

**Embodying Disney Dreams:  
the Representation of Femininity and Whiteness in Recent Disney Animated  
Films.**

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### **Abstract**

This thesis proposes to critically examine the ways in which whiteness and femininity are represented in recent Disney animated films. It will be contended that the Disney text is an influential part of the popular cultural discourse on femininity and whiteness but this is often obscured or made invisible by the ways in which the films work to naturalise these constructions. The work of this thesis will be to unpack the constructions of femininity and whiteness through an analysis of the figuration of the Disney heroine. This thesis will argue that idealized whiteness and femininity are discursively embodied in these Disney heroines in complex and contradictory ways, and that Disney works on and through these bodies to fix and contain the ideological constructions of gender, race, and sexuality.

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**Dedicated to the memory of my Grandmother Dorothy Maplesden.**

## **Introduction**

In this thesis I will explore the ways in which gender, sexuality, and race is embodied in recent Disney animated films. The thesis aims to examine the Disney heroine as an idealised form of white femininity made of perfected flesh. It also seeks to question the ways in which the idealised white female body is made to express cultural norms which privilege heteronormative white patriarchy, to the exclusion of Other, queer, raced, and feminist identity formations and ways of being.

Part of the reason why I chose this thesis topic is because of my interest in the ideological qualities of popular culture. As a feminist I feel committed to exploring the politics of representation, particularly in works, such as Disney, which are clearly marked by identity divisions. The work of this thesis is also of interest to me because of my own subject position as a white woman. I have rarely encountered the kinds of overt sexism which the women of my mother's generation remember: I have never felt that a prospective employer was less likely to hire me because of my gender. And I can hardly imagine the restrictions imposed on women of my grandmother's generation. Nonetheless, I do think that gender norms continue to have detrimental effects on 'everyday' life. I am interested in the ways in which gender operates to foreclose possibilities: I have related my experience with potential employers, yet, as I write this, I also remember my high school leaver's ceremony, in which my count put the amount of women leavers declaring an intention to work in early childhood education in the majority. Personal experiences such as these have suggested to me that gendered presumptions still have an effect on the ways that aspirations are shaped and the ways in which pleasure and fulfilment are culturally constructed.

While I have rarely encountered overt sexism I have certainly witnessed overt racism, and even occasionally been called upon to sanction racist conceptions in order to show my membership to a given group, or to ignore them in order to "keep the peace". This thesis does not propose to offer solutions to the ways in which race, sex, and gender norms circumscribe behaviours and ways of being. Instead, it will work to illuminate the ways in which these norms operate in popular

culture, with the intention of uncovering the representational strategies through which hierarchies of race and gender are made to appear natural, essential, and unproblematic.

The analytical framework of this thesis is based on the semiotic work pioneered by Roland Barthes (1982); Foucault's discourse theory (1979); and post-structural feminism, in particular Judith Butler (1990). I am also influenced by Richard Dyer's work on entertainment and hegemony (2002), and the ways in which whiteness is constructed and privileged in Western thought (1997). Finally, this thesis draws on the work of film theorist Laura Mulvey, in particular her pioneering work on the gaze and its effects on the ways in which film makes meaning. My method is text-based but I also draw upon historical and cultural contexts to inform these readings.

I will base my conception of how power operates on Foucault's theories relating to the control system. Foucault theorizes that in capitalist society control is not exacted from without but instead the control system prevails upon the individual to self-monitor and self-discipline themselves by promoting norms and naturalizing them so that the individual will feel compelled to conform in order to gain acceptance and success<sup>1</sup>. This type of self-regulation involves the twin disciplinary systems of gratification-punishment. Foucault argues, "[d]iscipline rewards simply by the play of awards, thus making it possible to attain higher ranks and places; it punishes by reversing this process"<sup>2</sup>. It is not a project consciously undertaken by one powerful party but is re-produced, through cultural practices, by all<sup>3</sup>. Cultural norms, which benefit the already powerful, are idealized and all that exists outside those norms are marginalized<sup>4</sup>. These norms relate to cultural conceptions of the body in that an idealised body is imagined which perfectly conforms to the norms as well as a transgressive body which is borderless and refuses to comply with the

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<sup>1</sup> Sandra Lee Bartky, "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power", in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, ed Katie Conboy, London, (Columbia University Press, 1997). p. 132.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Translated by Alan Sheridan, Second Edition, New York (Vintage Books, 1995) 181.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, (University of California Press, London, 1993). p. 250.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* p. 255.

norms<sup>5</sup>. The Foucaultian body is caught in a power nexus, and circulates in a discursive formation that renders it legible, docile, raced, sexed, and gendered.

This thesis seeks to determine how these Disney texts fit within this system of control. It seeks to explore the ways that these films reproduce and reinforce the norms set out in this system as well investigating the possibility that they can also challenge and undermine these norms. I contend that these films display both idealised and transgressive bodies, and that these bodies are given the opposing values of “good” (idealised) and “evil” (transgressive). This thesis sets out to explore the complex and sometimes contradictory ways in which these idealised and transgressive bodies are represented within these films. By doing so, I aim to articulate how the films work to display the system of “gratification-punishment”. I will argue that the idealised/transgressive oppositions which underpin this tend to be overdetermined in these films, and that, in more recently released films such as *Lilo and Stitch*, these oppositions are less rigidly defined. The ways that this control is demonstrated within these films is thus proposed to be not quite complete or consistent expressions of a closed system of control.

Foucault attempts to trace the genealogy of the modern subject. His work attempts to discover the different ways that humans have been made to be subjects and to think of the ‘self’ as individual<sup>6</sup>. Butler also seeks to uncover the conditions of subjectivity, focusing on how gender functions within a disciplinary reality. Butler reasons that;

“normative gender presumptions work to delimit the field of description that we have for the human...[they] establish what will and will not be intelligibly human.”<sup>7</sup>

Normative gender seeks to define and limit which articulations of gender are acceptable<sup>8</sup>. Butler’s writings on gender highlight that the gendered subjectivities that the control system works to produce and circumscribe are neither fixed or

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* p. 250.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Rabinow, “Introduction”, in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984). p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and The Subversion of identity*, (Routledge: New York, 1999). p. xii.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* p.xxii



fundamentally authentic. They do not arise from an essential and fixed inner self. Instead, gender can be understood as a product of the very descriptions and acts which appear to be it's authentic representation<sup>9</sup>. Although the constructs of disciplinary power work to predetermine gender, it is nonetheless a flexible and revisable identity<sup>10</sup>. Gender identity is constructed in, through, and on the body via the stylization of gestures, movements, and appearance. These stylized acts come to constitute gender identity through their ritual repetition in the public domain<sup>11</sup>. The sense that there is an essential "truth" to gender and sex is produced through these regulatory practices, and through the production of "discrete asymmetrical oppositions between 'feminine' and 'masculine'"<sup>12</sup>.

This thesis will utilise this understanding of gendered subjectivity by analysing how the films studied here reproduce the oppositions of "feminine" and "masculine", through and on the fictitious body of the animated character. Focusing on the characters that are constructed as feminine, it will explore whether the depiction of these characters is successful in positing a femininity which is unified and coherent.

The parameters of this thesis are that of the "two dimensional" animated films produced by the Walt Disney Company, from the official Disney canon, released since 1985<sup>13</sup>. These parameters are limited further by the decision to focus on films which feature central protagonists which are coded as female. The films studied in this thesis take the female body as their central site of meaning. This thesis also concentrates on "two dimensional" films. In part this is because the newer technologies which have enabled "three dimensional" films involve a different

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* p.32-33.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.* p.43.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.* p.xv.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.* p.23.

<sup>13</sup> For instance, Box Office Mojo reports the worldwide gross for *Beauty and the Beast* to be \$377,350,553 USD, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=beautyandthebeast.htm>, (accessed 30/09/08). Note: the official Disney canon refers to official theatrical releases from the Walt Disney Company, also called "classics". Direct to video releases (including sequels to official releases) are not considered part of the official canon. Definition available at <http://www.ultimatedisney.com/ultimateclassics.html>, (accessed 13/01/01). Note: I use the term "two dimensional" in opposition to what is popularly known as "three dimensional" films, which are created using computer graphics. "Three Dimensional" films are also commonly known as "computer generated films", however films with the "two dimensional aesthetic" have also been known to made use of computer graphics and imaging technologies for some time.

aesthetic, and may currently imply somewhat different audience expectations based on the perception of newness and novelty.

Part of the reason that these Disney texts may be said to be culturally significant is because they are consumed in such a high volume. Viewership for these films continues to grow, spurred on by DVD sequels and marketing tie-ins and merchandise<sup>14</sup>. Yet they tend to be thought of as ‘light entertainment’. So light in fact that ‘grownups’ are often reluctant even to admit that they once enjoyed watching them. Or perhaps the reluctance stems from the critical debates following these films which often tend to view them as unequivocally monocultural and sexist texts. As critic Jack Zipes writes in his essay “Breaking the Disney Spell”, “[Disney] capitalized on an American innocence and utopianism to reinforce the social and political status quo. His radicalism was of the right and the righteous.”<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, Disney himself was at pains to stress that his movies were “just entertainment”<sup>16</sup>, a mantra which generally persists in spite of the Disney Company’s wide range of products and influence in popular culture<sup>17</sup>. It seems that these films may be seen as throwaway, “light”, and, counteractively, as “heavy” with enduring and highly persuasive clichés.

As Katherine Woodward argues, forms of popular representation such as these films can be seen to produce meanings through which we can understand and make sense of our cultural identity<sup>18</sup>. Yet, the contention that Disney products are “light” seems to continue to pervade much of the public discourse

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<sup>14</sup> Straight-to-DVD titles include *The Little Mermaid II: Return to the Sea* (Kammerud & Smith, 2000), *Beauty and the Beast: the Enchanted Christmas* (Knight, 1997) and the *Disney Princess* series of DVDs, among others

See [disneyshopping.go.com](http://disneyshopping.go.com/webapp/wcs/stores/servlet/CategoryDisplay?catalogId=10002&storeId=10051&categoryId=11776&langId=-1) for further examples of DVD releases and merchandising:

<http://disneyshopping.go.com/webapp/wcs/stores/servlet/CategoryDisplay?catalogId=10002&storeId=10051&categoryId=11776&langId=-1>. (accessed 18/09/08).

<sup>15</sup> Jack Zipes, “Breaking the Disney Spell”, in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender and Culture*, eds Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, Laura Sells, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995). p. 21-22.

NB: this quote refers specifically to Walt Disney as the creator and figurehead of the Disney company. However, Zipes argues later (p.40) that subsequent Disney filmmakers have “followed in his footsteps”, adopting a methodological and ideological formula set out by his earlier films.

<sup>16</sup> As quoted by Janet Wasko in *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2001). p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*, p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Woodward, Katherine, *Identity and Difference*, (London: Sage, 1997). p. 14.

around Disney. This perceived lightness works to produce an understanding that Disney texts should be exempt from serious critical analysis. The notion that to analyse a popular text in depth is to read too much into it seems particularly relevant in terms of analysing Disney. This thesis attempts to uncover the ways in which these popular texts frequently work to reproduce dominant ideologies and how they work to naturalise these ideologies so that they seem to be reflections of reality. As Richard Dyer puts it,

“[A]ny entertainment carries assumptions about and attitudes of the world, even if these are not the point of the thing... The task is to identify the ideological implications – good and bad – of entertainment qualities themselves, rather than seeking to uncover hidden ideological meanings behind and separable from the façade of entertainment”<sup>19</sup>

This conception of entertainment has significant implications for the ways in which gender is made sense of in popular texts. According to Judith Butler, one of feminism’s key concerns centres on the ideological construction of gender: gender norms homogenise cultural conceptions of appropriate ways of being<sup>20</sup>. Butler argues that feminism aims to oppose sexist ideologies and that, the feminist conception of gender views it as something that should be rendered ambiguous or irrelevant, because it is always a sign of subordination for women<sup>21</sup>. However, Butler is careful to point out that attempts to define a standard for subversive or ambiguous gender practices are infective in combating the normative construction of gender because the repetition (and commodification) of subversion drains it of its significance<sup>22</sup>. In this light, the Disney texts studied in this thesis can be argued to form part of a popular discourse around femininity. The ways in which femininity is conceived of and reproduced in these texts form an important part of the ways in which gender is made intelligible in the wider, cultural world.

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<sup>19</sup> Richard Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, Second Edition, (London: Routledge, 2002). p. 2.

<sup>20</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, (London: University of California Press, 1993). p. 24.

<sup>21</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*. p. xii.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

## **Chapter Summary**

In this thesis each chapter will discuss a different aspect of the realisation of normative gender in recent Disney films. Each chapter will also analyse one or more of the Disney films within the given time frame. The choice of film for each chapter corresponds closely to the thesis of each chapter, allowing for the exploration of the theoretical underpinnings of each chapter to be informed by the “reading” of the films as much as the “reading” being directed by explorations of theoretical concerns.

The order of the chapters is in part intended to develop and extend the analysis of femininity by responding to the problems that are raised in each chapter: Chapter One takes up the construction of idealised white femininity, prompting questions about the construction of bodies which fail or refuse this idealised form. Chapter Two then explores the ambivalent or grotesque body, which is frequently cast in racist, sexist and homophobic terms, prompting the question of what happens when Disney attempts to reformulate the idealised body in response to accusations of ethnocentrism? Chapter Three then explores the production and marketing of *Pocahontas*, prompting the question of how she, and other more recent Disney heroines fit within the “Disney Universe”? Chapter Four explores this “Universe”, focusing on Disney Princess, a marketing campaign that groups some of its most commercially successful Disney heroines and produces auxiliary texts which attempt to maximise both the profits and the affects of the idealised female body. The exclusion of the heroines of the successful film *Lilo and Stitch*, then prompts an enquiry into the performances and appearances of gender in this film, and the possibility that there is something of a development, or temporary break, in the way that gender is circumscribed in Disney films.

## **Chapter One: The Embodiment of Idealised White Femininity in *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*.**

My first chapter will focus on the idealised figuration of the Disney heroine in *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*. I will argue that the bodies of these heroines are constructed as extreme forms of idealised white femininity. These

figures embody the ideologies of heteronormative and white-centric patriarchy. The extreme nature of these representations also means that there are moments where the contradictions of these ideals are revealed – the texts ‘leak’ - and, as a consequence, the heroine’s idealised body is rendered unstable, and visibly becomes a discursive construction.

## **Chapter Two: Ambivalence and the Grotesque Body in *Aladdin* and *The Little Mermaid*.**

Chapter Two will explore the body figurations in Disney which are ugly and evil. These borderless, lawless, and transgressive bodies are constructed in opposition to the idealised body of the heroine. The grotesque body embodies all that is undesirable and marginal. In *The Little Mermaid* the grotesque figuration of Ursula embodies anxiety about female power. In *Aladdin* the figuration of non-heroic characters collectively embody Orientalist fears about the Other. Nonetheless, this chapter will argue that these bodies can also be read as embodied figures of protest, which contradict and undermine cultural norms. Their very presence threatens the ideological stability of the text. They are contained finally, however, because of the ways in which these transgressive bodies are made to be examples of the dangers of transgression.

## **Chapter Three: The Discursive Margins of Ethnicity and Whiteness in Disney’s *Pocahontas*.**

This chapter will explore the ways in which Native American ethnicity is constructed in *Pocahontas*. I will argue that *Pocahontas* depicts its heroine in ways which actually reify whiteness and white post colonial America. Pocahontas is made to embody American myths of pluralism and racial unity. Pocahontas’ body is also domesticated so that it fits the current shape of idealised whiteness.

## **Chapter Four: Fantasy and Embodiment in Disney Marketing Strategy.**

Chapter Four will explore the central ways in which Disney’s idealised female bodies are reproduced and re-formulated in the intertextual sites of meaning

outside of the films. It will focus on Disney's Princess brand, which employs the bodies of Disney heroines to sell products, experiences, and, I will argue, fantasies. The Disney Princess brand encourages female consumers to engage in embodied fantasies of Princesshood. The merchandising for this product-line involves intertextual links which affirm the idealised white feminine body as a powerful, aspirational model. These intertextual links also encourage young people to understand pleasure and identity in terms of commodities.

#### **Chapter Five: Family and Embodiment in *Lilo and Stitch*'s Post 9/11 America.**

In the final chapter to the thesis, I will address Disney's most recent film to take the female body as its central concern. I will argue that *Lilo and Stitch* presents something of a re-assessment of gender and the family following 9/11. *Lilo and Stitch* can be read as a text that offers up a more empowered version of femininity and a more inclusive version of the family. However, I will also argue that the film demonstrates the ways in which Disney continues to work on and through the body in order to construct and naturalise gendered patriarchy.

I conclude the thesis by suggesting that the embodiment of race and gender in these Disney films work to shore up these categories, attempting to validate and confirm their existence as distinct and stable categories. These Disney texts anxiously repeat the corroboration of gender and race, valorising them through extreme examples of idealised femininity. Disney works to relate the idealised feminine body to heroism and to pleasure, while bodies which take on expressions of difference or otherness are vilified or made to work in the service of patriarchal whiteness.

**A “Tale As Old As Time”:  
The Embodiment of Idealised White Femininity in *The Little Mermaid* and  
*Beauty and the Beast***

The key musical number in *Beauty and the Beast* claims that the story is a “tale as old as time”. Yet, the film can be said to be very much a product of its time. Both *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Little Mermaid* find Disney grappling with the concerns of popular feminism, characterising its heroines as assertive and intelligent figures who rebelliously take on adventures. In this light both films can be read as postfeminist texts, since there seems to be something of a re-assessment of femininity through the empowerment of their heroines, and the simultaneous affirmation of idealised beauty. Nonetheless, as I will argue, Disney’s version of postfeminism may in fact work to re-inscribe femininity (and popular feminism) as identity positions that rely on heterosexual coupling and which position whiteness as the female ideal.

According to Paula Black, postfeminism rejects the dichotomy between idealized standards of femininity and feminism<sup>23</sup>. While descriptive categories such as postfeminism and popular feminism have been seen to have somewhat contestable meanings and connotations, such terms are useful here to denote popularly available forms of feminism which are not directly opposed to femininity or the popular<sup>24</sup>. However, according to Judith Butler, one of feminism’s key concerns is (or should be) the notion that femininity is always a sign of subjugation for women. For Butler, this means that gender should be rendered ambiguous or irrelevant. In this light, these texts can be criticised on the grounds that they form part of a popular discourse around femininity which works to encourage women to internalise gendered body norms. These

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<sup>23</sup> Paula Black, “Discipline and Pleasure: the Uneasy Relationship Between Feminism and the Beauty Industry”, in *Feminism in Popular Culture*, edited by Joanne Hollows and Rachael Moseley, (Oxford: Berg, 2006). p. 153.

<sup>24</sup> Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley, “Popularity Contests: The Meanings of Popular Feminism”, in *Feminism in Popular Culture*, ed Joanne Hollows and Rachael Moseley, (Oxford: Berg, 2006). p. 7.

standards also homogenise our conception of appropriate ways of being<sup>25</sup>. Body styles and bodily performances which adhere closely to contemporary norms of femininity are privileged while those that do not are delegitimated, and are frequently perceived as unthinkable.

These considerations bring up some key questions. Could there be a basis for finding empowerment within these representations on offer in these texts? If so, could there be “leaks” in these texts, which provide a reading, from within, which problematises oppressive gender norms? Or, are *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast* simply adding to the dissemination of patriarchal and oppressive power structures which postfeminist strategies attempt to manage, where the text is, as Judith Butler puts it: “social practice which produces the desires it claims to represent”<sup>26</sup>? To answer these questions this chapter will analyse key scenes from these two films, giving particular consideration to how the heroines may be said to embody patriarchally inspired power relations.

This chapter will begin by looking at the opening scenes from both films to demonstrate the ways in which these texts invoke popularly available understandings of both feminism and femininity. The initial scenes of *The Little Mermaid* tell us much about the characterisation of its star figure, Ariel, although she is conspicuously absent from them. The film begins with her father, King Triton, who rules all in the sea kingdom from his underwater court. He has a white beard and carries a trident. He is clearly signed as the embodied figure of patriarchal authority. We are then introduced to Triton’s other daughters who are seen taking the stage in what seems to be one of many performances for the court. The daughters behave like exaggeratedly shrill chorus girls, constantly posing and preening themselves. They seem to have no function other than to entertain the King with song and dance. Ariel is notably missing from what is meant to be her debut performance as part of this troupe.

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<sup>25</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, London: University of California Press, 1993. p. 24.

<sup>26</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and The Subversion of identity*, (Routledge: New York, 1999). p. xiv.



Her sisters, finding Ariel's absence from her star turn baffling, go backstage to put on makeup and groom themselves. Ariel is thus immediately characterized as being different. She is evidently not interested in looking at herself or in being looked at by other mer-folk since she does not bother to turn up to her 'show' for a glamorous star performance. She is unwilling to perform her role, that is, to offer herself to be looked at by King Triton and his court.

Belle too seems to care little for her appearance in the opening scenes of *Beauty and the Beast*. As the inhabitants of the town look incredulously on, Belle wanders through the village, indiscriminately tramping through puddles and sitting with farm animals. She is more interested in her book, and the adventures described therein, than in what is going on around her. She seems to not even notice let alone care that everyone is looking at her. She is therefore described by the villagers as "a beauty, but a funny girl". Her lack of interest is contrasted with a group of blonde dairy maids who fall over each other to impress the handsome villager Gaston and, again, can't understand why Belle isn't interested in getting his attention. In this scene, her difference is established as is her curiosity about the possibilities of adventure outside the village.

Narratively at least, these opening scenes seem to take on the notion of the gaze. As Laura Mulvey describes it, the gaze is a looking process within popular cinema. It involves constructing the female body as the passive object of the male subject's gaze<sup>27</sup>. Mulvey theorizes that frequently audience members take on, or are called to take on, this male gaze<sup>28</sup>. The opening scenes in *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Little Mermaid* have the heroines noticing the oppressiveness of this gaze, and expressing their discontent by attempting to absent themselves from it. The narrative also presents a sense that this rejection of the gaze is somewhat rebellious. Other girls within the narrative willingly seek it out and seem to understand it as the central pleasure of femininity.

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<sup>27</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989). p. 19.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.* p. 20.

Furthermore, there is a general understanding that the repudiation of the gaze is wrong-headed or eccentric or “funny”.



Figure 1: funny girl. From *Beauty and the Beast* (Gary Trousdale, & Wise, Kirk. Walt Disney Pictures, United States, 1991).

These scenes depict these fairy-tale heroines as relatively dismissive of the expectations of femininity. Instead they are forthright and want adventures outside of the familiar domestic scene. Far from being damsels in need of rescue, they seem headstrong and resolutely independent. This characterisation would appear to be an attempt to represent changing attitudes toward gender roles, and to acknowledge changes in the career expectations of women, that were ongoing in the late 1980s and early 1990s (when these films were produced). If, as Susan J Napier says, films are cultural representations that can be seen to help us to negotiate changes in cultural identity<sup>29</sup>, then the change on offer seems initially to be one in which gender restrictions are at least re-negotiated and re-examined, if not overthrown.

Writing on *The Little Mermaid*, Laura Sells assesses this aspect of the heroine’s representational role:

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<sup>29</sup> Susan J. Napier, “Princess Mononoke: Fantasy, the Feminine and the Myth of Progress”, in *Anime: From Akira to Princess Mononoke; Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation*, (New York: Palgrave, 2000). p. 175.

*“The Little Mermaid reflects some of the tensions in American Feminism between reformist demands for access, which leave in place the fixed and complimentary definitions of masculine and feminine gender identities, and radical reconfigurings of gender that assert symbolic change as preliminary to social change”*<sup>30</sup>

The struggle for access which Sells writes on may be compared with the heroine’s struggle to negotiate away from the repressive domestic life she was born into. The question to then ask would be whether the journeys of the heroines can be considered a success on these terms and whether forms of symbolic change may also be seen to be negotiated in the process. In other words, what tools does the Disney heroine have to serve her in her quest for access?

The scenes in which the narrative quest is set up in both *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast* provide some answers to this question. In both of these opening scenes the heroine is surrounded by a community of critical figures. Their disapproving and desiring gazes are concentrated in the form of a possessive male character. Ariel is chastised and forbidden from any contact with the outside world by her controlling father King Triton. He is the patriarchal figure who seeks to confine Ariel and who keeps her from her aspirations. Belle is propositioned by the domineering and physically imposing Gaston who tells her that women should be banned from reading or having ideas. His broadly comic, and camp, pursuit of her is something of a parody of the self-regarding male. He chases her not because he loves her but because he thinks she looks the part, and he considers her in terms of an accessory.

The heroines’ indifference to being looked at, and their rebellious rejections and acts of will against the male figures, who attempt to define and dominate them, are designed to display their qualities of authenticity and self-determination. But these gazes are also indicative of how they epitomize idealized femininity. As heroines they are the object of possessive male gazes within the narrative: they are looked at by the characters on screen but they are

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<sup>30</sup> Laura Sells, “Where do the Mermaids Stand?”, in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995). p. 177.

also looked at by the audience. Mulvey argues that the male characters who look at the bodies of female characters within the narrative can be seen as “the bearer of the look of the spectator, transferring it behind the screen to neutralise the extra-diegetic tendencies by woman as spectacle”<sup>31</sup>. Thus, as viewers we are positioned to applaud the heroines’ disinterest but also to take these on-screen gazes as an indicator of their special status. Through the gaze they are coded as desirable, and this seems to be what makes them important.

The centrality of the heroine is thus established within the narrative as being contingent upon her particular brand of idealized beauty, a fact given weight by the evident fascination she elicits from the other characters. For the viewer, it is what seemingly defines her as a character from the outset. It would then seem that there is an implicit assumption within these texts that considerations of value are necessarily bound up with the symbolic power of bodily representations of idealised white femininity.

Elizabeth Bell argues that Disney heroines tend to reflect contemporary beauty ideals. She describes earlier heroines such as Cinderella as having “fair-skinned, fair-eyed, Anglo-Saxon features of Eurocentric loveliness, both conforming to and perfecting Hollywood’s beauty boundaries”<sup>32</sup>. Clearly some echoes of these Eurocentric beauty ideals can be found in the bodily figurations of both Belle and Ariel with their white complexions set against high cheekbones and small upturned noses. Bell goes on to argue that earlier heroines were modelled after ballet dancers, lending their figuration a sense of graceful poise which she argues is used to denote the royal lineage of characters. The shape and movement of the dancers’ body also marks that body with the signifiers of the rigorous discipline of dance training which is coded as “natural” grace and poise<sup>33</sup>. It may be argued that there are, again, some parallels here for Belle and Ariel in that their bodies are lithe and firmly contained.

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<sup>31</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*. p. 20.

<sup>32</sup> Elizabeth Bell, “Somatexts at the Disney Shop: Constructing the Pentimentos of Women’s Animated Bodies”, in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*, eds Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, Laura Sells, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995). p. 110.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.* p. 110-111.

They can be seen as fixed sculptural forms, tightly restrained, connoting assumptions of abstinence and self-control, like the bodies of earlier Disney heroines<sup>34</sup>. Their bodies are not muscular - that would denote masculinity - but their stylized angular look fulfils the same need that Susan Jeffords observes in the masculine “hard” bodies of the Reagan era – to not be seen to be confusing or messy<sup>35</sup>. This comparison makes sense as *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*, released in Reagan’s final year of office and the two years after that respectively, were contemporaneous with the action blockbusters which Jeffords writes about<sup>36</sup>. While films like *Rambo: First Blood* took the male body as its project, in *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast* it is feminine gender identification which is worked on to avoid confusion.

The most notable example of this can be seen in the prominence of the narrow-wasted hourglass shape in the figurations of the heroines of these films. Susan Bordo argues that the hourglass figure is highly symbolic of maternal femininity. The hourglass figure was most prevalent in the nineteenth century and the 1950s - when *Cinderella* was released. Bordo goes on to assert that the employment of this figure works to convey a clear differentiation between male and female gender identities, where, arguably, corresponding masculine bodies such as the hard bodied Rambo figure would symbolically represent male identity.

While this means that, in some respects, the figuration of both Belle and Ariel is similar to that of Cinderella, there are also some key differences. Bell points out that the contemporary body ideal that they embody is closer to that of the “cheesecake” pin-up model<sup>37</sup>. Ariel is often depicted as something of a bombshell, at one point posing on a rocky shoal, her breasts thrust forward, with

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<sup>34</sup> *ibid.* p. 111.

Also Sean Redmond discusses the embodiment of abstinence and self-control in, ‘Thin White Women in Advertising’, in *Journal of Consumer Culture*, Vol3 (2): p. 101.

<sup>35</sup> Susan Jeffords, “Hard Bodies: The Reagan Heroes”, in *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*, (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994). p. 27.

Also Susan Bordo discusses the semiotic meanings of muscles in, *Unbearable Weight*. p. 193.

<sup>36</sup> Note: while *The Little Mermaid* was released in the final year of Reagan’s office, his office officially ended in January of that year.

<sup>37</sup> Elizabeth Bell, “Somatexts at the Disney Shop: Constructing the Pentimentos of Women’s Animated Bodies”. p. 111.

a background of climactic sea-spume splashing around her. She moves not with the “erect, ceremonial carriage”<sup>38</sup> of ballet but with the mincing coquettishness of a starlet. Belle spends less time posing, yet her movements may still be described as more fluid and spontaneous than that of Cinderella.

While the figuration of Ariel and Belle characterises them as sexually attractive and works to fix their femininity, they can also be read as very much youthful and nubile figures<sup>39</sup>. Their wide eyes and pubescent slenderness are that of the child-like woman, or the girl on the cusp of womanhood. Walt Disney’s famous motto, encouraging animators to “keep it cute”, survives in their freakishly wide eyes and all-American toothy smiles<sup>40</sup>. Child-like cuteness coupled with sexual attractiveness is not an uncommon phenomenon across popular culture and figures such as Belle and Ariel are typical of this discursive amalgamation. Valerie Walkerdine theorises that child-like women are the object of a ubiquitous eroticised gaze which finds its effects in the cult of youth for women<sup>41</sup>. Walkerdine finds that the child-like woman is also frequently coupled with an older “daddy” type figure which, she argues, is the pairing which is understood to be the most socially acceptable form of sexuality. She argues that the on-screen image of the child-like woman is similar to that of child pornography. Walkerdine finds it ironic that the very girls who are thought to be in danger from inappropriate eroticization are embraced as objects of fetish only a few years later<sup>42</sup>.

*The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast* avoid overt implications of child pornography via the narrative device of the sanctioned adult romance, complete with requisite “daddy” figure, positioning them finally as young women rather than girls. But this union does not occur until the end of these films and, arguably, there are frequently moments, such as Ariel’s “cheesecake” pose, where their bodies escape such sanitisation, disrupting the fantasy of the

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<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Janet Wasko in *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2001). p. 116.

<sup>40</sup> As quoted by Janet Wasko in *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy*. p. 111

<sup>41</sup> Valerie Walkerdine, *Daddy’s Girl: Young Girls and Popular Culture*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997). p. 157.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.* p. 167

child-like woman and stripping away the pretence which would make it socially acceptable<sup>43</sup>.

While attention is called to Ariel and Belle because of the problematic nature of physical beauty, it can in fact be seen to work against them in terms of agency within their respective narratives. Bell argues that early Disney heroines presented their own mixed message in that the symbolic power of their erect and strong ballerina poses worked against the narratives which characterised them as unimposing and pliable victims<sup>44</sup>. Arguably, the connotation of strength does not carry through to the modern forms of Ariel and Belle. They bear a physical resemblance which links them to self-discipline, but they are altogether less commanding and solemn in terms of posture and movement. Their less composed carriage can also be described as irresolute and ineffectual, lacking in signs of physical strength and confidence.

Given Ariel and Belle's contradictory figuration as idealised heroines who can also be seen as physically weak and underdeveloped, it is perhaps little wonder then that both characters end up aligning themselves with hard-bodied daddy figures. The kind of possessive behaviour which they both find so objectionable at the beginning of the film becomes crucial to their ability to eventually secure the safety of a happy ending. Furthermore, the heroines of these films are only able to win the man they fall in love with by submitting to his gaze. In fact, they must encourage it.

This capitulation is clearly played out within the narratives of *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Little Mermaid*. The bargain that Ariel makes with Ursula means that she can keep her human legs, and her life, if she can elicit a kiss of "true love" from the Prince. Her task then is to encourage Prince Eric to fall in love with her, and to act on his "true love". Yet, because of the spell, she cannot encourage him by expressing her own thoughts or desires. Ariel must bring about that desire but she can only do so by being desirable, by attracting his gaze. The taboo that proscribes female initiation of demonstrations of desire

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<sup>43</sup> Valerie Walkerdine argues that some texts can have moments like this in, *Daddy's Girl*, p.157.

<sup>44</sup> Elizabeth Bell, "Somatexts at the Disney Shop: Constructing the Pentimentos of Women's Animated Bodies". p. 112.

in the heterosexual matrix has its literal expression here. Only the Prince is allowed to do the desiring. Here the heroine is allowed to have desires but can only satisfy them through being the object of infatuation. It is her to-be-looked-at-ness that succeeds, that brings her desires to fruition<sup>45</sup>.

The appeal of the heroine is further reinforced when the evil Ursula attempts to prevent Ariel from breaking the spell by separating her from the Prince. She disguises herself and uses Ariel's stolen voice to get the Prince to believe that she is the mysterious singing woman who saved him earlier in the film, his erstwhile love. The audience knows that Ariel is the real singing woman and that this new arrival is actually Ursula in disguise. But the Prince does not know this and the mute Ariel has only her coquettish beauty to argue her case. Yet Prince Eric seems less than overjoyed to be wedding "the one". She doesn't have the same quality of to-be-looked-at-ness as Ariel. Indeed, later it is revealed that Ursula has had to enchant the Prince, turning him into a suggestible dupe, in order to usurp Ariel. Ursula is later seen to cast off the beauty which caused her to be read as human, revealing her abject and deviant body in all its opposition to the norms Ariel represents<sup>46</sup>.

In *Beauty and the Beast* the curse positions the Beast as the one needing to elicit love. In order to break the spell that disfigures him Beast must "love and be loved in return" or he will remain forever inhuman. But it certainly is not the Beast's qualities of to-be-looked-at-ness which allows him to win Belle's affections. Beauty must learn to love what is "inside" the monstrous exterior and brutish demeanour. Only through patience and persuasion can his lovable aspects be revealed. Here the put-upon demeanour she exhibits earlier with the villain Gaston is replaced with tolerance and, when he is responsive to her schooling, amusement and pleasure.

It can then be seen that both Belle and Ariel end up in essentially the same situations that they found objectionable at the beginning of their stories. The difference seems to be simply only one of consent. The heroines have

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<sup>45</sup> The term "to-be-looked-at-ness" is coined by Laura Mulvey in , *Visual and Other Pleasures*. p. 19.

<sup>46</sup> Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*, (New York: Routledge, 1994). p. 10-11.



chosen to gain access by accepting their role as the object of desire for a powerful male hero who will prove his love via acts of heroism.

Here there appears to be something of a re-articulation of traditional gender roles, whereby conformity is represented as the result of active choice rather than arising solely from biological and social imperatives. Nonetheless, we are still left with the sense that the happy conclusion is inevitable. The eventual coupling of the heroine with the hero remains the only logical outcome in spite of the heroine's characterisation as independent and self-determining. The heroines are also somewhat limited by physical weakness, a device which creates the opportunity for their rescuing Prince to step in and save the day. This device also allows little possibility that the heroines could ever be truly self-sufficient. The access conferred on the heroine can then be seen to be granted only under the terms dictated by patriarchal power structures<sup>47</sup>. It would then seem that within these films the successful postfeminist heroine gains access to power by retaining and relying on her ability to conform to idealised feminine norms. Rather than seeking autonomy for its own sake, she uses attributes such as a quick wit and independence of thought as a way of adding value to the qualities of idealised femininity she already possesses, thus ensuring the attainment of place and pleasure within the structures of gender.

Importantly, it is not any pretty cartoon girl who may reap the rewards of being a heroine. In fact a very specific formulation of feminine characteristics is required. In each of the films we are provided with examples of femininity that do not quite perform the right formulation of these characteristics. This flawed femininity is exhibited in the case of the aforementioned clutches of obnoxiously shrill women who inhabit both Belle and Ariel's home spaces. These pretty women exhibit a desperation for attention and preference for frilly costumes which tips them into parody. Their symbolic purpose seems to be to emphasise, by way of comparison, how

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<sup>47</sup> Janet Wasko makes this comment generally about recent Disney heroines in, *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy*. p. 116.

heroically independent and self-determining the heroine figure is because she does not conform to this depiction of femininity.



Figure 2: frilly girls. From *Beauty and the Beast* (Gary Trousdale, & Wise, Kirk. Walt Disney Pictures, United States, 1991).

But the comparison does not critique the limitations of received notions of gender. Rather, it operates to naturalise certain forms of gendered behaviours and ways of being. The groups of girls exhibit “wrong” forms of femininity because their performance is too self-congratulatory, too clearly manufactured. The rejection of this “wrong” performance of femininity leads to the discovery of the “right” performance which can consequentially be valorised as the true and authentic way of being<sup>48</sup>. The “right” performance is rooted in a form of “true” beauty, coded as natural and performed as innate.

Judith Butler explores performativity in her text, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. She argues that gender is “manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the stylization of the body”<sup>49</sup>. Here she asserts that an expectation of a (gendered) interior essence actually produces the phenomena it anticipates. Gender is enacted through a process of ritualised and repeated acts and, although it is taken to be

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<sup>48</sup> Judith Butler argues that this is one of the dangers of normative accounts of gender in, *Gender Trouble*, p. viii.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.* p. xv.

so, it does not arise from a fixed internal truth. Gender is made intelligible through the normative stylisation of the body, the construction of which is not politically neutral though, again, it is taken to be so<sup>50</sup>. Butler argues that the naturalization of gender norms work to circumscribe behaviours and ways of being, delegitimizing that which falls outside of the norm<sup>51</sup>. Yet, if the constructs of gender are to be seen as working on such a profound level, how can any individual or act be thought to resist?

Paula Black puts forward this question in “Discipline and Pleasure: The Uneasy Relationship Between Feminism and the Beauty Industry”, where she explores various debates around the choices women face in response to the norms of femininity<sup>52</sup>. She finds that many critics reject the notion that feminine gender identities must necessarily be restrictive or complicit with sexism. Others such as Jacqueline Rose and Maxine Leeds Craig argue that femininity is never a unified identity; rather, it is a project which is never quite complete, allowing individuals to at once both reject and embrace femininity<sup>53</sup>. However, the authority of normative gender representations remains powerful and, arguably, the ubiquity of normative gender identifications mean that marginalised identities are consistently withheld or rendered unfamiliar, even unintelligible, from “normal” or “common sense” understandings of gender<sup>54</sup>.

Nonetheless, in the construction of the image of this naturalised ideal of femininity there makes for some somewhat contestable ground, suggestive of a certain ambivalence about the very ideology which the image can be seen to embody. The over-determining nature of the Disney heroine’s exaggerated stylization means that the image becomes unstable and problematic, calling up opposing and competing associations.

Examples of this may be seen in the early scenes in each of these films. In both cases the heroines express their innermost desires in their opening song.

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<sup>50</sup> *ibid.* p.xv. and p. xviii.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.* p. xvii.

<sup>52</sup> Paula Black, “Discipline and Pleasure: the Uneasy Relationship Between Feminism and the Beauty Industry”. p. 148.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.* p. 156.

<sup>54</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*. p. xvii.

It is here that we see the strongest examples of the contestability of the visual figuration of these Disney heroines. In each instance the central characters sing of a yearning to leave their respective homes for the unknown. Belle wants “so much more” than what is on offer in “this provincial town”. Ariel wants to “be where the people are”. These emotive soliloquies of escape direct the audience’s attention to the fetishised visual characterization through character movement and form. As they each sing to sweeping crescendos, with arms flung heavenwards, their bodies seem to strain ever upwards, perhaps expressing a wish to be lifted up and out of their current setting. Such postures can be seen to produce associations of heavenly ascendance and spiritual purity. The idealized thin white bodies of the heroines are intrinsic to these associations<sup>55</sup>.

In *Beauty and the Beast*, Belle stands at the edge of a gusty cliff and sings part of her opening song against a dramatic backdrop of whirling grasses and swirling dandelion filaments. The wind sweeps up her hair and clothing and, as she reaches out and upwards, it seems her slender frame is almost in danger of being swept away on the breeze. Her body’s similarity to the wisps of wind-swept dandelion seeds that float around her tells us of the insubstantial qualities she possesses. Her thin and delicate frame is no match for the natural elements which come close to flowing right through her. She seems to be little more than an apparition, whose imploring and saintly posture expresses what Sean Redmond, in *Thin White Women in Advertising* calls a “vanishing corporeality”<sup>56</sup>.

The glowing whiteness of Belle’s skin is fundamental to these associations of both purity and transparency. Richard Dyer, writing on the history of photography and movie lighting, argues that it works to “assume, privilege and construct whiteness”<sup>57</sup>. The animated bodies in *Beauty and the Beast* and *Little Mermaid* follow the aesthetics of these traditions, using the

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<sup>55</sup> Sean Redmond makes a similar argument in, “Thin White Women in Advertising”, in *Journal of Consumer Culture*, Vol3 (2). p. 101.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.* p. 100.

<sup>57</sup> Richard Dyer, *White*, (London: Routledge, 1997). p. 89.

visual language of whiteness to communicate ideas of chastity and virtuousness. Their pale complexions, devoid of marks and shadows nearly to the point of blankness, are characteristic of Dyer's description of the angelic white woman. She represents the current ideal of whiteness, a distinctly pale shade determined by Dyer as "a whiter shade of white"<sup>58</sup>. Within white western visual culture this form of idealised white femininity has particular historical associations with Christian ideals of the sacred and divine<sup>59</sup>. The placement of Belle's (and Ariel's) upwardly extending body postures further invoke these associations of heavenly ascendancy.

The scene for the opening of Belle's song is set in the garden of her home and it is here that we first glimpse the significance of her whiteness. As she steps out into the world we see that Belle's skin is bathed in light, she is possibly even made up of light<sup>60</sup>. Indeed, as Belle walks outside the sun actually perceptibly brightens, creating confusion over whether she is lit up by the daylight or whether her presence actually generates the luminous glow that stretches in a wide halo around her. Within the language of whiteness this glow may be seen to signify a divinity and purity which comes from within and radiates outward through the skin<sup>61</sup>. This inner glow can be seen as metaphor for what Matt Roth argues is the "Disney vision", whereby only the strong and beautiful triumph. Roth argues that the essence of this vision is that Aryan heroes and heroines are born to rule and inevitably prevail through sheer willpower originated in the innate supremacy of their birth<sup>62</sup>. Indeed, Dyer argues that those who exhibit the illumination of whiteness are coded as being the enlightened and rightful heirs to power and prosperity<sup>63</sup>.

However, the over-determination of whiteness may prompt contradictory readings. The dawn-like moment where Belle steps outside and is pervaded by light demonstrates this. In this scene there is an instant where the

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<sup>58</sup> *ibid.* p. 93.

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.* p. 126.

<sup>60</sup> Sean Redmond, "Thin White Women in Advertising". p. 112.

<sup>61</sup> Richard Dyer, *White*. p. 127.

<sup>62</sup> Matt Roth, "The Lion King: A Short History of Disney Fascism", in *Jump Cut* v.40 (1992): p. 19.

<sup>63</sup> Richard Dyer, *White*, p. 113.

radiance of her skin and that of her surroundings reach a peak that threatens to dissolve the borders that contain the body, erasing the thin lines that contain her. Here it is possible to read, as well as associations of heavenliness, a whiteness that denotes absence, lack, ambiguity, and the threat of oblivion. Belle's pure white glow can be read as an undefined blank, denied or drained of vitality and life<sup>64</sup>.

Ariel's body also has a fragile floating quality, of course in this instance it is part of her characterisation as an undersea mermaid. Her hair and limbs float on invisible currents, becoming a part of the surge and flow of the sea. She merges with the environment and, like Belle, there seems little to keep her from drifting away in a strong current. This fragile slenderness is a mark of her femininity as well as of her privileged status<sup>65</sup>. Her slenderness has another function, as Susan Bordo articulates in her work *Unbearable Weight*, in which she writes on representations of the body. She argues that slenderness functions within visual culture as a symbolic indicator of spiritual and moral superiority<sup>66</sup>. However, slenderness is, much like whiteness, historically specific. The ideal slender body, neither too fat nor too thin, is thus seen to be the embodiment of correct attitudes and responses to the status quo<sup>67</sup>. The fragility of her physique is perhaps partly meant to lessen the historical ambivalence toward mermaid figures. Beryl Rowland describes the history of representations of mermaids as possibly originating from fertility goddess legends<sup>68</sup>. However, they have also been associated with sirens and with the immolation of sailors who listened to their songs. Here the combined threats of fleshly temptation on the soul and the danger the sea poses to the physical body are forcefully associated with the feminine<sup>69</sup>.

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<sup>64</sup> Sean Redmond makes this argument about white women in advertisements in, "Thin White Women in Advertising". p. 118.

<sup>65</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*. p. 186.

<sup>66</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.* p. 203.

<sup>68</sup> Beryl Rowland, *Animals with Human Faces*, Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1973. p. 140.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.* p. 140-141.

Ariel's underwater setting is the inside of an underwater cave which spirals upwards towards the narrow opening that provides its light source. As Ariel drifts upwards, without appearing to propel herself, she nears the opening and the light which shines from the refracted waves above. She almost seems to be physically trapped. Only her face is exposed to the softly filtered light, which sometimes casts shadows on her face. Such shadowing brings up associations of the melancholy and volatile, occurring rarely on the faces of the idealised Disney heroine. It appears only here to denote Ariel's troubled state of mind as an outsider. This morbid darkness is offset by the light from above, coded in white visual language as divine light<sup>70</sup>. As in Belle's case, this light is unstable and contested. Here, the blue tone of the lighting and the drifting quality of her ascension at times give her face a corpse-like ghostliness. Ariel's pallid visage then reads as both ethereal and ashen.



Figure 3: ghostly Ariel. From, *The Little Mermaid*, (Ron Clements & John Musker, Walt Disney Pictures, United States, 1989).

Belle and Ariel can then be seen to be characterized in such contradictory ways that they engender associations of both beauty and purity, along with ineffectuality and insubstantiality. They can be characterised as both

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<sup>70</sup> Richard Dyer, *White*. p. 118.

firmly contained and as physically weak. As Richard Dyer argues, representations of idealised white femininity are always contested, precisely because they are idealised<sup>71</sup>. These oscillations can be seen to produce textual ruptures which resist and critique the constructs of white femininity<sup>72</sup>. The assertion that their performance of femininity is natural is then made contestable, or at least unstable. However, the power of the normative gender presumptions embedded within the text of these films remains authoritative. The accessibility of the idealised white performance of femininity as a subject position, to the exclusion of others, operate, as Judith Butler puts it, to “delimit the field of description that we have for being human”<sup>73</sup>.

These films make an attempt to deal with the concerns of feminism, offering heroines who are more intelligent and assertive than previous incarnations such as Snow White. There also seems to be an attempt to address the oppressive looking processes which have traditionally been central to the ways in which women have been prevented from becoming speaking subjects within Hollywood cinema. Yet the heroines in these films are, finally, no better off than their predecessors. The attempt to provide a more progressive heroine is undercut by the continued fascination with marriage plots. Here it would seem that the Disney heroine remains unwilling or incapable of finding fulfilment outside of patriarchal power structures. In *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast* she also continues to be very much defined by an idealised white femininity. The tools which these Disney heroines possess can then be said to be only very slightly modified from previous heroines, and the access that they gain with them seems to be no different. These Disney heroines are allowed to choose but their options are strictly limited. They are allowed to be intelligent but they must also be available. They are ultimately presented as being complicit in their own oppression, choosing partnership with a protective male hero as the culmination of their adventures. Following the success of these films a number of other Disney films featuring female leading characters were

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<sup>71</sup> *ibid.* p. 127.

<sup>72</sup> Sean Redmond, “Thin White Women in Advertising”. p. 96.

<sup>73</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*. p. xxiii.



released<sup>74</sup>. Much of the rest of this thesis will look at other ways in which Disney has articulated the female body following this success. In the next chapter I examine the Grotesque body in *The Little Mermaid* and *Aladdin*. The relationship that the ideal body and the grotesque body have in Disney films adds to the complex ways in which Disney constructs and problematises gender. The grotesque body can be seen as an opposing body formation which speaks to - and at times contradicts - the ideological construction of the idealised feminine body.

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<sup>74</sup> *The Little Mermaid* box office figures total US \$222,300,000. and *Beauty and the Beast* figures at US\$378,300,000. according to imbd.com <http://www.imdb.com/boxoffice/alltimegross?region=world-wide>. (accessed 18/10/2007).

### **Ambivalence and the Grotesque Body in *Aladdin* and *The Little Mermaid***

While the Disney Corporation has built much of its brand on appropriating emotive concepts such as magic, dreams and wholesome family fun, it is also known for having a “dark side”<sup>75</sup>. Sinister depictions of death, as well as destruction and betrayal form a major part of the Disney formula. The artistry involved in portraying the drama of these moments is part of what makes Disney so popular and critically acclaimed<sup>76</sup>. However, Matt Roth has argued that the depiction of violence and evil in Disney films is little more than the vehicle for disseminating prejudicial ideologies<sup>77</sup>. Roth contends that certain Disney characters are presented as being superior, often due to their privileged birth, and others are “ugly, perverse villains vanquished by strong and beautiful heroes”<sup>78</sup>. Roth puts forward the case that the grotesque villains of Disney animated films are frequently characterized through stereotypes that are racist, sexist, and homophobic.

The “strong and beautiful heroes” that Roth refers to are embodied, in the feminine case, by the idealised girl’s body discussed in chapter One. The figuration of the opposing transgressive or grotesque body is somewhat less generic, although still readily identifiable within Disney texts through their negatively coded body shapes and styles. Here, the figuration of Disney heroes and heroines can be seen to conform to contemporary understanding of naturalised body norms. These norms work to fix gender and race divisions within a white patriarchal hierarchy. Grotesque and monstrous bodies may be seen to provide a negative contrast to images of the

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<sup>75</sup> Henry A. Giroux argues that Disney is popularly known for producing texts which are wholesome in *The Mouse That Roared; Disney and the End of Innocence*, (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 1999). p. 11.

While Matt Roth argues that Disney is also known for its darker side in “A Short History of Disney Fascism”, in *Jump Cut*, (v.40, 1992). p. 15.

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.* p. 16.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.* p. 15.

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.* p. 16.

normalised ideal body<sup>79</sup>. It can be argued that this contrast works to validate the ideal body by recognising the grotesque body as inferior<sup>80</sup>.

However, as Mary Russo points out, the presence of the grotesque may be seen to undermine the very normative bodily ideals it is meant to vindicate because the grotesque body wilfully transgresses the boundaries of those accepted norms<sup>81</sup>. The performance of the grotesque body may be seen as working to disrupt and satirise the homogeneity of body norms as well as other cultural projects which attempt to eliminate the “mistakes” of deviance and difference<sup>82</sup>.

These “mistakes” embodied by the grotesque characters in Disney films raise some interesting questions, especially in light of criticisms that have often been levelled at Disney texts. For example, Henry A. Giroux argues that Disney presents utopian fictions which viewers are encouraged to enter into in order to escape harsh or unjust realities<sup>83</sup>. Giroux argues that Disney films work to produce identities that are contingent on fantasy and consumption rather than on critical thought and participation in democratic processes. The depiction of abject and hysterical bodies within these fantasies would seem somewhat out of step with the contention that they present homogeneous and unproblematic dream worlds. This raises some key questions: does the depiction of the grotesque in recent Disney films reinforce the primacy of the normalized ideal? Conversely, can it be argued that transgressive bodies work to satirise and undermine norms, not just of the body but of other prevailing conceptions such as morality and progress which are habitually regarded as universal truths? If Disney texts can be seen to promote conservative and consumerist values, then does the depiction of the grotesque add to this project, or can it be seen to detract from this effort?

To answer these questions this chapter will analyse depictions of the grotesque which feature in *The Little Mermaid* and *Aladdin*. These films present two very different portrayals of the grotesque. In *The Little Mermaid*, Ursula the Sea

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<sup>79</sup> Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*, (New York: Routledge, 1995). p. 9.

<sup>80</sup> Robert Stam, *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989). p. 159.

<sup>81</sup> Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*. p. 11.

<sup>82</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Henry A. Giroux, *The Mouse That Roared; Disney and the End of Innocence*. p. 23.

Witch can be seen as a modern re-articulation of the mythical Medusa. This figure has been argued to represent female power as well its danger. In *Aladdin*, much of the supporting cast is depicted as monstrous or deviant. Racist and homophobic stereotypes are used to portray the entire Arab world as a grotesque and dangerous landscape. This link between the excesses of the physical body and the body politic is made by Mikhail Bakhtin in his writings on the carnivalesque and the grotesque. Bakhtin's work on the grotesque illuminates and valorises it as the mutable body which refuses completion. This grotesque body is that which exceeds its limits, thereby opposing tropes of beauty and progress which strive for the advancement of a single and fixed ideal form. For Bakhtin, the grotesque embodies multiplicity and the transgression of hierarchical norms<sup>84</sup>. However, the grotesque can also be theorised as that which serves civilising projects by providing an illustration of the undesirable defects which the ideal body pre-empt, justifying systems of classification which define the grotesque as negative and the ideal as positive<sup>85</sup>. Viewed through this lens, the grotesque represents the unsightly and the objectionable which the discriminating forces of gentrification promise to eradicate.

Such evaluative and prohibitive body norms have particular significance in regard to concerns about gender, as the previous chapter attests. The grotesque body, when viewed as the negative quotient in a binary where the idealized body is its opposite, is mirrored by the gender binary which arguably places the female in the negative category against the male. Furthermore, as Russo puts it, the excesses of the body which are expressed by the grotesque may be viewed as “all the detritus of the body that is separated out and placed with terror and revulsion (predominantly, though not exclusively) on the side of the feminine”<sup>86</sup>. The female and the grotesque would seem to have strong associations to one another. Indeed, for Russo it is the image of the “senile, pregnant hag”, as described by Bakhtin, that is the pre-eminent

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<sup>84</sup> Robert Stam makes this argument in his interpretation of Bakhtin's works, in, *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film*. p. 159.

<sup>85</sup> Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*. p. 22.

<sup>86</sup> *ibid.* p.2.

example of the grotesque body<sup>87</sup>. Perhaps the most distinct example of the female grotesque which Disney has yet produced is the figure of Ursula the Sea Witch.

When we first encounter Ursula she is a black figure in darkness, almost a silhouette, merging with the equally dark cave she occupies. This spatial placing gives an immediate indication of the correlation between her and the cave, both in terms of the parallel associations that they both engender, and the command Ursula has over her lair. She has total dominion over the cave, ensnaring invading creatures with the grasping strands that hang from the walls like extended Venus flytraps. Later, references to a long-standing dispute with King Triton suggest that she is in hiding there, perhaps regrouping from some bitterly remembered defeat. She remains in there for much of the narrative.

Ursula's cave is more than the place where she lives and hatches her plans. On a semiotic level the cave and Ursula can be seen as part of a series of correlating symbols. These symbols depend on cultural identifications which associate the grotesque with the grotto-esque (or cave), the grotto with the womb and the maternal body<sup>88</sup>. The grotto-esque is referred to by Russo as the "cave of abjection". Russo argues that these associations have the potential to cultivate misogyny based on the modelling of the body as cavernous and primal, producing responses of revulsion and loathing.

Ursula's cave is an example of the womb-like as nightmare material, comprised by dark fleshy voids of indeterminate area and origin. It seems to be a living organism. It evokes associations of nature as carnivorous digestive tract, and of the maternal as endless dissipating vacuum, capable of taking life as well as giving it. Ursula's victims are present as part of the cavern, reduced to shrivelled grey garden gnome-like figures sprouting from the floor of the cave. They are left voiceless and blinking, utterly emasculated by her powers. Also found within the cave are Flotsam and Jetsam, the shadowy streamlined figures who are Ursula's minions. Their names link them to the detritus of the sea, but also associate them with the more visceral detritus of the body. They seem to be extensions of her,

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<sup>87</sup> As interpreted by Mary Russo in, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*. p. 1.

<sup>88</sup> Mary Russo theorises about these associations in, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*, Routledge. p. 29.

obeying her desires and adhering to her motives. Her body seems to know no borders.

This area is mirrored by the cave which Ariel occupies. She too is confined, her movements restricted by King Triton's ruling. Her cave is filled with the leftovers and detritus from the human world yet it is less identifiable as the womb-like grotto-esque that Russo speaks of. Rather, during the course of her first song "Part of Your World", we come to see that the space is in fact conical, reaching upwards toward the world above the sea, and the light, a sort of inverse phallus. Within it she indulges fantasies, just as Ursula does, about having "more", and about being able to move freely through the world, possessing knowledge and experience without restraint.

Here there is a similarity between the two characters in terms of goals and aspirations. Where they differ is in the methods of gaining the desired outcome. Ariel aligns herself with the existing (patriarchal) power structures. Ursula attempts to usurp this established structure. She is associated with maternal power<sup>89</sup>. However, this power is depicted as monstrous and frightening. While her cave links her to reproductive body functions and to nature, it is nature portrayed as destructive and dangerous. It is the anti-utopia of patriarchal imagination. The depiction of Ursula as monstrous maternal power, imbued with gynophobic imagery, is then the exempting factor which makes her eventual annihilation more acceptable<sup>90</sup>. It is only the natural common-sense response to the threat of the revolting and horrific which threatens to overthrow all that is reasonable and safe, while Ursula's pursuit of power is punished; Ariel's quest to gain access to power is eventually validated<sup>91</sup>.

While their fates are very different, the correlation between Ursula's grotto and Ariel's hide-out is nevertheless representative of the close bond they share. Ursula mirrors Ariel in many ways, providing the film with an anti-heroine who frequently satirises and undermines the utopian world that Ariel hopes to inhabit. Ursula provides another opposing reflection for Ariel in her body figuration. Sells

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<sup>89</sup> Laura Sells, "Where Do the Mermaids Stand?", in *From Mouse To Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*, eds Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995). p. 182.

<sup>90</sup> *ibid.* p. 181.

<sup>91</sup> *ibid.*

describes Ursula's horrific anatomy as that of an "inverted medusa figure"<sup>92</sup>. Indeed, when Ursula steps out of the darkness she is revealed to be a monstrous chimera, her top half identifiable as human while her bottom represents a particularly sinister incarnation of an octopus-like creature. Her make-up and costuming caricature the vampish femme fatale, as does the framing which emulates the film noir stylistic use of extreme close-ups. These draw attention to her red lips and black tentacles. They waft about her menacingly, evoking the threat of multiplicity as well as the threat of entrapment. In this it can be seen that Ursula's symbolic genealogy originates with the arachnid family, with her nefarious eight "legs" and ability to stalk the ceiling of her cave.

It is difficult to reconcile such morbid associations with the contention, made by critics such as Henry A. Giroux, that the viewer is enticed to return repeatedly to the magical world Disney promises, where they can purchase and consume a sanitized and safe fantasy world<sup>93</sup>. Yet, as we have seen in the previous chapter, and as Giroux himself goes on to assert, it is arguable that participating in entertainment is never really escaping from reality<sup>94</sup>. Instead, entertainment can be seen as inhabiting and realising tropes of power within the context of representation. In his collection of essays *Only Entertainment*, Richard Dyer argues that the driving force of entertainment is a utopian sensibility, that is, the presentation of how an ideal world might be, or, rather, how it might feel<sup>95</sup>. This utopian sensibility describes, for instance, how fictional people are often improbably good looking as well as implausibly articulate. Similarly, problematic situations seem to be more easily and neatly resolved, even against impossible odds<sup>96</sup>.

Dyer argues that the nature of the wish-fulfilment that these entertainments offer can be seen as addressing the inadequacies of society. Utopianism in entertainment is then historically and culturally specific because it works to address the deficiencies of the time and place in which it is created<sup>97</sup>, although the needs that

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<sup>92</sup> *ibid.* p. 183.

<sup>93</sup> Henry A. Giroux, *The Mouse That Roared; Disney and the End of Innocence*. p. 34.

<sup>94</sup> *ibid.* p. 4-5.

<sup>95</sup> Richard Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, Second Edition, (London: Routledge, 2002). p. 20.

<sup>96</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> *ibid.* p. 1.

it represents are often understood to be universal and eternal “human” problems<sup>98</sup>. Perhaps the reason that these problems are so readily recognised is that, as Dyer contends, entertainment responds to certain defined needs that are actually interdependently related to the society they are produced in. Dyer uses the example of musicals, such as *Goldiggers of 1933*, produced in Hollywood during the depression. The real poverty of the times is addressed in *Goldiggers* through the representation of prosperity in the musical numbers<sup>99</sup>.

Dyer points out that the needs which entertainment works to counter are the same needs which capitalism proposes to resolve, transforming poverty, for example, into abundance through consumerism. The transactions proposed in entertainment are thereby defined only by the disparities in society which society itself promises to fix. Other needs, such as those created by gender and race inequalities, are effectively ignored<sup>100</sup>.

*The Little Mermaid* does deal explicitly with concerns raised by contemporary popular feminism, depicting Ariel’s struggles for liberation from the rules of behaviour as laid down by her father King Triton. But the film inevitably bypasses the issue of gender in Ariel’s story. Ariel’s status is advanced through successful romance rather than through redefinition of gender categories. The inequalities of gender are therefore glossed over in favour of propagating heterosexual union as the solution to the problems and needs created by existing gender divisions. The disempowerment and gender inequality experienced by Ariel at the hands of her Father during the beginning of the film is transformed by her romance with Prince Eric into harmony and wholeness, without usurping patriarchal divisions.

Figures such as Ursula the Sea Witch may be seen as the scorned exceptions that are incompatible with utopianism. These de-legitimated grotesque figures serve as the representation of what the progress of capitalism purports to leave behind, the mistakes and imperfections which hold off a consumer driven heaven. Yet they might also be seen as representations of the needs which are ignored by utopianism.

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<sup>98</sup> *ibid.* p. 26.

<sup>99</sup> *ibid.* p. 28.

<sup>100</sup> *ibid.* p. 27.



While the ugly and threatening depiction of these grotesque figures renders them denounced and reviled within the text, it is also possible to consider the anger and antagonism expressed by them as a defiant protest against the advance of civilising and normalising trends<sup>101</sup>.

In her study of Oscar Wilde's version of the *Salomé* myth, Gail Finney argues that representations of the aggressive femme fatale can be seen as a form of social critique<sup>102</sup>. She agrees with critics such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and Elaine Showater, who have discerned a tendency within melodrama texts for the depiction of abject and destructive characters to have a distinguishable "muted version", where the denounced grotesque figure can be understood as a subversive double who acts out rebelliously against the constraints of the conventional tendencies of the text<sup>103</sup>.



Figure 4: Ursula satirises body norms. From, *The Little Mermaid*, (Ron Clements & John Musker, Walt Disney Pictures, United States, 1989).

Ursula is then perhaps the muted voice of rage which opposes the norms and power structures that Ariel is forced to accept. She can be seen as the visible

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<sup>101</sup> Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*. p. 9.

<sup>102</sup> Gail Finney, "Demythologizing the Femme Fatale: Wilde's *Salomé*", in *The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance*, eds Lizabeth Goodman with Jane de Gay, (London: Routledge, 1998). p. 185.

<sup>103</sup> *ibid.*

incarnation of that which is marginalised by utopianism and, while she is repudiated within the text, she is also given time in the limelight to turn the tables and act out her own dismissive commentary on the caveats of this idealised dream world.

Sells' description of Ursula as an "inverted medusa figure" is important here<sup>104</sup>. The Medusa figure is a significant and complex archetype. Probably the most widespread and well known account of the Medusa figure is that depicted in both Greek and Roman mythology. The Gorgon Medusa is depicted in many of these tales as a monstrously ugly female figure with snakes on her head. Any man who looks at her directly is instantly turned to stone. Medusa is eventually beheaded by the vanquishing hero Perseus. Yet there are other accounts of her in which she is depicted as both beautiful and fearsome, a figure of great power and wisdom. It has been suggested that the Greek and Roman accounts of her arise from contact with African cultures who were ruled by women<sup>105</sup>. The name Medusa has been linked to the Greek for ruler or Queen<sup>106</sup>. Furthermore, some versions of her tale relate her ugliness as being the result of punishment for being raped by Neptune in Athena's temple<sup>107</sup>. As with Wilde's *Salomé*, the representation of her destructive rage may be seen as the expression of resentment for the injustice and mistreatment of women.

Freud's writings on the Medusa figure focus on her snake hair and her ability to turn men to stone<sup>108</sup>. He likened her hair to multiple phalluses<sup>109</sup>. For Freud, the Medusa figure represents castration anxiety which the male child encounters upon discovering maternal sexuality<sup>110</sup>. This reading of the Medusa myth literalises fear of emasculation onto the abjected female body, coding the female body as visceral and perilously contiguous. This account of the Medusa figure also naturalises gender differentiation both as the bodily experience of difference and as the unconscious

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<sup>104</sup> Laura Sells, "Where Do the Mermaids Stand?". p. 183.

<sup>105</sup> Kevin Frank, "'Whether Beast or Human': The Cultural Legacies of Dread, Locks, and Dystopia", *Small Axe*, 12.1, (2007): p.50. accessed via project Muse, <http://muse.jhu.edu/helicon.vuw.ac.nz/> (accessed 18/09/08).

<sup>106</sup> Marjorie Garber and Nancy J Vickers, *The Medusa Reader*, eds Marjorie Garber and Nancy J Vickers, (New York: Routledge, 2003). p. 3.

<sup>107</sup> *ibid.* p. 2.

<sup>108</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Medusa's Head", translated by James Strachey, in *The Medusa Reader*, eds Marjorie Garber and Nancy J Vickers, (New York: Routledge, 2003). p. 85.

<sup>109</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> *ibid.* p. 84.

formation of subjective identity. As Russo argues, subjectivity “requires the image of the grotesque body” because it is the illustration of excess and transgression against which the norm can then emerge<sup>111</sup>. Yet, without substantiating Freud’s reading of the Medusa myth, it is possible to view the mythical Medusa as a *description* of the construction of the female body as excessive and wayward.



Figure 5: the Gorgon Ursula. From, *The Little Mermaid*, (Ron Clements & John Musker, Walt Disney Pictures, United States, 1989).

The parallels between the Gorgon Medusa and Ursula the Sea Witch clearly extend beyond the visual. They go beyond even the shared destructive powers and wrathful fury. There are references within the dialogue to a time when Ursula was more powerful and it seems that Triton is responsible in some way for her loss of supernatural dominion. Ursula’s story may be seen as an invocation of the Medusa archetype and the associations of patriarchal oppression and manipulation her tale presents. They can both be seen as embodying protest against circumscriptive forces implied in utopian fantasies. Ursula disrupts *The Little Mermaid*’s narrative of containment through her bodily excesses. Amongst the weapons with which she implicitly critiques the Disney dream, Ursula has the flamboyant power of her voice. Armed with its range and melodramatic expression, her voice is reminiscent of the

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<sup>111</sup> Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*. p. 9.

(classical) Hollywood portrayal of the jaded yet wise female movie or theatre star, as frequently played by stars such as Bette Davis (*All about Eve*, *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane*). At times histrionic and booming and at others brittle and steeped in ironic affectation, it is the abrasive and knowing voice of experience.

She arguably presents the viewer with a possible future version of the demure star-struck Ariel. Ursula is older and wiser and more knowing in her performance of gender. Ursula sends up her own evilness through parodic imitations of coyness and pretensions of playing the helpful innocent. This is most evident in the “Poor Unfortunate Souls” song where she plays a swooning martyr whilst singing; “It’s what I live for // to help unfortunate merfolk, like yourself // poor souls with no one else to turn to”. These lamentations are made preposterous by ironic performance, ridiculing the sentimentality and moral idealism of the story.

Her performance also differentiates her from the artificially poised and proper Ariel. Ursula seems to enjoy her deviant body, most notably when she sings the phrase “body language”. Her body language and figuration seems to express joyous lasciviousness felt toward both “body language” and its implicit associations with sex and bodily enjoyment. At the same time her satirical manner lampoons the artifice of beauty and romance which her song is ostensibly validating. The “lighting” used in Ursula’s song or, rather, the way light is depicted on her, often seems to be the direct amber light from a low angle that would characterise early theatre and vaudeville<sup>112</sup>. This light is consistent with the bawdy tone of her song and her theatrical performance, all suggesting the routine of a failed diva or a transvestite in some dive stage venue. This “backstage” aesthetic is the perfect platform from which to problematise the category of the feminine as natural by revealing the performative elements that structure it<sup>113</sup>.

However, this light is also the opposite of the “light from above” which works to ennoble and enlighten<sup>114</sup>. At times this light from below is more stark and direct, emphasising both her body curves and her facial wrinkles and protuberances. In this light Ursula seems ghostly in a manner that is more horrific and powerful

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<sup>112</sup> Richard Dyer, *White*, (London: Routledge, 1997). p. 107.

<sup>113</sup> Laura Sells, “Where Do the Mermaids Stand?”. p. 182.

<sup>114</sup> Richard Dyer, *White*. p. 116.

than the ghostly pallor Ariel exhibits. The hierarchy of whiteness is expressed in the comparison with the purifying translucence which Ariel's figure is suffused with, and the stark yet murky lighting on Ursula's figure. Dyer suggests such low-key lighting bears cultural associations with insanity, criminality, and poverty<sup>115</sup>.

The double edged coding of Ursula's body, as both the embodiment of subversive protest and repulsive criminality, is indicative of both the potential risks and pleasures that representations of the wayward body offer. In the case of *The Little Mermaid*, the scales are arguably tipped in the closing scenes of the film. Ursula has disguised herself as a human in a ploy to prevent Ariel from breaking her spell. When it becomes clear that her disguise is no longer useful, Ursula literally breaks free and erupts from the confines of her disguise, her flesh ripping through the restrictions of the idealised body she has inhabited, horrifying onlookers.

Here her criminality and lust for power comes to the fore. She tosses Ariel aside, dismissing her as a commodity, a pawn in her power play, unimportant except as a means of blackmailing her enemy. It is power she is after, specifically Triton's power to control the undersea world. Any bond perceived between them is now imperceptible. Ursula is ultimately interested in obtaining or usurping male power and it is male power which defeats her in the end. Prince Eric, inflamed by Ariel's distress, defeats her by impaling her on his ship's phallus-like mast. Ursula's monstrous rage causes a storm of impossible magnitude which is resolved only when she has been destroyed and her body is consumed by a blazing sea.

In the face of such unbridled fury Triton's patriarchal authority is subsequently characterised as comparatively benevolent. In the final scenes of the film Triton's possession of power is depicted as rightful and natural, in spite of the fact that it is maintained through violence. It is portrayed as the power to assert the rightful order of things and to make the lives of his subjects complete and happy at will. It implies nothing dangerous or 'suspect'. This portrayal of patriarchal power is the very essence of Disney's version of patriarchal utopianism. It also features the sentimental moralising Ursula previously ridiculed as the insincere reasoning that masks a hidden agenda.

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<sup>115</sup> *ibid.* p.105.

As Giroux argues in *The Mouse That Roared*, a common theme of recent Disney animated films is the presentation of non-democratic power relations as natural, a part of the mythical realm (*The Little Mermaid*) and the animal kingdom (*The Lion King*)<sup>116</sup>. Indeed it seems that when the grotesque usurps power from the “rightful” monarchist rulers, nature itself gets out of whack. In the case of Ursula’s reign in *The Little Mermaid* her seizure of power causes squalls and a raging whirlpool that subsides only after she is killed and her body is swallowed up by the sea, causing it to boil and smoke. This scene provides a potent image of the punishment and destruction of uncivilised and deviant authority. It is also one of the most spectacular scenes in the film. The excessive nature of this spectacle suggests that the maintenance of patriarchal authority requires an enormous exertion of energy.

*The Little Mermaid* offers a villain whose embodiment of the grotesque links horrific evilness to the maternal body. Ursula is depicted as powerful and as linked to nature – but her power is constructed as malevolent and her links to the natural and the maternal are constructed as lethal and ruinous. However, the overdetermination of her grotesque body lends itself to implicit critiques of the utopian sensibility that shapes Disney films. *The Little Mermaid* is careful to show that such rebellious bodies should be repressed and punished. Yet the images of Ursula’s horrible deviant body may linger, remaining more affecting, and troubling, than the happy ending which supplants her.

*Aladdin* is an example of the grotesque being embodied across several characters instead of being encapsulated in a single figure. Indeed, it seems that all the significant characters of the film, except the idealised hero and heroine, are blighted by some notable character flaw which they can be seen to embody through a prominent physical defect, such as extreme fatness or thinness. These defects not only fall short of contemporary body norms, they are monstrous caricatures of difference which rely on racist and homophobic images to valorise the white American middle class. The film can be seen to form part of the colonial discourse

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<sup>116</sup> Henry A. Giroux, *The Mouse That Roared; Disney and the End of Innocence*. p. 107.

relating to the Arab world. Homi K. Bhabha argues that colonial discourse works to “construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin”<sup>117</sup>. These stereotypes are deployed to portray the Middle-East as a frightening and grotesque place which produces crazed villains and shape-shifting magic from every ‘dark’ corner.

The coding of racial difference as grotesque is arguably not unique to *Aladdin*. Henry A. Giroux argues that racial stereotyping in Disney films can be traced back to the 1946 movie *Song of the South*<sup>118</sup>, while Matt Roth argues that anti-Semitic stereotypes were present in *Pinocchio*, Disney’s second feature film, released in 1940<sup>119</sup>. *Aladdin* is a notable case because all the characters are Arabs, yet the way they are racially coded is variable<sup>120</sup>. For instance, the evil henchman Razoul is rough and burly with decidedly militant leanings. He is flagged as a villain partly via his thick foreign sounding accent and minimal vocabulary. He is threatening and loud and obeys his master’s orders with cruel glee, forming a recognisable stereotype of the Middle-Eastern Other as a violent and barbaric aggressor. Here there is a representational link made between racist stereotypes and natural wickedness, a conflation which adds up to an image of Razoul as a threatening sub-human ghoul. The coding of the supporting cast and chorus, as shiftily at best and monstrous at worst, may be seen as a companion to American foreign policy at the time; Arabs in general are not to be trusted<sup>121</sup>. Their bodies are constructed as “soft” bodies. Unlike the Reagan “hard body” which became a collective symbol which worked in the American imaginary to shore up national

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<sup>117</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, “The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse”, in *Visual Culture: the Reader*, (London: Sage Publications, 1999). p. 371.

<sup>118</sup> Henry A. Giroux, *The Mouse That Roared; Disney and the End of Innocence*. p. 103.

<sup>119</sup> Matt Roth, “A Short History of Disney Fascism”. p. 16.

<sup>120</sup> Henry A. Giroux, *The Mouse That Roared; Disney and the End of Innocence*. p. 105.

<sup>121</sup> Tim Jon Semmerling argues that the popular American perception of Arabs became more pointedly contemptuous in the 1970s when oil producing Arab countries began to demand more control of their natural resources, and imposing embargoes in order to attempt to change American foreign policy. In, “*Evil*” *Arabs in American Popular Film: Orientalist Fear*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006). p. 9-10 and 13.

boundaries, the “soft body” came to be seen as a collective symbol for immorality, criminality, and weakness<sup>122</sup>.

In contrast, the hero Aladdin is clearly defined. He is modelled after that paragon of white all-American charisma, Tom Cruise<sup>123</sup>. Instead of Razoul’s thick accent both Aladdin and Jasmine speak with the all too familiar Californian drawl<sup>124</sup>. As the America loving minority, our central couple are distanced via coding practices which place them as young and transparent, both in terms of their motives and their skin type. Most importantly Aladdin and Jasmine are characterised as dreamers who crave escape to, “a Whole New World”. This song, crooned by the two animated stars whilst on their flying-carpet joy-ride, articulates their openness to “a new fantastic point of view”, where “no one can tell us no”. They are clearly enamoured with the American dream. Here the film makes a careful distinction between ‘good’ Arabs and ‘bad’ ones. ‘Good’ Arabs are light skinned and Americanised. ‘Bad’ Arabs are dark and unintelligible. Jasmine and Aladdin are candidates for assimilation into capitalist utopia and characters like Razoul are potential threats to national security<sup>125</sup>.

Racist stereotypes are not the only way in which the film distinguishes its idealised hero couple from their grotesque surroundings. The head villain of the movie is Jafar who is coded both as a devious Arab and as a haughty gay villain. One of the ways in which he is coded as a gay stereotype is through his accent. One might expect him to also have an outlandish sounding accent. Yet, while his is not

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<sup>122</sup> Susan Jeffords, “Hard Bodies: The Reagan Heroes”, in *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*, (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994). p. 24-25 and 27.

<sup>123</sup> as reported by imdb; <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0103639/trivia> (accessed 16/05/08).

<sup>124</sup> Henry A. Giroux, *The Mouse That Roared; Disney and the End of Innocence*. p. 105.

<sup>125</sup> Tim Jon Semmerling argues that the perception of Arabic people as potential terrorists became popular in the late 1970s. There was a particular emphasis in the popular press that Arabs hated Americans, and Reagan made speeches that intimated that terrorism from Arab countries was an imminent threat. In, “*Evil*” *Arabs in American Popular Film: Orientalist Fear*. p. 20-23. When the film was released in 1992 it caused protests for this racial coding, as well as for the lyrics to the opening song “Arabian Nights”. While the wording of the song was toned down in subsequent releases of the movie the other ways in which Arabs are coded as villainous are arguably too many and too deeply rooted for any amount of censorship to cover over. The protests were reported in, *Entertainment Weekly Online*, <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,1202224,00.html>, (accessed 14/01/08). The lyrics which were originally: “Where they cut off your ear if they don't like your face/It's barbaric, but, hey, it's home.” were changed to “Where it's flat and immense and the heat is intense/It's barbaric, but, hey, it's home.” for the video release and the subsequent CD re-release.



the ubiquitous drawl of the Hollywood star it is nevertheless different from Razoul's. Jafar's accent is like that of an ageing thespian educated in Received Pronunciation. Here Jafar is characterized as a would-be Shakespearian actor turned pantomime villain. Jafar's characterisation adheres to popular cultural perceptions about queerness which link gay sexuality to superficial performance, pretentiousness and effete or feminine gestures<sup>126</sup>.

He is effete and theatrical, with elongated features and a manicured beard that is curling and kinky – bent – offset by curved shoulder pads and cape. He moves with cat-like grace, slinking out from dark shadowy recesses to surprise his enemies. His ornamental dress with its striking colour combination make him more expensively dressed than the Sultan, who employs him as an advisor. He persuades the Sultan via hypnosis, directed from his jewelled walking stick, in a manner reminiscent of a posturing magician. Jafar's sin is a lust for power and he spends much of the film scheming to usurp the Sultan, though even this is not enough in the end and he sets his sights on being an all-powerful sorcerer. As with Ursula in *The Little Mermaid*, *Aladdin* depicts the struggle of good versus evil as the natural law of patriarchy fighting against the unnatural law of the marginalised. This time it is homosexuality which threatens to destroy the natural order<sup>127</sup>.

The unnatural grotesqueness of Jafar is emphasised by his anorexic appearance and drooping mask-like face. The viewer is likely to find such extreme thinness grotesque because, as Susan Bordo argues in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, contemporary western societies pathologise bodies who are seen to stray too far from the acceptable norms, viewing them as alarming aberrations<sup>128</sup>. These bodies are likely to be found disturbing by the viewer because they embody resistance to the demands of normalization, they

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<sup>126</sup> Richard Dyer describes these associations in, *Culture of Queers*, (London: Routledge, 2002). p. 5-6.

Also, Kerry Mallan and Roderick McGills write about what they describe as Jafar's camp characteristics, and link them to his construction as a villain in "Between a Frock and a Hard Place: Camp Aesthetics and Children's Culture", in *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 35, no.1, (2005): p. 12. Accessed through Project Muse: <http://muse.jhu.edu/helicon.vuw.ac.nz/> (accessed 18/09/08).

<sup>127</sup> Richard Dyer, "Stereotyping", in *Gays and Film*, Edited by Richard Dyer, (London: BFI Publishing, 1980). p. 32.

<sup>128</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, (London: University of California Press, 1993). p. 186.

“go too far”. Their failure, or refusal, to attain what is perceived as the appropriate body styles of the moment is a repudiation of deeply held cultural standards which idealised bodies gratify<sup>129</sup>.



Figure 6: Jafar upsets the natural order. From *Aladdin* (Ron Clements & John Musker, Walt Disney Pictures, United States, 1992).

The Sultan presents the viewer with a body that is equally inappropriate. His physicality is characterized by fatness and clumsiness, typified by his inability to wear his turban without it tipping over and obscuring his vision. Bordo contends that bodies such as the Sultan’s engender associations of laziness and lack of willpower<sup>130</sup>, qualities that are not tolerated without disapproval. Again, cultural standards are contravened by wayward physical styles. The coding of the Sultan’s physicality may then be seen as proof that, in spite of being a ruler, he is ineffectual and gullible, literally not able to see what is going on in front of him.

The Arabia that *Aladdin* depicts is one which is beset by effeminate villains and emasculated leaders and is populated by half-crazed would-be terrorists. It is clearly lacking in proper (white, American) masculine leadership. However, Arabia can be made civilised by American culture and transformed into a suburban utopia,

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<sup>129</sup> *ibid.* p. 203.

<sup>130</sup> *ibid.*

peopled by beautiful people with bleached teeth, wide eyes, and fashionable haircuts.

The figuration of Aladdin's Genie also touches on paunchy fatness as well as the effeminate. But Genie's configuration is more easily read as camp. Susan Sontag's writings on camp argue that camp is an aesthetic or quality which offers a supplementary set of standards to that of good and bad. Camp favours frivolity and artifice over seriousness, and irony and style over seriousness and content<sup>131</sup>. Genie's hyperactive shifts in body configuration result in a nearly unintelligible rush of images. He shifts body size and gender at will, using his body as a tool for comedic effects. This characterization of Genie's mutable form can be seen as grotesque because it speaks of the fluidity of gender and sexuality. His body then might also be said to be momentarily creating what Alexander Doty terms "queer space". A space of sexual instability is created in which "already queerly positioned viewers can connect with in various ways, and within which straights can express their queer impulses"<sup>132</sup>. Genie's shape-shifting body might then be seen as a site of resistance to the law of patriarchal heterotopia, or as a location of openness and possibility<sup>133</sup>.

However, Mallan and McGills argue that Genie's body lacks any real subversive potential because it relies on an understanding of the norms which it is only temporarily subverting. The artifice of his body is only momentarily perceived as he shape-shifts, and is only then perceived due to its opposition to the norm. They argue Genie's shape-shifting is better described as *metacamp* – it references camp characters and styles in an exaggerated fashion for laughs. They argue that Genie is more clownish than camp<sup>134</sup>. However, the Genie's body may still be said to create queer space because the "normal" state of his body is characterised by his undefined

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<sup>131</sup> Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp", in *A Susan Sontag Reader*, (New York: Penguin, 1983). p. 107 and 115.

<sup>132</sup> Alexander Doty, "There's Something Queer Here", in *The Film Studies Reader*, edited by Joanne Hollows, Peter Hutchings, Mark Jancovich (London: Arnold, 2000) p. 340.

<sup>133</sup> *ibid.* p. 339.

<sup>134</sup> Mallan, Kerry and McGills, Roderick. "Between a Frock and a Hard Place". p. 12.

and swirling lower half which serves as a reminder of his ability to transform himself and those around him.

Genie's normal body is also still highly performative. Genie's blue skin and rounded smiling face visually link him to clownishness and they also distance him somewhat from the pejorative associations with Arab stereotypes. As does his accent, which matches that of Aladdin and Jasmine. Yet he does not possess a body that matches the physical norms which the hero and heroine model. Genie's performative clownish body may be argued to link him to black minstrelsy and drag. He is voiced by Robin Williams who was then known for flamboyantly performed popular humour and he spends much of his time enacting irreverent gags and songs to entertain Aladdin.

Genie is also effectively Aladdin's slave for much of the narrative. He is forced to obey whoever possesses the lamp which he is tethered to. The injustice of this is explored in the narrative of the film and Aladdin eventually frees Genie. Genie is surprised and grateful for this and they remain good friends. This part of the narrative replays the emancipation of black slaves in America in such a way as to reduce and mitigate the long and painful history of slavery.

The effacement of history is not the only purpose that Genie's characterization serves. Gwendolyn Audrey Foster argues that a frequent feature of white cinema is the inclusion of black characters, whose involvement in the narrative functions to clearly mark out the exceptional nature of the central white characters<sup>135</sup>. Black characters are Othered and kept safely to the sidelines of the story, recalled when their purpose is necessary<sup>136</sup>. In this way Genie serves to make Jasmine and Aladdin seem comparatively white. His servility confirms their "natural" superiority and his wackiness marks them as the "straight" characters with more serious and substantial fates. It is arguable that in fact all the supporting characters serve the hero and heroine in a similar way. Jasmine and Aladdin are pale and Americanised but this would not be as noticeable if the other characters were

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<sup>135</sup> Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, *Performing Whiteness: Postmodern Re/Constructions in the Cinema*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003). p. 7.

<sup>136</sup> *ibid.*

similarly characterised. Their idealised whiteness requires the comparative darkness of characters such as Razoul and Jafar in order to be visible<sup>137</sup>.



Figure 7: Genie serves Aladdin. From *Aladdin* (Ron Clements & John Musker, Walt Disney Pictures, United States, 1992).

While Genie is differentiated from these “bad” Arab figures, he still creates some hurdles for the Hero and Heroine. While he is not evil, his wish-granting ability has the potential to give the wisher power. Furthermore, he is impelled to grant the wishes of whoever possesses his lamp, the consequence of which is that his loyalty is necessarily fluid. Before the happy conclusion in which he is freed from the lamp, he is forced to lend his magical abilities to Jafar, even though he knows that his appropriation of power is unnatural. Genie is not depicted as wanting to be on the side of the “good” characters, even when he is forced to help Jafar. He is differentiated from Jafar in that he doesn’t want power; he is even willing to give up his own powers. This prevents him from being constructed as monstrous because he does not wilfully threaten patriarchal power. In fact, he aides Jasmine and Aladdin in defeating Jafar, by turning him into a Genie-slave.

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<sup>137</sup> *ibid.*

Genie is unmistakably one of Disney's more popular characters and it may be argued that much of this is to do with his 'elastic' body. These attributes may also be seen as challenging social categorisation and gender norms. Genie's performance arguably shares with musical star Fred Astaire a tendency towards narcissism, exhibitionism, and masquerade<sup>138</sup>. Steven Cohan argues in "Feminizing the Song and Dance Man", that these tropes are usually defined in Hollywood cinema as feminine attributes. Cohan argues that figures such as Astaire challenge and interrupt such assumptions through their self-conscious and joyful performance of song and dance<sup>139</sup>. Genie's show stopping musical numbers and comedic asides are exuberant respites from the staid conventionality of the central characters and the norms they embody. Genie's show-stopping body transformations also work to restructure the space around him. His routines often involve transforming the people and things within the scene, often for satirical effect.

However, Genie's numbers may stop the show for a short time, but they do not interrupt it indefinitely. The film is also careful to avoid giving Genie ambitions for power. Instead, Genie recognises Aladdin as the rightful bearer of authority. In fact he assists in the destruction of Jafar and his bid to usurp patriarchal western power. So, while Genie largely avoids the associations of "terror and revulsion" which Russo argues the grotesque is often associated with, it can be argued that this is because he poses no sustained threat to established hierarchies of power.

*Aladdin* makes use of the grotesque in order to construct its hero couple as natural and rightfully privileged. Racist imagery is used to depict the world that surrounds them as deviant and dangerous. The villain of the film is presented through homophobic characterisation and punished brutally for his challenge to white patriarchal power. However, the supporting character of Genie is rendered in more complex and contradictory ways. Genie presents the viewer with a performative body which temporarily destabilises heterosexist norms and creates "queer" moments. Yet, these moments do not overthrow the hetero-normative

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<sup>138</sup> Steven Cohan, "'Feminizing' the Song and Dance Man", in *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, Edited by Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, (London: Routledge, 1993). p. 48.

<sup>139</sup> *ibid.*

narrative of the film or substantially challenge the patriarchal power structures which shape it.

The representations of the grotesque in these two films may be seen to authenticate both the civilised body politic and idealised body norms by opposing them in an essentialised form<sup>140</sup>. Yet, as Foster puts it, while these dual categories continue to dominate in films such as *Aladdin* and *The Little Mermaid*, it “seems to take Herculean effort to maintain the binaries necessary to stabilise white heterotopia and supremacy”. The gruesome portrayal of the grotesque villain’s death seems to be necessary to arrest the possibility of weakening the heterogeneity and homogeneity of Disney’s Utopian world. Examples must be made of these aberrations by punishing and annihilating them, a deed executed with almost alarming ferocity.

However, the grotesque characters within these films are given the opportunity to satirise and undermine the heterosexist norms which structure the films. These characters embody ironic and camp sensibilities, opening up sites of resistance and possibility. They frequently act as embodiments of the subjectivities that are repressed and marginalised by the Disney version of white heterotopia. This repression is hysterically re-enacted in the narrative closing where their bodies are transformed or annihilated, leaving the way clear for the establishment of a utopian normality that has been sanitised of deviant elements.

The next chapter will examine the ways in which Disney has employed positive representations of marginalised subjectivities in *Pocahontas*. In contrast with the grotesque body studied in this chapter, the body of Pocahontas is domesticated to fit the configuration of the idealised feminine body.

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<sup>140</sup> Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*. p. 9.

**Visibilities and Erasures:  
the Discursive Margins of Ethnicity and Whiteness in Disney's *Pocahontas*.**

One of the greatest lies of the cinema is that the world is largely made up of attractive white people who perform heroic acts and reproduce. It takes a tremendous amount of effort to maintain the lie of whiteness, yet every time an ethnic type is actually portrayed, Hollywood and its audiences congratulate themselves, as if they are themselves breaking up the grand narrative lies of the past. Instead, they are usually heaping on more lies.

- Gwendolyn Audrey Foster.<sup>141</sup>

So far this thesis has focused on Disney's representation of idealized femininity and whiteness, exploring the conflation of idealized femininity with a configuration of whiteness that is both translucent and glowing. White femininity is constructed within a binary with grotesque villainous bodies that are racialised and figured through sexist and homophobic iconography. Yet, in a number of recent Disney animated features, such as *Pocahontas*, the idealized heroine of the film is characterised as belonging to a so-called "ethnic minority". However, as the above quote suggests, the visibility of non-white central characters in Disney films does not guarantee a break from a prejudicial account of non-white ethnicities.

Terms such as "ethnic minority" are frequently employed to describe and praise texts which include non-white figures. However, as Ella Shohat points out in her influential work "Ethnicities-in-Relation: Toward a Multicultural Reading of American Cinema", the assumption that some groups are "ethnic", whilst others are not, is based on the naturalised belief that whiteness is the universal norm, "unmarked" by ethnicity<sup>142</sup>. The very use of the terms such as "ethnic" can be seen to work to obscure unequal power relations as well as grouping disparate and independent identities into a singular category. The use here, then, of the term

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<sup>141</sup> Gwendolyn Audrey Foster. *Performing Whiteness: Postmodern Re/Constructions in the Cinema*, (New York: State University of New York Press). 2003. p. 138.

<sup>142</sup> Ella Shohat, "Ethnicities-in-Relation: Toward a Multicultural Reading of American Cinema", in *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema*, edited by Lester D. Friedman, (Illinois: Urbana University of Illinois Press) 1991. p. 215.



“ethnicity”, is taken from Shohat’s where she describes “a spectrum of identities and differences, all ultimately involving questions of inequalities of power”<sup>143</sup>.

It is the notion of unbalanced power relations which informs this chapter’s reading of *Pocahontas*. Ethnicity will be defined as being protean rather than fixed, and culturally constructed by diverse experiences rather than being universal or essential<sup>144</sup>. The “lie of whiteness” may then be described as the axiom that sees ethnicity as a discrete and coherent entity. In this axiom, whiteness is also regarded as de-politicized and ahistorical. So-called ethnic minorities are similarly unified under the category of “Other”, conceived through what Shohat terms the “mark of the plural”, in which diverse communities are homogenized and characterized as secondary or extraneous<sup>145</sup>.

On the surface, *Pocahontas* would seem to disrupt such ethnic pluralism through its “authentic” retelling of historical colonial events, centred on the figure of a young Native American from the Powhatan tribe. She is cast as the key figure in the narrative, which at times portrays white colonists negatively against positive representations of Native American figures. This apparent reversal poses some important questions for this project, the first of which is whether the depiction of the Disney heroine as belonging to an ethnic “minority” works against the binary which categorizes marginalized ethnic groups and nations as interchangeably “Other”. Or, can it be seen to contribute to this sectioning off of the so called “other”, in order to construct and reify bourgeois whiteness? The exploration of these queries is necessary to this project’s enquiry into the construction of the essentialised feminine ideal: is such a construct undermined or destabilised by the representation of ethnicity? Or do they merely smooth over or erase difference, thus re-inscribing white patriarchal power<sup>146</sup>? If so, how does this erasure work on the figure of the heroine in these films?

This chapter will argue that while *Pocahontas* is ostensibly set in the past, the film may be seen to speak to contemporary tensions and negotiations of ethnicity

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<sup>143</sup> *ibid.* p. 216.

<sup>144</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> *ibid.* p. 227.

<sup>146</sup> Jude Davies and Carol R. Smith, *Gender, Ethnicity and Sexuality in Contemporary American Film*, (Edinburgh: Keele University Press, 1997). p. 9.

and gender in which ethnic femininity bears an “important relationship to the way a nation sells itself and manufactures nationalist mythologies”<sup>147</sup>. Films such as *Pocahontas* can be seen to present an important step toward representing the stories of marginalised peoples in a way that values difference, as well as going some way to acknowledge past injustices. However, it may also be argued that *Pocahontas*, as an exemplary Disney text, in fact works in ways that diminish or otherwise peripheralize the oppression of marginalised peoples. Complex social and economic tensions are simplified, or smoothed over, to present a more comfortable account of American culture where racial inequalities are reduced to superficialities and confined to the distant past. This chapter will explore the ways in which the figuration of the heroine’s body in *Pocahontas* may be seen to embody such questions of cultural visibilities and erasures.

Pocahontas is a well known historical figure. However, the ‘facts’ of her life are contentious. What we can know of the “real” Pocahontas must necessarily be gleaned through a finite number of historical sources such as the letters of John Smith (also a real historical figure). The accuracy of such sources are likely to have been mediated by personal and political experience. Furthermore, sources of the Pocahontas story only come from the perspective of the English colonialists<sup>148</sup>. Regardless of what the “facts” of the story may have been, it is clear that the representational use of the Pocahontas story have historically been motivated by cultural and economic concerns.

Her story was used to claim the malleability of the “New World” and its peoples, presenting them as non-threatening and potentially assimilable<sup>149</sup>. In this story the native Princess Pocahontas was reported to have intervened to save the life of colonialist John Smith, throwing herself between Smith and her fellow tribesmen executioners. She was described to have been subsequently kidnapped by the

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<sup>147</sup> Diane Negra, *Off-White Hollywood: American Culture and Ethnic Female Stardom*, (London: Routledge, 2001). p. 136.

<sup>148</sup> Pauline Turner Strong, “Playing Indian in the Nineties: *Pocahontas* and *The Indian in the Cupboard*”, In *Hollywood’s Indian: The Portrayal of the Native American in Film*, edited by Peter C. Rollins and John E. O’Connor, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1998). p. 194.

<sup>149</sup> *ibid.*

English, only to embrace a “civilised” lifestyle<sup>150</sup>. This story captured the imagination of English society, spurred on by her conversion to Christianity, and marriage to tobacco farmer John Rolfe<sup>151</sup>. This conversion is likely to have appealed to the colonialist desire to transpose English society in Virginia, a desire which saw King James order his Bishops to collect funds for the “education” and conversion of the Natives<sup>152</sup>. That they were simultaneously attempting to edge the Powhatans off their land seems to have been an irony largely lost on the English. According to historian James Axtell, the English considered native land rights to be material rather than actual. Native land claims were thought to be inferior to the colonist’s claims as “civilised” people<sup>153</sup>.

Pocahontas’ subsequent visit to England is likely to have also contributed to a general fad for human curios from the New World<sup>154</sup>. This fad for displaying and viewing Indian bodies as exotic objects of desire continues in contemporary cultural texts. For example, S. Elizabeth Bird argues that cultural representations of American Indians have continued to position the American Indian body as both sexualised and desexualised object of the white gaze. Bird argues that images of American Indians are almost exclusively confined to a small group of stereotypes which work to confirm white myths about Native Americans as either savages or as noble spiritual keepers of the land<sup>155</sup>.

One of these stereotypes is that of the Princess. Bird describes this type as: “gentle, noble, non-threateningly erotic, virtually a white Christian, yet different, because she was tied to the native soil of America”<sup>156</sup>. Pocahontas is a prime example of this type. Her self-sacrificial defence of the white man John Smith

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<sup>150</sup> James Axtell, “The Rise and Fall of the Powhatan Empire”, in *Natives and Newcomers: The Cultural Origins of North America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). p. 250

<sup>151</sup> Katie N. Johnson and Tamara Underiner, “Command Performances: Staging Native Americans at Tillicum Village”, in, *Selling The Indian: Commercializing and Appropriating American Indian Cultures*, edited by Carter Jones Mayer and Diana Royer, (Tuscon: The University of Arizona Press, 2001). p. 44.

<sup>152</sup> James Axtell, “The Rise and Fall of the Powhatan Empire”. p. 252.

<sup>153</sup> *ibid.* p. 241.

<sup>154</sup> *ibid.* p. 236.

<sup>155</sup> S. Elizabeth Bird, “Savage Desires: The Gendered Construction of the American Indian in Popular Media”, in *Selling the Indian: Commercializing and Appropriating American Indian Cultures*, edited by Carter Jones Mayer and Diana Royer, (Tuscon: The University of Arizona Press, 2001). p. 62-63.

<sup>156</sup> *ibid.* p. 79.

provided America with a founding myth in which Indians welcomed whites to their land freely<sup>157</sup>. Bird argues that contemporary uses of the noble Princess/Pocahontas image work to affirm this myth. They also work to dehumanise American Indians so that they continue to be the eroticised objects of the white gaze, frequently found in narratives where they are shown to prefer white men. Such narratives and images can be seen to deny American Indians subjectivity within representation, especially sexual subjectivity, so that they can be seen as erotic objects for the white gaze, but are largely denied representation on their own terms<sup>158</sup>. Historically speaking then, the figure of Pocahontas has been used to build and confirm a sense of the inevitability of the white colonization of America. Her image has also worked to undercut voices of protest by representing the Native Americans of that period as erotic objects of fantasy who were largely complicit with the projects of colonization. The very fact that Disney chose to dramatise this story speaks of the pervasiveness of these myths.

Disney's version of this tale centres on a fictional love story between Pocahontas and John Smith. John Smith and his crew sail from England with the intention of finding gold in the New World. Eventually they arrive in America and dock on Powhatan land. Ignorant and afraid of the natives, they soon begin building a barricaded fort. Meanwhile, Smith meets Pocahontas, who teaches him not to fear her people. They fall in love but Smith is attacked by Pocahontas' erstwhile betrothed Kocoum. He attacks Smith and is shot. Smith did not shoot Kocoum but he takes the blame and is sentenced to death by Chief Powhatan. Conflict between English and Powhatan people is then intensified, leading to a major battle. On the battlefield, as Powhatan is about to strike Smith, Pocahontas enters and stops Powhatan from killing him. This halts the battle and the two sides reach a truce. Most of the English appear to return home, taking with them gifts given by the Powhatans.

Disney media releases, such as the one accompanying the DVD re-release, claim that the central character of Pocahontas is modelled on voice actor Irene

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<sup>157</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> *ibid.* p. 89.

Bedard, of Inupiat Eskimo, French Canadian, and Cree descent<sup>159</sup>. As if to prove the point that Pocahontas is based on a “real” American Indian, photographs of Bedard are presented side by side with stills of the animated Pocahontas in these articles. This assertion of authenticity, risible as it is considering Pocahontas’ extreme physique, does call attention to the problematic nature of arguments which call for realism in *Pocahontas*. As cultural theorist Eva Marie Garrouette argues, most attempts to define American Indian identity tend to work to “impose a misleading and timeless homogeneity onto tribes”<sup>160</sup>. The depiction of Pocahontas suggests that Disney takes all non-white people to be essentially one group. Such efforts to define the standard inevitably exclude that which is aberrational<sup>161</sup>. The question, then, is not whether the representation of Pocahontas is truthful or accurate but, rather, who benefits from the particular truth invested in the representation? It is important at this point to note that the intention here is not to imply a secret conspiracy perpetuated by the Disney Company, or to uncover hidden meanings within the texts. Instead, the focus here is on how notions of superiority and inferiority construct a racialised discourse within these texts<sup>162</sup>.

To that end, there is one deviation from the historical accounts of the Pocahontas story which seems significant. *Pocahontas* presents the central heroine in such a way as to suggest she has reached, or very nearly reached, adulthood. This is significant because, as Diane Negra asserts, representations of the ethnic woman present different implications to that of the ethnic girl. Representations of the ethnic girl tend to moderate any negatively coded racial attributes by virtue of the malleability suggested by her tender age. Representations of the ethnic woman, on

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<sup>159</sup> Renata Joy, “An Interview With Pocahontas: Actress Irene Bedard Reflects on Voicing Disney’s Strongest Female Character.”, accessed via Walt Disney Internet Group, “Ultimate Disney”, <http://ultimatedisney.com/pocahontas-interview.html>, (accessed 29/02/08).

<sup>160</sup> Eva Marie Garrouette, *Real Indians: Identity and the Survival of Native America*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). p. 67.

<sup>161</sup> Judith Butler makes this argument in regards to gender, though it seems appropriate as applied to other processes of normalization and naturalization, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and The Subversion of identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1999). p. xxi.

<sup>162</sup> Lola Young argues for this tactic in terms of analysing texts in, “Imperial Culture: the Primitive, the Savage and White Civilization”, in *Fear of the Dark: ‘Race’, Gender and Sexuality in the Cinema*, Routledge, London, 1996. p. 55.

the other hand, tend to work in ways that flaunt her ethnicity<sup>163</sup>. The historical figure of Pocahontas was thought to be about ten or twelve years old, which would perhaps explain her historical popularity as a symbol of benign colonial relations. Her characterisation as an undeveloped juvenile are likely to have appealed to paternalistic notions of colonial relations which, according to Edward Said, characterise the other as childlike and misguided, against which the colonial force may see itself as the rational and mature influence which the Other is found to require<sup>164</sup>.

Disney's Pocahontas, figured more recognisably as a young woman, or perhaps a girl on the cusp of womanhood, may then signal a shift in the representational use of Pocahontas and her story. While she is yet young enough to be occasionally rendered girlish, more frequently she is figured in ways which suggest physical maturity<sup>165</sup>. The liminality of her figuration parallels her role within the narrative, in which she serves as a go-between in the conflict between the English and her own people. Her age is central to this ability to function as mediator. She is young enough to be open to friendly relations with the invading whites, yet old enough to see that the colonists lack spirituality and ecological reverence, which her people can then trade off to John Smith and his fellow pioneers in exchange for peace and mutual respect. Here Disney's *Pocahontas* seems to re-affirm the apologist sentiments of the earlier Princess/Pocahontas myths.

This bizarre chain of logic reaches its zenith in the concluding scenes of the film in which both sides lay down their arms in response to Pocahontas' words of earthy wisdom, combined with the effect of some spiritually enlightening wind blowing through the scene. This exchange paints the erroneous picture that once the English settled in America they ceased destructive exploitation of the land and its people. The colonists' rapid conversion presents the colonisation of America as only briefly injurious to its small band of natives, instead of the prolonged and devastating oppression of diverse nations which frequently ended in the annihilation of entire populations. The only concession *Pocahontas* makes to the deep-seated and

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<sup>163</sup> Diane Negra, *Off-White Hollywood: American Culture and Ethnic Female Stardom*. p. 20.

<sup>164</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed, (London: Penguin Books, 2003). p. 40.

<sup>165</sup> Diane Negra, *Off-White Hollywood: American Culture and Ethnic Female Stardom*. p. 20.

persistent racism that continues to buoy colonialist discourse is expressed in the figure of the unpopular, and obviously evil, Governor Ratcliffe.

Blame is thus tidily assigned on an individual basis, rather than interrogating the unequal power relations that served the economic and cultural interests of the conquering whites in the “New World”. Othering tactics such as this allow viewers to react against blatant onscreen racism without relating it to forms of insidious and covert racism of everyday modern life. Like the westerns analyzed by Foster, this sleight of hand can be seen to act in such a way as to disguise and reformulate a shameful period in history, recasting it with a heavy gloss of nostalgia for a time that never was<sup>166</sup>. It would seem that, in this sense, rather than recovering the history of a group of marginalized and under-represented people, *Pocahontas* masks the horrors of subjugation and reclaims them for the mitigation of white guilt at a time when whiteness was severely under political and cultural pressure in America.



Figure 8: spiritual transferral. From *Pocahontas*, (Mike Gabriel & Eric Golberg, Walt Disney Pictures, United States, 1995).

While this transaction speaks to myths of American diversity which depict racial integration as largely unproblematic, the figure of Pocahontas can also be seen

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<sup>166</sup> Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, *Performing Whiteness: Postmodern Re/Constructions in the Cinema*. p. 138.

to speak to what Diane Negra identifies as the “late twentieth century tendenc[y] to promote the re-discovery of ethnicity as a source of vitality”<sup>167</sup>. These two representational impulses are not as antithetical as they may seem. Both affirm nationalist mythologies which posit an America that participates in an untroubled pluralism. The image of Pocahontas appeals to desires for a harmonious and unified America at a time when the coverage of Los Angeles riots and the trial of O.J Simpson were providing evidence that the nation was very much divided by racial inequalities<sup>168</sup>.

Negra identifies this period as one in which there was a sense of “cultural malaise” or exhaustion, where positive family and national identities were seen to be diminished<sup>169</sup>. She argues that contemporary texts worked to reclaim ethnic histories as a way to inject a sense of vitality and belonging in the face of what was seen as a sterile society that was in need of cultural rejuvenation<sup>170</sup>. The figure of Pocahontas may be seen as the embodiment of such looked-for ethnic vibrancy. An exemplary demonstration of this can be seen in the scene where we are first introduced to Pocahontas. She is seen diving from a great height off a steep cliff into the waters of a river. Her confidence and physical prowess in this feat is matched by the apparent affinity with her surroundings which allow her to make such a literal leap into the unknown. Village Shaman Kekata confirms Pocahontas’ uniqueness as well as locating its source to her ethnicity, summing her up by saying “she has her mother’s spirit; she goes wherever the wind takes her”. She is demonstratively free and spontaneous, living for the present and acting on each whim as it takes her. She is considered to be a unique figure in her community, attracting curiosity and speculation. This aspect of Pocahontas’ characterization, typified by Kekata’s statement, itself dangerously reminiscent of sportswear company slogans, can be seen to speak to American myths of individuality and exceptionality<sup>171</sup>. Further, her exceptionality is derived from her familial ties, her “mother’s spirit”, which is the origin of her wilful independence and “just do it” attitude.

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<sup>167</sup> Diane Negra, *Off-White Hollywood: American Culture and Ethnic Female Stardom*. p. 137.

<sup>168</sup> *ibid.* p.139.

<sup>169</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>170</sup> *ibid.* p. 20.

<sup>171</sup> *ibid.* p.138.



Pocahontas' youthful exuberance and energy as well as her headstrong approach may be seen as qualities constructed in response to perceived cultural enervation. Yet it is important here to question who principally stands to benefit from the potential cultural uplift that Pocahontas may be seen to speak to. As Negra puts it: "Americanizing ethnic femininity does not so much entail a renunciation of ethnic attributes, as it does an attempt to codify and delineate those attributes that are meaningful within an American ideological system"<sup>172</sup>. Attributes which substantiate the myth of American individualism can then be seen to work to affirm the goals of American capitalism. Here, Pocahontas' characterization may be seen to represent a kind of reservoir of "mother's spirit" which all consumers can gain access to. In this way, the co-opted image of Pocahontas can be seen as both a response to the spiritually starved consumer society and, conversely, an inducement to continue to attempt to purchase happiness and fulfilment.

To ensure viewers don't miss it, in *Pocahontas* this "spirit" is rendered external and visible through a magical wind, which shows up whenever anything heart-warming is about to happen. This wind is introduced to audiences during the aforementioned diving scene where we are first introduced to Pocahontas, ensuring audiences identify the link between the two. This enchanted wind is first glimpsed as a flurry of pastel coloured leaves swirling in the forest. Before there is time to ponder the origin of such tastefully feminine foliage, it is swept upward and away. The shot follows this mystical draft, in an extended tracking shot which eventually catches up with the wind and joins with it, becoming a sort of leaf POV. The audience is then part of the magic, another leaf being lifted skyward by mystical powers, heading towards the distant cliff top figure of Pocahontas.

As this is happening, the shot also zooms, bringing the audience closer to her mystical centre. She appears at first as a darkened silhouette, standing on the edge of a sharp precipice. She is as erect and motionless as a statue. Eventually, the shot swoops in to a low angle mid shot of her as the supernatural gust reaches her still and lifeless form. The wind swirls up around her, ruffling her hair and clothes. With an intake of breath, she is suddenly brought to life. This is followed by a prolonged

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<sup>172</sup> *ibid.* p.14.

moment which sees Pocahontas in almost orgasmic rapture - caused, one assumes, by her blissful communion with the mystical breeze surrounding her. This introduction to Pocahontas would seem to give the impression that the magic carried by this enchanted wind has a generative power which literally brings her to life.



Figure 9: uplifting wind. From *Pocahontas*, (Mike Gabriel & Eric Golberg, Walt Disney Pictures, United States, 1995).

This scene brings to mind the claims made by writer Jack Zipes that Walt Disney inserted himself in the narrative of *Snow White*, altering the ending so that it is the Prince (Disney) who brings Snow White back to life<sup>173</sup>. Zipes argues that this depiction of the Prince as having generative abilities was a metaphor meant to stand in for Disney's professed ability to give life to the inanimate through his artistic rendering<sup>174</sup>. Since Disney's *Pocahontas* is likely to be the only encounter with the Jamestown story that many will have, it is perhaps not such a grand statement for the Disney Company to again use such imagery to suggest the creation of the figure of Pocahontas. But the life-giving wind which suggests these creative powers is seen

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<sup>173</sup> In the Grimm's tale it is one of the Dwarves who is responsible for this, by knocking her casket whilst transporting her, dislodging the poisoned apple.

<sup>174</sup> Jack Zipes, "Breaking the Disney Spell", in *From Mouse To Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*, edited by Elizabeth, Lynda Haas, Laura Sells, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995). p. 38.

elsewhere in the narrative of the film. It is frequently invoked to bring special understanding to Pocahontas, or to cause those around her to suddenly be able to understand each other's differences and become peaceful and enlightened.

It may be argued that an attempt to present the American Indians in *Pocahontas* as rich in spiritual culture should be commended as a step towards something more substantive. Yet, Disney's *Pocahontas* channels the notion of such spirituality and directs it in ways that do not allow for complex reflections or debates that might lead to further understanding. It is a spirituality represented as magical rather than meaningful. Bell Hooks theorises about similar cultural phenomena in her discussions of the ways in which white culture "pimps" the Other: selectively appropriating aspects of the culture of the Other in order to spice up the "dull dish" of whiteness<sup>175</sup>. In *Pocahontas*, the selectively appropriated spirituality of the Native American Other is merely the creative seed for which the logical fruit is the magic and escapism of the Disney experience.

Pocahontas' representational appeal rests largely on her figuration as an exotic "Other". She is, perhaps, an embodiment of what Homi K. Bhaba describes as the "desire for a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite"<sup>176</sup>. She is highly sexualized, a "tribal eve", as one animator is reported to have said<sup>177</sup>. This sexualisation is coded as natural, a damaging stereotype that can be linked to the typing of the ethnic Other as animalistic and naturally reproductive<sup>178</sup>.

Her connection with the land is also coded as "natural", as Turner-Strong points out, in her assessment of the film's Academy award winning song "Colours of the Wind", in which Pocahontas promises to teach John Smith things "you never knew you never knew". However, the promised knowledge she offers turns out not to be knowledge of her people or language or customs but simply of a general reverence for nature, expressed, in the "Colours of the Wind" sequence, as

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<sup>175</sup> bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*, (New York: Routledge, 1994). p. 150-2.

<sup>176</sup> Homi K Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse", *October* 28, Spring 1984. p. 131.

<sup>177</sup> As quoted by Pauline Turner-Strong, "Playing Indian in the Nineties: *Pocahontas* and *The Indian in the Cupboard*", In *Hollywood's Indian: The Portrayal of the Native American in Film*, edited by Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1998). p. 194.

<sup>178</sup> Elizabeth S. Bird, "Savage Desires: The Gendered Construction of the American Indian In Popular Media", in *Selling The Indian: Commercializing and Appropriating American Indian Cultures*. p. 89.

sexualized play amongst the leaves and dirt. Turner-Strong points out that this is a startling impoverishment of Pocahontas' possible teachings and one which emphasizes her appeal as an eroticised object of the white gaze<sup>179</sup>.



Figure 10: Pocahontas in the wind. From *Pocahontas*, (Mike Gabriel & Eric Golberg, Walt Disney Pictures, United States, 1995).

The film's impoverished version of American Indian cultures may be described as a structuring absence, that is, a representation of a group of people in which vital elements of that group's history or culture are absent or underrepresented<sup>180</sup>. One of the more conspicuous absences of this kind in *Pocahontas* is the absence of the Powhatan language amongst the Powhatan people. They speak to one another in English almost all of the time, with few exceptions. The most notable of these is in the scene where Pocahontas meets John Smith.

The sequence opens with Pocahontas secretly following John Smith, whose Jamestown party has just arrived in her territory. Smith, realising that someone is sneaking after him, takes cover behind the waterfall and loads his gun in preparation

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<sup>179</sup> Pauline Turner-Strong, "Playing Indian in the Nineties: *Pocahontas* and *The Indian in the Cupboard*", In *Hollywood's Indian: The Portrayal of the Native American in Film*. p. 194.

<sup>180</sup> Robert Stam and Louise Spence, "Colonialism, Racism and Representation: An Introduction by Robert Stam and Louise Spence", in *Screen*, vol 24, number 2, March-April 1983, Society for Education in Film and Television Ltd. p. 7

for the kill. Pocahontas, unable to see him, ventures into the open. He jumps out from his cover but is struck dumb by what he sees. Neither character speaks. In this sequence the absence of language is total: rather, it is a dialogue of “looks”. John Smith looks at Pocahontas, who, again, seems to be caught on some kind of air vent which swishes her hair and clothing about. She looks back. Smith stares at the exotic stranger shrouded in mist and forgets his bloodlust. Smith then makes gestures of non-violent intention by putting down his gun and taking off his hat. Unable to comprehend this, Pocahontas scampers away. Smith calls after her, but this she also ignores. Finally he catches up with her and approaches again. He speaks to her but she replies in Powhatan, in spite of the fact that she has been speaking in English up until this point. Fortunately, the magical wind is there to help out. It speaks to Pocahontas (in English) telling her to “listen with your heart”. Suddenly, she is able to understand English (again). Ironically, it is the inclusion here of a small amount of non-English dialogue which highlights the omission of it elsewhere<sup>181</sup>. While Smith later makes an attempt to learn a basic Powhatan greeting, the majority of the film continues in English. This absence of the language of the colonised compromises the potential for oppositional voices within the narrative<sup>182</sup>. The other language which substitutes for Powhatan – the dialogue of “looks” – can be seen to further diminish Pocahontas’ voice within the narrative. In this scene she is the focus of John Smith’s gaze and, through him, the gaze of the audience. She is positioned as the (silent) erotic object of the white male gaze<sup>183</sup>.

While consideration of the constraints of the cinematic form are relevant here, such economies of representation are consistent with the Hollywood tradition of presenting images of Native Americans that speak more of the concerns of the dominant culture than they do of the peoples they are depicting<sup>184</sup>. These

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<sup>181</sup> Pauline Turner-Strong, “Playing Indian in the Nineties: *Pocahontas* and *The Indian in the Cupboard*”, In *Hollywood’s Indian: The Portrayal of the Native American in Film*. p. 194.

<sup>182</sup> Robert Stam and Louise Spence, “Colonialism, Racism and Representation: An Introduction by Robert Stam and Louise Spence”. p. 7

<sup>183</sup> Mulvey, Laura. *Visual and Other Pleasures*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989). p. 19.

<sup>184</sup> John E. O’Conner “The White Man’s Indian: An Institutional Approach”, in *Hollywood’s Indian: The Portrayal of The Native American in Film*, Edited by Peter C. Rollins and John E. O’Conner, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2003). p. 28.

“Hollywood Indians”, as Ted Jojola terms them, exist only in the imagination. They are, argues Jojola, constructed from distorted stereotypes, existing for the interests of outsiders<sup>185</sup>.



Figure 11: exotic beauty. From *Pocahontas*, (Mike Gabriel & Eric Golberg, Walt Disney Pictures, United States, 1995).

In her study of the ways in which American Indian identity has been described and defined, Garoutte describes some of the consequences of these stereotypes. She argues that much of dominant American culture; including government and legislative authorities, have difficulty imagining American Indians outside such images. She decries a general inability for dominant culture to acknowledge American Indian peoples and practices if they fail to meet such distorted and unrealistic expectations of authenticity<sup>186</sup>. Garrouette highlights some of the recorded incidents where the distinct traditions and necessary changes in lifestyle (often the result of outside influence and encroachment) have led legislative authorities to declare entire tribes to have forfeited their claims to aboriginal land

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<sup>185</sup> Ted Jojola, “Absurd Reality II: Hollywood Goes to the Indians”, in *Hollywood’s Indian: The Portrayal of The Native American in Film*, Edited by Peter C. Rollins and John E. O’Conner, (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2003). p. 12.

<sup>186</sup> Eva Marie Garoutte, *Real Indians*.p. 67.

rights. In the eyes of the law they were, effectively, not “real Indians”<sup>187</sup>. Definitions of “real” American Indians tend to be closer to figures like Disney’s Pocahontas, in that they are reconcilable to stereotypes of Indian looks and styles. A further similarity is that “real Indians” are seen to exist without any modification in what the dominant culture has come to consider “authentic” Indian customs and lifestyles. As Garoutte puts it, in contemporary dominant culture, “an Indian who is not an unreconstructable historical relic is no Indian at all”<sup>188</sup>. American Indians are thus often forcibly compared to this impossible notion of Indian-ness, risking material losses as well as devastating losses of visibility and voice if they appear to deviate.

Such romantic representations of American Indians existed long before the invention of the cinema. The image of the “noble savage” provided privileged Europeans with an embodied counterpoint to the strict moral and social codes of the classes they inhabited<sup>189</sup>. The noble savage was characterised as innocent and unselfconscious, a naïve ideal unspoiled by the concerns of civilization. He was also a tragic figure, thanks to the “natural” attributes assigned to him, making him incompatible with civilization. This tragic archetype, reproduced in philosophical and fictional works, was represented as unavoidably doomed, and so, beyond assistance. Noble savage figures, like *The Lone Ranger*’s Tonto, have appeared in popular texts since the 18<sup>th</sup> Century<sup>190</sup>.

Pocahontas may be seen to invoke the archetype of the “noble savage”, when, at the end of the film she saves John Smith from death at the hands of her own people. She protects him from the blow of her father’s blade by placing her body over his, shielding him. In this scene she arguably embodies the tragic noble self-sacrifice of the doomed savage, if only for a short time, since both she and Smith survive. The evocation of tragedy and violence in this scene brings to mind similar representations of ethnicity figured through what Margeurite H. Rippey terms “delectable tragedy”. Rippey, writing on the star Dorothy Dandridge argues that that

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<sup>187</sup> *ibid.* p. 68.

<sup>188</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>189</sup> John E. O’Conner “The White Man’s Indian: An Institutional Approach”. p. 27.

<sup>190</sup> *ibid.*

the success of her star image depended on “an image of victimization that evoked sexual desire tinged with anxiety”<sup>191</sup>

While the representational history of the objectification of black female bodies is undeniably predicated by a different social history than that of Native American female bodies, the depiction of Native American women is arguably caught up in this erotic fascination with flesh that is coded as Other. This fascination arises from pluralising discourses which position the white body as the site of normative sexuality, in opposition to the body of the Other. The body of the Other is positioned as the site of repressed or deviant sexuality, evoking both fear and desire<sup>192</sup>.



Figure 12: delectable tragedy. From *Pocahontas*, (Mike Gabriel & Eric Golberg, Walt Disney Pictures, United States, 1995).

Rippy also argues that Dandridge’s image was domesticated - made to fit the shape of current popular conceptions of sexual desirability – in ways that mimicked

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<sup>191</sup> Marguerite H. Rippy, “Commodity, Tragedy, Desire: Female Sexuality and Blackness in the Iconography of Dorothy Dandridge”, in *Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness*, edited by Daniel Bernardi, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001). p. 181.

<sup>192</sup> S. Elizabeth Bird, “Savage Desires: The Gendered Construction of the American Indian in Popular Media” p. 78



popular white sirens like Marilyn Monroe<sup>193</sup>. Rippy argues that the ways in which Dandridge was depicted, both in her films and in other popular media, acted to “reproduc[e] the commodification of white femininity on a black body”<sup>194</sup>.

Arguably, Pocahontas’ body is domesticated in similar ways. Tellingly, a key animator interviewed in *Harpers’ Bazaar* described her as having a Barbie-doll’s figure and the glamour of a supermodel<sup>195</sup>. She is thus figured in a way that is in line with her Disney predecessors - such as Ariel and Belle - which has the effect of grouping her image with that of other commodified Disney “Princesses” rather than with other strong female American Indian figures<sup>196</sup>.

Stam and Spence are also suspicious of such representations, arguing that they merely apply an old, already oppressive mould onto the “new” material<sup>197</sup>. Stam and Spence exemplify this argument using American films and television shows from the late 1960s and early 1970s<sup>198</sup> which depict black men as law enforcers. They argue that the depiction of these men promotes the notion that all citizens, even those marginalized and oppressed by the dominant culture, can participate and find membership outside the margins, but only by serving the established rules and laws of that dominant culture. In other words these men may be invited “into the elite club of the truly human, but always on white terms”<sup>199</sup>. In this way, marginalised peoples may participate in the dominant culture – may become visible - but only by perpetuating the hierarchies of power which keep them from being visible on their own terms.

The image of Pocahontas may be seen to provide visibility through her depiction as an attractive and vibrant fantasy figure, but these attributes may also be seen as the embodiment of her key role as peace-maker and as a moderate within

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<sup>193</sup> Marguerite H. Rippy, “Commodity, Tragedy, Desire: Female Sexuality and Blackness in the Iconography of Dorothy Dandridge”. p. 181.

<sup>194</sup> *ibid.* 183.

<sup>195</sup> Woody Hochswender, “Pocahontas: a Babe in the Woods”, *Harpers Bazaar*, June 1995.

<sup>196</sup> Turner-Strong, Pauline “Playing Indian in the Nineties: *Pocahontas* and *The Indian in the Cupboard*”, In *Hollywood’s Indian: The Portrayal of the Native American in Film*. p. 196.

Note: Pocahontas is in fact part of the Disney Princess merchandising strategy discussed in chapter 4.

<sup>197</sup> Robert Stam and Louise Spence, “Colonialism, Racism and Representation: An Introduction by Robert Stam and Louise Spence”. p. 7

<sup>198</sup> These were *In the Heat of the Night* (1967), *Pressure Point* (1962), and *Mod Squad* (1968-73).

<sup>199</sup> Robert Stam and Louise Spence, “Colonialism, Racism and Representation: An Introduction by Robert Stam and Louise Spence”. p. 9

Disney's revisionist imagining of colonialism<sup>200</sup>. This re-imagining achieves its fullest expression in her physical intervention between her father and John Smith in the climax of the "Savages" sequence.

For the finale of the film, both "sides" – the English and the Powhatans – are about to battle. Powhatan has captured John Smith, believing he had killed his finest warrior. He plans to sacrifice Smith before battling the outsiders. Pocahontas seeks advice on what to do from the spirit of her grandmother who, naturally, comes to life in the form of a tree. "Grandmother Willow" tells her once more to "listen with your heart". Yet again the mystical breeze enables a sudden epiphany which sends Pocahontas running towards the battlefield, accompanied by various spirits and winds. While hastening toward the battlefield she sings to these spirits, imploring them to give her strength and speed. With both the English and the Powhatans calling the other side "savages", Pocahontas wills the spirits to "make her heart be great". At this point she appears to be about to take some kind of radical action to end the conflict. Disappointingly, Pocahontas' radical solution is to throw herself over her white hero and berate her father. Her response to the Powhatan armed defence of their land is to decry it as "where the path of hatred has brought us". The magical wind then sweeps in and causes everyone to put down their weapons and lose interest in the battle.

Here Pocahontas and her spirit wind are pitted against violence in all forms. But Pocahontas is also against any staunch defence of Indian territory encroached upon by these invaders, aside from passive negotiation and trade. To do otherwise would be to go down the "path of hatred". Instead, Pocahontas teaches her father that progress is inevitable<sup>201</sup>. The potential for a critical voice that might oppose colonialism and its effects is thereby compromised as Pocahontas' body is made to express colonial apologist sentiments. Further, any serious statements in the narrative of the text which condemn ethnocentrism and exploitation are undercut by the physical figuration of Pocahontas. Hers is a highly objectified image, employed

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<sup>200</sup> Janet Wasko, *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001). p. 142.

<sup>201</sup> S. Elizabeth Bird, "Savage Desires: The Gendered Construction of the American Indian in Popular Media". p. 85.

in the interests of established power, not in the interests of the disempowered and disenfranchised. In this way, it may be argued that *Pocahontas* employs difference to express the desirability and reliability of assimilationist myths, through the domestication and commodification of the heroine's body<sup>202</sup>. Yet, Negra argues that representations of ethnicity have the capacity to disrupt the coherence of whiteness as an autonomous and stable construct. Ethnic identity, then, is that which has not yet been assimilated into whiteness<sup>203</sup>.

It is tempting to try to ascribe such attributes to Pocahontas and, indeed, she can be seen to be comparatively active, more spiritually grounded and more loose and free in her movements than her adopted contemporaries, perhaps disrupting some racialised hierarchies of superiority. Yet, these traits are also those which are arguably co-opted to reinvigorate the myths that sustain dominant American culture, limiting the radical potential of her image. The question of authenticity also comes in to play again here. For example, the film's supervising animator is said to have "enhanced" her figuration with Asian eyes and a thin waist as well as longer legs<sup>204</sup>. The promotional materials in some countries even described her as "less American Indian than fashionably exotic"<sup>205</sup>. All of this makes it difficult to locate exactly which ethnic identity is in question. While this chapter has argued that authenticity is always a problematic concept, such embellishments contribute to pluralising discourses that arguably affirm rather than destabilise racialised hierarchies of power.

Disney's *Pocahontas* does try to show positive images of non-white people who are central characters within a historical narrative. Yet, the ways in which it tells this story do little to support the voices of the underrepresented people it represents. This simplified and generic version of American Indian cultures bends heritage and belief systems into little more than can-do slogans and whimsical gusts of air. Pocahontas has spirit, but too often it is depicted as the same quality of spirit cheerleaders are said to have. In this way the depiction of Pocahontas and her

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<sup>202</sup> Marguerite H. Rippey, "Commodity, Tragedy, Desire: Female Sexuality and Blackness in the Iconography of Dorothy Dandridge". p. 179.

<sup>203</sup> Diane Negra, *Off-White Hollywood: American Culture and Ethnic Female Stardom*. p.21.

<sup>204</sup> Janet Wasko, *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy*. p. 142.

<sup>205</sup> As quoted by Janet Wasko in, *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy*. p. 142.

peoples does more to serve a sense of national unity and pride than it does to promote the culture and concerns American Indians.

The need to create images with “mass appeal” in *Pocahontas* results in a depiction of difference that is eminently consumable, particularly in the key figure of Pocahontas. Her figuration as sexualised “other” strips her image of cultural specificity and replaces it with a chic “international” glamour. These normative body styles which Pocahontas display work to hold back the potential for her image to disrupt hierarchies of power which privilege whiteness. Instead, Pocahontas’ bodily figuration is a universalised rendition of difference which is presented to the viewer in ways which position her as an erotic object rather than as a speaking subject.

Pocahontas’ figuration as the object of white fantasy supports her role within the narrative of the film. The result of Pocahontas’ narrative journey is the realization that the colonization of America by whites is *Manifest Destiny*. Her role is then to convince her tribe to welcome rather than resist this inevitability. In this way *Pocahontas* works to maintain and support popular myths which imagine the colonisation of America as an ultimately legitimate project. *Pocahontas* can be seen to depict a version of American Indians as naïve relics that can be consumed as a picturesque reminder of national history, erased of the violence of that history. To do so creates an alternative history which supports the denial of responsibility, and a denial of the voices of the many Native American subjectivities which *Pocahontas* obscures.

## **Feeling (like) a Disney Princess: Fantasy and Embodiment in Disney's Marketing Strategy.**

One of the key concerns for this thesis has been the idealised female body in Disney animated films. However, the life of this body does not end when the film credits roll. Images of this body proliferate and continue to generate meaning outside the filmic world. These images may be seen to be part of the “Disney Universe”<sup>206</sup>. This “Disney Universe” is arguably called into being by the ubiquity of Disney and its products, especially in American and westernised popular cultures.

The “Disney Universe” includes theme parks and resorts, hotels, an extensive range of merchandise, audio and music products, television programmes and channels, radio stations, print publications, websites, a cruise-line, theatrical productions, a town (Celebration, Florida) as well as tie-ins with other major corporations such as McDonald's and Visa<sup>207</sup>. Other sites of meaning in the Disney Universe include educational resources for teachers, as well as Walt Disney Youth Group Programs and an internship based college programme<sup>208</sup>. The range and technical innovation of cultural artefacts produced by Disney is extensive, if not exhaustive. The quantity of such artefacts is equally impressive.

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<sup>206</sup> First termed by Michael Real in 1973. As quoted By Janet Wasko, in *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001). p. 3.

<sup>207</sup> It is not possible to explore all of these here, although publications such as such as Wasko's *Understanding Disney* provide an excellent overview, an especially great feat given the sheer size of the subject matter. See especially p. 55; 57; 48; 60-61; 53;52;58; 47; 59; 35.

The internship is based at Walt Disney World and involves working at one of the Walt Disney resorts. [http://www.wdwcollegeprogram.com/sap/its/mimes/zh\\_wdwcp/index.html](http://www.wdwcollegeprogram.com/sap/its/mimes/zh_wdwcp/index.html), (accessed 28/07/08).

and Walt Disney Internet Group, “International Programs”, [http://www.disneyinternationalprograms.com/sap/its/mimes/zh\\_intlrec/international/index.html](http://www.disneyinternationalprograms.com/sap/its/mimes/zh_intlrec/international/index.html), (accessed 28/07/08).

Information on Disney's relationship to Visa can be found at the official Visa website.

[http://www.firstusa.com/cgi-bin/webcgi/webserve.cgi?partner\\_dir\\_name=disney\\_15giftcard\\_ch01\\_6m&page=cont&mkid=6SBE61](http://www.firstusa.com/cgi-bin/webcgi/webserve.cgi?partner_dir_name=disney_15giftcard_ch01_6m&page=cont&mkid=6SBE61), (accesses 28/07/08).

<sup>208</sup> Information on teaching resources can be sourced online through: Walt Disney Internet Group, “Disney Educational Productions”. <http://dep.disney.go.com/educational/index>. (accessed 28/07/08).

Information about Disney Youth Group Programs can be sourced online through: Walt Disney Internet Group, “Disney Youth Groups”.

<http://disneyyouthgroups.disney.go.com/wdyp/home>, (accessed 28/07/08).

Janet Wasko argues that these images and products create a “self-contained universe which presents consistently recognisable values through recurring characters and familiar, repetitive themes”<sup>209</sup>. A complication to this argument is presented by Deborah Ross. Ross disagrees with the notion that the Disney Universe presents consistent messages, arguing that the financial goals that are at the heart of the production of Disney films motivate the company to absorb and disseminate whatever values are likely to make the most profit. For Ross, this means that Disney films tend to lack philosophical coherence, meaning they fall short of propaganda<sup>210</sup>. This statement poses an important question for the final part of this project: if the ideological messages in the films can be seen to be too inconsistent for outright propaganda, can the same be said when one considers these messages in relation to sites of intertextual meaning? This question becomes particularly pertinent when one considers that a number of the sites of meaning for Disney encourage an embodied, and whole-bodied, performance.

Perhaps the most prominent example of this is the Disney Princess brand. Launched in 1999, the Disney Princess brand brings together the female characters from many of Disney’s successful feature films, some of which have been explored within this thesis. Others, such as Snow White and Cinderella, are taken from earlier Disney movies and placed alongside contemporary figures such as Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*. The figures are grouped together to advertise products and straight-to-DVD animations with a “princess” theme. Perhaps the most prominent site of meaning for the Disney Princess brand is the Disney Princess website which is a rich source of images and text which hail the viewer/user in multiple and complex ways. It is also fairly representative of the Disney Princess marketing strategy<sup>211</sup>. The sites of meaning associated with this brand are of particular interest to the aims of this thesis because they focus on the idealized feminine form of the Disney heroine, adding to, and reinforcing, the fascination with embodied femininity.

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<sup>209</sup> Janet Wasko, *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001). p. 3.

<sup>210</sup> Deborah Ross, “Escape from Wonderland: Disney and the Female Imagination”, In *Marvels and Tales: Journal of Fairy-Tale Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2004), (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004). accessed via Project Muse <http://muse.jhu.edu> p. 63.

<sup>211</sup> Many of the interactive features and images available on the Disney Princess website are also available through other sources such as *Princess Party vol I DVD*, 2004.

The sites of meaning invite the implied consumer to fantasise, and to act out fantasies, in which they take on the body of a Disney character or set of characters. They are invited to “Feel like a Disney Princess”<sup>212</sup> and to “Truly emulate”<sup>213</sup> their favourite character. They are encouraged to engage in a fantasy in which they embody the style, behaviour, and story of a Disney character or characters. The sites of meaning associated with this brand also present the consumer with images of idealised feminine bodies which model this fantasy. Images in much of the merchandise are of the animated Disney characters themselves. They are also often modelled by real, “live action” actors and models. These “live action” figures are frequently photographed in ways which are highly stylised and manipulated, as in the case of the image on the cover of the *Princess Party: vol I DVD*<sup>214</sup>. The little girl in this image has a perceptibly enlarged head compared with her body and her eyes also seem disproportionately large. Her face is also considerably paler than her neck and, in spite of her otherwise black skin; she has been made up with peaches-and-cream style cheeks and lips. Images of Disney Princesses are often accompanied by written text and interactive activities which further add to the complex ways in which Disney addresses and interpolates viewers as idealised white female consumers of both the products and the fantasies they sell.

Since the 1920s, when reformist concerns over the influence films might have on children led to the creation of an accepted canon of films for them, Disney has achieved and held an enviable place in American and westernised popular culture<sup>215</sup>. The Disney Corporation continues to promote itself as the producer of wholesome family entertainments, acting as the antithesis of other entertainments

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<sup>212</sup> As quoted on Walt Disney Internet Group, “Bibidi Bobidi Boutique”, <http://disneyworld.disney.go.com/wdw/moreMagic/shoppingDetail?id=BibbidiBobbidiBoutiquePage>, (accessed 28/07/08). This is the website for the shop at Disneyworld which specialises in Princess makeovers for children.

<sup>213</sup> As quoted on Walt Disney Internet Group, “Disney Bridal”, [http://www.disneybridal.com/pressrelease/press\\_pages/pressrelease\\_08212007.html](http://www.disneybridal.com/pressrelease/press_pages/pressrelease_08212007.html) 12/06/2008 (accessed 12/06/08).

<sup>214</sup> *Princess Party: vol I DVD*, 2004. This can be viewed at Amazon, <http://www.amazon.com/Disney-Princess-Party-1/dp/B0001I5614>. (accessed 31/07/08).

<sup>215</sup> Richard deCordova, “The Mickey in Macey’s Window: Childhood, Consumerism, and Disney Animation”, in *Disney Discourse: Producing the Magic Kingdom*, edited by Eric Smoodin, (New York: Routledge, 1994). p. 203.

It should be noted here that Disney and its products are also popular in many non-Western cultures, particularly in Japan.

and influences which might damage the innocence of children or lead them astray. This enviable status in popular culture did not come about by accident but was carefully nurtured to generate maximum profits. In his study of Disney's early marketing strategies, Richard deCordova identified two registers of consumption for children. The child was firstly addressed as consumers of films, secondly as consumers of products displayed in those films. The work of merchandising was then to link the two registers, creating a network of mutual points of reference<sup>216</sup>. This method has continued to operate, as the example of the Disney Princess marketing phenomenon testifies. Furthermore, as the second register of consumption has become more valuable to the Disney Corporation, so the ways in which they promote and link sites of meaning, both to the movies and each other, have come to be increasingly sophisticated<sup>217</sup>.

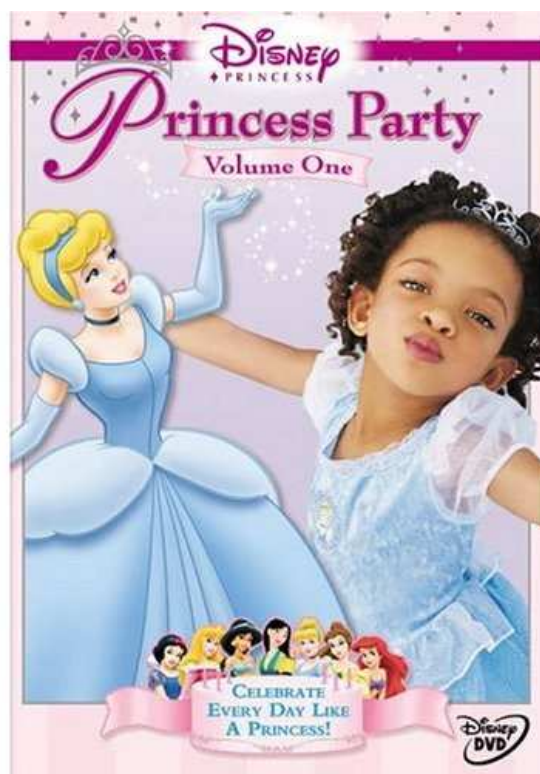


Figure 13: celebrating as a Princess.

<sup>216</sup> *ibid.* p. 204.

<sup>217</sup> Peter Krämer, "'The Best Disney Film Disney Never Made': Children's Films and the Family Audience in American Cinema Since the 1960s", In *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, edited by Steve Neale, (London: BFI publishing, 2002). p. 188-189.



The Disney Princess campaign made over 3 billion dollars from merchandising in the year 2006 alone<sup>218</sup>. One of the central strategies to market Disney Princess merchandise seems to be the simultaneous marketing of the Disney Princess party, which features on Disney parenting websites as well as on the Disney Princess website. Special party CD-ROMs and sing-along CDs are marketed. Key to this strategy is the invitation for children to play at being their favourite princess. As Andy Mooney, chairman of Disney consumer products puts it, Disney Princess is “about these girls projecting themselves into the life of a princess and the environment of a princess, and kind of really revelling in that moment”<sup>219</sup>.

However, the ubiquitous connection between Disney and wholesomeness has not gone entirely unquestioned in this case. *The New York Times* published an article in December 2006 in which the author, Peggy Orenstein, criticised Disney Princess for setting impossible ideals for girls, especially where physical appearance is concerned, and for the re-segregation of boys and girls in terms of play and aspirations<sup>220</sup>. ABC News online, owned by Disney, published an article in April 2007 which quotes some of Orenstein’s concerns<sup>221</sup>. This article could be seen as a part of the marketing strategy, designed in such a way as to appear to critically examine the Princess campaign, while it in fact works to reassure parents that Disney Princess merchandising is a benign, even positive, influence on children.

The article recruits a child psychiatrist, Dr Mark DeAntonio, who is quoted as saying; “I think it’s normal for kids to kind of fantasise roles, to try them on for size... and both boys and girls do this, and it’s a very normal thing”<sup>222</sup>. The possibility that the marketing of Disney Princess merchandise might actually work to limit the boundaries of fantasy, confining it within standardised norms of gender behaviours and body styles as well as consumption patterns, is not explored. The use

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<sup>218</sup> US Dollars. Figure quoted in Walt Disney Internet Group, “ABC News online”, <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/Health/story?id=3065469&page=1>, (accessed 28/08/08). The

<sup>219</sup> Walt Disney Internet Group, “ABC News online”, <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/Health/story?id=3065469&page=1>.

<sup>220</sup> Peggy Orenstein, *The York Times*, December 24 2006. p.4 accessed via: <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/24/magazine/24princess.t.html?pagewanted=4>. (accessed 1/8/08).

<sup>221</sup> Walt Disney Internet Group, “ABC News online”, (<http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/Health/story?id=3065469&page=1>).

<sup>222</sup> *ibid.*

of “normality” is telling here. These “roles” that children are apparently “trying on for size” work to fix certain roles as normal or desirable, to the exclusion of others. Disney Princess’ fantasy privileges certain modes of (gendered, classed, racialised) identity and body style. Both DeAntonio and the Disney Princess marketing machine also assume gendered play and fantasy as natural and not the result of the operations of power. Judith Butler argues that the invocation of a gendered body which exists before any form of social conditioning works to produce a gendered body which is assumed to freely reproduce indications of gender<sup>223</sup>. This circular logic is used here so that, instead of initiating gendered thinking, Disney Princess fantasising is constructed as a response to a “normal” phase in which girls freely choose to take part in feminine coded fantasy and play. DeAntonio fails to take into account the aspirational nature of these fantasies and the normative effect of valorising Princesses as the acceptable roles to “try on”.

Additionally, the article refers to the Disney Princess phenomenon as a “movement”<sup>224</sup>, inferring it to be the result of grass-roots demand instead of a rapacious marketing campaign. It also quotes a number of mothers who approve of the Disney Princess campaign, calling them the “moms of America’s would-be Cinderellas”, and stating that they are “on the front lines of the princess debate”<sup>225</sup>, recalling images of social protest. The impression created here is that the American public are empowered by exercising their democratic right to buy Disney products.

This empowered consumption is not only available to “moms”. Disney Princess works hard to address both children and parents. The Disney Princess website for instance primarily addresses the princess (child), offering a customisable greeting that welcomes them on visit to the website with text that reads “Welcome Princess (name filled in here)!”<sup>226</sup>. One of the pages of the site offers a “wish list”, allowing children to participate in the process of purchasing Disney Princess

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<sup>223</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1999). p. 5.

<sup>224</sup> As quoted in Walt Disney Internet Group, “ABC News online”, <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/Health/story?id=3065469&page=2>.

<sup>225</sup> As quoted in Walt Disney Internet Group, “ABC News online”, <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/Health/story?id=3065469&page=2>, Accessed 28/08/08.

<sup>226</sup> Walt Disney Internet Group, “Disney Princess”, [http://disney.go.com/princess/html/main\\_iframe.html](http://disney.go.com/princess/html/main_iframe.html), Accessed 2/7/08.

merchandise by checking the boxes next to desired items and printing them off for the adult (read: credit-card holder) to view. Themed computer games are playable on the site and individual character stories can be accessed via easy to navigate links. The homepage of the site also offers a separate table of contents for parents, which gives princess themed parenting tips.



Figure 14: entering the magical world.

For Disney theorist Henry Giroux, the way in which children are addressed as consumers works as a powerful pedagogical device. One of Giroux's main concerns is that the message that the Disney Corporation sends to children is that democracy and the right to consume goods are the same thing. Giroux argues that this will lead to a "hollow[ing] out [of ] those public spheres whose roots are moral rather than commercial"<sup>227</sup>. For Giroux, the end result of this emphasis on consumption is a powerful monolithic corporate culture which, gone unchecked, results in human exploitation and environmental devastation<sup>228</sup>.

<sup>227</sup> Henry A. Giroux, *The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, inc., 1999). p.160.

<sup>228</sup> *ibid.* p.162.

Part of the concern for Giroux is that there is no dialogue about the realities of producing such mass goods in the popular reception of them<sup>229</sup>. The modes and practices of production in which Disney Princess products are made is certainly invisible in their marketing and consumption. The product is intertextually related to the film, and/or other related products, at the expense of knowledge about the life of the product before it reaches the stores and screens and, finally, the homes and play spaces of children. A toy may carry a label telling us it is made in China but Disney works hard to relate the toy to the Disney Princess franchise, obscuring other information and ways of relating to the object.

It may be argued that the ways in which Disney Princess toys and other various items are related to is strongly motivated by identity politics. When mass produced items are transformed as Disney Princess adornments they may be imagined to have the power to, in turn, transform the buyer so that he or she is, or will be, at least a little closer to Princesshood. The desire to have such items can be ascribed to what Celia Lury describes as “the privileging of a relationship between individuals and things in terms of *possession*”<sup>230</sup>. She argues that, since the emergence of individualism and mass consumer society, there has been an increase in the conceptualisation of possessions as defining aspects of the self<sup>231</sup>. Lury takes this argument even further when she states that:

“consumer culture provides the conditions within which it is not just that self-identity is understood *in relation to* possessions, but that it is itself constituted *as a* possession”<sup>232</sup>

For the Disney Princess consumer this suggests at the very least a close relationship between the desire to buy Disney Princess items and the desire to be or become a Disney Princess. Indeed, Lury points out that not everyone who is interpolated by the likes of Disney Princess will be able to buy Princess merchandise or participate in Princess play. However, the aspiration to do so means that the

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<sup>229</sup> *ibid.* p.163.

<sup>230</sup> As quoted by Celia Lury, in *Consumer Culture*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996). p.7.

<sup>231</sup> Celia Lury, *Consumer Culture*.p.7.

<sup>232</sup> *ibid.* p.8.

individual can still be seen as participating in consumer culture, and thus still define themselves in terms of consumer culture and possessions<sup>233</sup>. The aspiring Princess may then apprehend Disney Princess merchandising in terms of denial of active participation and may therefore experience losses of self-esteem and self-worth. Bauman argues that such consumer inequality is also productive, in that it “triggers off zealous efforts to enhance one’s consumer capacity”<sup>234</sup>. The desire for Princess products could then bring about or galvanize the desire to have the ability to consume more.

It is perhaps then a mistake for Giroux to credit the Disney Universe as being without morals, or at least as being less than willing to assign value. Disney Princess could potentially be seen as training which teaches children to appraise themselves and others based on their aesthetic value as possessions. For example, on the *Disney Princess* website there is the *Disney Princess* personality test, which asks children “Which Disney Princess are You Most Like?”. This “game” asks a series of five questions to determine the user’s Princess personality. These questions, which have a limited range of set answers to choose from, focus on three distinct defining factors of “personality”. The first factor is, naturally, the way the participant looks. The first question asks what their hair colour is, the second what their style of dress is. There is a clear emphasis here on feminine appearance and, in particular, the conscious styling of the body. For instance the question which deals with style of dress asks participants to choose from such worldly descriptions as: “exotic”, “glamorous”, “simple”, “active”, “regal”, “beachwear”, “adventurous”, and “classic”<sup>235</sup>.

The second factor may be defined as interests, which extend only as far as preferred pet and favourite hobby. Here the only active option one can choose is canoeing, and none of the options are violent. Instead participants are asked to choose from such options as shopping, collecting, and organizing parties. The final factor may be interpreted as aspirations. Here, the participant is not asked to

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<sup>233</sup> *ibid.* p.6.

<sup>234</sup> As quoted by Celia Lury, *Consumer Culture*. p.6.

<sup>235</sup> The game can be accessed through Walt Disney Internet Group, “Disney Princess”, [http://disney.go.com/princess/html/main\\_iframe.html](http://disney.go.com/princess/html/main_iframe.html), (accessed 2/7/08).

consider any life goals beyond where they would like to live, and they are given such options as “in a castle”.

The “game” here seems to be about testing oneself against the traits and qualities of a Disney Princess. Yet the process of playing this game is also about articulating those qualities and, in so doing, conferring value on them. In particular the questions in the game draw an outline of a certain type of preferred body and style. This body is one which has a styled and groomed look, taking care with hair-style and outfit co-ordination. It is also a genteel body, eschewing rough play for minor domestic care-giving roles. It is also firmly located within the sphere of the home. This body is called into being through the Disney Princess website. The site also hails the participants in the game as bodily, as corporeal. Whether they are accurately described by the game or not, the subject position they are called into is that of a subject/object of gendered fantasy.

Mauyra Wickstrom theorises about this processes of embodied fantasy and Disney in her study of the stage version of *The Lion King*. She argues that through such texts viewers are encouraged to “slide” from being spectators to being part of the fictional story<sup>236</sup>. Working with Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto’s influential work on Tokyo Disneyland in *Images of Empire*, Wickstrom notes that,

[T]he consumer-subject is no longer an autonomous eye, but rather the suggestible subject/object of the fantasy, playing as well as consuming the commodity. In this scenario, it is not through the commodity, but *as* the commodity that the experience apparently takes place.”<sup>237</sup>

Wickstrom also suggests that the called-for response to this narrative fantasy is the consumption of other products and images which will intensify and confirm experience<sup>238</sup>. In particular the invitation for children to dress in Disney character merchandise and play with Disney character toys “invite children to perform as the commodified cartoon characters, both animal and human”<sup>239</sup>. It would seem then

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<sup>236</sup> Mauyra Wickstrom, “Commodities, Mimesis, and the Lion King: Retail Theatre for the 1990s”, in *Theatre Journal*, 51.3 (1999) Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999. accessed through <http://muse.jhu.edu>. p.285.

<sup>237</sup> *ibid.* p.294.

<sup>238</sup> *ibid.* p.285.

<sup>239</sup> *ibid.* p. 10.

that interaction with the Princess website is more than a bridge to fantasy. The Princess fantasy takes place through and in the body – the body which “feels” the site via the computer mouse, hearing and seeing, and responding, to the features of the site, and the body that is hailed and imaginatively transformed as a Disney Princess.

Much of this embodied Princess play calls upon the use and training of non-visual senses. These senses are generally understood as less intellectual and more emotional and innate. Mark M. Smith contends that, to a certain extent, these senses could be considered to be historically and culturally specific. Smith also advocates for an understanding of all the senses as culturally learned<sup>240</sup>. He concedes however that the non-visual senses are likely to be experienced as instinctive and intuitive – as “gut” feeling<sup>241</sup>. The body which interacts with the Disney Princess website not only sees idealized images of femininity but also hears and touches, and gets a visual and audible response to his/her own touch via the animated swirls and noises the mouse make when it is moved across various icons. It may be argued that Disney Princess’ appeal to these senses work to construct an understanding of sensory difference so that the user who “moves” through the pink-drenched website hearing antiseptic pop music, and whose touch generates sparkles, will develop a “gut” feeling about gender distinctions<sup>242</sup>. This sensory assault may then contribute to an understanding that the user does, or should, experience their bodies as “sugar and spice and all things nice”.

While the questions in the Princess personality “game” seem to be more concerned with appearance and largely consumer-centred activities, the results of the test can often be oddly sermonizing in tone, as in the case of the description for Belle. The description informs aspiring princesses that they are “loving and giving and can always see the good in others. You love to read and spend time with

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<sup>240</sup> Mark M. Smith, *How Race is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006). p. 2-3.

<sup>241</sup> *ibid.* p. 2.

<sup>242</sup> Mark M. Smith analyses this phenomena in more detail in, *How Race is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses*. p. 5.



others”<sup>243</sup>. The description which, after all, is really instruction, provides would-be princesses with a code of (compliant, credulous) behaviour by which to measure themselves.



Figure 15: feeling as a Princess

The child consumer of Disney Princess products is thus interpolated as a “good” girl, one who is not violent or raucous or misbehaved or dirty. She takes care to dress nicely and cultivates a feminine “look” for herself. She cares for pets and loved ones, spending her free time in non-destructive pursuits which produce pretty things to wear and decorate the house with. She is, in short, thoroughly civilised. Sean Redmond argues that the civilised body is a “constructed body, moulded to not only distance itself from the supposedly natural impulses, noises, and desires of the body, but to also embody social difference and validate social hierarchy”<sup>244</sup>. The “good” girl addressed by Disney Princess marketing is then a girl who embodies, or should embody, the social status of wealthy (white) consumers (westerners), through rejecting those bodily functions and behaviours which are constructed as natural and savage.

<sup>243</sup> Walt Disney Internet Group, “Disney Shopping”, [http://disney.go.com/princess/html/main\\_iframe.html](http://disney.go.com/princess/html/main_iframe.html), (accessed 2/7/08).

<sup>244</sup> Sean Redmond, “Lucretia Crumb’s White Docile Body”, in *The Death of Whiteness* (PhD submission, 2005). p. 54.



This assumed link between western whiteness and civility, and between whiteness and femininity, is historically and culturally constructed. Dyer argues that in western society whiteness has come to have connotations of purity and intellectuality as well as spiritual enlightenment<sup>245</sup>. Redmond identifies a double bind here in which whiteness is privileged because “one cannot truly be white unless one is enlightened and cultured, and one cannot truly be enlightened and cultured if one is not white”<sup>246</sup>. Upper and middle-class white women particularly have historically been represented in ways which emphasise their whiteness and depict it as coming from within, as emanating from an inner spiritual light<sup>247</sup>. Thus, even conventionally “raced” bodies depicted in and on Princess products, such as the little girl on the *Princess Party: vol I* DVD, are depicted as washed-out, or whitened, with idealised Anglo-Saxon features.

The site also implicitly encourages self-surveillance of this assumed white body, particularly through the matching of the participants’ “personality” with that of a Disney Princess. The site encourages its young audience to critically compare themselves against the body styles and behaviours their favourite characters exhibit. In working toward becoming a Disney Princess children engage in the mechanics of power through the regimes of critical self-analysis and discipline which promise to bring them closer to the body of a Disney Princess. As Foucault puts it, such regulating discipline “produces subjected and practiced bodies, ‘docile’ bodies”<sup>248</sup>. Girls are thus given a clear blueprint with which to begin a body project where the goal is a feminine body that is petite, white (or light) and docile. The implied trajectory for this body is that of wife, mother and all around care-giver<sup>249</sup>. Future Disney Princesses are not only taught how to embody civility and privilege but are trained to think of themselves as advocates of it in their future “loving and giving” roles.

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<sup>245</sup> Richard Dyer analyses this in more detail in, *White*, (London, Routledge, 1997. p.113-115.

<sup>246</sup> Sean Redmond, “Lucretia Crumb’s White Docile Body”. p. 71.

<sup>247</sup> Richard Dyer, *White*. p. 113-115.

<sup>248</sup> Michel Foucault, 1977 *Discipline and Punish, The Birth of the Prison*, (London: Vintage, 1977). p. 138.

<sup>249</sup> Sean Redmond, “Lucretia Crumb’s White Docile Body”. p. 67.

Uncivilised and disorderly bodies do not appear to exist in the Disney Princess texts studied here. They are, if anything, implied by their absence. For instance, the parenting tips supplied on the Disney Princess website offer no advice to tame wild unruly girls. Instead, the goal of these words of wisdom, as announced in the title banner, is to “Help Your Child Feel Like a Princess”<sup>250</sup>. The website advises parents to set aside blocks of time in which to imbue their child with the qualities of being a *Disney Princess*. They are instructed to have their “little princess” dress up as their favourite Disney Princess character, or to make up and tell their own princess story, starring their “little princess”<sup>251</sup>. Parents are told to weave pretty ribbons into their Little Princess’ hair and to paint each of her fingernails a different shade. They should throw a party for her and make for her a sparkly tiara to wear<sup>252</sup>. Far from needing discipline or being likely to succumb to ugly habits, these little princesses are worthy of little less than worship.

The chairman of Disney consumer products worldwide, who claims that Disney Princesses are good role models, was quoted as saying that Disney Princesses are “caring, they are loving, and they are courteous”<sup>253</sup>. The implication both here and on the Disney Princess website is that girl children should, occasionally, be allowed to be Disney Princesses. As long as they promise to behave like Little Princesses. The invisible “Bad” girl who misbehaves is, perhaps, excluded from Disney Princess play until she becomes like a “good” girl. The double system of gratification-punishment that Foucault theorises about in *Discipline and Punish* is evident here. Here, behaviour and performance which does not conform within the boundaries of accepted social norms is excluded and marginalized, while the norm operates as a standard to attain, rewarding degrees of normality and with correlating acceptance in the wider social body<sup>254</sup>.

It is easy to imagine that the parents of aspiring “little princesses” might make use of Disney Princess paraphernalia and Princess dominated “quality time” to

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<sup>250</sup> As quoted on Walt Disney Internet Group, “Disney Princess”, [http://disney.go.com/princess/html/main\\_iframe.html](http://disney.go.com/princess/html/main_iframe.html), viewed 2/7/08.

<sup>251</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>252</sup> As paraphrased in Walt Disney Internet Group, “Disney Princess”, [http://disney.go.com/princess/html/main\\_iframe.html](http://disney.go.com/princess/html/main_iframe.html), Accessed 28/07/08.

<sup>253</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>254</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish, The Birth of the Prison*, Vintage, 1977. p.179; 183;184.

reward good behaviour. But the concern here is not the ways in which individual family units may define good and bad behaviours, but the limits of good and bad behaviours in the Disney Universe. In the Disney Princess website it is the absence of boisterous active bodies which do not conform to normalised standards of feminine behaviour, as well as unlovely or unconventional bodies, which is of concern, especially given the high visibility of waif-like fashion model types in frilly dresses. Furthermore, the gratification which Disney Princess offers to “good” girls, even when it is found in ostensibly “free” sites of meaning such as the Disney Princess website (i.e. consumers do not pay to use it), always implies the consumption of further material goods to add to the value of the Princess-in-waiting.

If the purchase Disney Princess merchandise may be considered difficult to avoid, especially if the friends of aspiring “little princess” girls are perceived to have or covet such items, then the purchase of time to be a “little princess” may prove equally difficult to avoid. The parental suggestions offered on the *Disney Princess* website, as well as on DVDs such as *Princess Party* and sing-along CDs heavily emphasise the domination of Disney in a so-called “quality time”, where busy parents put aside time to focus on the emotional development of their children. Times marked out as special, and particularly birthdays, are heavily targeted by *Disney Princess*. Disney works to ingratiate itself into these facets of life, offering opportunities for princesses and their families to purchase some happiness and self-esteem for her.

As Ian Wojcik-Andrews argues, consumers of children’s films end up seeing what corporations consider profitable, in other words, what will encourage further consumption<sup>255</sup>. Here, we can see that even the sites of meaning that are consumed in response to Disney films are designed to encourage yet more spending. Just as troublingly, the sites of meaning created by the Disney Princess franchise are missing the unruly and uncivilised carnivalesque bodies that might challenge the ubiquity of the normalised princess bodies it specialises in. Such deviant bodies can be seen to populate the films from which the Disney Princess characters are taken,

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<sup>255</sup> Ian Wojcik-Andrews, *Children’s Films: History, Ideology, Pedagogy, Theory*, (New York: Garland Publishing Inc, 2000). p. 4.

but they are exorcised from *Disney Princess*. What is left in these texts is an advertising discourse which invites children to “slide” into a fantasy of embodiment in which they too can become princesses through the magic of buying.

This fantasy of embodiment is not without contradictions, albeit contradictions which may add to the value of Disney Princess products. The exercise of “sliding” from the position of spectator/user of Princess sites of meaning to imaginatively acting and fantasising as a Disney Princess is not the only way of interacting with these images and products. In the Disney Princess website, for instance, the user can participate in activities such as writing his/her thoughts in a Princess diary, plan a princess party, and play games as a Princess character, or order Princess products and costumes. These activities may be engaged with as part of the fantasy of being a Princess.



Figure 16: acting as a Princess.

Nonetheless, there are other notable aspects of the website which are inconsistent with this fantasy. For instance, as the user navigates the site she/he is watched over by the faces of the Disney Princess characters who populate the title banner of the website. The title banner, which stays visible whichever page is being explored, depicts the profiles of all the Princess characters. Each face is also an icon which can be navigated to open up the “world” of the character, offering more games as well as abridged versions of the story of the particular Princess. Each icon also responds to the “touch” of the mouse, producing a glittering aura around the

princess it touches. When a Princess icon is selected the “world” of the Princess offers an image of her, surrounded by other characters in her story<sup>256</sup>. Each of these is also an icon which leads to a game or activity. These can also be scrubbed over, this time the “touch” of the mouse transmits a voice telling the user what the icon leads to. This voice is implied to be that of the Princess. Additionally the website also advertises “Disney Enchanted Calls” which is a service in which customers are supposedly telephoned by their favourite Princess.

Here there is a second fantasy of “sliding”, one in which the user/consumer does not play at being a Princess but, through viewing and hearing the Princess icons which respond to their “touch”, is instead drawn into a play in which they encounter and engage with a Disney Princess. The Princess website is by no means the only site of meaning which offers this contradiction. Much of the merchandising for Disney Princess implies an invitation to feel and act as a Princess through holding and wearing the glittering pink items which recall the jewels and familiar objects of an affluent Princess, albeit in the form of mass-produced reproductions. These items are also prominently embellished with images of one or more Disney Princesses. Princess merchandise is engineered so that a young consumer may incorporate the wearing of high-heeled “Light-Up Belle Shoes for Girls”<sup>257</sup> into a fantasy of being a Princess. At the same time the consumer can view and admire an image of the Disney Princess, who is featured on the jewelled cameo which decorates the slippers.

The emphasis on stylised Princess images is repeated again and again in the design of these products. The Princesses are printed, stitched, or impressed upon a huge array of products, frequently shrouded in glitter and enchanted swirls and sparkles. The images and objects which depict the Princesses are consumed as objects of fetishistic scopophilia, described as a process by Laura Mulvey which “builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something

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<sup>256</sup> Notably, the “evil” or carnivalesque characters are missing from this line-up.

<sup>257</sup> Quoted from the product listing in, Walt Disney Internet Group, “Disney Shopping”, [http://disneyshopping.go.com/webapp/wcs/stores/servlet/CategoryDisplay?catalogId=10002&storeId=10051&categoryId=13927&langId=-1&N=0&Ntk=p\\_categoryID&Ntt=13927&Nu=p\\_productID](http://disneyshopping.go.com/webapp/wcs/stores/servlet/CategoryDisplay?catalogId=10002&storeId=10051&categoryId=13927&langId=-1&N=0&Ntk=p_categoryID&Ntt=13927&Nu=p_productID). (accessed 27/07/08).

satisfying in itself”<sup>258</sup>. Mulvey draws upon Freudian psychoanalysis as an account of the unequal gender relations that dominate the coding of popular visual images. Mulvey argues that traditionally images of women on display function as erotic objects of the male gaze, both for the male(s) on screen with her and for the audience<sup>259</sup>. For Mulvey, the woman as sexual object “holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire”<sup>260</sup>. She theorizes that female viewers may also consume images from this masculine point of view because of the patterns of pleasure and identification that are built into such images<sup>261</sup>.



Figure 17: coveting (as a) princess commodity

The traffic in Disney Princess images may also be viewed through Marx’s theories of the commodity fetish. Here the role of the fetish is to obscure the exploitative labour which produces the commodity. The fetishization of the commodity works to make it seem to be “endowed with life”, instead of the product of human labour<sup>262</sup>. This second “sliding” fantasy involves gazing upon images of Disney Princesses as fetish objects, and relating to them and the objects they adorn as dynamic and responsive entities.

The simultaneous invitation to participate in both fantasies of “sliding” clearly creates a contradiction between the active fantasy of being a Princess and the

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<sup>258</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989). p. 21.

<sup>259</sup> *ibid.* p. 19.

<sup>260</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>261</sup> *ibid.* p. 29.

<sup>262</sup> My reading of Marx is informed by that of Maurya Wickstrom, in “Commodities, Mimesis, and the Lion King: Retail Theatre for the 1990s”, in *Theatre Journal*, 51.3 (1999) Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999. accessed through <http://muse.jhu.edu> p.295.

passive fantasy of touching and gazing upon a Princess. However, both fantasies position consumers within a narrative for which the called for response is to desire, and to buy, objects which bear the images and signifiers of Disney Princesses. In this way the two overlaying fantasies can be seen to work in favour of Disney because they potentially double the desirability of Princess merchandise, allowing consumers to choose whichever mode of interaction and fantasy suits them at a given moment. They are asked to both have, and to become the Disney Princess. Both fantasies are brought into being in and through the body of the implied consumer. The consumer wears, holds, touches and plays with/as a Disney Princess. The consumer is directed to interact with objects and images in certain sanctioned ways – playing ‘nicely’ while wearing delicate fluffy slippers, or singing love songs to sing-along CDs<sup>263</sup>. These regulatory lessons on how to be(come) a successful, consumerist Princess, prepares them for a life of girling and its associated feminine docility.

Nonetheless, the confusion and apparent opposition of the two fantasies (playing with/as, and becoming a *real* Princess) may not necessarily work in favour of Disney’s desire for girls to consume their products. Certainly, Disney Princess is an overwhelmingly popular and profitable franchise but this does not mean that, even for those who own Princess objects, trinkets, dresses and bows, the fantasy is successfully enacted. In fact, the conflicting fantasies on offer may have the potential to cancel each other out, breaking the spell, or at least preventing either ‘fragment’ of the dream from becoming all-consuming and incontestable. Girls are often disappointed and disenchanted when the fantasy promise falls short of their expectations. The very fact that sanctioned Princess play is heavily scripted by Disney may, for some at least, prove its undoing. Its interpellation of consumers assumes an audience which is affluent, white, female and beautiful according to current western norms. Bodies who do not conform to this standard are invisible in terms of representation. As previously argued, those who are not affluent may experience Disney Princess products as something they are deprived of, the absence

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<sup>263</sup> See example *Sing Along with Disney Princesses*, which can be viewed at Walt Disney Internet Group, “Disney Shopping”, <http://disneyshopping.go.com/webapp/wcs/stores/servlet/DSIProductDisplay?catalogId=10002&storeId=10051&productId=1129235&langId=-1&categoryId=11887>. (accessed 02/08/08).

of which could cause feelings of low self-worth. Others may feel they are distanced from engaging Princess play because they do not see resemblances of themselves in the Disney Princess icons. When prompted to compare themselves with Princesses they may feel that they come up short. Nonetheless, as with the case of consumers who are not able to buy Princess products, this experience may not dissuade consumers from desiring Princess products. They may in fact be prompted to buy more in the hope that Disney Princess will make good on its promise that they too will someday be Princesses. However, this is not inevitable cause-and-effect logic.

The experience of Disney Princess may instead cause children who do not live up to the Princess body to withdraw from play or from fully immersing themselves in the fantasy. Indeed most children in the age-target for Disney Princess are unlikely see themselves in the more adult curves and impossible bodies of these heroines. Yet the power these icons have as an ideal to strive for is not cancelled out by the fact that they are impossible, and, one does not have to fully participate in fantasy to find it seductive. When it comes to the question of whether the ideological power of Disney can be counted as outright propaganda when it is experienced as a full-bodied fantasy, Disney Princess can certainly be confirmed as having the potential to be very powerful, offering consumers an enticing yet impossible body ideal which they are explicitly prompted to strive for. However, this fantasy of embodiment is offered to the real bodies of real people and there are almost certainly gaps between the bodies it interpolates into this fantasy and the bodies which see Disney Princesses, which reach out and touch them with clammy, grubby imperfect digits. What they touch may conform to a certain idea of perfection and may coax them into believing in this perfection, in investing in it as a representation of conventional beauty. Nonetheless, problems do arise which indicate that there may at least be the potential for consumers of the Princess fantasy to question the logic that they should attempt to duplicate this ideal or believe in it as the only possible definition of beauty and worthiness. That said, the saturation of Disney Princess, which has the potential to inveigle itself into nearly every facet of childhood existence, and the seductiveness of the Princess fantasy, does indicate that this



possibility for contestation arises in a gap which Disney is working hard to squeeze out of existence.

### **Afterward – Disney Bridal**

The fantasies which the marketing and products of Disney Princess enable may be viewed as a passing entertainment or as part of a consumer's childhood experience which will lose all its significance when the viewer "grows out" of the "phase" of childhood fantasy and play. However there is some evidence to suggest that the passage to adulthood does not necessarily spell the end of the allure of playing Princess. In 2007 Disney launched Disney Bridal, a line of wedding gowns which, according to designer Kirstie Kelly takes its inspiration "from the silhouette, palette and icons of each Disney Princess story and interprets the spirit of each young woman. ... Each of them has a unique, charming and very individual style that many brides everywhere can identify with – and now truly emulate – on their wedding day"<sup>264</sup>. Disney Bridal frames itself for a market of adults who continue to interact with and fantasise about the Princess body. As the Walt Disney Company Annual Report claims - "Disney Princess can fulfil the dreams of girls of any age, including brides-to-be"<sup>265</sup>. Clearly then the option to play at being a Princess can extend far beyond the tweens.

This raises some questions: what happens to these brides-to-be once they become the brides-that-were? What place in the Disney Universe will they have? Will there be Disney Princess maternity wear? Disney Princess anti-ageing cream? So far, it seems that the post-marriage Disney Princess consumer is not catered for. She is, in the Disney Universe, non-existent - except perhaps as the mother of the next generation of Princesses in waiting. Bell argues that, in the classic Disney narrative, women of child-bearing years are portrayed as villains, as grotesque devouring women. Perhaps this is why they are ignored within this realm of the Disney Universe – Disney simply does not know how to represent them. Here there

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<sup>264</sup> As quoted by designer Kirstie Kelly on Walt Disney Internet Group, "Disney Bridal", <http://www.disneybridal.com/press.html>, (accessed 20/07/08).

<sup>265</sup> Walt Disney Internet Group, "The Walt Disney Company Annual Report". Accessed via <http://search.disney.go.com/exec/?q=annie+lebovitz&x=20&y=8>, (accessed 27/07/08).

is perhaps the possibility that in this space of invisibility there is room for contestation, triggered by the disappointment that the “happily ever after” exists in a non-representational vacuum. But for how long will Disney avoid addressing these women when there may be profit in including them? Currently Disney Bridal offers gowns for “blossoms” (flower girls), “maidens” (bridesmaids) and brides. Perhaps the equivalent euphemism for the already married or older woman is not far away.

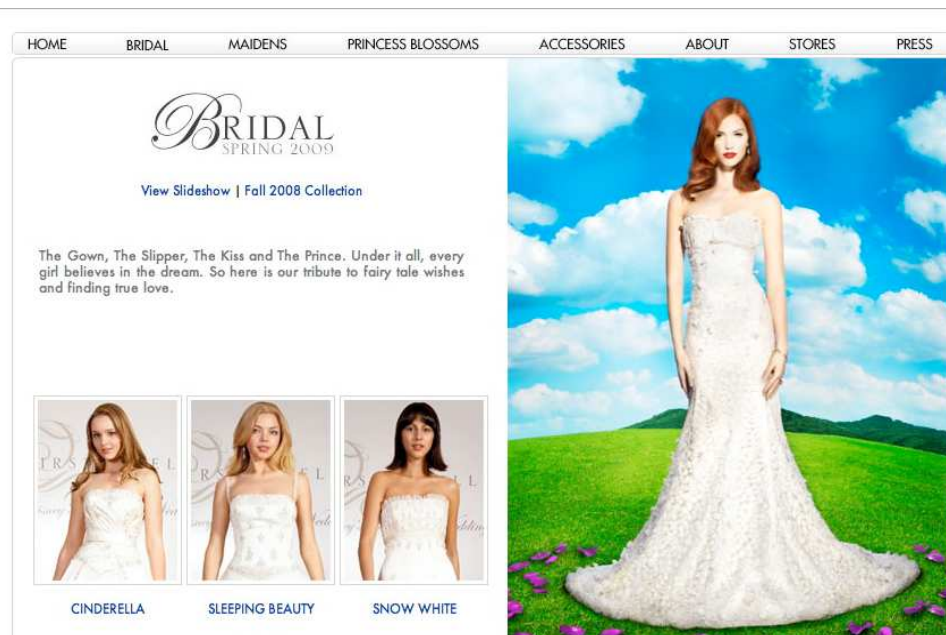


Figure 18: Living as a Princess.

**”Ohana Means Family, and Family Means No one Gets Left Behind”:**

**The Embodiment of Post-9/11 Anxiety in *Lilo and Stitch***

“Our family is little now, and we don’t have many toys. But if you want, you could be a part of it.”  
- Lilo

Following the events of 9/11, Disney’s *Lilo and Stitch* offered viewers a consoling allegory of the cultural climate of crisis and unease<sup>266</sup>. Lilo’s broken family and the film’s themes of isolation and fragmentation work as expressions of the popular sense of alienation and anxiety in post 9/11 America. Apprehensions about the threat of the invasion by the alien Other are also evoked in the guise of the Galactic Federation and the character of Stitch. The alien Other in *Lilo and Stitch* express anxieties about who possesses power and how power is used and maintained, frequently revealing anxieties about how America itself wields its authority as a super-power. The film works through these apprehensions to offer a utopian resolution to post-9/11 despondency through a re-engagement with the family unit. This new American family unit is necessarily built from fragments which include identities which Disney utopian imaginings have historically marginalized.

This chapter is the first to analyse bodily representation in terms of a specific event. This shift in focus seems necessary in order to adequately analyse *Lilo and Stitch*, a film which is loaded with contradictory representations, all of which seem inseparable from the historical context of the film. The analysis of gender and embodiment in *Lilo and Stitch* also presents a move within this thesis from the general analysis of feminine gender norms in recent Disney films to the specific analysis of the ways in which gender is done, and undone, in this highly contradictory and self-consciously performed text.

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<sup>266</sup> *Lilo and Stitch* was released in 2002. It has a production history which extends further back than the events of 9/11. However, it seems likely that the (possibly unintended) links that the film makes to the cultural climate following 9/11 contributed greatly to its success. *Lilo and Stitch* was a surprise hit for Disney, which was then beginning to see a slump in the sales of their 2D animated films. *Lilo and Stitch* earned \$145,771,527 gross according to: box-office statistics website The Numbers: <http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/indexL.php>. (accessed 29/07/08). Whereas the 2001 Disney release *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* earned \$84,052,762, and another 2002 Disney release *Treasure Planet* earned just \$38,120,554 according to the same website. Disney has not released a 2D animated feature theatrically since *Home on the Range* which earned \$50,026,353 (same source).

*Lilo and Stitch* presents viewers with representations of the family and the body which are permeated by oppositions and performative tensions. The need to present a version of Americanness which embraces divergent subjectivities and styles clashes with Disney's tendency to universalise using the short-hand of reductive and normalising stereotypes. The result is a mixture of performances and performative encounters which sometimes work to denaturalise gendered and racialised constrictions of the body. However, these performances and encounters are regulated and their meaning is somewhat abated by the circumscriptive use of stereotypes and narrative conventions which work to constrain these errant bodies. *Lilo and Stitch* seems to at once embrace and contain the body, and the family, of difference.

The film begins and ends with the definitive judgements of the United Galactic Federation. The Federation is a powerful inter-galactic organization, made up of alien beings. The opening of the film finds them assembled in a massive auditorium. They are headed by the Grand Councilwoman. She is adjudicating over a case in which a scientist, Jumba, has illegally created a living creature. The creature is revealed as a dangerous life-form called experiment 626, later known as Stitch. 626 has been engineered with the sole purpose to wreak havoc and destruction wherever he goes. Here Stitch is characterized as a dangerous body. The Grand Councilwoman decides to reason with him. But he refuses to make a logical account of himself, instead he uses his one opportunity to speak for himself; to utter something so obscene (in a presumably alien language which is not translated) that it actually makes one of the aliens throw up. He is then declared to be an "abomination" which has "no place among us". The Grand Councilwoman speedily makes her judgement, which involves Stitch being exiled to an isolated penal asteroid where he can never hurt anyone. He is carried away in a ship of colossal proportions which is followed by an envoy of smaller ships. The expurgation of Stitch's hostile body reflects what Sean Redmond identifies as an "emerging cult of bodily disappearance"<sup>267</sup>. Allison McCracken argues that many popular American

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<sup>267</sup> Sean Redmond, "When Planes Fall Out of the Sky: The War Body on Screen", *The War Body on Screen*, edited by Karen Randell and Sean Redmond, (London: Continuum, 2008). p. 30.

texts are “haunted” by such bodily removals, displacing and revealing the casualties and bodily disappearances involved in America’s war on terrorism<sup>268</sup>.

The remit of the Galactic Federation seems to be to preside over law and order throughout the galaxy. The breadth of their presupposed authority expresses a possible logical extreme of “manifest destiny”, the notion that American expansionism was an expression and a substantiation of the superiority of America and its values. Amy Kaplan argues that the rhetoric of manifest destiny has come back into popular circulation in the U.S.A., specifically in relation to the Muslim world. Kaplan argues that, in this rhetoric, voices that oppose American authority are seen to “resist not our power but the universal human values we embody”<sup>269</sup>. The Galactic Federation similarly seem to assume their authority on the basis that their influence will establish and maintain stability and order where there would otherwise be lawlessness. Just how far the Galactic Federation’s dominion extends and how or why they have come into existence is not specified. What is made clear is that they have the ability and the authority to annihilate whoever or whatever gets in their way.

This is principally demonstrated when Stitch escapes and crash-lands on Earth. It is revealed that the Federation can and will gas the whole planet in order to neutralise him, without much thought for the lives of the planet’s current occupants. Earth is only saved when one of the Federation’s advisors insists that it has been given the status of protected wildlife habitat (the Galactic Federation are apparently using the planet to rebuild the mosquito population). The Federation’s destructive capabilities and superior technology evidently render humankind insignificant. They wield terrible power, power that makes them capable of determining the fate of humankind. This sequence invokes the figure of the alien Messiah, the superhuman alien life-form whose power overwhelms that of Earth. The alien Messiah provides a higher authority, one which is frequently seen to provide a resolution to the conflicts and uncertainties of contemporary life. *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is an example

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<sup>268</sup> As quoted in Sean Redmond, “When Planes Fall Out of the Sky: The War Body on Screen”, In *The War Body on Screen*. p. 30.

<sup>269</sup> Amy Kaplan, “Violent Belongings and the Question of Empire Today Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, October 17, 2003”, accessed via Project Muse, <http://muse.jhu.edu/helicon.vuw.ac.nz/>. p.g.4.

of this: the film has aliens threatening nuclear destruction of earth unless all wars and violent conflicts on the planet come to a halt<sup>270</sup>. The Galactic Federation summon a similar sense of an external divine authority, though there seems to be less faith here that these alien Messiahs will always wield their power responsibly and for the good of human kind. Indeed, this sequence suggests that human-kind has no great advocates outside Earth. Instead Earth is vulnerable to the whims of a rather indifferent alien authority.

Stitch evidently poses just as much of a threat to earth and humankind as the Federation. The Galactic Tribunal's judgement describes Stitch as a potential menace who is incompatible with civilised society. Though he has yet to commit any acts of destruction they categorize him as a potential violent aggressor, as a possible insurgent. Yet this opening sequence also positions viewers to applaud Stitch's escape from the doubtful mercy of the Federation. This is partly because Stitch is depicted in the getaway sequence as a kind of cowboy outlaw, making his daring break-out against the odds. He escapes the ruthlessly efficient and almost unlimited security forces of the Federation by using their own laser-emitting weapons against them. This resourceful and mischievous escapade appeals to myths of American exceptionalism and individualism, briefly making him a somewhat heroic character. Here Stitch is both Other and Us: he embodies heroic attributes which the audience are called to identify with, as well as embodying the savage and unruly Other.

The other reason viewers are positioned to feel uneasy about the Federation is because of the ways in which their characterisation is consistent with those of other science fiction narratives. The Federation are strange and potentially hostile non-humans whose undefined collective powers threaten to decimate human civilization. The Federation is represented in ways which invoke fears of the unknown "other" of western narrative tradition. Ziauddin Sardar argues that this is a consistent trope of science fiction texts. Imaginings of what outer-space aliens might look and behave like are informed by the narrative conventions that arose from

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<sup>270</sup> Hugh Ruppersberg, "The Alien Messiah", in *Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema*, Edited by Annette Kuhn, (London: Verso, 1990). p. 36.

Western civilisation's encounters with the alien Other of non-Western civilisations<sup>271</sup>.

Sardar argues that the science fiction genre could only have arisen from the history and projects of Western science. This is because Western science, and science fiction, has historically been very much interdependent with Western imperialism. The supposed rationality and progressiveness of Western science was one of the ways which writers of the time argued for the uniqueness and superiority of the West compared to the cultures that were colonised by Western nations<sup>272</sup>. However, this conception of the alien as Other also incorporates anxieties about the possibility that the Other may not be so different, or so inferior, and may in fact have the potential to override Western power<sup>273</sup>.

Stitch embodies the representations of the violent and illogical savage which both fed and justified Western imperialist projects. But the Federation poses an even more potent menace. The representation of Galactic Federation is consistent with a modern re-working of the other. Like the Aliens in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) or the Borg in *Star Trek The Next Generation* (1987-1994), they embody the threat of a competing civilisation which is at least as organised and powerful as Western civilisation. The alien Other of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* presents a Cold War depiction of communist invasion from within. Here aliens with a secret agenda are disguised as ordinary people and succeed in infiltrating earth because they are almost impossible to expose<sup>274</sup>. Similarly, the Borg present a version of the Other as the post-human. Christine Wertheim argues that the Borg can be seen to present a "reflection of our own hybrid, freakish 'nature'"<sup>275</sup>.

Sardar argues that alien civilizations are made distinguishable in science fiction through essential differences which attempt to clearly define the boundaries of alien and human. As Sardar puts it, aliens "demonstrate what is not human the

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<sup>271</sup> Ziauddin Sardar, "Introduction", in *Aliens R Us: The Other in Science Fiction Cinema*, Edited by Ziauddin Sardar and Sean Cubitt, (London: Pluto, 2001). p. 3.

<sup>272</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>273</sup> Liz Hedgecock, "'The Martians Are Coming!': Civilization v. Invasion in *The War of the Worlds* and *Mars Attacks!*", in *Alien Identities: Exploring Differences in Film and Fiction*, Edited by Deborah Cartmell, I.Q Hunter, Heidi Kaye, and Imelda Whelehan, (London: Pluto, 1999). p. 105-6.

<sup>274</sup> As quoted by Ziauddin Sardar in, "Introduction". p. 14.

<sup>275</sup> *ibid.* p. 10.

better to exemplify that which is human”<sup>276</sup>. Frequently the fatal weakness of the alien Other turns out to be a lack of humanity, a lack made most literal in *The War of the Worlds*, which recounted the final defeat of invading Martians as the result of an inability to endure simple airborne bacteria<sup>277</sup>.

In *Lilo and Stitch*, the Federation presents the viewer with a group of aliens who are defined by a centralised and overly officious bureaucracy. Earth’s survival under their power depends on the vagaries of the Federation’s administration. They lack feeling and an understanding of the preciousness of human life. Yet, as Liz Hedgecock argues, often science fiction narratives seem to be saying that the alien “other” from outer-space may not be so different from “us” after all<sup>278</sup>. Hedgecock takes the example of the Martian invasion in *The War of the Worlds* and argues that they represent echoes of the expansion of the British Empire at the time the original novel was written. The sci-fi text can use the notion of the alien from outer-space to express concerns over what will happen to contemporary society if it continues to follow the direction it seems to be taking. In the instance of *War of the Worlds*, Hedgecock argues that the concern is the drive for the violent colonisation of other places and peoples, represented by the exterminating Martians.

The characterisation of the Federation expresses concerns about where Western civilization is headed. More specifically the depiction of the Federation embodies anxieties about the foreign policies of the U.S. Government and the international corporations with interest in its concerns. Its representation also conveys apprehension about the expansion of American imperialism. Conversely, the Federation can be seen to embody the danger of conceding authority to the whims of the Other. Clearly the burden of power weighs heavily on the film. Here *Lilo and Stitch* is very much concerned with the necessity for power to be in the hands of the “right” people. This sentiment may be understood as expressing what Amy Kaplan describes as “reluctant imperialism”. The logic of this ideology is

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<sup>276</sup> *ibid.* p. 6.

<sup>277</sup> The more recent remake of this film is analysed in more detail by Sean Redmond, “When Planes Fall Out of the Sky: The War Body on Screen”, *The War Body on Screen*, edited by Karen Randell and Sean Redmond, (London: Continuum, 2008). p. 30.

<sup>278</sup> Liz Hedgecock, “‘The Martians Are Coming!’: Civilization v. Invasion in *The War of the Worlds* and *Mars Attacks!*”. p. 105.



rooted in a conception of other nations and civilizations as failed empires which are vulnerable to chaos and terrorism. The U.S.A must therefore use its super-power status to bring order to the world<sup>279</sup>.

The representation of Stitch is also double-edged. He is described by the Federation using the language that the West employs for describing terrorists and insurgent Others. Yet he is also the embodiment of troubling characteristics within the popular understanding of Western civilization. Stitch is violent and destructive in ways that are self-serving and anarchic. His cocksure cowboy attitude in the opening sequence shows no concern for the results of his actions. He presents the potential for unhinged violence and fragmentation in post 9/11 America. His body must be managed and made coherent so that it can be recuperated into society.

Humankind (American civilians) is represented by Lilo and Nani. They are Hawaiian orphan sisters who are struggling with the concerns of their ordinary unremarkable lives. Their home is disorganised and their relationship is complicated rather than idealised. Unusually for Disney, they do not seem to be dramatically expurgated of features which do not correspond to white Western body ideals. Their figuration as heroines is dramatically different to that of the heroine of *Pocahontas* for instance. As the earlier chapter on *Pocahontas* argued, its depiction of Pocahontas works to domesticate difference by animating her as a conflation of various ethnic attributes and by positioning her as the sexualised exotic object of the gaze.

Instead Lilo and Nani are put forward as examples of the variety of experiences and subjectivities which compose post 9/11 America. Their splintered and damaged family unit can be seen to stand in for the larger national family unit. Importantly they are depicted as marginal identities – they are from a part of America which is seldom included in mainstream cinema except as a holiday location. In this way Lilo and Stitch can be seen to make a case for a more forcible recognition of difference in post 9/11 America. Amy Kaplan argues that post 9/11 conceptions of nation often imagine America as necessarily unified by the threat of

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<sup>279</sup> Amy Kaplan, “Violent Belongings and the Question of Empire Today Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, October 17, 2003”, p. 4.

terrorism. The borders of America are reconceptualised and shored up under the title of “homeland”<sup>280</sup>. Lilo and Nani exemplify this conceptual re-negotiation. They represent the marginalised and fragmented identities which must be incorporated into the American “family”.

However, these representations of difference are still motivated by the sanitizing conventions and norms which characterise Disney films. The mixture of the representational impulses that shape earlier Disney texts and the need to present the “real” faces of America create multiple tensions in the bodily figurations of Lilo and Nani. These heroines present non-idealised and even atypical body styles. Lilo’s figuration, for instance, is undeveloped and rounded. She is shorter than her peers and has darker skin and hair. Some aspects of Nani’s figuration do fit with white idealised norms. She is tall and fairly slender and has recognisably feminine curves. However, there are also aspects which differentiate her from the idealised norms of white femininity. In particular she is muscular and she does not move with the mincing delicacy or coyness which characterizes the movements of other Disney heroines. Nani is busy and active and she is often shown responding to situations by running, jumping, or kicking her way to her goal.

*Lilo and Stitch* is also notable for breaking with the Disney fascination with the idealised liminal girl-woman body. For example, there is a stark contrast between Lilo, and Nani, and figures like Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*. Yet the necessity to create relatable and universalised characters means that often both Lilo and Nani seem to behave and use their bodies in ways that are closer to what might be expected of a heroine with a girl-woman body. For instance, while there is no hint of precocious sexuality in Lilo’s movements, she often does behave with the impetuous fervour of a moody teen<sup>281</sup>.

Nani also often behaves more like a teen on the cusp of womanhood. She is charged with the care of her orphan sister which suggests that she is legally an adult. Yet she often struggles with her role as matriarch, finding it difficult to parent Lilo

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<sup>280</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>281</sup> Claire Hines, in an email to the author. 2008.

and deal with her many responsibilities. It often seems that she would rather deal with more teenage concerns such as surfing and boyfriends.

Other body tensions are also made apparent within the course of the narrative, particularly in the case of Lilo. These tensions arise from the clash between the film's apparent desire to represent unconventional characters and to destabilise norms, and Disney's tendency to universalise and to conventionalise. An example of this can be seen in the scene which first introduces us to Lilo. The sequence seems to be attempting to upset the conventions of the gaze by bestowing it on the unlikely Lilo. There is a dramatic difference between this scene and those found in some of the other films discussed in this thesis. Chapter One, in particular, explored the ways in which the opening scenes of *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast* worked to position the heroines of the films as the object of a fetishistic gaze.

In the scene which introduces us to Lilo there is something quite different going on. Lilo is first seen swimming in the ocean, her little body moving through the water with ease rather than grace. Lilo eventually makes it to shore and gets her things together to depart the beach. She hops over towels and between beach-goers in her haste to make it to her dance practice. But before going she sees something that captures her attention. She gets a small camera out of her bag and prepares to take a picture of it. Unsatisfied with the framing of her image she steps back and reframes before finally taking a photo. It is only now that we are at last shown a glimpse of what has prompted Lilo's careful amateur photography. It is the figure of a large sunburned white male tourist.

This is a pointed moment: Lilo is the bearer of the look here, not the white man. We see a reaction shot of the tourist but we never see Lilo from his point of view. He is the object of Lilo's gaze, and the gaze of the audience. Importantly though, this gaze is not one which positions the tourist as a sexual object – Lilo is too young to take up such a gaze and the tourist is too obviously a figure of fun for the audience to see him this way.

This interaction implies the distinction made by E. Ann Kaplan between “looking” and “gazing”. Mulvey's seminal work on the gaze uses both the look and

the gaze to describe the process of the visual objectification of women in film.

However, Kaplan distinguishes between the two, saying that;

“Looking will connote curiosity about the Other, a wanting to know (which can of course still be oppressive but does not have to be), while the gaze I take to involve extreme anxiety – an attempt in a sense *not* to know, to deny in fact.”<sup>282</sup>

The denial which Kaplan ascribes to the gaze is related to fetishistic scopophilia<sup>283</sup>.

Mulvey argues that fetishistic scopophilia acts as disavowal of the castration anxiety evoked by the female form. By building up and focusing on the (sexualised) beauty of the object of the gaze, the threat which it implies is circumnavigated. Scholars such as Ella Shohat have argued that the gaze performs a similar function in relation to marginalised peoples. She argues that Hollywood cinema can build up the exotic “Otherness” of marginalised people, depicting “subaltern” cultures and peoples in ways that posit ethnicity as stable and unselfconscious. Through this gaze Hollywood cinema presumes to speak for marginalised peoples and works to prevent those peoples from speaking for themselves<sup>284</sup>. For Kaplan, the gaze involves an active subject who gazes and a passive object that is gazed at<sup>285</sup>.

“Looking” implies the relations between both object and subject. Kaplan argues that the object can in fact return the look. However, looking still implies power relations and the possibilities for looking are very much subject to regulation. bell hooks discusses the looking practices of black slaves in America and describes how black slaves could be punished if they were caught observing the whites they served<sup>286</sup>. There are then inequalities of looking just as there are inequalities of power.

Kaplan argues that when the look is returned by the object oppressed by the gaze it can work to make the oppressor “see” themselves. That is, the sensation of

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<sup>282</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, And the Imperial Gaze*, (New York: Routledge, 1997). p. xvii.

<sup>283</sup> The concept of fetishistic scopophilia is discussed in chapter 4.

<sup>284</sup> Ella Shohat, “Ethnicities-in-Relation: Toward a Multicultural Reading of American Cinema”, in *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema*, edited by Lester D. Friedman, (Illinois: Urbana, University of Illinois Press). 1991. p. 225.

<sup>285</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, And the Imperial Gaze*, (New York: Routledge, 1997). p. xviii.

<sup>286</sup> As quoted in E. Ann Kaplan, *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, And the Imperial Gaze*. p. 3.

double-consciousness which DuBois theorises about is made to work on the oppressor so that they too are made to see themselves as others see them<sup>287</sup>. This is perhaps part of what makes the tourist in *Lilo and Stitch* so comical. Lilo's act of looking at him makes his sun-burned skin seem somehow appallingly white. His whiteness is not an unremarkable or invisible attribute: it is marked and described by Lilo's look.



Figure 19: capturing the body From *Lilo and Stitch*, (Dean DeBlois & Chris Sanders, Walt Disney Pictures, United States, 2002).

However, the experience of perceiving whiteness cannot be theorized as an equally painful or damaging sensation. The histories of unequal power relations which lie at the root of the symbolic power of the gaze mean that the white male gaze has a determining power which has traditionally been supported by the actual power to control and dominate others. Furthermore, as Susan Miller and Greg Rode point out, cultures are formed in part by the types of images which they have been shown. Some images have been more highly valued and more consistently shown than others. These remembered images contribute to cultural understandings of

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<sup>287</sup> As quoted in E. Ann Kaplan, *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, And the Imperial Gaze*, p. 8.

newer images<sup>288</sup>. Western audiences are simply used to seeing images of marginalised peoples which position them as exotic and sexualised objects of the gaze. It can be said then that images in dominant Western culture are not only constructed to privilege whiteness and the white gaze, they also work construct the audience which views and interprets these images.

Lilo's unfamiliar act of looking then does not have the same degree of determining power because it is not linked to an actual power to oppress or control. This is not necessarily a bad thing. Lilo's look in fact does something more interesting than simply reversing traditional relations of looking. The unfamiliarity of her act is central to this: Lilo's look has a destabilising effect on traditional looking relations. The viewer is made conscious of the act of looking because of its abnormal staging. The hierarchies of power that have traditionally been buried in the gaze are thus unearthed and made visible. Lilo can be said to be "doing" the gaze not to objectify the tourist but to highlight the act of objectification itself.

This revelation of the gaze is especially interesting considering that Disney has so routinely made use of it to visually structure its films. In a sense then, Disney may be seen to be turning the gaze on itself, exposing the ways in which it has underlined its narratives with ways of looking which privilege a white patriarchal hierarchy.

The de-naturalisation of the gaze lends itself to other kinds of denaturalisation. We are clearly meant to find the figure of the tourist amusing - he is fat and sunburned and cannot even control his motor reflexes well enough to keep from drooling ice cream down his front. Here we are being asked to question the (usually naturalised) logic that links whiteness positively to the civilizing force of post-colonialism. One is made to suspect that this white tourist can have very little to contribute to the betterment of Lilo's lifestyle or culture. Here there is something of a recognition of new form of post-colonialism through tourism. The cross cultural

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<sup>288</sup> Susan Miller and Greg Rode, "The movie you See, the Movie You Don't: How Disney Do's That Old Time Derision", in *From Mouse To Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*, edited by Elizabeth, Lynda Haas, Laura Sells, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995). p. 87.

exchange which is promised in conventional tourism discourse is revealed here to be merely the consumption of locale and “sights”.

Lilo’s journey through the film is peppered with interactions with such tourists. They are always depicted as having much more banal experiences: eating ice-cream while Lilo swims amongst the fishes, or having their photographs taken beside road signs while Lilo whizzes by in a rocket ship. Their whiteness is made to connote feckless complacency rather than decisiveness or superior intelligence. They see the “sights” but cannot access experience beyond the visual confirmation of what they have already learned of the place they see in the films and postcards which drew them there.

Lilo’s physical make-up is also key here. Lilo pauses from her exuberant and unaffected sprint from the beach to snap the tourist. In contrast to her helter-skelter running, Lilo’s play at being a photographer is enacted with a kind of childish seriousness. She is putting on a self-conscious performance of the tourist photographer. This exchange is also partly a satirical take on ethnographic encounters, with Lilo playing ethnographer instead of the white man. The tourist is posed like a museum exhibit dummy and Lilo obliges the display with an obligatory snap. The associations that this exchange present are all connected to Western civilisation’s history of consuming other civilisations as objectified bodies displayed for dispassionate study. The application of these associations reverses but also implies the history of ethnographic study of non-Western civilisations.

Lilo’s performance as ethnographer is one of many roles that she takes on throughout the film. These roles frequently offer a dramatic disjuncture between the body which Lilo is perceived to have, that of a little Hawaiian girl, and the behaviour she takes on. These performative disunities work to denaturalise the gendered and racialised configuration of the body by revealing the artifice of its construction<sup>289</sup>.

The impulse to universalise and objectify bodies and cultures is not altogether undone during this sequence. The non-diegetic music played over the

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<sup>289</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, (New York: Routledge, 1999). p. 175.

entire sequence is the kind of banal and inoffensive version of Hawaiian music that might be used to advertise package tour holidays. It confirms the location as the idyllic playground of tourist brochures. This continues to play over the interaction between Lilo and the tourist. This creates an odd juxtaposition. The visuals imply a critique of the ways in which post-colonial white patriarchal culture beholds and consumes cultures. Yet the soundtrack implies a confirmation and a celebration of the ways in which tourism flattens out and shapes cultural differences for easy digestion. Much of the film's mise-en-scene and soundtrack are similarly populated with recognisable Hawaiian tourism cliché's. Figurines depicting lady hula dancers are everywhere. The soundtrack is peppered with a mix of bland Hawaiian and Hawaii-era Elvis music. Nani even sings "Aloha 'Oe" to Lilo – the song which is possibly the most recognisable of the Hawaiian music canon.

*Lilo and Stitch* may also be criticised for making the tourists too stereotypical. The connotation of fatness here is of excessive consumption and laziness. As Susan Bordo argues, the contemporary cultural meanings of such excess body weight are of inadequacy and lack of will-power<sup>290</sup>. These associations may prevent audiences from seeing themselves in these images. They are not represented as the "universal" idealised bodies that audiences - whether they have bodies like those or not - are used to being asked to identify with. They may then be less likely to identify themselves as being part of the "problem" of post-colonialism, instead seeing it as something that is perpetuated by "others". The tourist, finally, is yet another alien Other. He is, like the Galactic Federation, both Us and Other. Here this double coding allows for criticism of America which perpetuates post-colonialism, yet also distances and disowns post-colonialism as something Others commit.

However, this pitfall can be seen as a by-product of something that the film may be praised for: part of the reason that audiences are unlikely to identify with the tourists is because they are positioned to identify with Lilo instead. The narrative depicts Lilo's struggle for a sense of family belonging in such a way that we are very

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<sup>290</sup> Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (London: University of California Press, 1993). p. 192. Bordo notes that this understanding of the body is historically and culturally specific: She argues that such associations are "only possible in a culture of overabundance" (same page).



much drawn in to her struggles. This is partly to do with her characterisation as an orphaned outsider. This is a narrative formula that Disney has used many times before<sup>291</sup>. However, Lilo differs from many in that she is quite wilfully antisocial, even before she is subjected to the “bad” influence of Stitch.

This antisocialism is made apparent early in the film when Lilo attempts to make a connection with some other girls her age. Lilo at first becomes angry with one of the girls when the girl teases her for telling strange stories. Lilo kicks and bites the girl before being sent outside by the teacher. Later, the other girls gather together to play with their dolls. Lilo approaches them and shows the girls her home-made doll. It is a crudely made rag-doll with an oversized head. The girls express dismay at its ugliness. Lilo attempts to explain her doll’s unusual appearance but while she is doing this the girls take the opportunity to disperse. When Lilo sees they have gone, she initially blames her rejection on the doll, throwing it down in disgust and walking away without it. But moments later she returns for it, hugging it tightly as she walks home. Lilo makes a point of refusing to abandon her deformed doll. The doll very obviously a representation of Lilo’s own social status and home situation. Her ugly behaviour and lack of cool toys render her an outsider and her orphaned condition makes her still more isolated.

This scene is one of many references to the Hans Christian Anderson tale “The Ugly Duckling”. The tale involves an orphan duckling<sup>292</sup> who is singled out by his peers for looking different from them. Later he grows up to be a beautiful swan who is the envy of those who once rejected him. The allusions to this tale in Lilo and Stitch concentrate on the earlier parts of the tale. Lilo (and later Stitch) is presented as a loner and an orphan. She is rejected by her peers and generally found unlovely or unusual by others. Later in the film Stitch becomes fascinated by an illustration in the book which depicts the newly orphaned duckling wandering alone and crying “I’m Lost!”

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<sup>291</sup> Claire Hines, 2008. Hines suggests this similarity, comparing *Lilo and Stitch* to *Snow White*. Some other examples include *Pinocchio*, *Aladdin*, and *The Lion King*.

<sup>292</sup> Actually a cygnet.



Figure 20: two orphan ducklings. From *Lilo and Stitch*, (Dean DeBlois & Chris Sanders, Walt Disney Pictures, United States, 2002).

The Ugly Duckling theme arguably appeals to the national mood in America following 9/11. Nancy Easterlin notes that Anderson's original tales were very much in agreement with such a national sense of loss and recession. Easterlin argues that:

the massive contraction of Denmark's realm in the first sixty years of the nineteenth century resulted in a national mood of withdrawal and retreat, a mood perfectly in sympathy with the outsider theme of many of Anderson's stories.<sup>293</sup>

Lilo finds some condolence for her loss and loneliness through Stitch, who is also an orphan of sorts and an outsider. Lilo and Stitch are both outsiders in search of a meaningful family. They are both also Othered figures. They may be seen as representatives of bereaved post 9/11 Americans. This is later confirmed by the comments of the two main adults of the film. The social worker Bubbles tells Nani

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<sup>293</sup> Nancy Easterlin, "Hans Christian Anderson's Fish Out of Water", in *Philosophy and Literature*, 2001. Accessed through Project Muse. <http://muse.jhu.edu>. Note: *The Little Mermaid* is also based on an Anderson tale. However, Disney's version of *Mermaid* arguably does not evoke such a strong sense of melancholy because much of the theme of alienation was de-emphasised in the Disney version. For more on this see Laura Sells reading of this film. Laura Sells, "Where Do the Mermaids Stand?", in *From Mouse To Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*, edited Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995). p.182.

that things have “gone wrong” with their family and Nani tells Lilo that their family is “broken”.

Lilo and Stitch are also wayward and uncivilised bodies. Stitch’s body is leaky and undisciplined. He growls and snarls and forages for bogies with his tongue. He also eats and then regurgitates his (and other people’s) food. Finally, when he is bored, he rolls on the ground with his legs in his mouth. Lilo’s catalogue of unruliness is more minor. She bites other girls and occasionally refuses to do as she is told, preferring to dance to Elvis Presley. Sean Redmond argues that while such bodies deviate from body norms, they may also be seen as cultural norms – they are the abject bodies before civilisation. Their savage and wicked behaviour requires restraint and shows the necessity for bodily containment<sup>294</sup>.



figure 21: Stitch says it with saliva. From *Lilo and Stitch*, (Dean DeBlois & Chris Sanders, Walt Disney Pictures, United States, 2002).

Hines argues that there is a disjunction between Lilo’s figuration as a cute young girl and her rude and anti-social behaviour. Her behaviour is often more like that of a rebellious teen<sup>295</sup>. This is matched by the disunion between Stitch’s occasional cuteness and his destructive tendencies. Stitch and Lilo can be said to act

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<sup>294</sup> Sean Redmond, “Lucretia Crum’s White Docile Body”, in *The Death of Whiteness* (PhD submission, 2005). p. 51-52.

<sup>295</sup> Claire Hines, in an email to the author. 2008.

as mirrors for each other<sup>296</sup>. Notably, this mirroring is not like the mirroring in *The Little Mermaid* in which Ursula's grotesqueness works as a kind of "bad mirror" for Ariel. Neither Lilo nor Stitch can be characterised as entirely good or entirely evil. Rather, Stitch may be said to be a more active representation of Lilo's disaffected rebelliousness. Together they misbehave and generally disrupt Nani's attempts to make their world more orderly and functional.

Lilo and Stitch's first day out together cements their relationship. Much of the day is condensed into a montage in which they are represented as a kind of Thelma and Louise or Bonnie and Clyde criminal couple. They wear sunglasses and roam about the town sporting sardonic postures and sharing moments of private fun. Stitch's more active rebelliousness is in evidence here: he snaps at passers-by and reacts violently to the curious sniff of another dog. However, Lilo eventually sees how damaging Stitch's behaviour can be. His disruptive displays cause havoc and further endanger the precarious status of their home-life. Lilo makes attempts to reform Stitch, to make him a "model citizen - like Elvis Presley". Here she can be seen to be attempting to tame her own wildness through her double Stitch.

Lilo takes on another performance here. Elvis may be the "model citizen" but it is Lilo who takes on the role of instructor in the ways of model citizenship. It soon becomes clear that the results of one uncivil body attempting to teach another produces less than ideal results. Lilo's efforts to make Stitch a more acceptable pet are in themselves rebellious acts: Lilo's version of a make-over does not involve transforming him into a well-groomed and domesticated pooch. Instead she encourages him to dress as a rhinestone Elvis and serenade beach-goers with an electrified Ukulele. Stitch's Elvis impression, which at first entertains beach goers, eventually becomes too raucous and uncontrolled, sending beachgoers running and causing the beach lifeguard tower to collapse.

The attempt to civilise Stitch is a failure and it is one which is attempted in only mock-seriousness. It would seem that neither Lilo nor Stitch are prepared, or able, to begin the transformation into that which would show them to be true model citizens. They either cannot or will not embody social norms through body styles

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<sup>296</sup> *ibid.*

and behaviours. Stitch is only finally made to be well-behaved and responsible when he understands himself to be part of Lilo's family. When he perceives that his new family is in real danger he undergoes an almost instant transformation. The guiding force of the notion of family provides him with a compass which directs him toward correct respectable behaviour. When the Galactic Federation arrest him he does not repeat his daring escape from the beginning of the film. He allows himself to be taken into their custody. His somewhat mawkish goodness in this scene compromises his previous interruptions of order. He literally allows himself to be shackled by the enforcers of the norms of civilised behaviour. Lilo is, by association with her double, made part of this acceptance.



Figure 22: Thelma and Louise. From *Lilo and Stitch*, (Dean DeBlois & Chris Sanders, Walt Disney Pictures, United States, 2002).

But one gets the sense that Stitch's good behaviour will not last, just as one suspects that Lilo's tantrums probably resurface on occasion. Their errant sense of fun seems unlikely to be entirely contained by their happy ending. Their good behaviour is not as convincing or as memorable as their unruly wayward behaviour. Haskell argues that such unconvincing narrative closures can frequently be seen as irrelevant in terms of the ways in which audiences read and remember films. Both

Haskell and Dyer use examples from Classical Hollywood films, such as *Mildred Pierce*, which vividly depicted successful independent women, only to have them submit to the better judgement of patriarchal authority in the final frames. Haskell and Dyer argue that the weighting of the mise-en-scene and the dramatic portrayal of independence overshadows the “climb-down” resolution of the narrative<sup>297</sup>. So too the images of Lilo and Stitch wreaking havoc in the tidy resorts and beaches of Hawaii outweigh the piety of Stitch’s reform.

This weighting is added to by the numerous other depictions of wayward bodies that the film offers. Indeed, Claire Hines argues that it is in fact the ugliness of both Stitch and the tourists that Lilo is attracted to<sup>298</sup>. Many of the film’s characters are distinguished by such fascinatingly queer looks. However, none of them have quite the uncanny grotesqueness of characters like Ursula in *The Little Mermaid*, or Jafar in *Aladdin*. This is perhaps because *Lilo and Stitch* is distinctly lacking in a single entirely bad character. The lack of clearly defined villains and heroes is unusual for Disney. Indeed the film often finds inclusiveness to be something of an uncomfortable fit – the impulse to find a clear villain seems to crop up throughout the film. The characters of the film are thus frequently required to be both villain and ally, frequently acting as both within the same scene. It would seem that virtually all the characters in *Lilo and Stitch* are revealed to be someone or something else in addition to their initial characterisation. They refuse easy categorisation, at times revealing their initial characterisation to be a performance.

The first of these characters is introduced to us as Stitch’s creator. He is an alien named Jumba. He has the accent of the stereotypical Cold War mad scientist from Eastern Europe and looks like a big furry beast with four eyes. Initially he is characterized very much as his voice implies, with the added element of an imposing and wayward physicality. But when he finds out that Lilo is in trouble, his manic zeal subsides. His world-destroying bravado is shed in moments. At this point his voice also softens and his doubled eyes and burly physique seem to take on a kind of unwieldy teddy-bear quality.

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<sup>297</sup> Richard Dyer outlines this argument in *Stars*, (London: Second Edition, BFI Publishing, 1998). p. 57

<sup>298</sup> Claire Hines. 2008.

Jumba is accompanied on his mission by Agent Pleakley. He is a three-legged one-eyed yellow creature with thin and floppy limbs and a voice that sounds like a pubescent teenage boy. The overall impression is that he is shrill and undignified. He is initially characterized as a pedant, embodying the bureaucracy of the Federation. Later, when they are required to disguise themselves as earthlings, Pleakley dresses as a woman. He is frequently caught in the act of enjoying this disguise. Jumba seems attracted to cross-dressing too, at one time demanding that Pleakley let him have a turn at it. Here Pleakley might be seen as something of a gay stereotype, and one that conflates homosexuality with cross-dressing. But Pleakley never develops into a villain; he is never punished for his transgressive performances. Instead he eventually learns to bend the Federation's rules to help Lilo. His loose physicality and preference for cross-dressing might then be said to convey flexibility.

The final intimidating character is the social worker, named Cobra Bubbles, who is assigned to Lilo. He is not really ugly but he is imposing. He is a tall, bulky black man with a *Men in Black* suit and sunglasses. However, his name somewhat undermines a strict reading of him as a menacing black man stereotype. Taken together, the "Cobra" part of his name suggests an imposing or dangerous exterior which is undermined by the frivolity and sweetness suggested by the "Bubbles" part. This somewhat reflects his role in the narrative. His gravity in the face of Lilo and Nani's pratfalls frequently seems to suggest a self-conscious pose of seriousness, and one that is used eventually for satirical effect as Bubbles reveals his ultimate performance to be the rescue of Earth via the few well phrased lies which led to the Federation believing that Earth needed to be classified as a wildlife habitat.

It would seem that nearly all the characters in *Lilo and Stitch* are involved in some form of play-acting or performing at some point. The abundance of play-acting and revelatory moments may be seen as the result of the film's overdetermination as post-9/11 text. E. Ann Kaplan argues that films may register and negotiate traumas, dealing with the events through displacements which both work through and reveal

the trauma<sup>299</sup>. Central to this displacement is of course the narrative journey of Lilo and her family. They variously embody the working through of loss and withdrawal in order for the family (and America) to re-affirm itself. The performances of the support cast add to this by repetitively acting out the Ugly Duckling theme, revealing each character to be finally “found” through their involvement in Lilo and Stitch’s family. These queer performances are then ultimately at the service of the restoration of paternal order.

“This is my family, I found it all on my own. It’s little and broken, but still good...  
Yeah, still good.”  
- Stitch

Stitch’s dramatic epiphany directs him to the importance of the family unit as the location of meaning and support. Post 9/11 America can regain its equilibrium by restoring the family as the centre value and the recourse from feelings of isolation and meaninglessness. In the final moments of the film the family gathers together to re-build their destroyed home. What has been “broken” can be re-built.

This ending is something quite new for Disney: it is a celebration of the non-nuclear family. Hines argues that the finale of the film articulates an acceptance of fragmented and multi-cultural queer family structures. Both the Alien authorities and the Earth ones come to agree that the family does not actually need to be fixed or expunged of deviant elements. Instead, they form an agreement to protect the family as is. However, this new post 9/11 family is constructed around institutions of surveillance which are represented by the Galactic council and the Government social worker/secret agent Bubbles. Patriarchal guidance is also interposed through the inclusion of Bubbles and Nani’s new boyfriend, David, into the family unit.

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<sup>299</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*, (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2005). p. 69.





Figure 23: rebuilding from the fragments. From *Lilo and Stitch*, (Dean DeBlois & Chris Sanders, Walt Disney Pictures, United States, 2002).

As the film began, so it ends: with a definitive pronouncement by the Galactic Federation. But things have shifted somewhat. The potential threat that they seemed to pose at the beginning of the film is dramatically softened. The Grand Councilwoman, upon hearing that Stitch now has the love and support of a family, perceives that his violent nature has been neutralised by it. She elects not to take him away after all. It would seem, then, that the Galactic Federation are not entirely unfeeling, especially where the family is concerned. The Aliens are also revealed to be not completely effectual or all-knowing: Bubbles divulges to Nani that it was he who had once saved Earth – by feeding them the rather flimsy lie that Earth’s “endangered” insect population had to be protected.

The Galactic Federation, and thus the behemoth American imperialism, is portrayed finally as essentially ethical and just. They believe in the inviolability of the family unit and are prepared to bend their rules to protect innocents. They may wield great power and influence but it is ultimately for the good of humankind to accept their rule. They leave declaring Lilo and Stitch’s family are to be protected under their rule. They also assert that they will be back in future to check on them. Here the film manages to portray the revelation of the Federation’s invasive

surveillance as the positive manifestation of paternal concern. The message is clear: American civilians, and the rest of the Western world, must learn to accept the better judgement, and discipline, of the American government.

It would seem then, that while Disney attempts to offer a re-imagining of the family and the body as diversely constructed and idiosyncratic, it cannot seem to avoid working to contain its aberrations and variations. The film works, finally, as an anodyne to post-9/11 America, re-asserting the mythology of American unity and prosperity. However, the film also offers a number of performances and moments which problematise the tidiness imposed on the film's conclusion. The errant bodies of Lilo and Stitch in particular lend themselves too well to moments of performativity and rebellion. Their bodies are ostensibly enveloped by the regulatory influence of the family, but their deconstructive behaviours leave kinks in the surface of the film that cannot be so easily ironed out.

## Conclusion

This thesis has explored the ways in which white femininity and Otherness is represented in recent Disney animated films. The focus has been on the body and its idealisation, racialisation, and monstrosity. The thesis has also explored how these representations emerge out of the social and historical context in which they were made: these films form part of a cultural dialogue which expresses anxieties about the ways in which race and gender are culturally constructed and managed. This thesis has found that these texts attempt to creatively alleviate concerns about the instability of race and gender as meaningful categories in an age where, as Koberna Mercer argues, identity is in crisis.

The first chapter of this thesis focused on the ways in which *Beauty and the Beast*, and *The Little Mermaid* attempted to grapple with the concerns of feminism and postfeminism. These films present heroines who are more intelligent and assertive than their Disney predecessors. There is also an attempt to present them as active narrative agents rather than damsels in distress. Belle and Ariel are exemplary models of a femininity that allows them to be smart, independent and creative. Nonetheless, as this thesis has suggested, the revisionist femininity in play in these films is still very restrictive and continues to favour patriarchy and heterosexual norms. The happy ending to both films only comes when the heroine finds her true love. It is also contested that these narratives of heteronormativity are embodied in heroines who are ideally white. The hyper whiteness and feminine civility of Belle and Ariel's contained bodies signify not only the fixity of the gendered norms which sustain heterosexual patriarchy, but the continued power that whiteness has to define notions of goodness and beauty. Yet, it has also been suggested that there are moments in these films when these hyper-white feminine bodies appear unstable and insubstantial, or too death-like to continue to hold the gaze. Both Belle and Ariel seem too translucent, ghost-like, to be ideally desirable. As such, in both *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Little Mermaid* the rigidity of the gender binaries is at once

confirmed and made problematic because of the excessive representation of femininity that one encounters.

For much of the Disney canon, idealised heroes and heroines are juxtaposed against ‘mirror’ characters who are deviant or monstrous and therefore evil. These Other wayward bodies are employed to illuminate and valorise the norm and confirm their own inferiority and subjugation. These deviant characters are drawn as embodied extremes (gross, thin, pointy, borderless) and are registered as racial stereotypes, liminal figures, or queer intruders. However, this thesis has also suggested that the relationship between the grotesque and the ideal body is often more complex than (these) simple power-saturated binaries. For example, in *The Little Mermaid* the grotesque villain can be read as an embodied protest to the patriarchal norms which the heroine submits to. In *Aladdin*, the Genie’s high-camp, self-reflexive play with self, space, and time offers the audience an inviting representation of the ‘alternative’ lifestyle. Nonetheless, in *The Little Mermaid* Ursula is punished for her transgressions, and in *Aladdin* Genie is made subservient to the marriage plot of the film. These films offer characters who can be read as vibrant and subversive, but Disney is careful to illuminate the dangers of such subversiveness.

A number of Disney’s recent films have attempted to redress the white bias of the canon by featuring non-white heroines. One such film is *Pocahontas*. However, the idealised feminine body found in this film is ultimately erased of difference and made to fit the same oppressive model of idealised femininity that her predecessors embodied. Furthermore, the utopian sensibility which pervades the film means that Pocahontas’ body is made to efface the history of Native American suffering in order to offer the audience a spurious origin myth in which Native Americans welcomed European invasion and colonisation. Disney’s version of the Pocahontas story presents the audience with a heroine who functions as a post-colonial recovery myth founded on pluralism and racial unity. The depiction of difference through “positive” images works to contain the potential for voices of protest. Notably, in *Pocahontas* the body of the Other is not punished as it is in *The Little Mermaid* and *Aladdin*. Instead, the body of the Other is made to acquiesce to

the potential subversive power of its Otherness. What remains after this erasure is put to use as a tool which sustains and valorises white patriarchal hegemony.

These Disney films display a preoccupation with the naturalisation of gender and race divisions as the ordering logic which overcomes chaos. Evil and problematic characters are frequently defined by bodies which are ambiguous in terms of gender, sexuality, and race. The racial coding of these characters often suggests an Otherness that is “dark” and shifting; their bodies and voices are often depicted as close to incomprehensible. The happy endings in these films hysterically re-enforce order and forcefully reinstate gendered and racialised divisions. The heroism and goodness enacted by the idealised bodies in these films confirm that the natural and rightful order is maintained by the natural and right body, which is *essentially* white.

These bodies, and the ideologies that they embody, do not merely exist as fanciful imaginary figures which are subsumed or made irrelevant by “reality”. This thesis has argued that popular cultural texts have a part in shaping the various “realities” of their viewers and consumers. The popularity of Disney products suggests that the ways in which these films depict identificatory categories, such as race and gender, have a hand in the dissemination of the “common sense” understandings of what these categories mean, and how they should be performed or “lived”.

The figuration of the idealised female body in Disney is taken from the fictional text to the shop and home through its merchandising range. This thesis has taken a particular interest in the popular Disney Princess brand which uses the bodies of Disney heroines to invite consumers to engage in fantasies of idealised embodiment. Disney Princess promises the consumers an impossible dream in which they will both be a beautiful Princess, and will have a Disney Princess to play with. This marketing strategy extends the normalising influence of the idealised female body: the extensive proliferation of images and objects (play things) of slender, to-be-looked-at Disney Princesses, mean that their ideological or discursive effect may prove more potent, and more damaging, for those who consume them. However, there may be multiple ways in which these images are consumed or ‘tried on’. The

invitation to participate in embodied Disney Princess fantasies may be powerful but it is still only an invitation. It is possible that these images may be creatively transformed by consumers, perhaps in transgressive ways which problematise the body of the Disney Princess. There is also the possibility that one is disappointed or disenchanted with the Disney Princess one has purchased. That said, the ways in which the Princess brand is promoted, and the phenomenal popularity of Princess parties and products, do indicate that images of Disney Princesses are at least coveted and sought out by consumers. It does seem that the pleasures promised by the Princess fantasy are persuasive.

This thesis has argued that the ways in which Disney Princess asks girls to engage in fantasies are especially troubling because the invitation interpolates people as consumers first. The consumption of Disney products is not secondary to the fantasy – it is part of the fantasy. Consumers are asked to consider their own bodies as accessories or products of the Disney Princess brand, and are encouraged to enhance their fantasies - and themselves - through the purchase of products.

The final film studied in this thesis, *Lilo and Stitch*, is the most recent of Disney's 2D animations to feature a leading female protagonist. The body of the heroine Lilo is notably unlike that of the bodies of the Disney Princesses studied in the rest of this thesis. *Lilo and Stitch* attempts to depict bodies which do not conform to idealised norms of gendered behaviour and body styles. The film seems to be calling for a construction of the body, and the family, which allows for some degree of diversity. However, the ending of the film indicates that Disney remains preoccupied with seeking the "common sense" limitations of the body, and closing off or containing the aberrational. For *Lilo and Stitch* this means that the heroine (and her rebellious double Stitch) must be made to realise that they are being watched by powerful guiding forces who will shape them into civilised bodies. But, unlike their predecessors, Lilo and Stitch are only made to behave civilly at the end of their narrative journey, and as such this ending is not entirely convincing. *Lilo and Stitch* offers an indication that Disney can produce representations that are not entirely constrained by rigid binaries of good and bad which place the uncivilised/queer/Other body squarely on the side of bad.

The operations of the gaze have been a particular concern in this thesis, taking up far more of the work of the thesis than *initially* expected. I think this is because these moments create somewhat jarring inconsistencies in the looking regime of the films studied. For example, *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast* take the gaze as an implicit concern within the narrative. In both of these films the heroines feel the burden of the desiring gazes of male figures. They attempt to escape these desiring gazes, a journey which is understood as necessary in order for them to be able to explore their own desires. In *Pocahontas*, the heroine implores the racist hero to “listen with his heart” instead of seeing only differences, and encourages him to see nature with reverence rather than desiring to own it. Once again there is an implicit concern about the power of possessive and desiring gazes. Nonetheless, in these films the gaze is employed to indicate the uniqueness of the heroine. This creates unsettling contradictions: Disney presents these female characters as protagonists with desires which are central to the narrative, but seems to find it difficult to do this without anxiously emphasising their desirability. The heroines who ostensibly reject the gaze are frequently also made to be the objects of the gaze. This creates an uneasy fit between the goals of the narrative and the mode of representation. In *Lilo and Stitch* there is a further inflection of Disney’s preoccupation with the gaze. There seems to be a self-reflexive commentary on the problematic nature of the politics of looking. Here Disney seems to go some way towards a radical re-assessment of the modes of representation it has traditionally relied on.

### Suggestions for Further Research

An extension of the scope of this study might include research into whether Disney has made further use of the ways in which *Lilo and Stitch* challenges patriarchal modes of representation. This thesis has ended with Disney's most recent 2D film with a central female heroine. A study of the more recent 3D films would extend and develop the exploration of representation in Disney films. These films have so far been Disney Pixar productions but it seems reasonable to consider them in a similar light since Pixar has had a long relationship with Disney. It may be that the input of Pixar, and the change in aesthetic, from cell to digital animation, offer different, more challenging modes of representation.

A cursory look at a number of these films suggests that, like *Lilo and Stitch*, they are very much occupied with the family and its place in American culture. Often these families are damaged or in crisis. Familial breakdown is the key theme in *Chicken Little*, yet another film to feature an alien invasion narrative. This film seems to offer faith in the family as the solution to a climate of fear and disunity, while it simultaneously offers fear of the Other as the driving force of the narrative. The normative, heterosexual family becomes the 'body' of the text. In *Meet the Robinsons* and *Finding Nemo* the hero is driven by a desire to find and fix his family. Often in these films the family ends up being one which, like in *Lilo and Stitch*, is created from fragments. There is a sense in these films that the family unit – which can be taken to stand for America – needs to be re-established and galvanised, even if that means accepting the fragments that have traditionally been underappreciated and marginalised.

A number of these films feature families who are extraordinary or super human. *Meet the Robinsons* and *The Incredibles* are the most obvious examples of this. However, films such as *A Bug's Life* and *Finding Nemo* also feature ordinary people (well, creatures) who are forced to overcome their ordinariness and find the superhuman strength to save the day. Their success is finally won through collective willpower. These films seem to be suggesting that the family unit needs to become extraordinary (elastic). There also seems to be a sense that the family/country needs



to overcome crisis, and that this crisis requires extraordinary acts in order to reach a resolution.

While these Pixar productions do not focus on the idealised feminine heroine, some recent and upcoming Disney films suggest that the embodiment of idealised femininity is still compelling, and profitable, for them. Disney's largely live-action film *Enchanted* takes the animated Disney heroine and transports her to a "real" situation. The juxtaposition between the world of the fairy tale and that of supposedly gritty New York is the basis of much of the dramatic and comedic moments of the film. The central fairy tale character Giselle is characterised as the embodiment of the naivety and innocence of her fairy tale world. Her idealised white body is presented as vulnerable to the dangerous and corrupted bodies of cynical urban New Yorkers. It carries with it the values of white heterosexuality that appear to be lost in this modern cosmopolitan "reality". Eventually, Giselle's joyful naivety endears her to her fellow New Yorkers, who turn out to be not so cynical once they listen with their hearts. *Enchanted* shows that Disney can be self-reflexive about its embodied utopian sensibility, without actually managing to be critical of it.

The embodiment of idealised femininity also looks to be included in a slated future release for Disney. *The Princess and the Frog* has so far been promoted by Disney as "a return to the warmth and grandeur of hand-drawn animation"<sup>300</sup>. One cannot help but connect this return in terms of aesthetic to what seems to be a return to the occupation with the female body. The connotations with affection and tradition which the promotional material conjures up would seem to suggest that there is now a connection between the idealised female body in Disney and a nostalgic longing for traditional (patriarchal) order.

As I write this, *The Princess and the Frog* is still in production. However, the film has already caused public outcry. Protests have been made based on the information that Disney has so far released about the film. The heroine was to be named Maddy (uncomfortably close to the derogatory term "mammy"). She was to

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<sup>300</sup> As quoted in Walt Disney Internet Group, "The Princess and the Frog", <http://disney.go.com/disneypictures/princessandthefrog/>, (accessed 29/09/08).

have been a servant to a white debutante and was to have been rescued by a white Prince. This outline was criticised for characterising the heroine as subservient<sup>301</sup>.

The concessions that Disney appears to have made following this outcry suggest that it is responsive to public censure. This is not new for Disney. Irene Kotlarz argues that early on Disney was able to see that such protests might negatively effect distribution. However, this simply meant that marginalised people were either made invisible in Disney films or were transformed into anthropomorphic animals with negatively coded stereotypical behaviours – one of the more famous examples of this being the lazy black “black” crows in *Dumbo*<sup>302</sup>. Similarly, this thesis commented on the public protests which caused Disney to make minor changes in the content of the lyrics in the opening song of *Aladdin*. So far the media commentary about *The Frog Princess* suggests that, like *Aladdin*, the racism in/of the text is likely to prove impervious to such alterations. The latest publicity material for the film indicate that it will rely on familiar stereotypes of blackness, “spiced up” with touches of the exotic. *The Princess and the Frog* will feature a funky Jazz-age princess with a voodoo fairy godmother and a number of anthropomorphised animals<sup>303</sup>. The website that has already been set up for the film describes these animals as “a trumpet playing alligator and a love-sick Cajun firefly”. The teaser trailer features said Firefly, who seems to be something of an Uncle Tom figure<sup>304</sup>. How these representations will ultimately be fleshed out is difficult to know at this stage, but indications so far suggest that Disney continues to find it difficult to refrain from presenting difference through damaging stereotypes which pejoratively equate Otherness with nature and the uncivil. If Disney is one moment within a hegemonic order that trades and traffics in patriarchal normativity, then patriarchy remains an empowered subjectivity.

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<sup>301</sup> These criticisms were paraphrased by Arifa Akbar, in “Disney’s ‘Subservient’ Black Princess Animates Critics” in, *The Independent on Sunday*, accessed via website, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/film-and-tv/news/disneys-subservient-black-princess-animates-film-critics-869725.html>. (accessed 29/09/08).

<sup>302</sup> Irene Kotlarz “The Birth of a Notion”, in *Screen*, vol. 24, no.2, March-April, (1983). p. 28.

<sup>303</sup> According to *The Independent on Sunday*, the voodoo priestess fairy godmother featured as part of early previewed information. It seems unclear whether this character will feature in the finished product, as it not mentioned on the website. Arifa Akbar, “Disney’s ‘Subservient’ Black Princess Animates Critics”.

<sup>304</sup> Walt Disney Internet Group, “The Princess and the Frog”.

An additional point for further research suggested by this thesis would be to conduct a study into the ways in which audiences actually interact with Disney texts. In particular, ethnographic study of the ways in which children – and adults- interact with the various sites of meaning for Disney Princess seems necessary. As it is this thesis is somewhat limited in terms of finding an ‘end result’ of the ways in which Disney represents femininity – it is hard to say for certain what the implications of these texts are without quantitative sociological research. However, this thesis does provide some groundwork which explores the ways in which Disney texts themselves make sense of idealised femininity, and the ways in which Disney interpolates audiences and calls for preferred responses.

### **Final Thoughts**

Certainly it seems obvious that the idealised bodies in these Disney texts set impossible goals for young girls to strive for. What I have come to realise in working on this project is that these texts have a potentially much more profound effect in that they train the viewer in the experience of being in one's own body. It is the ideological work that Disney engages in to contain and codify the body through constructions of gender and race which are ultimately most affecting. The idealised bodies in these texts school the viewer in appropriate ways of performing the body: how to walk, talk, and act as a girl. They also provide models for how to find pleasure in the body – almost exclusively through heterosexual love and matrimony. My own experiences of watching Disney films as a child certainly had some effect on how I behaved – as a 10 year old leaving the movie theatre after watching *Beauty and the Beast* I was compelled to walk around the rest of the day on my tip-toes, imitating the mincing ballerina walk of Belle. Obviously this particular rendering of femininity did not last: it was a self-conscious performance which did not quite match up with the understanding of feminine embodiment found in my daily life. In writing this thesis I have often reflected upon this moment and wondered how much my adult performance of femininity might have been affected by these films: I may not have lasted long on tip-toes but when I discovered high

heel shoes in my early teens they seemed not at all unnatural – not at all like the absurd weapons of self-torture that they are. How much effect Disney texts have ultimately had on my own performance of gender is hard to know – much of it is obscured by the work of naturalisation. I do think that these texts contribute to “common sense” understandings of how our bodies should behave and that, they can, and perhaps increasingly do, have a hand in shaping “common sense” to better fit its economic and ideological goals.

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