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Damsels and Heroines: The Conundrum of the Post-Feminist Disney Princess

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Abstract

This research explores cultural shifts in the popularity of the Disney princess in American culture, especially its postmodern resurgence, as well as the complex relationship between Disney's recent representations of women in the 1990's and post-feminist ideology. My project begins by analyzing the historic appearance of the Disney female in relation to the women's movements. I also examine lingering anti-feminist backlash in representations of what I call "New Wave" Disney heroines. Finally, I examine the implications of post-feminist discourse and advertising for young female viewers.

When asked about Disney movies, many parents groan and launch into a familiar diatribe about the studio that transformed their daughters into princesses. The dresses, the tiaras, the pink; countless parents watch their little girl embrace the princess way of life, and struggle with the contradictory messages found in many of the films. Disney princesses have often come under attack for promoting harmful, unrealistic body types and the narrow ideal of marriage as the happiest of endings for young women. Viewed through this lens, the postmodern resurgence of films featuring these characters in the early 1990's seems in-congruent with the increasing independence and visibility of women in our culture. Why, even when second-wave feminism has brought women unprecedented levels of equality, (Women's Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor 2011) do audiences of all ages remain infatuated with images of beautiful underweight damsels? Drawing on scholarship from cultural studies and gender theory, as well as ideological analyses of select Disney films, this paper will examine both the evolution of Disney heroines, and the complex relationship between Disney's recent representations of women in the 1990's and post-feminist ideology. While these new heroines appear more autonomous than their pre-second-wave feminism predecessors, they also represent elements of the anti-feminist backlash agenda that sought to regulate and dis-empower female images through media and marketing in the late 1980's. The first section of this paper analyzes the historic appearance of the Disney female in relation to the women's movements. The second section examines lingering anti-feminist backlash in representations of postmodern Disney heroines. The third section of this paper examines the implications of post-feminist discourse and advertising for young female viewers.

The Walt Disney Corporation has enjoyed a lengthy reign in the realm of princess film production, helping to shape the ideals of femininity for millions of little girls both in America and around the world. Despite the obvious un-reality of these fairytale narratives, the central characters that inhabited these imaginary lands were human, and as such their representations bore a considerable likeness to contemporary gender expectations and stereotypes, giving audiences a figure with whom they could comfortably identify. Most fascinating is Disney's endless revamping of the princess to correspond with contemporary gender standards, to maintain relevance both in actions and characteristics. Throughout the twentieth century, the princess waxed and waned in reaction to periods of strength and decline in the women's movement, reflecting the compulsion to regulate, and subsequently de-fang, female sexuality through visual media. These idealized representations of women corresponded to cultural pressure for women to retreat from active roles, a trend at each turn of what Susan Faludi dubbed the "tilted corkscrew" (Faludi 1991, 54) of feminism, a spiral of illusionary progress forever turning towards an unreachable goal of gender equality. With this in mind, it is understandable that the image of the Disney princess reappeared every few decades, appealing when widespread anti-feminist backlash shifted the women's movement away from its objectives.

Early Disney Woman: Voiceless Beauty

In the period leading up to the second-wave feminist movement, Disney women were derived entirely from Grimm's fairy-tales, voiceless heroines who performed conventional gender behaviors like housekeeping and nurturing. (Bell, Haas, and Sells 1995) Even though the first-wave suffrage movement had won women both the right to vote and the confidence to enter the labor force in unprecedented numbers, (Milkman 1976, 78) the very first Disney princess drew on associations of traditional femininity, indicating the widespread encouragement of these traits within 1930's American culture. The Great Depression left tens of thousands of people jobless, and the competition for labor combined with Catholic moral reform movements fostered a national desire for women to return to the home, a mentality that was widely represented in 1930's commercial media. The incredibly popular *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) featured a female protagonist who fit the domestic expectations of pre-World War II women, (Rosen 1973) and appealed to Depression-era escapism. (Gabler 2006, 273) *Snow White* exemplifies Hollywood's trend towards passive, childish figures like Joan Fontaine and Billie Burke, in a time when the Hayes Production Code condemned loudmouth superstars like Mae West and Katharine Hepburn as "box-office poison." After the early 1930s, when strong leading women prospered in the wake of liberated flappers and newly-won suffrage, a heavy increase in censorship began to limit female characters in action and dialogue, resulting in the elimination of silent screen vamps and early talkie spitfires, and the embrace of *Snow White's* pure maiden innocence. (Rosen 1973, 190)

However, the varying acceptability of this submissive female image is apparent in its absence during World War II, and its resurgence in the postwar period. From 1937 to 1950 Disney produced plenty of escapist fare like *Dumbo*, *Bambi*, and *The Three Caballeros*, but princess characters were entirely absent, mainly due to the unprecedented public activism of American women in the war effort. (Dabakis 1993, 182) Since women were leading the war effort at home and managing entire households and companies on their own, few would easily or readily identify with the passive damsel awaiting her prince. The magical splendor of fairylands

was cast aside as war culture fitted women with role models like Rosie the Riveter, and restocked the silver screen with strong heroines like Katharine Hepburn and Joan Crawford. (Rosen 1973, 209) This trend thrived until the postwar period, when the appeal and security of domestic marriage were popularized and pushed on the American public. (Friedan 2001, 61) The success of *Cinderella* (1950) demonstrated this shift in mainstream cultural thinking after World War II, towards the desire for women to return to family matters and allow men to embody the ideals of hard work and ambition. Like other Hollywood moguls, Disney was eager to cash in on the “new” woman of the 1950s, providing escape from Cold War fears. These trends towards traditional femininity represent cultural attitudes toward adult females, and with *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) Disney attempted to retain traditional ideals of femininity while speaking to a changing generation. However, the film’s critical and popular failure suggests that these new filmgoers found the rigidly defined gender roles of Disney princesses less desirable and irrelevant to their experiences. (Gabler 2006)

With this in mind, it is unsurprising that the period between 1960 and 1989 saw no princess films. A time of experimentation in social life as well as in cultural media, this era of American filmmaking coincided with massive campaigning for gender equality as well as questioning of previously unchallenged gendered images. However, while the presence of the Second-wave feminist movement and the subsequent visibility of powerful, influential women did not jive with Disney’s image of the passive princess in the 60s and 70s, the presence of anti-feminist backlash and the subsequent rhetoric of post-feminism encouraged its resurgence in the late 80s and early 90s. In this period of postmodern filmmaking, feminist film critic Laura Mulvey notes a political shift in “aesthetic and intellectual priorities” towards “neoliberal imperialism,” (Mulvey 2004) the foundation of 1980s anti-feminist backlash. The advent of Reaganomics and subsequent conservative trends of the 1980s fostered an environment of anti-feminism, propagated through visual media such as advertising, television, and most significantly, cinema. With a little refurbishing, the Disney female character joined ranks of women’s magazines and TV shows as the perfect vehicle for post-feminist rhetoric in the guise of promoting “new womanhood.”

The new Disney female is, at first glance, an overwhelming improvement from Snow White and Cinderella, and reflects the improvement in female status since the respective eras of those productions. With its release of *The Little Mermaid* (1989), Disney underwent a shift towards a “New Wave” of princess films, which transformed the damsel into a heroine of sorts, with both a voice and a desire for adventure. This new approach ushered in two decades of go-getting, proactive heroines, with progressive qualities and character traits that corresponded completely to the increasingly acceptable gender roles in a society where women hold the same jobs as men. (Women’s Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor 2011) If Snow White, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Cinderella* exemplified the traditional Disney female as docile, beautiful objects waiting for their prince to come, then Belle, Jasmine, Pocahontas, Meg, Mulan, and Tiana¹ are exactly the opposite: focused, ambitious, and in the case of Pocahontas and Mulan, literally heroic as they perform the traditional prince role and save the day. In fact, a study funded by the University of Connecticut demonstrated that masculine qualities of the traditional Disney hero are increasingly applicable to the female characters. The study suggests that traits such as “assertiveness,” “independence,” and “desire to explore” are coded masculine, and delineates the

¹ From the films *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *Pocahontas* (1995), *Hercules* (1997), *Mulan* (1998), and *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) respectively.

progression of female characters towards embodying these previously off-limits characteristics. Indeed, both Pocahontas and Mulan demonstrate levels of strength and leadership that were inconceivable in the depiction of the traditional white, well-groomed princess. Tiana openly scoffs at fairytales throughout *The Princess and the Frog* (2010), repeating, “You can’t rely on that star, you gotta have hard work of your own.” However, while Disney replaced the previously valued feminine qualities of “affection, fearfulness, and nurturing” (England, Descartes, and Collier-Meek 2011, 555-567) with positive representations of autonomous female characters, these princesses are highly visible in a problematic post-feminist world, where less overt but ever-present backlash redirects the goals of feminism in a counterproductive fashion, disguised as female consumer empowerment. (McRobbie 2004, 255) Disney utilizes post-feminist rhetoric in two ways; the content of the films acknowledges the gains of feminism, while marketing strategies paradoxically reverse the message to convey post-feminist ideals.

“It’s certainly different now, but is it better?”

The post-feminist princess embodies ideals of feminism while representing the pressures and entrapment of pre-feminist culture. Disney presents its post-feminist princess with desires similar to Susan Gill’s description of the myth in society, where women are “entirely autonomous agents, no longer constrained by any inequalities or tyrannies.” (Gill 2007, 93) Disney utilizes this ideology to buoy the narrative conflict, creating a world where heroines are trapped and breakout signifies a happily-ever-after. Jasmine explicitly states this feeling, and Belle, Ariel, Pocahontas, Tiana, Meg, and Mulan all express a desire to escape from their surroundings. In tune with post-feminism strategies, Disney often appropriated the rhetoric of feminism with quips like when Jasmine states that “I am not a prize to be won,” or when Belle sings “I want so much more than they’ve got planned.” This sense of powerful spirit coupled with a longing for change positions these new Disney princesses as a representation of the pre-feminist woman, constrained by society through marriage pressure, royal status, or even having fins instead of legs. The situations of these princesses are, in effect, a criticism of the very situations with which Disney began its princess empire. Snow White would never turn up her nose at a handsome prince, nor would Cinderella turn down a chance to escape her life of drudgery. Instead, these feisty new heroines rarely felt love at first sight, and did not relish the idea of spending happily ever after with a rude, conceited prince. Belle, Jasmine, Meg, Tiana, and Pocahontas all reject, initially at least, suitors who would come into conflict with their goals. However, the ability to choose the right suitor at the end signifies post-feminist autonomy, and thus constitutes a happy ending. Post-feminism celebrates woman as the sexually autonomous individual, and thus Disney’s rhetoric shifted from *any* prince to the *right* prince.

While the new Disney princess expresses feminist ideals of autonomy, she is also a microcosm of post-feminist ideals. In an era of pervasive anti-feminist backlash, media professor Karen Ross warns against this “replacement of one set of stereotypes for another” disguised as “genuine progress.” (Ross 2010, 3) In other words, just because a princess is no longer “wishing for the one she loves to find her,” as Snow White does, she is not necessarily now wishing for anything grander than finding him herself. Disney’s *The Little Mermaid* is the perfect encapsulation of the post-feminist agenda, contrasting the threatening female ambitions of power-hungry Ursula with the non-threatening ambitions of lovesick Ariel. While the princess’s desires and ambitions are largely unprecedented within the Disney canon, the film reorders her

goals much in the way post-feminism reordered the American women's goals. The film initially posits Ariel's fascination with land as cause for leaving the ocean, but in the style of backlash politics, it eventually channels her struggle for independence and autonomy into the more traditional, narrow goal of choosing a husband. The narrative commandeers her desire into a desperate teenage romance, amplified when both Sebastian and her father refer to her as "a teenager" and "my little girl." The repositioning of Ariel's desire is understandable in a society emerging from the backlash politics of the 1980's; bombarded with images of the ruthless career woman too in love with ambition to embrace traditional femininity; society could only accept a woman whose ambitions were channeled towards love, or a woman with a great love for her father, a very prominent trend in postmodern representations of powerful female characters.

While early Disney films featured wicked stepmothers and fairy godmothers, postmodern Disney updated the mature authority figures to male adults as a source of approval and justification for the heroine's aspirations, in fact reducing her agency and independence. Valerie Walkerdine notes that throughout popular culture, the "Daddy's girl" presentation of childish innocence is "more alluring" to the viewer, "corruptible" and "vulnerable." (Walkerdine 1998, 2)

This trend in Disney begins with adventurous Ariel, whom the film reduces to a lovesick child, finally delivering the film's closing line "I love you Daddy;" and ends with Tiana's restaurant ambitions. While *The Princess and the Frog* presents tremendous female empowerment by allowing the black female protagonist to own a business, the film constantly reminds the viewer that Tiana inherited this dream from her father. The search for male parental approval not only feminizes ambitious Tiana, but also reduces her to a little girl with love for her deceased father, lest she appear threatening like Ursula. Her mother even remarks, "You're your Daddy's daughter all right," and Tiana wants to make sure "Daddy's work means something" when her mother tells her she should meet her Prince Charming instead. Other princesses Ariel, Jasmine, and Pocahontas show independence and determination in rebellion against their fathers, searching for forbidden love in forbidden lands, but each film's happily-ever-after occurs when the father is pleased with the arrangement, such as when King Triton exchanges a knowing smile with Ariel's soon-to-be-husband Eric. These finales clearly constitute the happy ending necessary for any children's film, but their importance lies in patriarchal approval, the final blessing from the father, as in *The Little Mermaid* or *Mulan*. This shift to Daddy's girl also coincided with the relocation of most princess films to patriarchal cultures outside of the United States.

While the Disney studio is clearly trying to update its princess image for a post-feminist audience by consciously addressing gender issues in *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, or *Mulan*, the spatial and/or temporal transference of these issues transforms them into cultural criticism, reducing their potential as a representation of agency for an American female audience. The Disney "New Wave" marks a progressive shift towards the exclusion of "princess" characters, and inclusion of non-white, non-American female heroines: *Pocahontas* (1995), *Mulan*, *Aladdin*, *The Princess and the Frog*, and *Hercules*, while problematic in various ways, are unprecedented attempts by Disney to broaden their market appeal towards postmodern diversity while catering to the new expectations of its female audience. However, Disney consistently relocates these films to another country or time period, replacing the now-tired images of fairytale kingdoms with exotic foreign lands and nostalgia. For example, *Mulan* consciously questions her cross-dressing motives, wondering if she did it not to save her family but because it was the only way to make something of her life. This is a brilliant critique, and states the problem of any woman searching for importance in a society that pushes motherhood and housewifery. Unfortunately,

by relocating this critique to ancient China, and creating overtly sexist male characters, the film's message comes across as a criticism of the repressive ancient Chinese government, allying viewer sympathies with Mulan against her repressive environment, and distancing the viewer from the reality that American female viewer remains oppressed in many aspects of personal and professional life, if not by laws and regulations, by visual media and advertising. The film champions Mulan for throwing off the conventional Disney princess attributes of demure beauty to save her country, just as it presents stubborn Belle and Jasmine in a positive light. However, while all post-feminist princesses embody this admirable image, much of its power is lost to the dominance of objectification in the Disney toy market.

The Princess Movement: Post-Feminist Advertising

The autonomy of these characters onscreen justifies their infantilization and objectification in the realm of advertising. Just as the societal rationalization for the frills and appearance-oriented self-improvement (Faludi 1991, xv) of post-feminism is that the goals of feminism have been met, the justification for the postmodern princess marrying a prince and retreating to traditional feminine roles in the extended world of marketing is that the heroine's needs have been met. When narratives conclude, heroines like Belle or Ariel are happily removed from their oppressive environments, and characters Jasmine or Tiana find their circumstances have improved to the extent that the environment is no longer oppressive. Once a fiery outsider, the Disney female no longer need dream of anything outside of her prince and the promising future, and can retreat to the world of baking pies and dressing for galas on the Disney princess website, which is where most little girls will interact with their favorite characters on a daily basis. Among other products, dress-up dolls play an important role in disintegrating the powerful postmodern princess into traditional objectified beauty, a passive figure to be dressed for others' visual pleasure, not for her own adventure. Advertising picks up where the narrative left off, immersing Disney consumers in the hard-won happily-ever-after with an onslaught of products. Like post-feminist advertising strategists, the Disney Corporation sees this happily-ever-after as a vehicle for selling empowerment as commodity to the empowered female consumer. The idea that women do things and buy things to please themselves is very important to the rhetoric of post-feminism. (Gill 2007, 91) However, in a society where advertising still encourages women to associate self-confidence with specific outward appearance, (Ross 2010, 58) this rhetoric is questionable, and the marketed images of the Disney princess reflect a similar dilemma.

As children entered the marketplace in the last few decades and became targets of aggressive toy marketing, Disney advertising ushered little girls into this new female "autonomy" through the princess films. In post-feminist society, advertising often channels female agency not only into purchasing power, but also into the power to make decisions about one's physical appearance. Cultural analyst Rosalind Gill describes this as a shift from "sexual objectification to sexual subjectification," (Gill 2007, 73) where marketers exploit the language of feminism to encourage a woman to view herself as the autonomous subject, capable of purchasing beauty not to attract men, but for her own pleasure. Post-feminist ad campaigns

promise ageless skin; longer, thicker eyelashes; shoes to help her “walk sexy;”² all designed to “empower” the woman of the twenty-first century, equating a sense of control and self-esteem with visual appearance. Representations of Disney princesses are saintly compared to advertisements featuring half-naked, barely legal models, but these images play a very important role in the auto-objectification of young girls, encouraging them to view themselves as “pretty” and to achieve princess-worthy beauty through the purchase of princess-themed beauty products.

In the “magical world of the Disney Princess,”³ dresses, high heels, and long hair signal not lounging incompetence but a desirable state of fun for children. In fact, one mother blogged that her five-year-old’s beloved golden locks were long and unmanageable, and another child gave herself blisters emulating Cinderella in plastic slippers. Another mother explicitly stated that it is “empowering” for her daughter when people stare at the princess gown because it says “treat me like royalty.” (Weill 2009) When girls attempt to be these princesses through dress up, they internalize a notion central to post-feminist discourse: the illusion of the power of being looked at. Faludi describes this market-dictated shift in female images as a shift to encouraging female *publicity* rather than public *agency*, (Faludi 1991, xv) a process that removes the active heroine from the beautiful body. While mainstream media seems to be doing all it can to present adult women as sexualized subjects, family-friendly Disney seems to be taking steps backwards and marketing its females as beautiful objects, using its traditional princesses as a template.

Just as post-feminist rhetoric borrowed traditional gender ideals to construct its platform, the Disney Corporation drew on its own in-house archives of femininity, recycling old images of nostalgia directly for profit. The reemergence of “traditional” Disney princesses Snow White, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty marketed alongside Belle *et al* represents a problematic blurring of gender ideals, which privileges some aspects of femininity and disregards others. Postmodern Disney princesses definitely possess beauty equal to that of their predecessors, but within the confines of narrative their character strengths lie mainly in their wit, spunk and passionate ideals. They certainly do not adorn themselves for the pleasures of any man; it is quite clear that princesses like Tiana and Belle could not care less about attracting a handsome prince at the expense of giving up their dreams. But in a marketplace that encourages females to make powerful statements that are physical instead of vocal, even strong female characters find their power stripped and reduced to silent, attractive images akin to the Grimm’s princesses. (Gill 2007, 261) When sold in company of the traditional princess, the modern heroine acquires these qualities of nurturing and passivity, feminized through dress-up and association with pink, hyper-girly products. Alongside these ball gown-clad figures even warrior Mulan is taken out of her armor and placed in feminine Chinese dress. However, the modern Disney heroine remains unquestionably autonomous within her narrative, and by association through advertising and products, this independent spirit passes retroactively to the traditional passive princess, manifesting itself as a problematic notion akin to post-feminist strength-in-beauty ideology. (Gill 2007) Through a two-fold process, the passive beauty of Snow White mingles with the strength and determination of Belle, resulting in products that equate independence and agency with attractive appearance in the eyes of the consumer. When little girls process these images, the

²Such as the popular “Body Training” shoes available from multiple retailers such as PUMA. “PUMA BodyTrain Toning Shoes - Walk Sexy, Walk Light, Walk Tight.” PUMA. *Welcome to the Home of SportLifestyle*. Web. 28 July 2011. <<http://www.puma.com/bodytrain>>.

³Available online at “Disney Princess ... Games, Movies & More.” Official Home Page for All Things Disney. Disney. Web. 02 July 2011. <<http://disney.go.com/princess/>>.

ability to identify with a strong female character becomes the desire to dress like her, to emulate in appearance not action.

New Frontiers, or Same Old Dresses?

The Disney princess evolves endlessly to embody popular archetypes of femininity and appeal to each new generation of filmgoers. The myth of post-feminism keeps this princess image viable in the twenty-first century, creating films that showcase feminist ideals of independence but reduce them to post-feminist ideals of marriage, while image-based marketing recalls traditional femininity and derails the princesses' potential as feminist role models. Unlike characters from Disney's other films like *Pinocchio* and *The Lion King*, the Disney princess is repackaged and resold to its consumer decades after the film's release, allowing endless readings by audiences. This ability to appeal again and again is central to the power of the princess, and its popularity reflects cultural attitudes towards beauty and female autonomy.

In spite of princess-culture, the post-feminist princess seems to be waning yet again. After the disappointing reception of *The Princess and the Frog*, Disney/Pixar chief creative officer John Lasseter vowed to cease production on all princess films due to the unprofitability of young female viewership. And since the rapid proliferation of *Toy Story* and other *Pixar* films, the tremendous financial and critical success fostered by Pixar's animated male heroes has made the production of more princess films a questionable investment for studio executives. (Chmielewski and Eller 2010) Paradoxically, the protagonist of Pixar's upcoming 2012 release *Brave* is a Scottish princess archer. While it is not yet clear whether or not this female will receive the same treatment as the Disney princesses, Pixar will doubtlessly market its first female protagonist with a bow in her hand. This image cannot offset the ubiquitous marketing of Disney's traditional princesses, but it is a step towards creating more diverse female images for young female audiences.

Film companies often claim to cater to consumer preferences, but as film viewership continues to decrease, studios should offer young girls more than dress-up and tiaras from their narratives. Lasseter observed that little girls eventually outgrow their infatuation with the princess, and thus studios must rethink their products in order to create long term interest. Disney's entertainment partner Pixar has proven that it is possible to make profound, quality narratives for children, and still produce iconic, marketable images. It is time for Disney to invest in female-driven narratives that have staying-power with consumers, to create female protagonists with the cultural endurance and profitability that lie in the character and personality of Pixar's male heroes. Until Disney develops and markets its heroines in this fashion, these females will never truly champion the progressive ideals of equality that inspired the women's movement for decades.

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