

Keeping up with Disney

A focus on Disney's feature length animated movies.

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Introduction

Within this dissertation I will be critically exploring Disney's studios animated feature length films. I will analytically look into the way Disney's characters and narrative types have evolved over the last 80 years; starting when Snow white and the Seven Dwarfs was released in 1937, up to Ralph Breaks the Internet (2018). This time frame will give me a broad outlook to explore the changing world of Disney with many examples to explore, regarding the purpose of this dissertation.

This dissertation will show the readers how, or if Disney have been evolving their films in general and along with other mainstream media's. To do this I will need to look into Walt Disney himself, and find out his purpose and desires when approaching his animated films and how much of that can be read from his films.

Disney has a majority child-based audience worldwide, with its animations, and it will be of great importance to look into whether these films were suitable when they were released, and the representation of all character types are appropriate when looked back on; in a world where there is the evolving attempt to shift certain representations and stereotypes. This will include including gender, race, ethnicities and members of the LGBTQ community. I have decided to keep more focus on gender stereotypes in comparison to race and the LGBTQ, as I believe I needed to choose one strong element with my world limitation.

A main chapter of this dissertation will be of women representation, as this has been of great controversy for decades within Disney's films. Disney's women on screen and behind will be explored, and the way in which women are stereotyped will be brought to attention, and if this has actually improved or not in their latest films.

Instead of blaming Disney for poor representation of women I need to look into other artistic and creative medias are to see for any similarities to rule out whether this was just the way of life many decades ago, or Disney's films are an anomaly. Artwork in the 50's, the movement of Pop Art will be compared, to see if, as mentioned, Disney kept up with big movements happening in America and Britain; their largest audience location. Along with female characters, I will be monitoring all the heroes, princesses, villains, and sidekicks. Also, why the princess maids with a dream to find a man have now become independent women, that are career driven and dreamers of things other than men. Also, how the obvious tall scary villains are now the manipulative character in the background that you never would have guessed.

Towards the end of this dissertation I will be exploring other rival companies of Disney and what their approach was when making their films and what the differences are. Many believe Disney rush out sequels to quickly make more money, unlike Disney Pixar and DreamWorks that are more story driven with their approach to sequels, and would rather wait a few years to perfect the story and its characters.

I will need to look into a variety of resources to fairly inform myself and as evident of my statements in this dissertation, many of the books are on Walt Disney himself and what his idea of Disney films were, other books relate to the last few decades of Disney films. I will be getting my information from resources such as books and documentaries on Walt Disney's life, online articles and potential YouTube videos to view debates regarding character representation and the actual films I'm choosing to explore, and bring in my own personal arguments and opinions within this dissertation. I will also briefly mention Simone De Beauvoir, and her views as a

political activist and feminist to assist my arguments and apply them within my second chapter involving women within Disney films.

Chapter 1 – 80 years in the making: has much changed?

The aim of this chapter is to provide a historical overview of Disney purpose and possible change throughout the decades, and assist the connection within the statements being made and supply contexts for the reader. In regards to character analysis and the impact left on the viewers of these films.

Disney's animated films since 1937 certainly look different, but beyond the progression of technology and CGI, this chapter of the dissertation will be exploring the changes in Disney in regard to story arc and character development. To understand any potential changes, Walt Disney's vision will need to be focused on. Many of Disney's earlier films were straightforward fairy tales with unusual dance and musical sequences that didn't appear to have much to do with the story's overall narrative. On the other hand, it is understandable as these films were made for kids and were for pure entertainment, so is it essential for there to be this overarching plots to make sense and be analysed? Disney took old folk stories with dark themes and important messages that were made to warn children, and turned them into fun musicals with no true meaning and ended them where a man and woman fall in love. Which to look back on, was expected at this time; that being the middle of the 1900's.



Fig. 1

To focus on unusual dance sequences, I'm looking into notably one of Disney's first villain and villain song by the character 'Honest John', from Pinocchio (1940).

Meeting this character is the turning point in the narrative and he leads the protagonist down a bad path, resulting in many of the plot points. However the lyrics of 'Hi-Diddle-Dee-Dee', do not suggest anything towards Pinocchio's outcome. I will be looking into whether these films have now become narrative driven with iconic characters or are still suck in the same predictable loop where there's a unrealistic happily ever after. Not to say old Disney films were unsuccessful, they were new, fascinating, and never done before.

Back in the early to mid-1900s, Disney took simple animations and made their own world for people to explore. They were seen as an escape for the audience, especially during the traumatising events in the first half of the 20th century, worldwide. The characters all had a purpose and desire, unfortunately back then it was either a man or 'for a man' to come and save the day. Also, looking back, many of these films were considered racially insensitive and was not a suitable representation of women. To look back on, many of these characters were

predictable and a little flat, most of them lacked true emotion, an identity to relate to. The original release of *Fantasia* (1940) shows racial wrongness as the character *Sunflower*, who is the only black character playing a servant to the other white led characters. Due to its backlash, Disney removed the character completely from all other releases. Which questions what was the purpose of the character if so easily removable from the story.

They are all fairy tales, with a sad beginning and a happy ending, but that may be what Walt Disney intended. He took old folk stories that were made to mainly show that wrong actions have consequences and he recreated them with his own little twist. That arguably being a sugar coated version of the original that will always somehow end up fine in the end. To move on to more recent Disney films, it may show that Disney could be reshaping the way their stories are told, they seem fresher, like *Mulan* (1998) for example. That being equality and people of minorities are being focused on and attempted to make a shift from the originals. In comparison Disney have now challenged princess stereotypes, shown in the new trailer of 'Ralph Breaks the Internet', the story of platonic male and female characters on a videogame adventure. The trailer makes fun of princess stereotypes and acknowledges that men shouldn't be known to come and to save the day.

To focus more on Disney studio's actual story arc, we start with the introduction of the main characters and their main problem or conflict and as the film progresses we get to see this conflict in action until it rises to its climax, and the turning point happens at the emotional peak. As the film ends the problem is resolved and we see its outcome, usually in some sort of future sequence.

Other than narrative arcs I want to find other story similarities made by Walt Disney himself, and why the films are the way they are. As known, Walt's mother passed due to a fault in the house bought for her and his father shortly after Walt became successful. "He had the studio guys come over and fix the furnace, but when his mom and dad moved in, the furnace leaked and his mother died." (Boxer, 2014) So physiologically speaking, it is understandable why in most Disney films, they don't have a biological mother, either not wrote in the story or they have died at some point within. However, some Disney films do have a mother figure that is very fitting for the tale being told, Dumbo (1941) for example. It's for debate whether it is due to Walt's personal loss or whether it's for story convenience. Many of the characters in Disney films are young, who make bad decisions and have juvenile behaviour that evidently helps expand the narrative, and arguably they would not have made if parental figures were intervening.

To look further into this, Walt may have been trying to make a perfect world; that uplifting 'happy ever after'. It's down to one's own opinion whether Walt was a vulnerable man trying to make a world where the characters were an expression of a more ideal life and that happy ending, or he was someone that many believe was a blatant racist and sexist, which was transparent in many of his earlier films.



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

'White washing' is when movies cast a white person to play a role based on a person of colour, or within animation, a character will be appear more white; not fitting with their ethnicity. Disney was heavily criticised over the release of the new Ralph Breaks the Internet (2018) trailer, which shows all the Disney princesses previously. As Princess Tiana from The Princess and the Frog (2009), appears a lot less like the original film, there was a lot of complaints thrown Disney's way. Simone De Beauvoir once said 'If you live long enough, every victory turns into a defeat' (Franklin, 2010) suggesting that, in the context, regardless of what you create, society will outgrow it, and it may no longer be acceptable in this ever changing world. Walt had rules in regards to his workers, and the main one was "knowledge of story construction and audience values" (Holliss and Sibley, 1988). Suggesting again, as mentioned, that the content and stories they created at the time wasn't as controversial as it is to look back on.

It is very easy to point out negative aspects about Disney's animations, but the positives need to be looked into. Disney revived old tales for a reason, the messages

to respect our loved ones and help them that are in need. And when our morals are in the right place, being on the 'good side' and not 'evil' means you'll always win. It teaches us not to take from strangers, stop daydreaming and act upon what you dream, nor do animals deserve to be treated cruelly, and never judge someone on their appearance. Disney's target audience also needs to be looked into here, children will not analyse these films like some older members of society will, the somewhat subliminal messages do not reach a child's mind, they simply watch for pure entertainment.

Chapter 2: Women have dreams?

As once being within Disney's target audience, I feel that growing up as female watching Disney classics, you're really were just watching someone else's interpretation of gender. Disney performs gender, they have the ability to control every single choice, movement and facial expression each character makes. Snow white's movements were graceful and smooth whilst the male dwarfs were stomping around, 'like men'. Women were given a passive and compliant roles with a pretty face and expected to, for example, give up their voice and for a man they've just met, like in Ariel (1989). Whether it was consciously decided upon or not, I and millions of other young girls were shown that 'this is how a woman acts'.

"We keep moving forward, opening new doors, and doing new things, because we're curious and curiosity keeps leading us down new paths." – Walt Disney. From this quote, it's implying that Disney is attempting to change, and that they are curious about new ways to make their films up to date with the real world. They seem to

state that they want to create new content, breaking from fairytale normalities, but do their recent films reflect this?

Arguable, one of Disney's most popular animations to date; Tangled (2010) was a huge success, visually pleasing and a great all rounder for all ages and genders. Which is great that Disney are not just targeting young girls for their films here. Disney did well in recreating the tale but still kept a tight grip on the typical princess story. A white, thin and young goody girl with blonde hair and big blue eyes that had a dream to leave her castle, and only when the male protagonist came along, it happened. She literally asks when will her life begin as she's too busy doing chores and being extremely over emotional; very typical for Disney to write a princess like this. On the other hand she saved the male protagonist's life multiple times throughout the film and came across as independent at times. She had real-world internal struggles that many teenagers can relate to, which is something Disney has definitely improved on. Disney also changed the male protagonist into someone more lower class and not a typical prince. Although, it was very apparent that making her beat a villain character with a literal kitchen tool to give the 'you-go-girl' attitude was to blindly impress the 21st century audience to thinking that this is the only way possible to write strong female characters.

After Tangled, Disney released a statement that they weren't going to make anymore Princess films for a while, after all, as said by Chief Ed Catmull of Pixar Animation Studios, 'genres do run a course' (Beck, 2010). This lasted 3 years before the release of Frozen in 2013. The Disney film stated to not have any princes, so instead it had one princess searching for a man to love throughout the entire film and falls in

love after one day and when that doesn't work out, she settles for the 'other guy' that's been obsessed with her, that being the standard 'it was him all along' narrative.

The main princess Elsa, was a scared and fearful woman that wanted control, and her way of dealing with this lack of control was to actually run away from her home and all responsibilities, which received much backlash from the public as a bad role model for children within certain situations in the real world. Although, it is just a kids cartoon being well analysed. There was very little character development besides a change in attitude. Disney failed a lot in this film and it's only saving grace was its popular song 'Let it go'. Very similar to early Disney as previously mentioned, where the characters were flat and unrelatable and the songs were great, for children; but still had nothing to do with the story. It's unusual how Disney makes films like this and then make films that make fun of this type of narrative and character types in their other films, an example being in 'Ralph breaks the Internet' (2018).

Moving on to art forms and medias, Disney films were already a huge success, but it's beneficial to explore if that media was keeping up with its time and audience. Especially within the United Kingdom and the United States, which were and still are Disney's biggest audience locations. Pop art was a huge movement around two decades after Walt's success. Pop art was where all medias such as advertising and comics were changing traditions and styles. Although, Pop art works are mainly known by men, such as Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns and Roy Lichtenstein, it's beneficial to see how other men represent women in their art.



Fig. 4

The illustration above is *Drowning Girl*, by Roy Lichtenstein made in 1963 shows a young woman crying and in fear as she is in danger of drowning in waves, yet she states she doesn't want a man's help. Some would describe the women in his work as heroines and I would agree to some extent. I would interpret from this that she's making an attempt to be powerful and somewhat independent. Yet I understand many would argue against, saying she's gone too far, she's so proud of being a woman that she would endanger her life just so she doesn't have to say that a man saved her. There's also little evidence of the situation and the viewer doesn't get enough information from the cropped image, to make an informed assumption of the purpose of the image.



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

To compare further Fig. 5 and 6, both show women doing house chores. On the left is painting called *The Water Cistern* made between 1733-1739, by Jean-Baptiste-Simeon Chardin showing a woman pumping water from a cistern, as a young girl in the background watches. The woman is the focus of the image as she is brightly coloured compared to her cistern, linking them together, suggesting this is her job or chore. Her clothing also suggests that she is a maiden, and as the young girl is dressed similar she may be looking towards her future role. On the right shows a still from Disney's *Cinderella* released over 200 years later, in 1950. Cinderella is cleaning and doing her house chores for her wicked family while she has a dream to break out of it. It can be said that art forms didn't come far in representing women as housewives for literal centuries. Reinforcing typical stereotype of the female gender to young children in the 50's that you have to be a housewife.

On the other hand, these are simply two very similar looking images placed together. And Disney recreated a story set in 1697 without changing women representation; arguable keeping it true to its tale. As said by Simone De Beauvoir, 'Art is an attempt

to integrate evil' (Sekimonyo, 2018). With the rise of feminism over recent decades, women are almost pressured to not be a housewife or to do household chores.

“In the 1950s, women were expected to stay at home, and those who wanted to work were often stigmatized. Today it's mostly the other way round, pitting women against one another”

(Bennhold, 2018).

Chapter 3 – What Disney doesn't do.

This chapter will be moving on from critically analysing what Disney does within their films and move on to what they don't. I will be seeing what Disney is missing in their animated films and why companies like DreamWorks and Pixar are, for example, very true competitors in regards to high end animated stories. It will be beneficial to explore the reasons why Disney may not be, as aforementioned, moving on from their classic way of storytelling and are stuck in a loop of rolling out potentially offensive and predictable, princess classics.

Disney's studio had a huge downfall shortly after Walt Disney's death and it is noticeable that they lost their sense of creative direction, in the 70's and 80's, Disney's 'bronze age', films were not getting the normal success and many believe it is due to Walt's death, but Disney also made changes to their style. A technique called Xerography was introduced and Disney took full advantage. This style was cost and time effective the first film released with this technique was 101 Dalmatians (1961) five years before Walt Passed away. Due to that films success they continued

using this style even though there was a noticeable quality difference. The style shows a prominent black line around the characters and moving objects, shown in films like *The Jungle Book* (1967), unlike the smooth colour shading and warmth to films like *Pinocchio* (1940). So, Disney started rolling out multiple films quickly and saving them money, for the next 28 years, establishing the 'Bronze age'.

This evidently back lashed, as this period of time was where rival companies were being introduced and Disney's trademark quality was declining and rushed. This reveals that Disney studios were becoming extremely profit orientated. Films such as *The Fox and the Hound* (1981) and *The Black Cauldron* (1985) show this new style. However, it's noted that many people enjoy the films from this era, as mentioned the *Fox and the Hound* was a huge success in the box office, yet *The Black Cauldron* (1985) hardly has any positive aspects at all, besides the fact that this was their attempt to appeal to older audiences; Disney quickly started to ignore the fact they made this film. This could be seen in a way that Walt Disney branded himself and his company into a corner, his style was solidified, and he was almost in a loop of being expected to make films a certain way. His classics were becoming too cheesy but anything different are apparently not 'Disney' enough. It must have been impossible to make anything revolutionary to the film industry as he did many decades before, because we was torn between his identity and keeping up with the changing and competitive animators.

During this 'Bronze era' time many of Disney's animators left, and one of them was called Don Bluth, his reason for leaving was because Disney had stopped trying to expand animation, like they used to. He went on to create his own animations, such

as *The Secret Life of NIMH* (1982) and *The Land Before Time* (1988). Don went on to be a great success and compared to the release of Disney's *Oliver and Company* also in 1988, the box office for *The Land Before Time* topped by over 10 million. "We're interested in trying to re-establish animation as an art form, creating subject matter which will appeal to the adult brain." (Cawley, 2018).

One of Disney's leading competitors is Disney Pixar formerly known as Pixar, a subsidiary company of Disney since 2006. There's many huge differences between these companies, as mentioned Disney shows us a typical princess fairytale, while Pixar will give us a story filled with content to relate to and characters we can empathise with. Visually, we will expect the traditional artist flare with Disney like in films such as *Mulan* (1998) with the heart shaped face and big eyed female protagonists, whilst Pixar focuses on fine detail and won't settle for a lower quality, a well known example of this is in *Monsters Inc* (2001). Disney's characterisation is full of the ideal scenario with a heroic nature, and Pixar expresses each character's motive within their story, like in *The Incredibles* (2004). Here we were made aware of each character's motive and purpose if this film, and of which many families could accurately compared with. The majority of Disney films are musicals, the music shows the characters signing and helping set the atmosphere and sometimes, narrative parts of the story, where as Pixar's sound is memorable and sets the incite of the character within the scene.

Pixar isn't afraid to take risks and say no, and have rarely turned down a project, where as Disney won't take that risk. Pixar is a company willing to take time in perfecting the story, and it always works in their favour, because people always want

to watch good stories and feel an impact from doing so. It took 12 years for Pixar to release the sequel for their very successful *Monsters Inc* (2001), because it was worth perfecting the story. Whilst Disney will knock out sequels for their films within a year or so, and all of which never do well, but enough to profit from.

“The Walt Disney Company's objective is to be one of the world's leading producers and providers of entertainment and information, using its portfolio of brands to differentiate its content, services and consumer products. The company's primary financial goals are to maximize earnings and cash flow, and to allocate capital toward growth initiatives that will drive long-term shareholder value.” (Jurevicius, 2013)

There was a statement made in 2013, called *Walt's Mission*, the quote above is a section taken from it. From this quote in 2013, Disney have proven that they are profit oriented, which just again questions whether they are just rolling out numerous quirky films without a purposeful story for quick money, and yet still expect to be the best in the business. Also, it suggests they are just buying out companies to look like they are catering for all. I personally believe there is no issue in aiming to be the top in your field, especially as they've already had a taste of it. But it is showing that Disney is losing the love for the art they invented and are forgetting where they started. Buying out their competitors isn't talent.

To move forward Disney's studios need to do what people have been asking for the last couple of decades. Proper representation of real people, of all cultures and minorities has been asked of Disney for years, but they yet to show. It is important to

introduce all character types, whether that is people within the LGBTQ communities or people with disabilities, and state it. It is vital to cater for you audience in order to move forward as a company, many fans have tried guessing whether certain characters are gay, for example, and Disney never comments on it. It is possible for Disney to keep their traditional style but update their character types, and Pixar's recent film *Coco* (2017) proves this. *Coco* is a film about a typical Mexican family, and the Mexican holiday around the day of the dead. Many believe it was respectful and the culture was shown beautifully, it was a huge step forward for Hollywood and progress for non-white representation in animations in all aspects. "Brown people get precious few chances to see themselves portrayed onscreen, and so to see our skin and hair treated with such love and care and nuance is world-changing" (Gavia, 2017).

Conclusion

This piece of writing was to research and critically analyse the ways in which Disney studio animations have developed as a company, a platform for women representation and as a high end competitor for animations, for over half a century. Also, I have explored what impact that it has had on its audience. As a woman exposed to Disney I made sure to provide how this extremely successful business was impacting young girls that watch their films. After deducting the purpose of Walt himself and why his films are stuck in this traditional loop, it's understandable why Disney has not changed all that much. You know what you're going to get and what you're paying for. It's not new, as mentioned throughout this dissertation, Disney made its success from re-telling tales from centuries back, and it's keeping true to

the original story. It's hard to state whether Disney is in the wrong as they are just telling a story, but in the modern world it's easy to point out all the negatives being shown to young children. There was no true key finding here and i personally believe it's down to one's views whether Disney needs to move forward with the times or stick to being itself. There will always be positive and negative aspects, like in every film ever made, someone's not going to like it. I will confirm that this dissertation naturally leaned in the way against Disney's favour despite multiple counter arguments.

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