘manly’ activities like sword-fighting, horse riding, and performing rescue behavior. His entire visualization and characterization thus make him a classic Disney prince if only there was not his sudden personality twist which signals the audience most evidently: People are not always what they seem.  

The appearance of a character is also always significantly influenced by the clothes and props he or she is equipped with. One such accessory that carries symbolic value in *Frozen* are gloves, which add to Hans being a villain ‘in disguise.’ Both Elsa and Hans – the potential and the actual villain – are shown to wear gloves, and in each case, they carry the hidden meaning of concealing what is underneath. In Elsa’s case, this function is rendered more openly, since, when she is a child, her father gives her gloves to keep her ice powers under control and tells her to “conceal […], don’t feel” (Buck and Lee 2013: 0:08:42). At her coronation, when she is under immense pressure and has to take them off, she almost releases her icy powers. At this point in the film, she cannot yet show who she truly is. Later, in her famous musical number “Let It Go,” she frees herself from the

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24 The same sudden plot twist and change of a seemingly harmless character into a villain is portrayed in 2016’s *Zootopia*. 
constraints placed upon her and proclaims that she is finally free. It is now that she takes her gloves off and releases her magic. Hans, not hiding any dangerous icy powers with them like Elsa, wears gloves throughout the film. In his case, he hides his true, evil nature underneath them. This is symbolized by him only taking one of them off in the scene where he reveals his cunning plans to Anna. When he leaves her to die and goes back to the public to proclaim that he is “the hero who is going to save Arendelle from destruction” (Buck and Lee 2013: 1:13:35), he needs to maintain his noble, kind image and conceal his true intentions. Significantly, exactly upon uttering this sentence, he puts his glove back on, completing his disguise again.

Hans’ sudden change of character both triggers a shock effect in the viewer and also makes the overall composition of the film more ‘realistic’ in the sense of acknowledging that the appearance of a person does not inform about his or her character, but can, in fact, even completely counter it. Furthermore, it allows the Walt Disney Company to entertain its viewers with new, refreshing content, instead of repeating the same schema – beauty is good, ugliness is evil – over and over again. Like this, the studio’s outputs remain relevant to contemporary audiences living in a ‘postmodern’ era, which, with regard to the media, is characterized by increasing self-irony and self-reflexivity.

Since these postmodern Disney productions frequently deconstruct their own established tropes and stereotypes, taking a look at the representation of evil women – who were most heavily stereotyped in the past – is also essential. From the ‘Princess films,’ the prime focus of this study, Mother Gothel from Tangled is the striking proof that body images and appearances of villainesses also underwent a change. Kidnapping Rapunzel, a princess by birth, and locking her up in a tower in order to make use of the girl’s magic hair to always remain young and beautiful, Gothel appears as the obsessive, destructive, evil witch audiences remember from Snow White, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and The Little Mermaid. While this is true for her personality, her looks completely contradict this image: She is drawn in smooth curves, with a moderate bust, flowing curly hair, and big eyes – a slightly older version of a typical Disney princess. She is neither de-feminized in her appearance – as it is the case for the Evil Queen, Lady Tremaine, Maleficent, or Ursula – nor in her behavior as a ‘mother figure’ for Rapunzel. While she does abuse the princess for her own gain,
she also performs ‘motherly,’ that is, traditionally ‘feminine’ tasks, such as cooking or brushing her ‘daughter’s’ hair, which puts her in stark contrast to the ‘anti-mother,’ Lady Tremaine, who never showed any affection – fake or not – towards her daughters, let alone genuinely cared for them. Since Gothel is both beautiful and powerful, Tangled also breaks the association between female agency and ugliness, which was prominent in the earlier productions mentioned above.

Still, it should be noted that the gradual deconstruction of the beauty-goodness stereotype in Disney films does not occur lineally and without exceptions. The best example for this is a life-action remake of an old Disney classic – the Sleeping Beauty rendition Maleficent from 2014. Angelina Jolie was cast as the titular character which led to the film being praised for being revolutionary as “[b]y presenting the audience with an actress considered a sex icon, Disney finally annihilates the relation between women and evil, old age, and ugliness” (Elnahla 2015: 121). Such assumption is based on a common misreading of the film, however. Yes, this version’s Maleficent strays far away from the ugly, transgendered, de-feminized version of the animated film from 1959, but this depiction of her as beautiful goes hand in hand with turning her into the remake’s misunderstood, wronged protagonist, instead of its antagonistic wicked witch. Thus, her new, beautiful looks correspond to the altered – good – personality she assumes in this live-action film.
5. Looks that Matter – Superficiality, Incoherence, and Irony in Disney’s Narratives

Since not only the visual designs of Disney characters display the significance of their respective looks, but also the narratives as such often largely revolve around this subject, the seven main films of this study shall be examined more closely with regard to their angle on beauty and physical appearance. The centrality of these topics to the progression of the stories, the fictional discourses thematizing them, and the inherent messages about beauty will be looked at more closely in this analysis.  

5.1. “The Fairest One of All” – Snow White and the Seven Dwarves (1937)

In Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, physical appearance and beauty are the central plot elements that drive the entire story forward. The film revolves around the nameless Evil Queen, who is so jealous of her stepdaughter, Snow White, that she decides to kill her in order to be the most beautiful woman in the land. She asks her magic mirror the famous question “Magic Mirror on the wall, who is the fairest one of all?” (Hand 1937: 0:02:51), and upon finding out that Snow White is the fairest maiden in the land, she orders a huntsman to lurk her into the woods and stab her. Despite the queen’s vanity being portrayed as evil and as the cause for her eventual doom, the film wallows in the message that beauty is essential and ‘obligatory.’ Snow White is also concerned about her looks since she fixes her hair and dress before she presents herself to the prince and before she enters the hut of the seven dwarves.

Twice, Snow White’s beautiful appearance proves itself to be her ‘survival skill.’ When the huntsman takes her into the woods to kill her, he stops upon her lovely sight, admitting that he cannot carry out the queen’s command. The second time, the princess is sleeping in the dwarves’ beds, who, when they return from work, fear a monster has invaded their house and decide to kill it. They sneak up on Snow White, ready to slay her, but refrain from it once they see her face. They

For the sake of simplicity and readability, I will treat the respective characters as active agents of their stories (e.g. “Snow White goes...,” “Ariel decides to...,” “Aladdin chooses to...”), rather than as passive constructions of the filmmakers (“Belle is presented/portrayed/shown to...”). This, of course, does not imply that the characters actually have minds of their own, but their ‘actions’ still reflect the choices of their animators and producers.
immediately soften and one of the dwarves remarks that “[s]he’s beautiful, just like an angel” (0:32:48).

Similarly, the prince is also defined in terms of his appearance. Snow White claims to be in love with him even though she only saw him briefly. When she tells the dwarves about him, they immediately ask whether he is tall, strong, and handsome, which seem to be the defining qualities of a ‘proper’ prince. Throughout the film, Snow White and the prince never speak with each other – they share a brief encounter in the beginning of the movie and the next time they meet, the prince awakens her with his kiss. Since they never have a conversation with each other or go through anything together, their romance and attraction to each other is solely based on their partner’s appearance.

For the queen to kill Snow White with the poisoned apple, she first has to disguise herself and transforms into a repulsive, scary, old hag which emphasizes the correlation between her looks and her ugly character. The final positive outcome and happy ending for Snow White are again owned to her beauty. Upon finding out that the only antidote for the poisoned apple would be to be kissed by one’s true love, the queen concludes that this will never happen since the dwarves will bury Snow White when they find her dead. Had she indeed been buried, then the prince would have never found her and revived her with his kiss. However, since Snow White is “so beautiful, even in death, that the dwarfs could not find it in their hearts to bury her,” but instead “fashioned a coffin of glass and gold” (1:15:39), she is turned “into an object of display” (Elnahla 2015: 117) and the prince has the chance to find her and bring her back to life.

In Disney’s first feature film, the physical appearance of the characters is thus so central that it not only drives the entire plot forward, but it is also portrayed as the protagonist’s most powerful ‘weapon.’ Snow White’s beauty becomes her lifesaver multiple times and eventually ensures her happy ending. The romance presented in the film appears superficial as the deeper feelings or thoughts about each other of the pair are never explored – they are simply matched based on their equally appealing looks and the fairy tale stereotype of a ‘dashing prince and beautiful princess living happily ever after.’
Being Disney’s first animated feature and coming from as early as 1937, where the options for filmmakers were still rather limited, the themes and character compositions are correspondingly simplistic. The next film of this study, however, is already more convoluted. It also employs the notion that beauty is essential, but renders it even more obviously – while Snow White and her stepmother never interact in the film, *Cinderella* directly contrasts its ‘flawless’ heroine with other, unattractive figures she is surrounded by.

5.2. “More Beautiful Than All” – *Cinderella* (1950)

Similar to *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, the main plot driver of *Cinderella* is the villains’ jealousy of the heroine’s beauty. Cinderella’s appearance is already topical before the main story even starts. In the film’s prologue, the words “Though you’re dressed in rags, you wear an air of queenly grace. Anyone can see a throne would be your proper place.” (Geronimi 1950: 0:00:27) are sung – the fact that Cinderella’s ragged looks neither match her graceful personality nor her ‘proper’ deserving status is the main hook upon which the narrative unfolds.

The prevailing contrast between the beautiful and kind Cinderella and her ugly, cruel stepfamily is also established right in the beginning. A narrating voice informs the viewer that “[i]t was upon the untimely death of this good man [Cinderella’s father] […], that the stepmother’s true nature was revealed. Cold, cruel, and bitterly jealous of Cinderella’s charm and beauty, she was grimly determined to forward the interests of her own two awkward daughters” (0:02:18). The inner and outer ugliness of Anastasia and Drizella is further emphasized when the narrator informs the audience that the family had lost all their fortunes because of the selfishness and vanity of the stepsisters. Therefore, Cinderella was turned into a maid in her own home and has to serve Lady Tremaine and her daughters. Yet, Anastasia’s and Drizella’s ‘vanity’ – is not further specified what exactly is to be understood by that – did not improve their looks in any way: It is still Cinderella, who is not shown to be vain and who was made a scullery maid, who is way more graceful and beautiful. Lady Tremaine thus “must keep her stepdaughter out of sight at all costs so that her less lovely daughters will have a chance at a royal marriage with ensuing riches” (Johnston and Thomas 1993: 19).
Fixing and improving one’s appearance serve as prominent, recurring themes throughout the film and also help to put Cinderella in stark contrast to her stepsisters, highlighting the former’s gentle nature and the latter’s desperate striving for beauty. In the first scene that features grown-up Cinderella, she is getting ready with her mice friends who help her wash and get dressed. Whenever either Cinderella or her stepsisters are about to meet someone ‘important,’ they are seen fixing their appearance and trying to look their best. Before attending the ball, and again later, when the Grand Duke visits every household to try and find the girl who lost her slipper at the ball, Anastasia and Drizella bombard Cinderella with work that would improve their own appearance. While Cinderella calmly and gently brushes her hair upon expecting the Grand Duke, Anastasia and Drizella hectically push each other away from the mirror, pluck at their clothes, and powder their faces aggressively.

Given the importance of the glass slipper that eventually ensures the protagonist’s happy end, clothes and accessories are given a symbolic value in this movie. When the mice make a ball gown for Cinderella (since her stepsisters are keeping her busy with chores that would make them look better and Cinderella thus lacks the time to ensure she has a proper dress to attend the ball), they conclude that, when wearing it “[s]he’ll be more beautiful than all” (0:30:51). The mice use a sash Anastasia previously threw away and beads which Drizella specifically did not want to wear to fix up Cinderella’s dress. These two accessories, along with Cinderella’s overall beauty, cause the main conflict of the story: When her stepsisters see Cinderella in the gown her mice friends made for her, they urge their mother to somehow prevent the girl from attending the ball. Lady Tremaine draws her daughters’ attention to the sash and beads Cinderella is wearing, upon which Anastasia and Drizella accuse their stepsister of theft, tear her dress apart, and thus deprive her of the chance to attend the royal ball. The jealous women have ‘mutilated’ Cinderella’s physical perfection for a brief moment, but the scene serves as the main catalyst for the upcoming events to unfold: When Cinderella cries desperately and gives up all hope, her Fairy Godmother appears and equips her with her iconic, exquisite princess dress and the famous glass slippers. Cinderella’s utmost beauty is restored, and she can now head off to the path towards her happy end.
The visual metaphors of Cinderella’s beauty, as well as her attire and shoes being the ‘wings’ that allow her to ‘fly’ into a happier, better life, are extended at the royal ball. Upon arriving, all eyes turn to Cinderella, who stands out as she is the only one who is shown wearing a white, glittery dress. Again, the contrast between her and her stepsisters is laid out sharply. When Anastasia and Drizella are presented to the prince, the king, who wants nothing more than this son to find a bride and to have grandchildren, takes only one look at them and expresses that he could not expect the prince to fall for someone like that. The next moment, the scene shifts to Cinderella, who is the only girl the prince shows any interest in. Thus, the stepsisters are not only ugly, but they are also ineligible brides, whereas the beautiful Cinderella is suited to become the future queen, the mate the king wants for his son, and the mother of his grandchildren.

As in Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, the romance between Cinderella and the prince happens fast and is solely based on the other’s appearance. After the ball, Cinderella raves about the man she met, claiming that “he was so handsome” (0:54:01). They share only one dance with each other, barely communicate, and the prince does not even know Cinderella’s name when she leaves the ball. She, in turn, has no idea the man she danced with was the prince. Yet, they are ‘in love’ and get married as soon as Cinderella’s foot fits the glass slipper. This ‘love,’ however, is, like the romance portrayed in Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, to be situated within the simplistic and superficial fairy tale stereotype that a handsome prince and a beautiful princess will make a perfect couple as their matching looks mirror their matching characters.

The Little Mermaid, the next film I examine in more detail, was released 39 years after Cinderella. While one might expect a development over such a long time and a more ‘progressive’ depiction of beauty and romance, I argue that The Little Mermaid offers probably the most superficial rendering of these subjects. On the surface, it portrays a more self-reliant heroine with more agency than Snow White and Cinderella, who does not wait for a dashing prince to sweep her off and passively accepts her fate. While this is indeed the case, there is another major difference to the former heroines and this difference is central: While Snow White and Cinderella were simply lucky to be pretty enough to be singled out by their princes, the character of Ariel propagates the message that it is not only okay and sufficient to solely rely on your looks to achieve what you want,
but also that it is worth sacrificing your individuality for the sake of a prince whose appearance appeals to you.


The Little Mermaid is the first film of the ‘Disney Renaissance’ and the first one to feature a princess as the main character since Sleeping Beauty in 1959. Here, too, the princesses’ beauty and the handsomeness of the prince form the background for the entire story. In contrast to the earlier Princess films, it seems as if The Little Mermaid tries to establish a new Disney heroine, a more active and determined young woman pursuing her goals. The problem, however, lies in what those goals are in the first place. In sum, The Little Mermaid revolves around the beautiful Ariel’s desperate try to make the handsome prince Eric fall in love with her. Fascinated by all things human, she becomes obsessed with him even though she only saw him for a few moments and knows nothing more about him than the fact that he is physically appealing to her. Since Ariel has traded in her voice for human legs and thus cannot speak for most of the time when interacting with Eric, he also grows fond of her solely because of her appearance as they never actually communicate throughout the film.

The importance of Ariel’s beauty is already established early in the movie, when the wicked witch Ursula does not refer to her by her name, but by calling her the “pretty little daughter” (Musker 1989: 0:11:24) of the sea king Triton. Indeed, this is all Ariel remains throughout the story: A pretty little girl who eventually gets everything she wants because of her charms. Ariel herself is also shown to be concerned with her looks, as she is seen adjusting her hair and checking her appearance multiple times, especially before she is about to see Eric. After meeting him for the first time, she is so occupied with getting ready, decorating her hair, and looking her best, that her sisters and her father are starting to worry about her.

In this film, the ‘male gaze’ is partly reversed and it is Eric who becomes the object of desire of the almost predatory Ariel who longs for him and risks her voice, home, and family solely to be with him. Ariel takes on the active role usually embodied by men and pursues the man she ‘loves.’ When
she first sees him, she gazes at him for a long time, instantly being smitten by his looks. Eric is first shown in a close-up, then we see Ariel’s longing eyes whose perspective is shared by the viewer. Her first description of Eric to one of her friends is that “he’s very handsome” (0:20:00). After saving him and admiring his body and face while she sings to him as he is unconscious and unaware of her presence, she again concludes that “he’s so beautiful” (0:24:19).

Ariel is later seen raving over a statue of Eric which ended up on the bottom of the sea after Eric and his crew suffered shipwreck. The statue was formerly given to Eric as a present, who seemed quite discontent with it since it did not resemble him at all. Ariel, however, upon inspecting the statue, claims it looks just like him – even though it clearly does not – and that she is in love with Eric. As Rustad (2015: 48) rightly states, “[s]he doesn’t know Eric well enough to know he is not accurately represented here, and it is thus made clear that she is in love with his image [...] and not the man himself. Her love for him is just another item in her collection [of human tools].”

How much Eric’s appearance is actually a plot motivator becomes evident when Ariel goes to see the sea witch Ursula, hoping she would help her conquer Eric. When Ursula’s minions try to persuade Ariel to come with them and see their mistress, she initially refuses. However, upon looking at Eric’s face of the statue, she changes her mind. Once in Ursula’s cauldron, Ariel still shows some reluctance to trade in her voice for a pair of legs and make a deal with the sea’s most wicked creature. However, Ursula successfully uses Ariel’s obsession with Eric’s appearance and shows her his image for her to swoon over and give in. Sells (1995: 180) reads Ariel’s following transformation into a human as her “compliance with the beauty culture, rather than her desire for access, mobility and independence. Ariel becomes ‘woman as man wants her to be’ rather than ‘woman for herself.’” Given that only by giving up her true self (and thus, her real physique, visualized by her fishtail), Ariel can eventually live her happily ever after, and considering how central romance and the beautiful appearance of both her and Prince Eric are for the eventual positive outcomes of the story, Sells’ argument is unquestionably plausible.

The scene in Ursula’s grotto also offers two more instances that give insight into how this film propagates the importance of a beautiful appearance: When Ursula tells Ariel that she has to give
up her voice in order to become human, and the latter is reluctant, the sea witch tells her: “You’ll have your looks, your pretty face. And don’t underestimate the importance of body language!” (0:41:28). While the words spoken by a villain are normally not what the audience is supposed to value as the truth, they indeed hold true in this case: Once on land and after changing her form from mermaid to human in order to achieve her goal, Ariel has to solely rely on her looks to make Eric fall in love with her. She is seen adjusting her hair, batting her eyes, smiling at Eric seductively, and dressing up in order to impress the prince – a behaviour which slowly bears fruit. Even though he is on the lookout for a specific girl with a beautiful voice (who actually happens to be Ariel, who now cannot express that she is that very person), Eric is shown to be more and more fascinated by Ariel’s appearance, and her beauty is also mentioned by their respective friends frequently. Constantly gazing and admiring each other, Ariel’s and Eric’s romance is developing, even though they cannot communicate with each other (cf. Towbin et al. 2004: 38).

The second scene in Ursula’s cauldron that revolves around beauty and appearance serves as a visual metaphor for the entire film. When the sea witch demonstrates her magic to Ariel and shows her how she can help “poor unfortunate souls” (0:39:11), she draws up the image of an extremely thin man with unproportional body parts and an overweight, older woman, who both have extremely unhappy facial expressions. After explaining “This one longing to be thinner, that one wants to get the girl, and do I help them? Yes, indeed.” (0:39:17), they transform into a young, good-looking, happy couple, reminiscent of Eric and Ariel, with the snap of Ursula’s fingers. Not only does this scene clearly illustrate ageism, but it also propagates that a beautiful appearance is the prerequisite for a romantic relationship. Both the ugly, middle-aged Ursula and the old, overweight
woman from her creation cannot have a fulfilling relationship – this ‘privilege’ is reserved for young, beautiful people like Ariel and Prince Eric.

Ariel’s youthful beauty and Ursula’s ugliness are further contrasted after the sea witch has transformed herself into a young woman, looking like a brown-haired version of Ariel in order to thwart the girl’s success and marry Eric. Even though the movie centres around the importance of appearance, it takes a surprisingly negative stance against vanity. Earlier in the film, when Ariel was daydreaming about Eric, she was seen in front of a mirror, fixing her appearance and ornamenting her hair while humming a melody. A similar scene occurs again later, when Ursula, in her disguise, also stands in front of a mirror and aggressively sings about how beautiful she looks now and how she will use this new appearance of hers to doom Ariel. Significantly, her reflection still shows “the same ugly Ursula” (Johnston and Thomas 1993: 189) and not her new, appealing self – the mirror literally mirrors her despicable character which goes hand in hand with her actual appearance, not her current, fake-beautiful looks. While Ariel’s concern over her appearance and her relying on it is portrayed as natural, normal, and even vital in order for her to achieve what she wants – indeed, her looks and pretty face are sufficient to eventually succeed and live happily ever after with her prince, which makes the film, along with Ariel’s sacrifice, appear overly superficial – Ursula’s transformation into a woman looking similar to Ariel and trying her luck with Eric is displayed as an evil act of vanity and cruelty.

5.4. “Beauty is Found Within” – Beauty and the Beast (1991)

Vanity and shallowness are also portrayed as negative in the next film in question, Disney’s Beauty and the Beast. These traits are nowhere fleshed out more clearly than in this story’s threatening and comic villain, the overly self-absorbed macho Gaston. Obsessed with himself and his handsomeness, he becomes so self-entitled that he constantly raves about himself, admiring his own reflection in the mirror. His confidence in his looks is further boosted by the villagers of the fictional French city, especially the women who swoon over Gaston, exclaiming that “he’s such a tall, dark, strong, and handsome brute” (Trousdale and Wise 1991: 0:07:21). That these ‘swooning ladies’ are equally superficial and shallow is soon made clear via contrasting them with the story’s
intellectual heroine, Belle, who is repulsed by Gaston’s primeval views about women as passive housewives who should not think independently, let alone gain knowledge from books.

Gaston made it his quest to marry Belle and he refers to as “the most beautiful girl in town,” which “makes her the best” (0:06:46 – 0:06:50). As Rustad (2015: 61) rightly observes, Gaston appears to view Belle “as a feminine reflection of himself,” which can be read as a parodic comment on earlier films: One could very well interpret Gaston as a wannabe fairy tale prince who assumes that equally attractive partners must simply be made for each other – a message both classic fairy tales and Disney films frequently propagate. This gives him the ‘right’ to view Belle as a fitting partner for himself, as he declares in the opening song: “Right from the moment when I met her, saw her, I said she’s gorgeous and I fell. Here in town there’s only she who is beautiful as me, so I’m making plans to woo and marry Belle” (0:06:55). The problem he overlooks, however, is that fairy tale-like beauty is also commonly equated with goodness and integrity – traits he cannot offer. This increases the film’s condemnation of vanity even more, as Gaston places a beautiful physical appearance over anything else. In fact, his obsession with marrying the most beautiful woman in his town and his refusal to accept her reluctance emphasize the shallowness of his persona. Initially designed “as an arrogant, burly, mustached, self-acclaimed Romeo with a small brow and a large jaw,” the animators soon decided to make Gaston less of “a caricature, a buffoon” (Johnston and Thomas 1993: 208), but a handsome young man. Like this, he could be taken more seriously and, as the gorgeous-but-rude type, he would set up a perfect contrast to the hideous-but-kind Beast, assisting the film to convey its intended message that a person should not be judged by his or her looks.

Overall, the film tries very hard to convey the message that “beauty is found within” (0:01:58). When the Beast refuses to give the old beggar woman shelter, she warns him “not to be deceived by appearances” (0:01:55), but when he turns her away on the grounds of her ugliness, he is punished for his superficiality. Similarly, Gaston’s shallowness is his doom and Belle, the only woman in town to not swoon over him because of how handsome he is, is portrayed as clever and as the main figure of identification, whose views the audience is supposed to share. With Gaston, who fails to see beyond any superficial traits eventually being cast as the villain and being ridiculed,
and Belle falling in love with an ugly beast, the movie tries to convey that looks do not matter, but that an individual’s character is what truly counts.

Beauty, however, is way too important for the narrative as that it could be dismissed as ‘not important.’ The conflict of the story lies in the Beast’s transformation into an ugly creature, a problem that has to be solved for him to find happiness again. While, on the one hand, beauty is depicted as a superficial quality embodied by Gaston, the Beast, too, wants nothing more than to be beautiful again. Significantly, after freeing Belle from his castle, and thus thinking he forever lost his chance to ever have his curse broken, the Beast falls into deep despair, not even standing up for himself or his servants anymore when the palace is under attack. The Beast is never equipped with any quests, ‘hobbies,’ or problems other than finding someone to ensure his transformation into a handsome prince.

Similarly, beauty is the prime category by which Belle is defined. The female protagonist is ostracized by her society for being ‘different,’ in the sense of being intelligent and an avid reader. The townspeople who remark that “it’s no wonder that her name means beauty, her looks have got no parallel. But behind that fair façade, I’m afraid she’s rather odd. Very different from the rest of us, she’s nothing like the rest of us” (0:06:07) and call Belle “a beauty but a funny girl” (0:07:54) are portrayed as narrow-minded and rude for reducing her to her outer qualities – however, this is exactly what the film does as well. This incoherence, that looks actually do matter, is already expressed in the title. It is not enough that the Beast finds someone to love him, it has to be the most beautiful girl in the village. Belle, despite being an intellectual, self-reliant, unconventional young woman, is defined by her looks – after all, the film does not emphasize a smart or ordinary woman freeing the Beast from his curse, but it places its focus on the developing romance between a beauty and a beast. Undoubtedly, this drastic difference between the main characters allows for more tension and a more dramatic story, but it also leads to the female lead being cast as an object of desire, whose appearance is vital for the progression of events.

Both the Beast and Gaston are more than aware of Belle’s beauty. The Beast, despite hoping that Belle could lift his curse, remarks that “it’s no use. She’s so beautiful and I’m...well, look at me!”
(0:32:32) and thus expresses the sentiment that beautiful and ugly simply do not go together. Gaston solely wants to be with her because of how she looks and similarly considers himself to be deserving of her due to his handsomeness. The fact that he cannot ‘win’ his ‘prize’ hurts his ego and turns him into a villain. Even the household items in the Beast’s castle instantly comment on Belle’s beauty, acknowledging she could be the one to free them all. Concerned about making her even more ‘beautiful,’ they dress her up when she is about to meet their master to present her as his potential mate. The development of the story is thus based on the female’s physical appearance and two suitors, one hideous but slowly reforming, the other handsome but too superficial, battling over a beautiful woman’s affections.

As Pinsky (2004: 143) notes, “for a studio that has done as much as any other in Hollywood to equate beauty with goodness, Disney makes the opposite argument in Beauty and the Beast – at least conditionally.” The ‘conditionally’ is exactly the decisive factor. The film’s end betrays its own narrative and the final transformation of the Beast into a classic handsome fairy tale prince contradicts the message that “beauty is found within” which the movie tried to set up initially. Looks and character again match as the prince’s now-kind personality is reflected in his now-appealing appearance. Also, it is only then that he can have a fulfilling relationship with Belle, and it is only through his transformation into someone beautiful that his dilemma is solved.

5.5. “A Diamond in the Rough” – Aladdin (1992)

The message that “it is not what is outside, but what is inside that counts” (Clements and Musker 1992: 0:02:27), that Beauty and the Beast already tried to convey is also employed in Disney’s Aladdin, which was released one year later. In this case, however, the problem of the main hero does not lie in him being a hideous beast, but in his low status. Aladdin is a poor thief, who, although not unattractive, is seen as nothing more than a worthless, dirty street urchin. Thus, when the narrator, upon presenting viewers with a lamp that appears plain and not particularly special, instructs them to “not be fooled by [...] common place appearance,” the word ‘appearance,’ refers to Aladdin not looking like a high-class person, rather than looking ordinary, let alone ugly. The lamp which appears simplistic on the outside but actually contains phenomenal powers (since it is
inhabited by the Genie) is a metaphor for Aladdin, whose true worth is not visible just by looking at him – he is “a diamond in the rough” (0:02:43).

Apart from this brief mentioning of appearances in the beginning, the rest of the narrative is more concerned with delivering the message to be oneself rather than being concerned with physical beauty. Still, ‘being oneself’ is closely related to one’s appearance, which is made even clearer when the three main characters of the story, Aladdin, Princess Jasmine, and Jafar, all disguise themselves at some point and pretend to be someone they are not in order to achieve their goals. Aladdin pretends to be a prince and, with the help of the Genie, dresses like one, so he can approach Jasmine. She, being frustrated with her life as a princess who is being pressured to marry against her will, disguises as a commoner and flees her palace. Jafar disguises himself as an old prisoner upon persuading Aladdin to go to the Cave of Wonders and fetch the magic lamp for him. Naturally, their deceptions are bound to fail. While Jafar’s megalomania and his attempts to overreach himself by forcing the Genie to transform him into what he simply is not meant to be – the most powerful being in the universe – are his eventual doom, Aladdin and Jasmine can only find happiness once they accept themselves for who they are and stop trying to be someone else.

Like the other films already examined, the beauty of the female protagonist is also emphasized in Aladdin, but it is also made clear that this is not all that counts or the presupposition for a fulfilling relationship. When Jasmine goes to the market, the merchants comment her on her looks and Aladdin, upon seeing her for the first time, gazes at her in awe, instantly smitten by her. The viewer sees her through Aladdin’s eyes, which could lead to interpreting Jasmine as the object of desire subjected to the male gaze. This is only partly true, however. The film successfully counters the notion that a beautiful woman is an object to possess and to admire solely for her looks. The remarks made by Jafar (“a beautiful bloom such as yourself should be on the arm of the most powerful man in the world” [1:12:34]), who wants to possess Jasmine for power, and Genie (“heard your princess was a sight lovely to see, and that […] is why he [Aladdin] got dolled up and dropped by” [0:48:47]) about Jasmine’s appearance are dismissed on the grounds that they are superficial and she is, in her own words, “not a prize to be won” (0:51:27). In fact, when Aladdin, in his princely disguise, comes to ask for her hand in marriage, Jasmine is outraged and refuses him. This scene is
a direct comment on the previously employed fairy tale convention in Disney films that a handsome prince and a pretty princess are made for each other and get married without even knowing one another, solely on the basis of their status and matching appearance. It is only when Aladdin makes true efforts to get to know Jasmine, to understand her, and respect her views and independence, that she gives him a chance and shows interest in him.

Still, even though Jasmine expresses resistance at being treated like a beautiful object to gaze at, she is not unaware of her feminine charms and does not hesitate to make use of them when needed. Significantly though, she only uses them on two occasions which actually serve to criticize the objectification of women. In the first one, still angry at ‘Prince Ali’ (Aladdin’s fake name when he pretends to be a prince), she pokes fun at him after he had called her beautiful. Seductively walking up to him, running her fingers on his chest, she suddenly pushes him away and makes him aware that her looks, along with her status, do not give him the right to objectify her and treat her like a prize to win. The other situation serves as a means of stopping the villain’s crimes, rather than trying to impress her love interest on the basis of her beauty. It takes place at the film’s climax, when Jafar is using the Genie to turn him into the sultan to rule over Agrabah and humiliate Jasmine and her father. After enchaining her and making her his slave, Jafar tries to force Jasmine into marrying him to prove his dominance over her even more. He urges the Genie to make her fall in love with him, but he reminds him that he cannot grant such a wish. Realizing that Aladdin has come to help them fight Jafar, Jasmine quickly decides to act as if the Genie had actually made her fancy the villain in order to distract him, so Aladdin can retrieve the lamp and stop Jafar’s tyranny. In a scene with an overly orientalist touch – resembling a lady of the harem using her feminine charms to infatuate the sultan and thus attain power over him – Jasmine walks up to Jafar, swinging her hips, and sweet-talking him in her must seductive voice. The growing sexualization of Disney’s Eisner Era women undoubtedly becomes visible here. Significantly, while Aladdin fights Jafar with his wits and agility, Jasmine relies on her appearance, her ‘sexiness,’ in order to destroy evil, which counters her otherwise expressed resistance to being reduced to such superficial qualities.

Apart from this slight inconsistency in Jasmine’s characterization, the narrative highlights her intelligence, her free-spiritedness, and her reluctance to conform to traditional expectations of
what it means to be a princess. She makes it clear that she will not marry someone she does not know and who does not appreciate her personality, and certainly not someone who objectifies her. Similarly, while Aladdin is undoubtedly motivated by his interest in Jasmine to wish to become a prince, he has to learn that neither deception nor superficiality can truly make them both happy in the end. In *Aladdin*, appearance does play a role, but the overall message of the story is that, despite being a motivator at times, it is not all that matters. In fact, the themes explored in depth in the film are self-discovery, self-acceptance, and an appreciation for what a person is like on the inside rather than the outside. No matter if Aladdin is a prince or a street urchin, and no matter if Jasmine is a pretty princess or a commoner – what unites this couple is their desire for freedom, not their desire for a physically appealing partner. They bond over their common interests and views, and only after learning to understand and respect one another, they can live happily ever after.


In the next film, the physical appearance of the main character becomes the prime focus again, but this time, the subject is handled much more seriously and critically, rather than superficially. On the surface, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* employs a similar narrative than Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*. An ugly, male character, ostracized by society, falls in love with a beautiful female, who sees behind his appearance and appreciates him for his personality. However, in this film, the eventual transformation of the ugly man into a handsome prince is missing, as is the romantic involvement of the two main characters. While the moral hero not finding romantic fulfillment might be one reason for the film’s poor reception and an aspect commonly criticized by scholars (cf. Davis 2013; Norden 2013), I argue that *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* is, in fact, much more effective than *Beauty and the Beast* in delivering the sentiment that it is what is inside that counts as it does not rely on the idealized fairy tale stereotypes that a beautiful character is always mirrored by a beautiful appearance and must have a ‘perfect’ happy end.

The film’s opening song poses the telling question “Who is the monster and who is the man?” (Trousdale and Wise 1996: 0:05:39) which runs like a common thread throughout the entire story.
After introducing the deformed, but innocent Quasimodo and the cruel and particularly complex villain Claude Frollo, this question of the movie’s narrator directly sets Quasimodo’s appearance in relation to Frollo’s character. When it is brought up again and rephrased at the film’s end as “What makes a monster and what makes a man?” (1:20:34), it effectively closes the circle of events which, over the course of the narrative, have shown that Quasimodo is “the man,” and his deformity changes nothing about it (in contrast, the Beast literally has to transform from an animalistic creature into a dashing prince in order to be a true ‘man’ again), while Frollo, despite not suffering from any physical deformity, is the real monster, and it is his ugly soul which makes him one.

Frollo’s cruelty and his inclination to judge others solely on the way they look already establishes him as the villain early in the movie. When he takes a bundle from a Gypsy woman, thinking she carries stolen goods with her, and discovers that she was actually carrying a deformed infant, Frollo’s first instinct is to drown this ‘demon’ in a well and send it to hell, where, according to him, such a monster belongs. After already being guilty of Quasimodo’s mother’s death and after the archdeacon of Notre Dame has seen how Frollo attempts to kill the child too, the cleric urges Frollo to take care of the infant and raise it as its own if he wants to make up for his already committed sins. Haunted by fear of eternal damnation for the first and only time in his life, Frollo agrees but locks the child up in Notre Dame’s bell tower and names it Quasimodo, which means ‘half-formed.’ He is shown to be anything but a caring foster father as he instils the idea in Quasimodo that he is a monster and too ugly to live in public like ‘normal’ people. This introduction of the two main male characters does make physical appearance the film’s central topic as it is Quasimodo’s looks which cause events to unfold, but it also most obviously critiques Frollo’s hypocrisy and superficiality. While the latter is also applicable to Beauty and the Beast’s villain, Gaston, whose emphasis on surface qualities is ridiculed and makes him the story’s antagonist, the theme is much more sophisticatedly realized in the relationship between Frollo and Quasimodo, as the judgements Frollo confronts his victim with not suddenly dissolve into thin air due to the latter’s magical transformation into a handsome prince, but instead, Quasimodo slowly builds up his acceptance of himself and happiness despite his looks. This film does not simply let its protagonist’s ugly appearance – and thus, his key problem – vanish. Instead, Quasimodo has to place focus on more important qualities to appreciate about himself.
Still, for the plot to evolve, Quasimodo’s looks as well as the beauty of the female protagonist, Esmeralda, are central. Disobeying Frollo and attending the annual Feast of Fools, which Quasimodo has, so far, only watched from his bell tower, sets up the initial conflict of the story. Looking for the ugliest face in Paris to crown its owner the King of Fools, various attendants of the festival – where everyone wears masks – are pulled up on the stage by Esmeralda. Mistaking Quasimodo’s face for an ugly mask, Esmeralda accidentally exposes the bell ringer, much to the anger of Frollo who forbade Quasimodo to leave his tower. Esmeralda feels instant regret for bringing Quasimodo in such an unpleasant situation, which only increases when the townsfolk, despite crowning him their ‘king’ for his ugliness and cheering him for a brief moment, start to mock and torture Quasimodo because he repels them.

This scene at the festival is central not only because it introduces the main problem of the story – the lack of society’s acceptance of Quasimodo – but it also leads to further events unfolding due to Esmeralda’s introduction as “the finest girl in France” (0:22:08). The male gaze is operating in this film more than in any other – the female lead is the ultimate sexualized object of desire of three men – Quasimodo, Phoebus, and Frollo. Her beauty is emphasized throughout, even Quasimodo’s gargoyle friends call her “a vision of loveliness” (0:37:16). The first shot we see of Esmeralda shows her dancing in the streets for money, thus presenting her curvaceous body to a (predominantly male) audience. Her rendering as an ‘object on display’ is even more emphasized at the Feast of Fools, where she seductively dances for the entire townsfolk, flirts with the audience, and the viewer sees her through the eyes of Phoebus, Frollo, and Quasimodo, who gaze at her, smitten by her seductiveness.

Appearance is thus central not only by the three men’s interest in the Gypsy woman driving the story forward, but also with respect to how the main protagonist and the villain evaluate themselves and Esmeralda as their affections for, and obsession with her start to grow. While Quasimodo develops genuine feelings for her, he admits to himself that he will never have a fulfilling relationship with her because of his looks. He compares the aura surrounding happy couples to “heaven’s light,” and concludes that “no face as hideous as my face was ever meant for heaven’s light” (0:44:48). While Quasimodo thus finds the reason as to why their relationship fails
in himself and his appearance, the exact opposite holds true for Frollo. He blames Esmeralda and her sensuality for his own, twisted desires. Quasimodo’s rendition of “Heaven’s Light” directly shifts to Frollo’s song “Hellfire,” the title of their musical numbers already delineating their different views on Esmeralda. Frollo is shown in front of his fireplace, where he sees an image of the Gypsy in the flames, seductively posing and blowing kisses. Having grown infatuated with her, but unable to accept these lustful feelings, he makes Esmeralda’s beauty and ‘lasciviousness’ responsible for his own loss of control over his desires. As he laments, “the sun caught in her raven hair is blazing in me out of all control” (0:47:01) and “this burning desire is turning me to sin” (0:47:19). Concluding that “she will be mine or she will burn” (0:48:57), Frollo starts terrorizing entire Paris, even setting the city on flame, only to find Esmeralda and force her into becoming his mistress. Thus, again similar to Beauty and the Beast, the appearance of the female character is a central plot motivator in The Hunchback of Notre Dame, as the villains fully loses control over themselves upon the sight of a beautiful woman and the inability to be with her.

Despite (feminine) beauty being essential for the story to progress, the male protagonist of this film embodies the message that character development and a kind personality are what truly matter. Both Esmeralda and Quasimodo are victims of society’s persecution, the former for her ethnical background, the latter for his looks. When Esmeralda tells Quasimodo that Frollo is wrong for calling her evil and Quasimodo a monster, she sets the tone for the overall focus of the story. Rather than reducing the bell ringer to his physical features and centring the narrative around the eventual lifting of his ‘curse,’ as Beauty and the Beast does, The Hunchback of Notre Dame places more value on the protagonist’s character growth, and it does so without ever equating his looks with his personality, but demonstrating that these two can and do not always match. I very much agree with Rustad, that the film manages to shift its focus away from a stereotypical romantic narrative, but instead focuses on social injustice and how to end it. As the author (2015: 102) notes, “Quasimodo undergoes a paradigm shift, in which he ceases to fight for Esmeralda (which is by extension a fight for his own gratification) and instead fights against Frollo’s evil.” Indeed, the romance between the equally attractive partners, Esmeralda and Phoebus, is only a side plot, and Esmeralda not returning Quasimodo’s affections does not hinder the latter to embark on a journey
of self-discovery as it was the case with the Beast, whose happy ending was dependent on the affections of Belle.

Yet, not all scholars see *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*’s rendering of physical appearance, or the lack thereof for a happy ending, in a positive light. While Rustad (cf. 2015: 92-104) praises it as particularly progressive and encouraging, others call it problematic or even dangerous (cf., for example, Norden 2013: 163-178). This discrepancy is justified, since, on the one hand, the film puts values such as solidarity, standing up for what is right, and fighting injustice higher than probably any other piece of the Disney canon, and due to its fleshed out characters and adult themes, this ‘serious’ message is effectively delivered. It puts its focus on virtues that go way beyond the superficial emphasis of the importance of a beautiful physical appearance or finding and equally attractive partner. Yet, on the other hand, these themes are also present, and the way they are rendered is not without problems. I argue that the messages the film sends regarding beauty are neither fully ‘good’ nor ‘bad,’ but they are undoubtedly conflicting and sometimes at odds with each other.

Particularly controversial are the ‘comic relief’ scenes which ridicule Quasimodo’s looks. His gargoyle friends, no vicious villains like Frollo, but actually supposed to be ‘supporting’ characters appear anything but supporting in the musical number “A Guy Like You.” Noticing Quasimodo’s affections for Esmeralda, they make him false hopes that she will fall head over heels for him since she will nowhere else find a more ‘special’ partner than Quasimodo. ‘Special,’ however, is nothing more than a euphemism for his ugliness. The gargoyles contend that Quasimodo is unique and memorable since he is “shaped like a croissant is” (0:55:43), and when they offer him a mirror, it is shown to shatter upon the bell ringer watching his reflection. While this scene is supposed to add some fun to an otherwise rather dim story, the ‘fun’ happens at the expense of Quasimodo by making fun of its appearance, which is exactly what the overall narrative attempts to criticize.

Apart from this incoherence, however, the emphasis of the film does lie on Quasimodo’s character development and his ability to finally “see himself through the eyes of people who see him as something other than a monster” (Rustad 2015: 101). He succeeds in making society accept him
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for who he is, along with the other heroes and heroines fighting for more justice and acceptance, which are themes rendered more important than appearance or the fact that Quasimodo does not get romantic fulfilment. The bell ringer’s transformation into a more confident and heroic person are not motivated by Esmeralda, his love for her, or his hope to eventually transform into a dashing prince, but his sense of morality (cf. Rustad 2015: 101).

As Rustad (2015: 102-103) fittingly summarizes,

> [t]he film’s take on romance is that there is a sense of right and wrong that transcends it, and that romantic failure or success doesn’t have to be anyone’s defining characteristic. Whether a person has the courage and kindness to stand up for what is right is more important than whether their ordeal results in a storybook marriage. [...] The film echoes a sentiment expressed in Beauty and the Beast, that often the most monstrous are those who do not appear as such.

Unlike Beauty and the Beast, though, The Hunchback of Notre Dame shows that ‘having it all’ is neither always realistic nor a presupposition to be happy. Quasimodo finds fulfilment in growing beyond himself and the borders previously imposed on him. Also, in contrast to Beauty and the Beast, this film does not rely on the eventual equation of beauty and goodness, and that is what makes The Hunchback of Notre Dame refreshing in relation to more stereotyped Disney productions. Appearance is a central theme also in this movie, but it is made central in the first place in order to deconstruct it in the course of the narrative and show audiences that it is indeed not all that matters.

5.7. "I Suddenly See Him Standing There, A Beautiful Stranger, Tall and Fair” – Frozen (2013)

The last film examined in detail in this paper not only deconstructs conventional beauty ideals and their apparent essentiality, but heavily parodies them. First of all, the topics ‘beauty’ and ‘appearance’ are completely irrelevant to the plot unlike in the other examined films where they were central or at least played a minor role. Here, the story audiences watch unfold is that of two estranged sisters who overcome their hardships and eventually re-establish their bond. No matter if those sisters were ugly, ‘normal,’ or extraordinarily beautiful – the events would still be able to progress. Apart from this absence of the themes in the plot, the film brings up traditional fairy tale conventions of romance and the beauty-goodness stereotype to then revert and satirize them.
Only twelve minutes into *Frozen*, the notion that a princess is always pretty, graceful, simply ‘perfect,’ is poked fun at, when, after two men are heard talking about Anna and Elsa and raving that “I bet they are beautiful” (Buck and Lee 2013: 0:12:13), the scene shifts to Anna lying in bed with messy hair, snoring, drooling, and being the personified deconstruction of the ‘flawless’ princess known from earlier Disney films. Indeed, the entire character of Anna is a parody of the classic fairy tale/Disney princess. Employing all their stereotypical traits, she eventually has to learn that her fantasies were nothing but illusions and that betting on them gets her into immense trouble.

Upon getting ready for the coronation of her sister and the ball that is to be held afterwards, Anna is concerned with dressing up and looking lovely, as she hopes that, at the party, she could meet “the one” (0:13:58). When she leans against the wall, trying to appear seductive, while imagining how it will be to meet her dream prince, she accidentally slaps herself with the curtain’s tassel, signalizing how her idealizations are really flights of fancy and some sense needs to be – figuratively – ‘slapped’ into her. Her twirling through the ballroom with the bust of a man in her hands, imagining her first encounter with ‘Prince Charming,’ and singing “I suddenly see him standing there, a beautiful stranger, tall and fair” ends abruptly when, being the clumsy, non-elegant, awkward princess that she is, she loses hold of the bust and it lands in a cake on the buffet. Still, she further expresses her wish to find true love, stating that “for the first time in forever I could be noticed by someone” (0:14:35), but also shows slight awareness that maybe her hopes are unrealistic and indeed crazy.

Though, at first, it seems as if her wishes are actually coming true when she suddenly runs into the dashing Prince Hans, reminiscent of a traditional prince-princess meeting in Disney’s Classic Period films. Nonetheless, their encounter is also very awkward, which deconstructs its idealized, ‘romantic’ atmosphere. After falling on top of each other in the most clumsy fashion and gazing at the other with dreamy eyes, Anna instantly tells Hans how gorgeous he is before being startled at herself for making such a comment about a man she has only known for a few moments. When they meet again at the royal ball, the scene bears resemblances to the ball scene from *Cinderella*, which changed the dull life of the protagonist forever. Spending only one evening together, Anna
and Hans conclude that they are “just meant to be” (0:23:56) and can now “say goodbye to the pain of the past” (0:23:58), as they both previously expressed how they both feel let down by their siblings. The fact that their romance is later shown to fail clearly parodies the fairy tale-like rendering of love as a ‘rescue tool’ opening the handsome prince and the beautiful princess the door to a happier, better life.

Anna’s decision to instantly marry a handsome prince is criticized and ridiculed not only by the overall narrative, but also by other characters within the story. Elsa confronts Anna with the words “you can’t marry a man you just met” (0:25:32), a reference to what earlier Disney heroines tended to do. Kristoff, too, questions her about whether she has never been warned about strangers and states that he does not trust the judgement of someone who wants to get married within a day. When Hans eventually reveals his true nature to Anna and refuses to kiss her to thaw her frozen heart, he mocks her for her naivety to immediately trust him. The sudden transformation of the dashing prince into an evil plotter pointedly satirizes the equation of beauty and goodness, as well as the stereotypical trope of a sweet princess and a charming prince naturally belonging together. Refusing to kiss her further deconstructs the fairy tale convention of ‘true love’s kiss’ as the means to rescue the distressed princess as it was employed in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* and *Sleeping Beauty*.

The deconstruction of classic stock figures from fairy tales, however, is not only visualized through Anna and Hans, but it is visible in all four main characters of the film: Anna is no graceful, restrained princess, but a clumsy, awkward girl, who has to learn that her visions of romance are delusional. Elsa is no evil witch, but, even though powerful and able to produce magic, an emotionally conflicted outcast, who is more at war with herself than anyone else. Kristoff is no elegant, romantic Prince Charming, but a practical, pragmatic, and tough mountain man, tending to bad manners. The greatest aberration from fairy tale stereotypes is realized through Hans, who is neither a kind and moral prince, nor a typical villain in the sense of being scary, ugly, or identifiable as evil at first glance. While Rustad (cf. 2015: 165-168) argues that Hans’ change of character is illogical and superfluous, I argue that quite the opposite is the case. True, Disney presents his sudden revelation as evil in a shocking, maybe exaggerated manner, but this is nothing new for
animated films targeted at children who are not yet as recepietible to overly complex plots and characters like adults. Disney films need to bring their messages across in a simplified, obvious manner if they are supposed to be understood even by children of only a few years of age. While it would undoubtedly account for more ‘realism’ if Anna and Hans had realized they simply are not each other’s true love instead of turning one of them into a villain, it teaches viewers a tremendously important lesson about appearance that was largely neglected in Disney films up to Frozen – that people are not always what they seem and that one’s looks do, in fact, not necessarily mirror one’s character. The fact that this realization hits Anna in her darkest hour, when she is about to die, adds even more drama to the sudden twist. It shows how sometimes people would let you down when you most need them – and that is definitely something very ‘realistic’ and something audiences are more likely to relate to than fast-paced, perfect, love-at-first-sight romances between like-minded, equally attractive partners. Also, it is an important lesson for children that teaches them to not trust or like someone solely based on their appealing appearance and that a beautiful face and body tell nothing about the individual underneath.
Conclusion

In this master’s thesis, I have shown that in Disney films the appearance of characters and their personalities within the narratives largely coincided for a long time. I have analyzed seven films from different periods, as they not only allowed for variegated insights into how topics like beauty and appearance can be tackled, but also, they stem from distinct historical backgrounds and consist of multiple human characters of different sexes, ages and ethnicities. This made a broad comparison across time and across three distinct categories – particularly gender, and age and race to a lesser extent – possible.

For *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Cinderella, The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast,* and *Aladdin,* I have demonstrated that, while the heroes’ and heroines’ beauty, corresponding to dominant beauty standards of the respective times the films were made in, was emphasized both by their visual designs and the fictional discourses, the villains were marked as exaggerated, ugly, or deviant. While the moral ones are unrealistically ‘perfect’ – with slender builds, smooth faces, and well-groomed, voluminous hair, the evil ones are equipped with over-sized body parts, long, sharp nails, pointy faces, and extremely arched eyebrows. Drawing protagonists in bright colors, while antagonists are animated in a dark fashion increases the overall perception of the character as either positive or negative. These strong visual metaphors allow for fictional figures to be clearly set apart at first glance based on the competence and morality they exhibit within the stories. *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *Frozen* were shown to employ more diversity and ambiguity, as each of them breaks the beauty-goodness stereotype with one central character and does not rely on the ‘othering’ of the villain by marking him as grotesque or transgendered, as it is the case with the other five films. With time, the clear delineation between good and evil, visible at first sight because of the characters’ looks, has shifted towards a more intricate representation of virtues and vices.

Due to the intense creative freedom the animation genre gives to its creators, which I discussed at the beginning of this thesis, the meanings communicated via characters’ looks can be modified by the stroke of a pen or, in more modern productions, the click of a mouse. These visualizations and
their meanings are relevant as they demonstrate viewers from an early age on which appearances are ‘acceptable’ and ‘beautiful’ and which are not. I have shown that visual media and its corresponding merchandise are more than just means of entertainment, but that they carry an ideological and educational function which particularly influence very young audiences.

While Disney’s narratives foster the encouraging message that a good character is what counts and what will be rewarded eventually, they also tend to leave a sour taste as kind actions and moral personalities are almost exclusively linked to a pleasing outer appearance. What is more, those pleasing outer appearances are idealized and presented as if they were vital for positive life outcomes such as success and heterosexual romances, leaving less ‘flawless’ individuals or those who do not conform to a clear male-female-binary underrepresented or pushed into the roles of villains. Particularly the Disney Princess line has come under severe criticism for displaying harmful images of womanhood and romance, exerting pressure on women that beauty and hyper-femininity would be essential ingredients of ‘proper female identity.’

I have also pointed out the double standards between representations of masculinity and femininity, whereby the latter are more prone to stereotyping and categorizing, whereas the former exhibit more variation and complexity. While female characters could be put in groups of good or bad women based on their appearance and age, male ones were not restricted to these ‘drawers’ as also good, ugly heroes, such as The Hunchback of Notre Dame’s protagonist, or handsome, young villains, like Gaston from Beauty and the Beast or Hans from Frozen, exist in Disney’s repertoire. More recent films like Tangled also slowly open up more chances for female antagonists to no longer be cast as the stereotypical ugly witch-characters, but instead, those newer productions disclose that appearance and character do not always essentially correlate, both in men and women. Still, one can by no means speak of a linear development from more to less stereotypical representations, as deviations continue to exist, such as in the 2014 Sleeping Beauty adaptation Maleficent, where the beauty-goodness-stereotype is only broken on the surface.
With newer films, which tend to challenge established tropes of beauty and goodness, and villainy and ugliness, Disney is reacting to current trends requiring more diverse and ambiguous characters. Thus, the company avoids becoming ‘old-fashioned’ as it keeps entertaining with new, ‘contemporary’ films conforming to the dominant zeitgeist. This has led to both visual and characteristic representations evolving over the years. For example, female characters started to be much more sexualized and dressed more practically in the 1990s when real-life Western women also grew more emancipated, whereas positive male characters became less muscular or ‘softer’ with time, acknowledging the notion that men could be both strong and gentle.

In the Classic Period, beauty and chastity were linked, while men appeared as rather plain stock characters and stereotypically handsome, charming princes, whose only function was to provide an heroic act at the end of the film which would ensure the couple’s happily ever after and romantic involvement. In later productions, women became more active and performed more ‘masculine’ activities like horse-riding, climbing, and fighting, which was also reflected in their bodily designs and their clothes. Flowing, elegant princess gowns were replaced by more practical dresses or even pants. In postmodern productions like Frozen, it can be observed that Disney is reacting to the criticism it has received over the years – it appears as if the company is reflecting on its own old-established tropes and ridicules them: Not only is villainy no longer liked to ugliness, queering, or older age, but also the classic romantic narrative of earlier Disney films is turned upside down by showing that a beautiful appearance and fast-paced ‘love at first sight’ do not guarantee a happy ending, but that, like in real life, an ugly personality can be hidden behind a beautiful face. With the most recent Disney princess film, Moana, the stereotype that good characters are always representing a thin-ideal is also broken.

The content analysis of the seven main films of this study – Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Cinderella, The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, Aladdin, The Hunchback of Notre Dame and Frozen – has revealed the following results: In Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Cinderella, The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, and The Hunchback of Notre Dame, looks and beauty were vital plot motivators and central for the progression and outcomes of the stories. In Aladdin, it was more backgrounded and in Frozen, it was irrelevant for the main plot, and, when thematized, it
was parodied. While *Snow White, Cinderella*, and *The Little Mermaid* openly wallow in the importance of appearance, *Beauty and the Beast*, as well as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* attempt to criticize this notion, with the latter being much more sophisticated. *Frozen*, then, uses old fairy tale notions of beauty to tackle them with irony. In all of the films except *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *Frozen*, a beautiful appearance corresponded to a kind personality, whereas ugliness was linked to evilness. Also not including *Aladdin*, the romance between the main couple was largely, or even solely based on the equally attractive appearance of the partners. This theme was particularly prominent in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* and *Cinderella*, but even though less obviously stressed, remained decisive also in the Eisner Era as exemplified by *The Little Mermaid*. The couple in *Aladdin*, Aladdin and Jasmine, bonded to a significant amount over shared values and beliefs rather than the simple appreciation of each other’s looks. The rendering of the theme in *Beauty and the Beast* is heavily contradictory. Trying hard to establish the notion that personality is more important than appearance, the story eventually relies on the equation of beauty and kindness and presenting the Beast’s transformation into a handsome prince as the beginning of his happily ever after with Belle. In all the films, beauty is linked to romantic outcomes, since neither the ugly but nice Quasimodo, nor the villains, nor the Beast, while still in his beastly self, were shown to have fulfilling love relationships (cf. Towbin et al. 2004: 29).

In the two Classic Period movies, as well as in *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, the attractiveness of the female protagonist was the determining factor for the actions of the respective villain. Men were shown to lose control over their desires and sexuality upon the sight of beautiful women who were subjected to the male gaze and reduced to being objects of desire. Furthermore, the women’s appearance was stressed and valued more than their intelligence or other features of their personalities, such as Belle’s interest in books or Ariel’s curiosity about the human world. In *Frozen*, the former notions of beauty and the apparent importance of physical appearance are ridiculed. Also, it is the princess who temporarily loses control over her reason and immediately wishes to marry upon meeting a handsome prince. (cf. Towbin et al. 2004: 28-30).
What prevailed in this analysis and what also deserves to be stressed again, is that its purpose was never an evaluation of how ‘good’ or ‘bad’ the images Disney presents are. What is key is to not simply judge older Disney films as being ‘reactionary’ or to try to replace them with newer, more ‘progressive’ ones, but to reflect on their respective contexts and origins. I argued that films which are as successful as most of Disney’s, always operate as a ‘cultural mirror’ of what sells best with a mass audience at a certain period in time, while at the same time emphasizing and strengthening already existing values and beliefs. Thus, instead of criticizing or even condemning what a giant entertainment provider presents its audience with, I argue that it would be more beneficial to reflect on which images and contents the audience wants to consume in the first place and why that is the case. Analyses like this can help to understand hidden ideologies and patterns present in cultural texts, but it is important to bear in mind that these messages were previously created by society itself and not randomly invented by media conglomerates like the Walt Disney Company. I stick to Rustad’s (2015: 4) claim that “broadening perspectives […] is the most fundamental way in which people grow in their understanding of all things, especially art and entertainment” and if this master thesis constitutes one little mosaic piece in the discourse of ‘deconstructing Disney’ by unearthing how visuals and meaning work together in its films, then it fulfilled its purpose.

I opened this project by citing the famous question from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, “Magic Mirror on the wall, who is the fairest one of all?” (Hand 1937: 0:02:51), and I will close it by arguing that Disney itself has assumed this ‘mirror-function’ over the years. Disney films show us who or what is “fairest of all” by reflecting trends and movements within society. As the criticism for traditional beauty ideals has grown, as well as the interest in more variegated plots not solely centred on appearances and stereotypical fairy tale romances, so does Disney indeed mirror these sentiments in its productions.
Appendix – Plot Summaries

Snow White and Seven Dwarves was Disney’s first animated feature film and came out in 1937. It tells the story of the young princess Snow White, who has to serve as a scullery maid under her cruel stepmother, the Evil Queen, who is jealous of the girl for being the most beautiful woman in the land. To flee from her wrath, Snow White seeks shelter in the woods in the hut of the seven dwarves and takes care of them and their house in exchange for their hospitality. Finding out that Snow White is still alive, the queen transforms herself into an old, ugly hag to disguise herself and goes to the cottage with the intention to kill the princess by letting her take a bite from a poisoned apple. After the dwarves have put her ‘corpse’ in a glass coffin, a prince comes along and brings Snow White back to life though his kiss of true love.

In Cinderella, the titular protagonist also suffers at the hands of her stepmother, Lady Tremaine, and her spoiled daughters, Anastasia and Drizella. When every unwed maiden in the land is invited to a royal ball where the prince is supposed to choose his future bride, the Tremaines want to use this chance to improve their status, while Cinderella wants to escape her terrible life for one enjoyable evening. After her stepfamily has destroyed her dress to thwart her hopes, Cinderella is visited by her Fairy Godmother. She fixes Cinderella’s dress and provides her with a coach and staff so she can attend the ball. Cinderella and the prince spend the evening together, but at the stroke of midnight, Cinderella has to leave as the magic created by the Fairy Godmother starts to vanish. On the palace stairs, she loses her glass slipper and the prince swears to marry the girl whose foot fits into the slipper. His servants start searching far and wide for her. Upon realizing that Cinderella is the girl the prince is looking for, Lady Tremaine looks her up, but her animal friends are able to free her. After fitting into the slipper, Cinderella and the prince get married and live happily ever after.

The Little Mermaid revolves around the ocean princess Ariel, who is fascinated by the human world and wishes nothing more than to be a human herself, despite the warnings of her father, King Triton. After seeing the handsome prince Eric and saving him from drowning, she makes a deal with the sea witch Ursula: Ariel will trade in her voice in order to become human for three days.
During this time, she needs to make Eric fall in love with her and kiss her, otherwise she will turn back into a mermaid and become Ursula’s slave. After Ursula has managed to thwart Ariel’s success, King Triton sacrifices himself for his daughter, which makes Ursula the ruler of the sea. Eric, however, manages to stab the sea witch and proper order is restored. Realizing how much Ariel wants to live with Eric, Triton turns her into a human permanently and she and the prince get married.

In *Beauty and the Beast*, a handsome but selfish young prince is turned into a hideous beast by an enchantress, and his only chance to undo the curse is to fall in love with a woman and earn her love in return. After an eccentric inventor seeks shelter in the Beast’s castle and is imprisoned for trespassing, his daughter, Belle, agrees to take his place and stay as the beast’s prisoner. As time passes by, Belle and the Beast grow closer and due to her guidance, the beast learns to show kindness and compassion. After truly falling in love with her, the Beast gives Belle back her freedom. In Belle’s village, an angry mob under the leadership of Gaston, Belle’s narcissistic suitor, has formed to march to the castle and kill the Beast. Belle returns just in time and declares her love for the Beast, who then turns back into a handsome prince and lives happily ever after with Belle.

The titular protagonist of *Aladdin* is an Arabian street urchin, who, one day, happens to find a magic lamp and free its powerful inhabitant, the Genie, who grants Aladdin three wishes. Since Aladdin is in love with Princess Jasmine, but cannot approach her due to his low status, he wishes for the Genie to turn him into a prince. While Jasmine is slowly growing fond of Aladdin, the evil grand-vizier Jafar plans on marrying the princess himself and then killing her and her father in order to become sultan. Also, he wants to use the power of the magic lamp for himself, and upon discovering Aladdin’s secret, he tries everything in his might to reveal his identity and destroy him. In their final battle, Aladdin tricks Jafar into wishing to become an all-powerful Genie, which leads to the latter being trapped in his own tiny lamp. Aladdin tells Jasmine the truth about himself and the sultan changes the laws of Agrabah, the fictional city the story is set in, so that Aladdin and Jasmine can get married.
The Hunchback of Notre Dame is set in 15th-century Paris and tells the story of the deformed bell-ringer Quasimodo, who was raised by the cruel judge Claude Frollo, who locked him into the tower of Notre Dame and forbids him to ever leave it. One day, when a feast is held in the city, Quasimodo disobeys him and attends the celebration, where he, Frollo, and one of Frollo’s guards, Captain Phoebus, fall for the beautiful Gypsy woman Esmeralda. When the crowd discovers Quasimodo and publicly torments him because of his looks, Esmeralda stands up for him, but draws Frollo’s wrath upon her and has to claim sanctuary in the cathedral. Quasimodo helps her escape, but Frollo, who has grown obsessed with her, sets entire Paris on flame to find her and tricks Quasimodo into revealing Esmeralda’s hideout. Once he has gotten hold of her, Frollo blackmails Esmeralda to have her burnt at the stake for witchcraft if she does not agree to be with him. The Gypsy woman chooses death, but Quasimodo is able to rescue her and give her sanctuary once again. Frollo storms the cathedral, trying to get what he wants by force, but Quasimodo, Esmeralda, and Phoebus manage to defeat him. Esmeralda and Phoebus become a couple and Quasimodo is welcomed into society.

In Frozen, the two princesses Anna and Elsa grow up isolated from each other, as the latter has magical powers that allow her to create snow and ice and that she is not able to control. Years later, when Elsa is crowned queen, Anna, who has been suffering from the isolation, meets the handsome Prince Hans and immediately wants to marry him. Elsa tells her that she cannot marry someone she just met the same day and the sisters begin to fight which leads to Elsa unleashing her powers and bringing eternal winter to the kingdom. Horrified by the chaos she created, Elsa flees into the mountains and isolates herself even more. Anna leaves Prince Hans in charge of the palace and undertakes a journey to find her sister. Assisted by the tough mountain man Kristoff, his reindeer Sven, and the snowman Olaf, Anna eventually finds Elsa, but she pushes her away and accidentally hits her with a stroke of ice. Since only an act of true love can thaw Anna’s heart and keep her from dying, Kristoff takes her back to Hans. He, however, refuses to kiss her and reveals that he only wanted to marry Anna to then kill Elsa and become king. When he tries to capitate Elsa, Anna throws herself in front of her and saves her life. This act of sisterly love lets Anna’s heart thaw and Elsa realizes that love can help her control her powers.
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Image 23: https://www.google.com/search?q=moana+movie+poster&tbm=isch&ved=2ahUKEwjEtYbhsqAhVR2aYKHf0O8zMQ_AUoAXoECBMQAw&biw=1536&bih=750#imgrc=pxO79oTLLZW0mM

Image 24: https://www.google.com/search?q=ursula+poor+unfortunate+souls&client=firefox-b-d&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjEtYbhsqAhVR2aYKHf0O8zMQ_AUoAXoECBMQAw&biw=1536&bih=750#imgrc=W3VH0Boai3xM&imgdii=w7b1cmUF4Day9M

Image 25: https://www.google.com/search?q=ursula+poor+unfortunate+souls&client=firefox-b-d&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjEtYbhsqAhVR2aYKHf0O8zMQ_AUoAXoECBMQAw&biw=1536&bih=750#imgrc=W3VH0Boai3xM&imgdii=w7b1cmUF4Day9M