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Bachelor's thesis

Adaptation and Cultural Norms

The Case of *Beauty and the Beast*

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Table of Contents:

- INTRODUCTION..... 2**
- DISNEY ADAPTATION: FROM BOOK TO ANIMATION..... 3**
- LIVE-ACTION FILM 5**
 - DIVERSITY AND INCLUSIVENESS 6
 - FEMINISM 7
- DISNEY AND CULTURE 9**
- CONCLUSION..... 10**
- REFERENCES..... 11**

Introduction

In the 21st century, Disney have started to re-make their animations into live-action adaptations. This phenomenon can be seen as a way to make a previously animated film version - that is now often considered to be either culturally inappropriate, or downright racist - into one that is more appropriate for a new cultural climate. Disney often base their movies on old literary fairytales which they adapt to fit a standard “Disney-format”. This format is easily recognizable through its visual style, and Disney is also known for the ideological agenda in their animation (Cartmell, 2007, p. 170). However, the general values and attitudes in society have changed since the 20th century, and since “Disney movies are such cultural icons in the western world, and worldwide, they are ripe for cultural critique” (van Wormer & Juby, 2016).

Through the new streaming website Disney Plus, or “Disney +”, Disney responds to the critique by warning their viewers that some of their content are outdated and offensive (Iati, 2019). Michael Baran, who has a M. A and Ph. D. in cultural anthropology, commented that “[the warning] really feels like a first step,” and that Disney can do more when it comes to taking accountability for past wrongs (Iati, 2019). The next step might therefore be the live-action adaptations; A chance for Disney to remake their fan-favorites in accordance to 21st century appropriate ideologies. The only problem is that the standard for cultural appropriate values and attitudes differ worldwide, therefore making some of Disney’s new adaptations banned, boycotted or censored in some places and countries because of the ideologies reflected. This happened with the new live adaption with *Beauty and the Beast* (Condon, 2017).

In this essay, I will focus on *Beauty and the Beast* - the original story by Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve from 1740, the animated Disney version from 1991 (Trousdale & Wise) and finally the latest live-action adaptation from 2017 (Condon). The primary focus will be on the latest version and how it is adapted in a new cultural light. Through added scenes and new dialogue, the film conveys Belle as a more active heroine, and the film even involves interracial couples, “gay-moments” and cross dressing. The new aspects in the film also points to the different standard for appropriate behavior - since it is banned and controversial in some countries and places; And the added formal elements and scenes convey changes and inclusiveness in society, that was not present 26 years prior in the animated version. In short,

this essay will be about the evolution of cultural ideologies in the story of *The Beauty and the Beast*.

To structure this essay, I will first introduce Disney's recognized adaptation method in accordance with their adaptation of *Beauty and the Beast*. I will focus on the cultural changes of marriage, romance and social class when it comes to the 1740 book and 1991 adaptation, because of Disney's focus on the relationship between Belle and the Beast in the Trousdale and Wise animation. After this introduction, I will focus on the live-action film, and on how the story remains the same, while simultaneously adding new aspects to make it more appropriate for today's standard. The focus will be on representation, diversity and feminism in the newest adaptation, and how it is just as accepted as it is criticized, for its diversity and representation, and even how it is criticized for not being representative enough.

Disney Adaptation: From Book to Animation

The original *Beauty and the Beast* story from 1740, differ a lot from the popular Disney animation from 1991. In the book, Belle has six brothers and six sisters, the family was rich before a compilation of freak accidents, the Beast is rendered stupid by the curse as well, fairies are prominent in the book, and Belle turns out to be half-human, half-fairy and a princess, and the Beast's mother are out at war. These examples are just some of the aspects which was left out in the animation. The animation has taken some aspects from the first half of the novel, although they completely obliterated the part of the novel explaining why the prince was turned into a Beast and the explanation of Belle's origin, and made it into a work of their own. Because of the major differences, the 1991 adaptation can be seen as an analogy; Since it is a "fairly considerable departure for the sake of making another work of art" (Wells, 2007, p. 206).

As alluded to in the introduction, Disney is known for adapting stories to fit their "Disney-format". Visually, Disney has been identified as "sentimental modernists" in how they combine the real and unreal, exaggerate cuteness and sentimentality, restore rationality, animate inanimate objects, and satirize the high culture signifiers etc. (Cartmell, 2007, s. 170). Disney is also recognized for their ideological agenda through the themes and values in their adaptations such as: "Individualism and optimism, [...] magic imagination, innocence, romance and happiness, good triumphing over evil" (Cartmell, 2007, s. 170). Some of these

techniques are used in the adaptation of the animation of *Beauty and the Beast* as well. In the following passage, I will point out some of the main changes Disney brought to the story of *Beauty and the Beast*.

Romance and happiness is one of the values and themes that Disney films focuses on, this can also be seen in the 1991 animation, where the whole story build around this romance (Cartmell, 2007, p. 170). As mentioned above, The Beast was both stupid and ugly in the book, or, as quoted on location 404, “the Beast was more inclined to stupidity than to ferocity” (De Villeneuve, 1740). This differ from the animation where the Beast is quite ferocious and short tempered in the beginning of the film. The focus on this alteration is due to the different attitudes towards marriage for women in 1740 and 1991. The book even contains a passage where Belle’s father feels obligated to urge her to marry the Beast, upon learning that he is noble despite his brutish appearance. He tells her that “it is much better to have an amiable husband than one whose only recommendation is a handsome person,” in which she replies that his appearances was not compensated by good conversations (De Villeneuve, 1740, Location 650). Yet, on location 779, she tells the Beast that believing him to be dead made her realise that she loved him, but there is a lot more to the story than this (De Villeneuve, 1740). The animation, however, focuses primarily on the slow-building romance between Beauty and the Beast, where they use books as a tool to show their compatibility (Trousdale & Wise, 1991, 50:30).

De Villeneuve’s book also stresses the class difference between Belle and the Prince, something that Trousdale and Wise dropped from their animation. In the book, the Prince's mother voices her strong disapproval that her son - of “noblest blood” - would mix with that of a simple “merchant’s daughter”; And that it would be degrading and unworthy for a prince (Location 859). The fact that marriage across social classes are frowned upon and discouraged in the 18th century- especially for royalty - is common knowledge. By dropping this dilemma, the animation prompt for the American value of social mobility; The belief that personal qualities should be valued over which social class you are born into (Booker, 2010, p. 7).

Disney films are known for their classic Hollywood structure and is considered to be the opposite of the heritage film (Cartmell, 2007, p. 170-171). Heritage films are known for their respect for the source text, meaning that they respect the historical accurate dilemmas of the original text. Disney films, however, changes the narrative to fit the cultural values of the

time, and is known for satirizing the cultural pretensions and “highmindedness” of the original text (Cartmell, 2007, p. 171). An implicit satire of the “highmindedness” can be seen through the different reasons as to why the Beast is cursed in the book and the animation. While the Prince is cursed into a Beast because he refused to marry an old fairy in the book (Location 956-1194), Trousdale and Wise implicitly satirize high-culture by stating he was spoiled, selfish and mean (1991, 1:25). By stating that the royal, of a high-status birth, is spoiled and selfish, can be seen as a critique of social hierarchy based on birth. This value is amplified by the kind and selfless commoner, Belle, rising in social rank because of her personal qualities. The critique of the Prince and the social movement of Belle, is a clear correlation with the American dream and belief in social mobility.

The departure from the original literature is a common in Disney adaptation. Disney is known for usurping the original literature and as a result, making the film, rather than the text, the original for most viewers (Cartmell, 2007, s. 169). This have led them to be accused for not just adapting a narrative, but virtually stealing the story to make it their own (Cartmell, 2007, s. 171). In this light, it is important to remember that:

An adaptation may remove itself from its source text, edit or amplify a part of it, or transpose the whole, in a spirit of deference, homage, critique, opportunism, or indifference. (Brooker, 2007, p. 118).

Disney has removed itself from the source in creating *Beauty and the Beast* (Trousdale & Wise), and used the “Disney-format” to create a story of Beauty and the Beast in their own way, according to their own values and ideologies, in terms of 1991 cultural standards.

Live-Action Film

The live-action film has high fidelity to the animation, although there are some changes and added scenes that has been included to fit the cultural standard in the 21st century. It also adds a scene that nods to the original text which points to the engagement on hypertextuality (Brooker, 2007, p. 113). As I briefly mentioned above, Disney films have a tendency to adapt according to American values and ideologies, so when society change, Disney adaptation has to change accordingly. In this passage, I will point out how Condon adjust the story of *Beauty and the Beast* in order to become more inclusive, in terms of sexuality, ethnicity, and gender, as well as making small changes to Belle as a way to alter the stereotypical gender role depicted in previous Disney animations.

Diversity and Inclusiveness

In the live-action adaptation of *Beauty and the Beast*, diversity and inclusiveness are celebrated through the casting of several people of color and through the emphasis on Disney's first and second interracial kiss on film. This inclusiveness and diversity can be seen as a result of the "#OscarSoWhite" movement in 2016, where people of various ethnicities called out Hollywood for its lack of diversity at the Academy Awards (Mazzucato, 2017). Mazzucato point out that the interracial kisses, between the previously animated inanimate servants Madame Garderobe and Maestro Cadenza, and Lumière and Plumette (Condon, 2017, 01:50:00), are used as publicity to self-congratulate themselves for their progressiveness and inclusiveness (2017). The use of ethnic representation and interracial relationships as a way to promote the film, points to a shift in values in society, where equality and diversity is celebrated over an all-white casting.

The inclusion of Disney's first gay character in Condon's *Beauty and the Beast* has been criticized for being an unjust representation of the LGBTQ community while simultaneously being boycotted and criticized for even including a gay character (University Wire, 2017). The gay character is Gaston's funny sidekick, Lefou; And his orientation is depicted through his "male gaze" towards Gaston and a few seconds showcasing Lefou dancing with another male character at the end of the film (Rohrs, 2019, p. 6; Condon, 2017, 01:53:20). There is no "coming-out scene" or obvious actions - such as a kissing - declaring his orientation, only lingering gazes and that dance scene. "The male gaze", according to Laura Mulvey, is a narrative tool used to depict women as erotic objects for the characters within the story, and for the people watching the film (Rohrs, 2019, p. 7). Lefou's sexuality is therefore shown through the same way one would present heterosexuality in a film (Rohrs, 2019, p. 8). By using the same narrative tool on homosexuality as with heterosexuality, could be seen as a way to normalize LGBTQ characters (Rohrs, 2019, p. 7). This downplayed display of sexual orientation would explain why:

The majority of [the] negative backlash [towards Lefou's sexual orientation] occurred before the film's release, indicating that any anger incited by this character's sexual orientation came from those who learned of his sexual orientation through news media sources, and not through an experience with the character interactions within the film (Rohrs, 2019, p. 8).

By presenting Lefou's orientation in this way it can be seen as non-threatening for homophobes, while simultaneously making supporters of the LGBTQ community wanting more representation, instead of the bi-role in a heterosexual person's story in Disney films (University Wire, 2017).

Not only is diversity in sexual orientation present in the new live-action film, but as a result of an alteration from the animation to the live-action film, we see a different attitude towards cross-dressing and the transgender and queer community. At the end of both films, Gaston leads a mob to kill the Beast, which results in a fight scene between the servant objects and the villagers. At one point in the fight the animation includes a scene where the animated closet, or Madame Garderobe, drags a man into the closet, changing him into typical women's clothing, he shrieks and runs away horrified after taking a look himself (Trousdale & Wise, 1991, 1:07:45). The live-action version has the same scene, but instead of one man, there are three men, and after being put in dresses, two of them are horrified, but the last man embraces the change; He grins at the change of dress and he welcome the compliments from Madame Garderobe as he saunters off with her parting words "go be free" (Condon, 2017, 01:39:00).

Feminism

When Disney's first adaptation of *Beauty and the Beast* was released in 1991, "critics hailed the film for its apparently innovative portrayal of the heroine, Belle," and the filmmakers claimed that they did not want another passive princess (Cummins, 1995, p. 22). June Cummins, however, "saw the same old story, a romance plot that robs female characters of self-determination and individuality" (1995, p. 22). She argues that the focus on a princess that reads took our attention away from what she was reading; Which was fairytales of "princes in disguise" and "prince-charming" (Trousdale & Wise, 1991, 5:00 & 5:30). In the live-action adaptation the books she read are books from real life, classics - such as Shakespeare - which strengthens the belief that Belle is an intellectual girl, and not just a girl dreaming about prince-charming. The live-action adaptation has taken the old critiques into account, and through the casting of Belle, personal characteristics and dialogue, Condon have made her a more active heroine that stays true to her individualism throughout the story, despite marrying a prince in the end.

The road to a more feminist approach to *Beauty and the Beast* (Condon, 2017), started with the casting of Emma Watson as Belle. An article published for The Guardian, before the release of the film, summarize the reason why: “post-Potter [Emma Watson] has received more plaudits for her activism than her acting” (Barber, 2017). Since “she now spends as much time on feminism as she does on films” we make the assumption that the film in itself will be up to a feminist standard as well. Even the director, Condon, acknowledges that women and society has changed since 1991, and that Belle is more an activist in this film, such as Emma herself (Filmisnowextra, 2017, 4:00).

Belle is depicted as an activist in the 2017 film adaptation, and it is shown through her being an inventor and teaching other girls how to read. In contrast to the 1991 animation, Belle is the inventor, not her father. Early on in the live-action adaptation she is seen inventing a construction which does the laundry for her while she reads (Condon, 2017, 14:00). Not only does it tell us that she is smart, but it conveys her activism to free herself from the shackles that domestic work puts on women - it opens her schedule to do what she wants and gives us a reason as to why the villagers think she is a “funny girl”. Like in the animation, Belle asks her father if she is odd, and instead of brushing it off, Maurice, in the live-action film, tells Belle that she is ahead of her time and that the villagers are narrow-minded and intimidated by her (Condon, 2017, 12:00). The truth behind Maurice’s words are shown to be true only moments later, when the villagers see Belle learning another girl how to read - making progress for women in society - and they respond by ruining her laundry (Condon, 2017, 14:40).

Belle also keeps her individuality more in the 2017 adaptation, compared to that in 1991 through the way she speaks her mind, and does not tolerate being ordered around. As an example, when the Beast tells her that she will eat dinner with him, Belle does not respond in the 1991 animation, but she lays down and weeps on the bed (Trousdale & Wise, 25:10). Later, when the Beast loses his temper and yells at her for not joining him for dinner, she simply states that she isn’t hungry and would not join him (Trousdale & Wise, 1991, 31:40). In the live-action version, she has more spirit. The Beast invites her to eat with him, and instead of staying silent, she asks incredulously how he could think that she would join him for dinner when he has taken her as his prisoner, in which he responds by yelling and she yells back (Condon, 2017, 42:00). She is also more proactive when it comes to freeing herself from the Beast’s imprisonment, as when she makes an escape rope, out of dress-material

(Condon, 2017, 42:00). And even though she chooses to nurse the Beast back to health after he saves her life - instead of escaping - her need for freedom is shown through a dialogue with the Beast where she says “can anybody truly be happy if they aren’t free?” (Condon, 2017, 1:24:00).

Disney and Culture

Disney has “played it safe” throughout history, when it comes to progressive values and themes in their movies. For the vast majority in America, Disney values correlated to American values, but as society changes Disney has to change too (Wills, 2017, p. 73). In the 1970s, Disney “seemed out of touch with national trends and the growing diversity” (Wills, 2017, p. 74). The persistence of the mainstream has therefore led to a shift in priorities and values in Disney Culture over time, making the corporation more diverse than ever (Wills, 2017, p. 5).

While Disney becomes more progressive, the vast majority in society becomes more progressive as well; But more conservative people condemn Disney for the inclusive and progressive values they represent, believing themselves to be defenders of traditional morality and family values (Best & Lowney, 2009, p. 439). With the live-action adaptation of *Beauty and the Beast*, we could see these “morale defenders” throughout the world, boycotting and banning the film for the inclusion of a gay-character. In Kuwait, the film was pulled from all theatres, a drive-in theatre in Alabama banned the film (Raghavan, 2017), a Russian Member of Parliament called for a ban of the film and The Malaysian Censorship Board approved the film, but only after editing away the “gay moments” (BBC, 2017).

Despite the critique and boycotting of Disney because of their progression, there are people who congratulate it. It is even a demand for even more inclusion and diversity in Disney films. An article in The Guardian applaud Disney for finally making strong female character while simultaneously making a jab about it “taking them so long” (Pulver, 2016). And as mentioned in the introduction, the disclaimer provided by Disney plus (about inappropriate material) was received by both praise for taking accountability for its past, and received critique for it being too dismissive (Iati, 2019). Both the critique and praise calls for a shift in the tides for Disney to correct their wrongs and provide a representation of the diversity in

society. John Wills, the author of *Disney Culture* even end his book with the parting words demanding more activism from Disney:

After decades of playing it safe, Disney Culture in the twenty-first century needs to challenge us. It needs to mean something beyond merchandise. Disney Culture is part of our heritage and our culture. Mickey needs to start saying something (2017, p. 132).

His parting words gives us a strong message: Society has changed, and Disney should be a frontrunner for this change since they have a big impact on the world's culture, especially in America and Western countries.

Conclusion

Through the story of *Beauty and the Beast*, Disney have indirectly been relaying their values and shown progressiveness. Disney made the story their own through their first adaptation in 1991, where they adapted the story to fit their usual "Disney-format" and was even hailed for its progressive portrayal of a princess more interested in books than men. But, seen through a critical lens, even this adaptation could be criticized for the female character losing her individualism throughout the story and zero representation of ethnicity and sexual orientation. 26 years later, society calls for more inclusion and cultural representation in the cinematic world. Disney responds to the demand; they take responsibility for previous animation and adaptations, while starting a remake franchise to right their wrongs. Condon's *Beauty and the Beast* has tried to retell the animated version in a new cultural light; Making it both familiar and nostalgic and new and progressive film.

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