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Genre in Contemporary Disney Animated Features (2008-2016)

Eve Benhamou

A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with the requirements for award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Arts

Department of Film and Television
15 February 2019
79,352 words

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how Disney has re-appropriated and re-envisioned a wide range of Hollywood genres in order to revise and renew the studio's feature-length animated output. Focusing on films released between 2008 and 2016, this study analyses their distinctive generic approach, building on the specific aesthetic of animation, and the intertext and paratext surrounding Disney.

This study elaborates on two main trends characterising Disney's contemporary output. Section 1 focuses on borrowings from and convergences with genres of romance, including romantic and screwball comedies, looking closely at how Disney self-reflexively revises one of the studio's most iconic genre: the fairy tale. Section 2 explores the studio's more expansive generic impulses, considering re-appropriations of action-adventure genres such as the superhero film and the cop buddy film. These two sections demonstrate the multiple ways in which Disney's output engages with contemporary Hollywood genres, both as *animated* films and *Disney* features.

Examining these films from the perspective of genre studies challenges well-established understandings of Disney, mainstream animation, and film genres. The analysis of non-canonical films such as Disney animated features, often excluded from live-action dominated genre studies, opens new ways to approach major Hollywood genres, foregrounding the porousness of generic borders and the key role of paratexts in generic construction. Such a generic perspective also reassesses recurring associations between mainstream animated films and a very narrow set of genres, linked to their perceived limited audience and lightweight content. Through the particular form and styles of animation, these films re-imagine a multiplicity of genres in playfully challenging and often subversive ways. Combining a focus on genre and on the specificities of the animation medium, this thesis illuminates how Disney distinctively reworks contemporary generic tropes, engaging with the studio's own familiar narratives, aesthetic style, and gender portrayals in the process.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisor, Kristian Moen, for his dedicated guidance, patience, and enthusiasm for my project. His illuminating advice and constant encouragement have been invaluable. My co-supervisor, Sarah Street, has always provided insightful feedback and assistance.

My sincere appreciation goes to the University of Bristol for its financial support. Lucy Langley-Palmer and Shelley Marsden significantly helped navigate the practicalities of postgraduate research studies.

I am particularly grateful to the Film & Television postgraduate community for their thought-provoking suggestions and infectious passion for cinema. The long film discussions over cake/ice cream were particularly appreciated. Special thanks to Miguel Gaggiotti, Dominic Lash, Hoi Lun Law, Steven Roberts, and Polly Rose for their comments on this work.

The denizens of the Arts & Humanities graduate school also made this PhD journey a more joyful one. Special praise goes to Jawaher Alghamdi and Dana Ramona.

I am forever indebted to my parents for their unwavering confidence in me and in my work, and for fostering my love of film through an extensive home video library and weekly trips to the cinema.

Huge thanks to my boyfriend, Ricardo, who introduced me to many of the (action-adventure) films discussed in this thesis, and selflessly accompanied me to watch *Frozen* and almost everything released by Disney in the past five years. His support and silly jokes helped me go through the ups and downs of postgraduate life.

Finally, I dedicate this thesis to my father.

Eve Benhamou
15 February 2019

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

Some of the arguments in chapters 4 and 5 appear in the following publication:
Benhamou, Eve. "Freezing Versus Wrecking: Reworking the Superhero Genre in Disney's *Frozen* (2013) and *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012)." *Animation Practice, Process & Production* 4 (2014): 13-27. doi: 10.1386/ap3.4.1.27_1.

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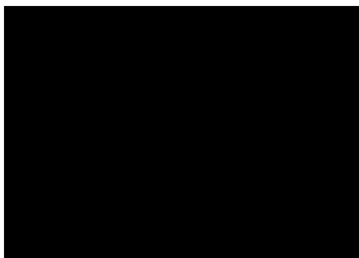

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the past decade, the Disney studio has strived to reinvent and update its animated output by revisiting a wide range of Hollywood film genres, often in playfully challenging ways. My thesis examines Disney's contemporary animated features, namely *Bolt* (Byron Howard and Chris Williams, 2008), *The Princess and the Frog* (Ron Clements and John Musker, 2009), *Tangled* (Nathan Greno and Byron Howard, 2010), *Wreck-It-Ralph* (Rich Moore, 2012), *Frozen* (Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee, 2013), *Big Hero 6* (Don Hall and Chris Williams, 2014), *Zootopia* (Howard and Moore, 2016) and *Moana* (Clements and Musker, 2016), but from a different perspective than in most academic and popular writing.[1] Rather than approaching these animated films as belonging to a cohesive, strictly delimited canon identified with the studio's brand – "Disney films" – or through the potentially reductive generic label of children's or family films, my thesis explores how these films interact with a much wider generic milieu. Disney animated features imitate and rework a diversity of generic tropes in ways that humorously rework and re-envision Hollywood genres. They do so as *animated* films, using the distinct language and form of animation, and as *Disney* animated films, building on a rich intertextual and paratextual network. Throughout this thesis, I will use the term "Disney" as a shorthand for the company's animation studio, referring to the latter as the primary force behind the films, rather than original founder Walt Disney or more contemporary film directors. These films re-envision genres in ways that are specific to Disney animation. Their generic re-appropriations resonate with contemporary discourses surrounding film genres, animation aesthetics, and gender portrayals.

[1] *Zootopia*'s release title in the United Kingdom is *Zootropolis*. In this thesis, I will refer to the original American title.

Applying genre studies to animation sheds new light on our current understanding of film genres. It opens new areas of cinema to generic analysis, foregrounding the key role of mainstream animated features in re-envisioning and challenging well-established live-action genres, such as the romantic comedy and the action-adventure film. Applying genre studies to animation also opens new perspectives on the analysis of mainstream animated features, revealing the multiplicity of generic influences at work within these films. As this chapter will go on to discuss, a generically inclusive perspective not only goes beyond the isolationist approach of some animation scholars, but also challenges the potentially reductive generic labels associated with mainstream animated films, whether coming from studio names or perceived audiences, such as the family. Such an approach particularly challenges studies of Disney contemporary animated features: they interact with live-action genres in ways that are specific both to their animation medium *and* to the studio's distinct aesthetic style, intertextual and paratextual history.

In parallel with a study of genre, my thesis will examine Disney's gender constructions, relying on the concept of post-feminism. As it will be further developed in the literature review, gender portrayals represent a recurring focus within Disney studies, alongside the studio's specific aesthetic style and paratexts. Constructions of gender are central to Disney's contemporary revision of its own recurring set of tropes. It is essential, for example, to consider the figure of the contemporary animated prince in order to fully understand the studio's wider reworking of its own fairy-tale formula and interactions with the romantic comedy. Post-feminism crystallises the uneasy balance that Disney animated films continuously strive to strike regarding constructions of femininity and masculinity: between formulaically yet knowingly traditional, and challengingly empowering. Such a critical concept allows one to move beyond reductive categorisations – either retrograde or progressive – illuminating

Disney's complex relationship with its own past generic canon, aesthetic style, and multifaceted paratexts.

The overarching concerns for my thesis are: how Disney contemporary animated features revisit Hollywood film genres, and in what ways they imitate and rework a diversity of generic tropes while playfully challenging and re-envisioning genres. I focus on three aspects which are pivotal throughout Disney's generic reworkings, and central in studies of Disney: the portrayal of gender, the aesthetics of animation, and the relation of the studio's output to the Disney "formula," including Disney intertexts and paratexts. How are gender constructions, central in contemporary revisions of genres of romance and action adventure, reflected and negotiated throughout Disney's output? In what ways does the aesthetic style of Disney animated films reframe these generic tropes? To what extent have Disney animated features borrowed from Hollywood film genres in order to update and complicate what some critics and scholars perceive as a cohesive Disney formula?

From a wider perspective, such a generic approach aims at challenging preconceptions surrounding mainstream animation, and Disney animated features in particular. Beyond the reductive association of mainstream animation with child audiences, animated films reach a wide public through their multi-layered reworking of a multiplicity of genres. Beyond their perceived lack of depth due to their association with commercial blockbusters, their very status as animated films often allows them to challenge generic tropes in a more subversive way than some live-action films. Beyond the clear-cut distinction between live action and animation operating within some academic circles, studying animated films alongside live-action films reveals the essential role that animated films not only play within contemporary genres, but also Hollywood cinema.

***

Animation has been mostly side-lined within genre studies, either sporadically included or largely ignored. I suggest that there are three possible reasons for this problematic positioning: the understanding of "genre" as a potentially rigid and fixed concept; the marginalized status and reductive categorization of animated features within wider critical and popular discourses; and the "isolationist" approach of animation scholars. My thesis goes beyond these conceptual and discursive limitations. It opens new perspectives on both genre and animation by analysing Disney animated features within the *wider* context of contemporary Hollywood generic trends, such as romance and action adventure, and exploring the ways in which they specifically inflect generic tropes.

Contemporary discussions of film genres can be situated between two poles, emphasizing either generic purity or hybridity. The concept of generic purity is based on the idea that genres are characterised by recurring narrative formulas and "have clear, stable identities and borders".[2] From this perspective, only films that share and replicate "the generic prototype in all basic characteristics" will be considered as belonging to that single specific genre.[3] For example, Tamar Jeffers McDonald's *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre* provides a "master definition" on which the granting of the romantic-comedy label is based: "a romantic comedy is a film which has its central narrative motor a quest for love, which portrays this quest in a light-hearted way and almost always to a successful conclusion".[4] This understanding of the romantic comedy presupposes that the genre possesses clear and fixed generic borders, and is based on "a very limited number of texts" which repeat similar structures.[5] Such attention to narrative frameworks builds on a "syntactic view" of genre.[6]

[2] Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 16.
[3] Ibid, 18.
[4] Tamar Jeffers McDonald, *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre* (London: Wallflower, 2007), 9.
[5] Celestino Deleyto, *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 49.
[6] Rick Altman, "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre," *Cinema Journal* 23 (1984): 10, accessed 1 March 2018, doi: 10.2307/1225093.

These strict groupings and labellings, privileging generic purity, partly explain why mainstream animated films tend to be marginalised or even ignored within genre studies. Following on from the example of the romantic comedy, the narrative motor of animated films such as *Shrek* (Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jenson, 2001), *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled* arguably corresponds to characters' "quest for love", portrayed in a light-hearted way and concluding with a happy ending.[7] Building on Jeffers McDonald's definition, they should be included in studies of the romantic comedy, as they clearly replicate its "generic prototype". Yet, it seems that the semantics of the films represent the real obstacle to their inclusion. Semantics refer to the "building blocks" of a given genre: recurring traits such as "attitudes, characters, shots, locations, sets".[8] The characters' anthropomorphic form – Shrek is an ogre, *The Princess and the Frog*'s leads are turned into amphibians – and the enchanted settings of the animated films, displaying a fantasy version of the Middles Ages in *Shrek* and *Tangled*, function as semantic barriers. The latter prevent the assimilation of these animated films into the typically urban contemporary romantic comedy, featuring live-action (human) actors. The strong generic association of these animated features with the fairy tale hinders their inclusion further: if generic borders are fixed, then these films can only belong to one single genre.

An alternative to this exclusive conception of genre is Rick Altman's "semantic/syntactic approach".[9] Combining semantic and syntactic notions of genre, namely both the "genre's building blocks" and the "structures into which they are arranged", this perspective may allow the consideration of mainstream animated features within genre studies.[10] Altman argues that

> a dual approach permits a far more accurate description of the numerous intergeneric connections typically suppressed by single-minded approaches. It is simply not possible to describe Hollywood cinema accurately without the

[7] This generic approach will be developed further in chapter 2.
[8] Altman, "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre," 10.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.

> ability to account for the numerous films that innovate by combining the syntax of one genre with the semantics of another.[11]

Building on this perspective, a semantic/syntactic approach to *The Princess and the Frog* would explore how the syntactic structure of the romantic comedy, namely two initially antagonistic protagonists falling in love, is combined with fairy-tale semantics – magic kiss, prince and princess – foregrounding the convergences between and re-envisioning the two genres.

This semantic/syntactic approach supports the concept of generic hybridity. Both Altman and Steve Neale underline the porousness of generic boundaries: genres are "interfertile" and films are correspondingly "multi-generic".[12] More contemporary works follow on from this approach to rehabilitate specific authors and genres, and reassess film texts beyond canonical generic understandings. Christine Gledhill, for example, acknowledges "genre mixing" as central to women media makers' "re-writing" of tropes critically constructed as masculine or feminine.[13] Noel Brown's study of the family film explores examples as generically varied as *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) and *Mrs Doubtfire* (Chris Columbus, 1993), illuminating their shared "specific ideological overtones, emotive aspects and commercial intent".[14] Celestino Deleyto examines the "fundamental" influence of the romantic comedy in "the social and sexual dynamics" of a wide range of films that are not traditionally included in studies of this genre, such as the "auteur" film *Before Sunset* (Richard Linklater, 2004).[15] These authors foreground and unpack the multiple, sometimes unexpected interactions between genres and film texts.

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[11] Altman, "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre," 12.
[12] Rick Altman, "Reusable Packaging: Generic Products and the Recycling Process," in *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, ed. Nick Brown (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 24; Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge, 2000), 51.
[13] Christine Gledhill, preface to *Women Do Genre in Film and Television*, ed. Mary Harrod and Katarzyna Paszkiewicz (New York: Routledge, 2018), xii-xiii.
[14] Noel Brown, *The Hollywood Family Film: A History, from Shirley Temple to Harry Potter* (London: I. B Tauris, 2012), 12.
[15] Deleyto, *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy*, 51.

While strict generic categorisations are broken apart by authors who emphasise generic hybridity within live-action cinema, opening new and wider perspectives within genre studies, animated films still seem to be marginalised. They are largely absent from canonical works on genre, such as Neale's *Genre and Hollywood*, as well as more contemporary edited collections, such as Malcolm Geraghty and Mark Jancovich's *The Shifting Definitions of Genre: Essays on Labelling Films, Television Shows and Media*, Barry Grant's *Film Genre Reader IV*, and Mary Harrod and Katarzyna Paszkiewicz's *Women Do Genre in Film and Television*.[16] When they do include animated films, their presence tends to be limited to a single chapter. For example, Matthew Bartkowiak's *Sounds of the Future: Essays on Music in Science Fiction Film* dedicates one essay to *WALL-E* (Andrew Stanton, 2008); *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical* includes one chapter on the animated musical.[17]

The generic isolation of animated features within contemporary discourses on genres might seem surprising. Since the late 1990s, mainstream animation has gained a prominent role within Hollywood's landscape. The industry-wide adoption of CGI, paralleling the growing number of animation studios (Illumination Entertainment, Laika) and animation divisions within established studios, has opened up the market.[18] This evolution was implemented and reinforced by the multiplication of highly successful franchises such as DreamWorks' *Shrek* (2001, 2004, 2007, 2010), Blue Sky's *Ice Age* (2002, 2006, 2009, 2012, 2016), and Illumination's *Despicable Me* (2010, 2013, 2015, 2017). The box office revenues of animated releases have also dramatically increased, with films such as *Shrek 2* (Andrew Adamson and

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[16] Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*; Malcolm Geraghty and Mark Jancovich, ed., *The Shifting Definitions of Genre: Essays on Labeling Films, Television Shows and Media* (London: McFarland, 2008); Barry Keith Grant, ed., *Film Genre Reader IV* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012); Mary Harrod and Katarzyna Paszkiewicz, ed., *Women Do Genre in Film and Television* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

[17] Kathryn A. T. Edney and Kit Hughes, "'Hello WALL-E!' Nostalgia, Utopia, and the Science Fiction Musical," in *Sounds of the Future: Essays on Music in Science Fiction Film*, ed. Mathew J. Bartkowiak (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2010), 44-66; Susan Smith, "The Animated Film Musical," in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*, ed. Raymond Knapp, Mitchell Morris, and Stacy Wolf (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 167-78.

[18] Brown, *The Hollywood Family Film*, 205.

Kelly Asbury, 2004) and *Toy Story 3* (Lee Unkrich, 2010) being the highest grossing films of their respective years in the United States.[19] The creation of a distinct category specifically for animation at the Oscars in 2001 highlighted the critical recognition gained by animation within contemporary Hollywood. Why would genre studies, especially considering the growing importance of generic hybridity as a concept, disregard some of the most popular and significant releases from the past twenty years?

The exclusion or marginalisation of animated films points to a wider hierarchisation underlying studies of genre. Altman describes as "bad objects" certain genre labels that have "systematically become pejorative terms".[20] This phenomenon arguably depends on the perceived audience of a specific genre, the perceived quality of its narrative content, and sometimes its budget and gross. For example, both the romantic comedy and the action film have suffered in varying degrees from their generic status as "bad objects" within critical circles, which resonates to some extent with their marginalisation within genre studies. Stacey Abbott and Deborah Jermyn argue that the "low critical esteem" that has typically met the romantic comedy, and the limited academic attention the genre has attracted, are partly due to its supposedly "predominantly female" audience and the preconception that "chick flicks are constructed as lightweight".[21] Similarly, Yvonne Tasker observes that the presupposed obviousness and lack of depth of action films explains why they "have consistently failed to meet the markers of aesthetic and cultural value typically applied within contemporary film culture".[22] Tasker particularly notes critical contempt for the action film as representative of

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[19] "2004 Domestic Grosses," Box Office Mojo, accessed 2 March 2018, http://www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?yr=2004; "2010 Domestic Grosses," Box Office Mojo, accessed 2 March 2018, http://www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?yr=2010.
[20] Altman, *Film/Genre*, 113.
[21] Stacey Abbott and Deborah Jermyn, "Introduction – A Lot like Love: The Romantic Comedy in Contemporary Cinema," in *Falling in Love Again: Romantic Comedy in Contemporary Cinema*, ed. Stacey Abbott and Deborah Jermyn (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 2.
[22] Yvonne Tasker, "Introduction: Action and Adventure Cinema," in *Action and Adventure Cinema*, ed. Yvonne Tasker (London: Routledge, 2004), 2.

mainstream popular cinema, product of an industry perceived as mindlessly replicating a predictable and superficial generic formula.[23]

Animated films often face the same assumptions in critical and popular accounts, and this affects their positioning within genre studies. This is particularly the case for *mainstream* American animated features. Animated films such as *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (Wes Anderson, 2009), *Waltz with Bashir* (Ari Folman, 2008), and *Spirited Away* (Hayao Miyazaki, 2001), for example, have been critically acclaimed partly because they benefit from a highly favourable generic aura. *Fantastic Mr. Fox* was received as a "Wes Anderson film", associated with independent, auteur cinema; *Waltz with Bashir* was understood as a documentary, generating "key debates about how animated film could be used to mediate and represent historical sources".[24] Japanese animated films such as *Spirited Away* are praised for the complexity of their generic approach: "everything that Western audiences are accustomed to seeing in live-action films – romance, comedy, tragedy, adventure, even psychological probing".[25] By contrast, mainstream animated features produced by major American studios such as DreamWorks, Illumination, Blue Sky, and most notably Disney, tend to suffer from their perceived status as commercial films, associated with predictable and lightweight content and/or appealing principally to children and family audiences. This considerably constrains their generic categorisation.

The association of children/family audiences with mainstream animated films frames their recurring generic labelling as one single category: the family film. For example, popular

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[23] Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre, and the Action cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993), 166.
[24] "Anderson's indelible imprint is on every frame here, more for better than for worse." Todd McCarthy, "*Fantastic Mr. Fox*," *Variety*, 14 November 2009, accessed 17 August 2018, https://variety.com/2009/film/markets-festivals/fantastic-mr-fox-3-1200476864/; Paul Wells, "THE ANIMATION MANIFESTO; or, What's Animation Ever Done for Us?" *Metro: Media & Education Magazine* 188 (2016): 99, accessed 3 March 2018, https://search.informit.com.au/documentSummary;dn=043767293711109;res=IELLCC.
[25] Susan J. Napier, *Anime from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 6-7.

streaming services such as Netflix categorise "Family Feature Animation" as a subgenre of "Children & Family Movies"; academic works on the family/children's film such as Brown's *The Hollywood Family Film: A History, from Shirley Temple to Harry Potter*, Karin and Stan Beeler's *Children's Film in the Digital Age: Essays on Audience, Adaptation and Consumer Culture*, and Alexander Howe and Wynn Yarborough's *Kidding Around: The Child in Film and Media*, prominently include mainstream animated films.[26] In this case, the assumed audience for the films tends to be privileged over their semantics or syntactic structure. Such generic categorisation is notably constraining because of its status as a "bad object". Brown notes that family films are often misleadingly referred as "children's films" in a "patronising" sense.[27] They are perceived as a "culturally-negligible format" defined by "excessive sentiment" and "juvenility".[28] Such understanding of the family film as a "bad object" is reinforced by the categorisation of "expansively-produced family films" as "blockbusters": their perceived "commercialism" opens them to denigration and dismissal.[29] The recurring assimilation of mainstream animated films within the family/children's film genre, combined with the derogatory aspects of this label, partly explain the marginalised status of mainstream animated films within genre studies. Their presence tends to be limited to works or chapters that solely focus on family/children's films – when they are included at all.

Despite the recurring association of mainstream animation with the family, the considerable success of franchises such as DreamWorks' *Shrek* and Pixar's *Toy Story* (1995; 1999; 2010) indicates that both their audience and generic scope are much wider. For example, Haseenah Ebrahim notes that the popularity of Pixar's animated films "appears to be

[26] Brown, *The Hollywood Family Film*; Karin and Stan Beeler, ed., *Children's Film in the Digital Age: Essays on Audience, Adaptation and Consumer Culture* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2015); Alexander N. Howe and Wynn Yarbrough, ed., *Kidding Around: The Child in Film and Media* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).
[27] Brown, *The Hollywood Family Film*, 9.
[28] Ibid, 10; 15.
[29] Ibid, 10.

widespread among adolescents and young adults too".[30] Quoting more recent animated box office hits such as *Frozen*, *Despicable Me 2* (Pierre Coffin and Chris Renaud, 2013) and *The Lego Movie* (Phil Lord and Christopher Miller, 2014), critic Dominic Patten (*Deadline*) argues that "no films can tally numbers like that without transcending genres and having mass appeal".[31] Approaching these films from a semantic/syntactic approach foregrounds their generic hybridity, which tends to be overshadowed by their potentially reductive generic labelling as family films. For example, the *Toy Story* franchise combines tropes from the western, science fiction, horror, spy film, adventure, comedy, and buddy films. Such hybridity draws on the iconic generic status of some of its protagonists: sheriff Woody evokes the western and space ranger Buzz Lightyear evokes science fiction, for example. Multiple "intertextual references to popular culture and to cinema history" reinforce the cross-generational appeal of the franchise.[32] The casting of prominent voice actors represents additional generic signifiers and intertext: for example, Cameron Diaz and Eddie Murphy bring their associated generic identity – action comedy, buddy film – to *Shrek*.[33] Mainstream animated features are generically mixed: therefore, their audiences, and correspondingly, generic borders go beyond those of the family film – a genre itself more "diverse" than suggested in some popular and academic discourses.[34]

Beyond associations with the family film and commercial cinema, the marginalization of mainstream animated features within genre studies comes from the strong generic identity of their affiliated studio, which plays a central role in the production, marketing, and reception

[30] Haseenah Ebrahim, "Are the 'Boys' at Pixar Afraid of Little Girls?" *Journal of Film and Video* 66 (2014): 47, accessed 8 February 2016, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/jfv/summary/v066/66.3.ebrahim.html.
[31] Dominic Patten, "OSCARS: Time for a Toon to Take Best Picture," *Deadline*, 21 February 2014, accessed 2 March 2018, http://deadline.com/2014/02/oscars-animated-film-best-picture-frozen-despicable-me-2-684768/.
[32] Julian Cornell, "No Place like Home: Circumscribing Fantasy in Children's Film," in *Children's Film in the Digital Age: Essays on Audience, Adaptation and Consumer Culture*, ed. Karin Beeler and Stan Beeler (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2015), 18.
[33] Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York: NYU Press, 2010), 51.
[34] Brown, *The Hollywood Family Film*, 205.

of these films. Altman observes that, throughout publicity, films are not necessarily associated with any single genre: their "proprietary characteristics" such as their stars, director, or previous successful films from the same studio are foregrounded instead in order to assure a strong audience.[35] For mainstream animated features, the studio name represents a central proprietary characteristic, primarily referred to throughout film marketing and reception. In some critical and academic discourses, the studio name functions as a genre: with it comes a set of expectations related to narrative, plot, characters, and tone. For example, Pixar tends to be associated with particularly emotional and nostalgic storylines featuring unconventional protagonists – cars, toys, monsters – while DreamWorks' films are viewed as more irreverent, ironic and comedic.[36] This often leads authors to look at the canon from animation studios as a cohesive entity, like genre films.

In this context, Disney animated films are doubly marginalised: the generic identity of their studio is particularly strong – Disney is one of the oldest and most successful studios throughout mainstream animation – and is perceived as a "bad object" in numerous critical and academic works. The studio's take on the fairy-tale genre, for example, has faced numerous criticisms, crystallised into Jack Zipes's concept of the Disney "formula".[37] Zipes describes the latter as "a model to be avoided and subverted", characterised by its narrative predictability, sentimentalism, and conservative portrayals of gender and authority.[38] Such status as a "bad object" is linked to Disney as a wider brand: it is not only an animation studio, but also a global purveyor of entertainment with a vast range of related merchandise and theme parks, and a

[35] Altman, *Film/Genre*, 115; 117.
[36] These points will be developed further in chapter 1 regarding DreamWorks, and in chapters 4 and 6 regarding Pixar.
[37] Jack Zipes, "Introduction: Towards a Definition of the Literary Fairy Tale," in *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, ed. Jack Zipes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), xxxii. This concept will be thoroughly developed in chapter 1.
[38] Jack Zipes, *The Enchanted Screen: The Unknown History of Fairy-Tale Films* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 86; 88.

multimedia conglomerate playing a central role in mainstream American culture.[39] Correspondingly associated with commercialism, family content, and formulaic storylines, Disney animated features combine most generic preconceptions surrounding mainstream animation, which helps explain their marginalisation within genre studies.

To some extent, such marginalisation reflects the side-lining of animated films within the wider field of film studies, which mostly focuses on live-action cinema.[40] A potential reason for this initial lack of recognition and attention is the complexity and multiplicity of animation techniques and aesthetics, from computer and cel animation to stop motion animation, including cut-out, silhouette, sand, plasticine and puppet animation. Suzanne Buchan argues that such heterogeneity partly explains the slow and sporadic integration of animation into film studies until the 1990s: "academic texts on animation were scattered in film and experimental cinema anthologies and journals… more often than not, authors have expressed puzzlement, rarely delving deeply into [animation]".[41] Karen Beckman points to a related underlying hierarchy between the perceived "proper object" of film theory, namely live-action cinema, and its "freaky cousin:" animation.[42] For animation to be properly acknowledged, an entirely new field needed to be created, which emerged at the end of the twentieth century, "in part reflecting the growth of animated imagery in society".[43] Many animation scholars, such as Paul Wells, justify this separation due to the "difference" between live action and animation as a medium: "its very aesthetic and illusionism… potentially prompts alternative ways of seeing and understanding what is being represented".[44] Buchan argues that animation poses indeed "an

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[39] These points will be developed further in the literature review.
[40] Maureen Furniss, *Art in Motion: Animation Aesthetics* (Eastleigh: John Libbey, 2014), 3.
[41] Suzanne Buchan, "Introduction: Pervasive Animation," in *Pervasive Animation*, ed. Suzanne Buchan (New York: Routledge, 2013), 2; 4.
[42] Karen Beckmann, "Animating Film Theory: An Introduction," in *Animating Film Theory*, ed. Karen Beckmann (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 11.
[43] Maureen Furniss, introduction to *Animation: Art and Industry*, ed. Maureen Furniss (New Barnet: John Libbey Publishing Ltd, 2012), 1.
[44] Paul Wells, *The Animated Bestiary: Animals, Cartoons, and Culture* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 5.

aesthetic puzzle not fully solved by live-action based film studies approaches and methodologies".[45] Consequently, Buchan and Wells favour the adoption of a "language that can be specifically used in critical and theoretical writings on animation film" in order to account for the "unique vocabulary available to the animator".[46]

Relying on critical frameworks distinct from live-action based film studies, these authors argue for a departure from conventional generic analysis when examining animated films. Buchan regards animation as a "cinematic form that can have more to do with sculpture, algorithms or painting than with the genres of narrative live-action cinema".[47] Such "intrinsic difference as a form" leads Wells to argue that animation "may support and relate to established definitions of genre but will ultimately be defined by its own generic terms and conditions".[48] Such a differentiating approach is fruitful when looking at experimental animation and/or specific types of animation such as silhouette, cut-out, plasticine, puppet or cel animation. As Donald Crafton explains, such animated spaces are "ostentatiously constructed", notably contrasting with the aesthetic conventions of live-action cinema.[49] The latter strives to disguise such constructedness, "creating natural believability, a cinematic *trompe l'oeil* that passes for reality".[50]

Yet, such distinction is complicated when applied to mainstream computer animation. Chris Pallant notes that, since the mid-2000s, digital animation "has become *the* core ingredient of contemporary moving-image production", from the feature-length output of animation studios such as Pixar and DreamWorks, to the computer-animated environments and/or characters from live-action blockbusters such as *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009), *The Avengers*

[45] Buchan, "Introduction: Pervasive Animation," 8.
[46] Suzanne Buchan, introduction to *Animated 'Worlds*,' ed. Suzanne Buchan (Eastleigh: John Libbey Publishing, 2006), vii; Paul Wells, *Understanding Animation* (London: Routledge, 1998), 11.
[47] Buchan, "Introduction: Pervasive Animation," 2.
[48] Paul Wells, *Animation: Genre and Authorship* (London: Wallflower, 2002), 44.
[49] Donald Crafton, *Shadow of a Mouse: Performance, Belief, and World-Making in Animation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 146.
[50] Ibid.

(Joss Whedon, 2012) and *Gravity* (Alfonso Cuaron, 2013).[51] Such predominance of the digital suggests, to some extent, a degree of aesthetic porousness between live action and animation. The cinematography and design of backgrounds and environments within films as varied as *Avatar*, Pixar's *Up* (Pete Docter and Bob Peterson, 2009), and DreamWorks' *How to Train Your Dragon* (Dean DeBlois and Chris Sanders, 2010) comparably strive for believability, disguising their digital constructedness. As Furniss argues, aesthetics represents "an immense area" in which animation and live-action media may overlap.[52] This converging aspect represents one of the entry points of animated films into film studies, and more specifically live-action dominated genre studies.

Christopher Holliday's recent work on contemporary computer animation qualifies these convergences, arguing for a distinct generic label.[53] Holliday emphasizes that generic tropes and influences are so diverse within computer-animated films, that the most consistent generic impulse remains that of the computer-animated itself: these films are examined "as connected through their own internal structures and attributes, rather than simply governed by the rule-based familiarity of live-action genres".[54] Such an approach reveals some illuminating connections between computer-animated films, such as their emphasis on their own simulacrum effect and the recurrence of the journey narrative.[55] However, it faces some limits regarding Disney's contemporary output. Unlike other mainstream animation studios such as Pixar and DreamWorks, Disney is characterised by a long history of cel animation and a large canon of animated features, which permeates the production and perception of its contemporary computer-animated films. The release of cel-animated fairy tale *The Princess and the Frog*

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[51] Chris Pallant, introduction to *Animated Landscapes: History, Form and Function*, ed. Chris Pallant (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 3.
[52] Furniss, *Art in Motion*, 5.
[53] Christopher Holliday, *The Computer-Animated Film: Industry, Style and Genre* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 29.
[54] Ibid, 32-3.
[55] Ibid, 41; 220.

testifies to such enduring influence, and notably frames subsequent computer-animated *Tangled* and *Frozen*. Disney contemporary animated films are not only in dialogue with other computer-animated films and live-action genres: they also interact with Disney's rich intertext and paratext, and with the studio's own generic and aesthetic history. The complex generic hybridity of Disney contemporary animated features is the basis for unique reworkings and challenges to live-action genres: using the "computer-animated" label dilutes, to some extent, such specific re-envisioning.

Therefore, from the perspective of genre studies, mainstream animation as exemplified by Disney and live-action need to be studied alongside each other. The discrepancy between the position of animated films within contemporary Hollywood and within academia needs to be challenged. Theoretical approaches to genre and animation need to overcome the marginalisation of the animated medium to reveal the multiplicity of generic influences, re-appropriations and confluences at work between mainstream animated and live-action films, challenging their perceived status as "bad objects". This does not mean, however, that the specificities of animation as a form should entirely be discarded. In this thesis, I share Wells's and Holliday's postulate on the potential of animation – and computer animation – in offering a commentary upon genre as understood within live-action cinema through "the distinctive credentials of animated forms".[56] These include, for example, the self-reflexive impulses of animation, the importance of visual and thematic metamorphosis, the aesthetics of caricature and slapstick, and characterisation through anthropomorphism.[57] Taking these particularities into account does not necessarily involve using a different generic language, or separating animation from live-action study. As Janet Staiger points out, "the critical function of using

[56] Wells, *Animation*, 48.
[57] These concepts will be developed further in subsequent chapters.

categories is to see things perhaps not otherwise visible".[58] Relying on the same generic tools while acknowledging animation specificities helps expand and challenge the understanding of genre within live-action dominated genre studies, and unpack the multiple generic reworkings at the core of contemporary mainstream animated films. Studying Disney's contemporary output from the generic lens of romance and action adventure, for example, reveals and reassesses specific narrative, aesthetic, and gender tropes that may not be obvious from the sole perspective of the family genre or computer-animated film.

In this thesis, I adopt a semantic/syntactic approach, with an emphasis on generic hybridity, in order to investigate genre within contemporary Disney animated features. I will follow Neale who, at the end of *Genre and Hollywood*, calls for the need to study "hybrids and combinations" of all kinds and to focus on "more than a handful of canonical films".[59] He particularly insists on the benefits of this approach: "in addition to opening up other areas of the cinema to generic analysis, conceptions such as these permit a more inclusive… flexible approach to Hollywood's output, one which can encompass minor trends… non-canonical genres… cyclic contributions".[60] This approach is particularly fruitful in relation to animated features: within genre studies, they are indeed non-canonical, at the margins of works focusing on well-established live-action genres. My primary focus will be on the film texts. Following on from Deleyto's emphasis on generic hybridity, I will particularly investigate how genres "come into contact with one another" within the animated case studies, how they "vie for dominance and are transformed".[61] I will foreground the notable presence of genres such as the musical and the romantic comedy outside their restricted live-action canon, and how they

[58] Janet Staiger, "Film Noir as Male Melodrama: The Politics of Film Genre Labelling," in *The Shifting Definitions of Genre: Essays on Labeling Films, Television Shows and Media*, ed. Lincoln Geraghty and Mark Jancovich (London: McFarland, 2008), 86.
[59] Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, 254.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Deleyto, *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy*, 14.

intersect with the conventions of other genres, such as the fairy tale, revealing unexpected convergences and variations.

Adopting an "expanded conception of genre", I will also look at paratexts, namely the discourses of publicity, promotion and reception that surround Disney animated films, and play a crucial role in creating generic expectations, images and labels.[62] As Altman points out, genres must also "be understood discursively, i.e. as a language that not only purports to describe a particular phenomenon, but that is also addressed from one party to another, usually for a specific, identifiable purpose".[63] A film text may be "classified differently in different institutional contexts" depending on the audience, whether that be within the process of production, the marketing or the critical reception.[64] This expanded approach reveals the generic ambiguities surrounding Disney animated films, which serve as an entry point to the exploration of the generic tensions within the animated film texts.

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The first section of my thesis, including chapters 1, 2 and 3, focuses on the cycle of Disney fairy-tale adaptations released between 2009 and 2013, namely *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled*, and *Frozen*. I approach these animated fairy tales from the perspective of the romantic comedy and other genres, such as the screwball comedy, in which romance represents a central narrative impulse. The second section, including chapters 4, 5 and 6, focuses on the way in which generic tropes from action adventure are developed throughout Disney's wider contemporary canon from 2008 to 2016.

The choice of action adventure and romance as generic frameworks follows on from my observation of two main trends throughout Disney's contemporary output. With *The Princess*

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[62] Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, 3.
[63] Altman, *Film/Genre*, 121.
[64] Lincoln Geraghty and Mark Jancovich, "Introduction: Generic Canons," in *The Shifting Definitions of Genre: Essays on Labeling Films, Television Shows and Media*, ed. Lincoln Geraghty and Mark Jancovich (London: McFarland, 2008), 4.

and the Frog, *Tangled*, and *Frozen*, Disney returned to what has been perceived as *the* iconic genre of the studio. Fairy tales in which romance plays an essential part, such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (David Hand, 1937), *Cinderella* (Clyde Geronimi and Wilfred Jackson, 1950), and *Beauty and the Beast* (Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise, 1991) have represented the most successful releases of the studio. Their popularity has been preserved through Disney's merchandising, remakes, and theme parks, but also challenged through the irreverent competition of DreamWorks' *Shrek* franchise. With *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled*, and *Frozen*, the studio is both nostalgically reviving and playfully revising the concept of romance as constructed within Disney's past fairy tales. Such re-appropriation of romance allows Disney to look inwards, throughout its past canon, in order to renew and re-invent its iconic generic formula.

With the release of *Bolt*, *Wreck-It-Ralph*, *Big Hero 6*, *Zootopia* and *Moana*, Disney ventured into a generic territory that was perceived as more unexpected for the studio, yet is "ubiquitous" within Hollywood cinema: action adventure.[65] Such generic influence is also notable through the studio's fairy-tale canon, as exemplified in *Frozen*, and more specifically through the portrayal of Queen Elsa. Tasker draws a parallel between romance and action adventure, arguing that each genre "emerges from and participates in any number of allied genres and sub-genres… theories of genre hybridity and multiplicity are central to [their] understanding".[66] Action adventure and "allied" genres such as the superhero film, the cop buddy film, the spy film, and the road movie represent particularly interesting entry points to explore how Disney has re-negotiated its generic identity since the acquisition of Pixar (2006), Marvel (2009) and Lucasfilm (2012), and more specifically between 2008 and 2016.

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[65] Yvonne Tasker, *The Hollywood Action and Adventure Film* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 19.
[66] Ibid, 20.

In 2008, Disney released *Bolt*, the studio's first animated film entirely supervised by the team appointed by new chief creative officer John Lasseter, also in charge of Pixar at that time. Pixar's computer-animated aesthetic and generic emphasis on buddy narratives had dominated mainstream animation in the 2000s. 2008 was also the year of release of the first instalment in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, *Iron Man* (Jon Favreau), which spawned dozens of highly successful features and imposed the superhero film as the major genre of the decade. With *Bolt*, *Wreck-It-Ralph*, *Big Hero 6*, *Zootopia* and *Moana*, the Disney studio then arguably looked outwards in terms of genre, repositioning its output at the centre of both mainstream animation and Hollywood cinema. The status of these texts, as both *animated* films and *Disney* features, allows them to self-reflexively challenge and expand aspects of the narrative, aesthetics and gendering of action adventure.

This study considers Disney's output until 2016, a fitting endpoint as the studio's subsequent animated releases are sequels: *Ralph Breaks the Internet: Wreck-It Ralph 2* (Phil Johnston and Moore, 2018) and *Frozen 2* (Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee, 2019). As a result, the timeframe of this thesis, namely 2008-2016, corresponds to a distinctive moment in Disney's animation history, including a particularly generically diverse, post-Pixar, post-Marvel, and post-*Shrek* output. The presence of *Frozen* in both parts of the thesis illuminates the studio's hybrid strategies, building on conventional Disney genres – the fairy tale – and a multitude of live-action generic tropes, such as the romantic comedy, the action genre and the superhero film, to both revive and revisit the Disney formula. Combining such attention to generic hybridity with a focus on animated films not only reveals another area of cinema in which romance and action adventure thrive, but also unpacks generic re-mixings specific to Disney animated features, such as action adventure and musical.

This thesis provides a panorama of genres within Disney's contemporary output since 2008: only *Winnie the Pooh* (Stephen Anderson and Don Hall, 2011) does not feature in this

study. This specific release represents an anomaly considering Disney's contemporary canon: it is based on pre-existing Disney characters, following on multiple short films, direct-to-video films, and feature-length *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh* (John Lounsbery and Wolfgang Reitherman, 1977). Although *Winnie the Pooh* illustrates Disney's wider nostalgic impulses, characterising contemporary animated fairy tales, the film does not interact with genres of romance, or action adventure as exemplified by Pixar and Marvel. In terms of box office, this animated feature was the least successful of the decade, grossing only $26,692,846 domestically – the average gross of Disney animated films since 2008 was $194,650,545.[67] In this context, it stands out as a minor, odd experiment which does not reflect Disney's wider efforts to update its iconic and familiar formula, and expand its generic framework. This thesis explores these two parallel strategies within films which rework and challenge genres of romance and action adventure.

Before exploring these two main generic trends, I begin with a literature review discussing three themes recurring throughout Disney studies and that are central to the studio's generic interactions: Disney's aesthetic style, Disney's promotion of culture and entertainment, and Disney's representational politics, focusing specifically on gender portrayals. Identifying a notable duality within academic and critical studies of Disney, epitomised in observations on Disney's constructions of femininity as *either* progressive *or* retrograde, I then examine alternative approaches. I explore how the concept of post-feminism may help us to move beyond binary understandings of Disney's output, and how genre as a wider analytical framework fruitfully enriches contemporary discourses on Disney.

Section 1, including chapters 1, 2 and 3, focuses on genres of romance. Chapter 1 examines the ambivalent generic identity foregrounded throughout the paratexts of *The*

[67] "Walt Disney Animation Studios," Box Office Mojo, accessed 20 August 2018, https://www.boxofficemojo.com/franchises/chart/?id=disneyanimation.htm.

Princess and the Frog, *Tangled* and *Frozen*. By the late 2000s, a certain conception of the Disney fairy-tale genre – what Jack Zipes terms the Disney "formula" – had been repeatedly criticised, subverted and satirised. *Shrek* particularly ridiculed the sanitized and conservative aspects of the genre. In this context, the discourses of promotion and advertising of *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled* and *Frozen* were purposefully ambiguous regarding the generic labelling and filiation of these animated films, between parody of the Disney "formula," and nostalgic homage to these very same tropes.

These generic tensions provide a framework to understand the sometimes-uneasy combination of parody and nostalgia characterising romance in Disney's contemporary fairy tales. Chapter 2 focuses on *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled*, exploring the construction of romance as revived through the prism of Disney nostalgia. These Disney animated fairy tales accentuate the convergences between the fairy-tale genre and the romantic comedy by further developing their nostalgically idealised version of romance. *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled* rely on nostalgia at an aesthetic, paratextual, and generic level in order to frame the romantic comedy as a particularly familiar, reassuringly magical, and purchasable fantasy. This multi-layered sense of nostalgia relies on nostalgic memories of traditional hand-drawn animation, of watching and listening to Disney fairy tales, and of visiting Disney theme parks. Such nostalgia is also digitally and self-reflexively mediated: such mediation forms the basis for Disney's re-appropriation of postfeminist romance.

Chapter 3 examines how, in parallel to Disney's nostalgic idealisation of love and courtship, *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled* re-appropriate the more playful aspects of the contemporary romantic comedy in order to mock and update Disney's fairy-tale romance. Beyond nostalgic framings, I explore the extent to which *Frozen* operates a more significant generic departure, based on the self-reflexive impulses of the romantic comedy. I will focus more specifically on the concept of "true love", the construction of fairy-tale masculinity and

femininity, and the depiction of coupledom. The sentimental and old-fashioned Disney couple is re-imagined as a witty, knowing, and initially antagonistic duo, and the foundation of Disney's fairy-tale romance – "true love" – is significantly called into question. Such a playful and self-reflexive approach towards Disney's romantic fairy-tale formula also extends to the ideals of femininity and masculinity tied to such generic conventions, embodied through Disney's most emblematic cultural icons: the Disney Princess and Prince. This chapter also explores the extent to which these films expand the comic and subversive impulse of the romantic comedy through their status as animated films.

Looking at *Bolt*, *Wreck-It Ralph, Big Hero 6*, *Zootopia*, *Moana* – and *Frozen* to a significant extent – Disney's contemporary output is also marked by strong convergences with the action-adventure genre. Section 2, including chapters 4, 5 and 6, examines how these films revisit contemporary action adventure, while preserving their singularity as both *animated* features and *Disney* films. Each of the following chapters focuses on a specific facet of action-adventure cinema as reworked by Disney.

Chapter 4 examines Disney's three-layered reworking of the digital action "spectacle." At a first level, these films playfully transpose the dazzling aesthetics and thrills of live-action action-adventure films to computer animation. Beyond this humorous perspective, Disney animated films also tend to question the spectacular dimension of these impressive displays. At a second level, these films suggest that the action spectacle is also an illusion, a *mise en scène* that depends on the performance of its actors and audience. However, the action spectacle has the potential to become an exhilarating and empowering experience for the hero(ine). At a third level, *Wreck-It Ralph*, *Big Hero 6* and *Moana* develop the analogy often drawn between the musical and action adventure; *Moana* particularly crystallises and reinvents the convergence between the two genres.

Chapter 5 examines Disney's reworking of gender as constructed within action-adventure cinema, and more particularly as influenced by the extraordinary and powerful bodies of live-action Marvel superhero films. This chapter explores how *Wreck-It Ralph*, *Frozen*, *Big Hero 6* and *Moana* mock and challenge the gendered performance of super-heroism through the prism of Disney animation. These animated films frame the exertion of superpowers as a potentially disruptive and dangerous performance that will ultimately be controlled. The nature of this control, between mastery and containment, channelled abilities and restrained power, is arguably what defines the gendering of the "super" performance. In particular, I examine how Disney relies on the comic, creative, as well as disruptive power of animation to re-envision such gendered performances – differentiating its animated superhero output in the process.

Chapter 6 focuses on Disney's anthropomorphising of action-adventure cinema. *Zootopia* stands out throughout Disney's contemporary canon through the exclusive presence of animal characters. This anthropomorphic lens, specifically translating tropes from the live-action cop buddy film to animation, forms the basis for *Zootopia*'s reworking and questioning of issues linked to gendered and racial identity. Disney's three-layered reworking addresses the gendered imbalance of cop buddy films, challenging constructions of femininity within post-feminist action adventure. This generic re-appropriation resonates with wider social dynamics, including constructions and understandings of race within contemporary America. The anthropomorphising of action buddy tropes also frames a more self-reflexive revising. *Zootopia* complicates and re-envisions Disney's contemporary depictions of race relations, linked to the studio's sentimental tone and generic predictability. The chapter examines how, through its anthropomorphic lens, *Zootopia* reimagines generic gendered roles, wider issues of racial identity, and Disney's own representational and generic configurations.

Through this generic study of contemporary Disney animated films, my thesis explores how the studio directly interacts with and re-envisions a wide range of Hollywood films, updating and expanding its own generic scope in the process.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Disney

Introduction

Within Disney studies, three main areas of research have emerged within the past thirty years, exploring Disney as: a *studio* which has played a pivotal role within the evolution of animation aesthetics and technology; a *company* which has grown into a major multimedia conglomerate; and a *purveyor* of specific ideas surrounding representational politics. These areas tend to merge in more contemporary "multidisciplinary" works, in which authors adopt "economic, cultural, historical, textual, and technological" approaches.[1] Paralleling the wider field of animation studies, works on Disney have tended to privilege an isolationist approach, initially due to Disney's specificity within the wider media landscape, and in an effort to establish it as a serious, "legitimate point for cultural and social analysis," as Janet Wasko explains.[2]

This literature review elaborates on three key areas of research arguably prominent in Disney studies and on which my thesis builds: Disney and animation aesthetics; Disney and the promotion of culture and entertainment; and Disney and society, with a particular focus on analyses of gender. Identifying a recurring ambivalence and/or duality within academic and critical studies of Disney, epitomised in observations on Disney's construction of femininity, I then explore alternative perspectives. I particularly examine how the concept of post-feminism allows discussion to move beyond potentially reductive accounts of Disney's output, and how genre as a wider analytical framework fruitfully expands and enriches contemporary – often isolationist – discourses on Disney.

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[1] Chris Pallant, *Demystifying Disney: A History of Disney Feature Animation* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), ix.
[2] Janet Wasko, *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 3.

Disney and Animation Aesthetics

Animated films are arguably the products most easily identified with Disney: "Disney serves as a trigger, priming the audience to expect a specific style of animation".[3] Within Disney studies, animated films and their "style" have been primarily analysed through their complex relationship with other art forms and technology.

Authors have repeatedly emphasized the hybrid nature of Disney animated features. Steven Watts contextualises this phenomenon by positioning Walt Disney as an "aesthetic mediator".[4] Watts argues that Disney short- then feature-length films from the 1930s and early 1940s were characterised by a mix of "nineteenth-century sentimental realism and modernist art… innovative elements and tradition".[5] Watts coined the term "sentimental modernism" to define Disney's combination of "nonlinear, irrational, quasi-abstract modernist explorations" with tropes from the Victorian past such as "exaggerated sentimentality, clearly defined moralism, and disarming cuteness", as epitomised in *Fantasia* (James Algar et al, 1940).[6] This concept crystallises the complex blend of past and present artistic influences, namely "emerging" trends and "soothing images from an earlier age", that authors have described regarding Disney's aesthetics.[7]

The technological innovations and aesthetic transformations taking place at the Disney studio from the 1930s onwards and their wider impact on animation have divided academics. The use of the multiplane camera, for example, led to more elaborate, detailed characterisations and constructions of animated space.[8] As Donald Crafton explains, authors disagree about whether such changes were beneficial, "leading to progress in cartoon art, or a detriment,

[3] Pallant, *Demystifying Disney*, 7.
[4] Steven Watts, *The Magic Kingdom: Walt Disney and the American Way of Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 142.
[5] Ibid, 102.
[6] Ibid, 104.
[7] Ibid, 452.
[8] Crafton, *Shadow of a Mouse*, 148.

causing producers and consumers to lose sight of the essence of the animated art form".[9] Criticisms focused on a perceived loss of "early animation's verve, jazzy spontaneity, and ludic surrealism", with cartoons becoming "less imaginative, less rubbery, more realistically inclined".[10] Wells, for example, argues that Disney's emphasis on "verisimilitude", with an increasing investment in anatomical and environmental "authenticity", seemed to dilute the ability of the medium to "challenge the parameters of live-action illusionism".[11] Building on Watts's concept, Disney animation was perceived as becoming more naturalistic than fantasy-like, more "sentimental" than "modernist", as epitomised in *Bambi* (David Hand, 1942).

Yet, authors such as Crafton and J. P. Telotte qualify such clear-cut understandings of Disney's animation aesthetic. The former argues that the evolution was "neither progressive nor regressive", consistent with parallel trends in American art and film industry; the latter observes that the studio's aesthetic remained a "caricature of realism, combining believability and exaggeration".[12] Such "bargaining with the real" – the "real" as reproduced within live-action cinema – has been the focus of studies of Disney's more contemporary aesthetic, particularly since computer technology has been included to support, then supplant traditional cel animation.[13] The influence of Pixar's computer animation and the potential of computer-generated photorealism have led to renewed criticisms within popular and scholarly discourses regarding the perceived loss of animation specificities, disappearing in an effort to imitate live-action visuals and effects. Yet, as Telotte points out, computer-animation aesthetics still represent a "visual compromise": Disney as influenced by Pixar has relied on a "rapidly

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[9] Crafton, *Shadow of a Mouse*, 148.
[10] Ibid, 149.
[11] Wells, *Animation*, 9; Wells, *Understanding Animation*, 23.
[12] J. P. Telotte, *Animating Space: From Mickey to WALL-E* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 134; Crafton, *Shadow of a Mouse*, 211.
[13] J. P. Telotte, *The Mouse Machine: Disney and Technology* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 160.

developing digital technology for realistic reproduction, yet consciously trying to avoid a purely photo-realistic" look.[14] This helped preserve Disney's differentiating impulse.

The most nuanced comparisons between Pixar and Disney animated features and digital animation and live-action cinema from the perspective of aesthetics have underlined the subtle balance that animation studios aim to reach in relation to photorealism and live-action verisimilitude. As crystallised by Watts's concept of "sentimental modernism", Disney has specifically and consistently been characterised by an elaborate combination of innovation and tradition regarding animation aesthetics. The studio has relied both on stylised, caricatured – often cute – characters harking back to 1930s rubbery cartoon figures, and increasingly detailed, eye-catching environments and effects through evolving analogue then digital technology.

Such aesthetic balance, building on the studio's unique positioning in animation history, has a striking and unexpected impact when considered from the perspective of genre studies. Dazzling and spectacular digital effects and visuals represent a key component of live-action action-adventure cinema: the playful and subversive ways Disney animated films reproduce these aesthetic tropes constitute an elaborate genre commentary, building on the very specificities of Disney animation. The studio's more notable reliance on aesthetics perceived as more traditional – associated with cel animation – in its contemporary fairy tales is also further illuminated through a generic perspective, reinforcing the nostalgic impulses of genres of romance. Such genre-centred observations, further developed in chapters 2 and 4, allow discussion to move beyond analyses of "realism", and explore the complex generic and aesthetic dialogue between Disney's output and live-action cinema.

Disney's 2006 acquisition of Pixar not only exemplifies Disney's constant efforts to appropriate emerging trends and techniques, reaching a delicate aesthetic balance between

[14] Telotte, *The Mouse Machine*, 161.

innovation and tradition; it also typifies Disney's power as an influential, expanding multimedia conglomerate. The latter aspect has arguably been the focus of most academic and popular criticisms of Disney as a *company*.

Disney and the Promotion of Culture and Entertainment

Within Disney studies, analyses of the company's positioning within the global entertainment landscape revolve around three main areas: economic, describing Disney as a "synergistic machine";[15] cultural, considering Disney's take on popular literary works; and educational, exploring how Disney conveys specific values and messages to audiences, especially children.

Foregrounding the link between art and economy within Disney, Telotte observes that the studio's application of cutting-edge technologies and appropriation of emerging aesthetic styles was accompanied by the company's innovations and expansion in the world of entertainment.[16] One significant example was the cooperation between Disney and "the new technology of television through its 1954 deal with ABC to produce the Disneyland television series," which helped finance the similarly named theme park.[17] From a historical perspective, Watts considers that Disney's "successful marketing of numerous entertainment commodities", with television serving as a promotional tool for Disney films and parks, played a key role in the "explosive growth of consumer capitalism after World War II".[18] Such a move consolidated and widened the 1930s merchandising ventures initiated around characters such as Mickey Mouse and Snow White.[19] Disney's spectacular growth since the mid-1980s, from the company's cable holdings and entertainment websites to its partnership with other studios and

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[15] Pallant, *Demystifying Disney*, 85.
[16] Telotte, *The Mouse Machine*, 17.
[17] Ibid, 15.
[18] Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 362; 378.
[19] Ibid, 372.

technology companies, has further relied on a "perpetual generation of merchandisable commodities" which continuously promote each other.[20] Authors such as Wasko have favoured a multidisciplinary perspective on such a widening synergistic enterprise, "emphasizing the economic as well as the ideological, or production as well as consumption", hinting at the cultural impact of the company's monopolistic impulses.[21]

Such impact has been particularly emphasised regarding Disney's adaptation of existing texts or events, crystallised through the term "Disneyfication": the company's perceived "bowdlerisation of literature, myth and history in a simplified, sentimentalised, and programmatic way".[22] Cultural products are sanitised and trivialised, rendered into a "standardised format almost instantly recognisable as being from the Disney stable".[23] Disney's re-appropriation of European fairy tales particularly illustrates such perceived bowdlerisation. Authors such as Marina Warner and Bridget Whelan have observed that, due to the wide circulation of Disney films and their associated merchandise and products, American audiences were mainly familiar with *Disney*'s version of the tales, while other authorial voices and stories featuring more complex characters were relatively unknown.[24] Zipes has particularly criticised the formulaic and conventional nature of Disney fairy-tale adaptations, becoming "hollow and fluffy narratives" which promote elitism and traditionalist gender constructions.[25]

Such criticisms also hint at issues going beyond audiences' literary and cultural knowledge: the potentially damaging messages and values appearing through the "Disneyfication" process and circulated via the company's multiple products and media outlets.

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[20] Pallant, *Demystifying Disney*, 82-3.
[21] Wasko, *Understanding Disney*, 5.
[22] Alan Bryman, *The Disneyization of Society* (London: SAGE, 2004), 5.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde* (London: Vintage, 1995), 207; 416; Bridget Whelan, "Power to the Princess: Disney and the Creation of the Twentieth-Century Princess Narrative," in *Kidding around: The Child in Film and Media*, ed. Alexander N. Howe and Wynn Yarbrough (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 172-3.
[25] Zipes, *The Enchanted Screen*, 87.

Watts argues that, since the 1950s, Disney has continuously promoted "individual achievement, consumer prosperity, family togetherness, celebratory nationalism and technological promise".[26] Authors such as Henry Giroux and Grace Pollock argue that, through the propagation of these American ideals, Disney has helped *shape* national identity, public memory, gender roles and childhood values.[27] As children are understood as Disney's primary – and easily influenced – target audience, a plethora of works have explored what the company's products are "teaching" them.[28] Popular works such as Annalee Ward's focus on film narratives in order to examine whether "Disney films contribute positively to children's moral education" and include "prosocial" messages, and whether Disney animated characters, in Amy Davis's terms, represent "good role models".[29] More interdisciplinary academic studies, such as Julie Garlen's and Jennifer Sandlin's, explore Disney as "curriculum, a vast and varied totality of experiences that operate as an educational process".[30] They particularly acknowledge the complexity of audiences' engagement with Disney, and their potential resistance to its pedagogical power.

A particularly representative example of Disney product which both typifies the company's synergistic, sanitising, and pedagogical dimension, and crystallises criticisms of Disney as an entertainment company, is the "Disney Princess" brand, created in 2000. The protagonists of every Disney animated fairy tale (Snow White, Cinderella, Aurora, Ariel, Belle, and Jasmine), and the heroines of *Pocahontas* (Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg, 1995) and *Mulan* (Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook, 1998) were extracted from the worlds of their animated

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[26] Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 449.
[27] Henry A. Giroux and Grace Pollock, *The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 12.
[28] Ibid, 91.
[29] Annalee Ward, *Mouse Morality: The Rhetoric of Disney Animated Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 3; 134; Amy M. Davis, *Handsome Heroes & Vile Villains: Men in Disney's Feature Animation* (New Barnet: John Libey & Co Ltd, 2013), 251.
[30] Julie C. Garlen and Jennifer A. Sandlin, "Introduction: Feeling Disney, Buying Disney, Being Disney," in *Disney, Culture, and Curriculum*, ed. Julie. Garlen and Jennifer A. Sandlin (New York: Routledge, 2016), 16.

films and gathered into an extremely lucrative brand to sell a wide range of merchandise. In 2001, Disney earned $300 million due to the Princess brand; in 2006, that number rose to $3 billion, globally; in 2011, it was the best-selling licensed entertainment character merchandise in North America, topping *Star Wars*.[31] The brand has helped promote both past and contemporary Disney fairy tales, as each new fairy-tale release led to regular additions to the merchandising line. *The Princess and the Frog*'s Tiana, *Tangled*'s Rapunzel and Merida from Pixar's *Brave* (Mark Andrews and Brenda Chapman, 2012) not only featured on merchandise individually, but were also included alongside their earlier counterparts on products as diverse as toy boxes, figurine sets, sticker packs, colouring kits, puzzles, mugs, table covers, balloons, candle sets, confetti, and reusable shopping bags.

This assemblage of varied princesses added another level of "Disneyfication" to their fairy-tale source. As Jonathan Gray argues, film "peripherals", including merchandise and toys, play "a key role in refining and accentuating certain meanings" from their related films.[32] The image selected to represent the princesses, subsequently replicated on Disney Princess merchandise, as well as the Disney Princess website and Disney theme parks – performed by actresses – emphasizes further their prettiness and marriageability. They feature dressed in the sparkling outfits worn when they meet their prince (Cinderella), waltz with him (Aurora and Belle), or marry him (Tiana).[33] The image of such fixed, demure, smiling, copyrighted princesses has been so widely circulated through Disney's media outlets and products that it has prompted numerous criticisms among sections of the mainstream audience. Authors such

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[31] Peggy Orenstein, "What's Wrong with Cinderella?" *New York Times Magazine*, 24 December 2006, accessed 22 January 2018, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/24/magazine/24princess.t.html; Jenna Goudreau, "Disney Princess Tops List of the 20 Best-Selling Entertainment Products," *Forbes*, 17 September 2012, accessed 22 January 2018, https://www.forbes.com/sites/jennagoudreau/2012/09/17/disney-princess-tops-list-of-the-20-best-selling-entertainment-products/#1e33bb92ab06.

[32] Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 181.

[33] Even Pocahontas and Mulan, characters situated within more action-oriented frameworks, underwent a fairy-tale makeover in subsequent variants. This included additional glitter on their dresses and jewellery – as well as the disappearance of Mulan's soldier outfit – which participated in creating a more homogeneous vision of the Disney princess despite generic variations and characters' cultural particularities.

as Peggy Orenstein found fault with the "retrograde role models" of characters "interested only in clothes, jewellery and cadging the handsome prince".[34] Academics such as Whelan argue that Disney's sanitised fairy-tale version "has wormed its way into the psyche of the American public", emphasizing the role of the Princess brand in the "Disneyfication" of other princess narratives.[35]

In the early to mid-2000s, the studio's monopoly on the fairy tale was notably challenged. Authors such as Zipes and Napier have observed the success and influence of other studios, such as Ghibli and most spectacularly DreamWorks with the *Shrek* franchise, challenging "the Disney worldview and conventional narrative".[36] This led Disney to revise its formula throughout subsequent animated releases, arguably acknowledging – to some extent – criticisms regarding Disney's version of literary fairy tales and the values conveyed through the studio's animated output. Such revision, however, has been ambivalent. Building on multidisciplinary approaches to Disney, chapters 1 and 2 consider contemporary discourses of promotion and merchandising alongside film texts. This expanded approach reveals the ambiguous ways in which Disney promotes and markets its output, alternating between reviving and distancing – often criticised – elements from the studio's past canon of fairy tales. Such analysis of Disney's multifaceted ambivalence challenges understandings of "Disneyfication" as a predictable and straightforward process and foregrounds the potentially contradictory ideas circulated through Disney's many paratexts and peripherals.

Analysing discourses of reception further illuminates such complexity. Reviewers, for example, tend to approach Disney's output from a wider perspective than academics who favour

[34] Orenstein, "What's Wrong with Cinderella?"
[35] Whelan, "Power to the Princess," 175.
[36] Susan Napier, "Not Always Happily Ever After: Japanese Fairy Tales in Cinema and Animation," in *Fairy-Tale Films beyond Disney: International Perspectives*, ed. Pauline Greenhill, Kendra Magnus-Johnston and Jack Zipes (New York: Routledge, 2016), 175; Jack Zipes, "The Great Cultural Tsunami of Fairy-Tale Films," in *Fairy-Tale Films beyond Disney: International Perspectives*, ed. Pauline Greenhill, Kendra Magnus-Johnston and Jack Zipes (New York: Routledge, 2016), 7.

a more isolationist approach, noting connections that go beyond literary sources or other Disney films. Such unexpected correspondences rely on a wide range of Hollywood films and genres. For example, *Zootopia* has been compared with *L.A. Confidential* (Curtis Hanson, 1997) and *48 Hrs.* (Walter Hill, 1982), suggesting parallels with the crime film and cop buddy film, live-action genres that are very rarely associated with Disney's animated output.[37] Such reviews represent a fruitful starting point from which to reassess Disney's animated releases and paratexts. This thesis re-positions Disney as a studio and a company within the wider contemporary Hollywood landscape, and adopts a generic perspective in doing so in order to complicate further contemporary understandings of "Disneyfication". More than a one-dimensional process, it appears as an elaborate bricolage of influences which potentially differs from the idea of Disney as conveyed through the company's multifaceted paratexts and numerous products, and received by the audience.

Examining how Disney reinterprets and circulates its own past conventions, and builds on current generic film trends to do so, shows that Disney – the entertainment company *and* the animation studio – consistently combines traditional formulas and emerging trends. Such complex mix of old and new also characterises Disney's representational politics.

Disney and Society: Race, Gender, and Post-feminism

Issues of race, gender and sexuality represent the "area of Disney scholarship… that has attracted the most attention because of the culture industries' power to frame and organise social understandings of difference".[38] Moving beyond approaches which emphasize how Disney

[37] Peter Travers, "*Zootopia*", *Rolling Stone*, 3 March 2016, accessed 20 May 2018, https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/reviews/zootopia-20160303; Robbie Collin, "*Zootropolis* Is the *Chinatown* of Talking Animal Films – Review," *Telegraph*, 24 March 2016, accessed 20 May 2018, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/films/2016/04/14/zootropolis-is-the-chinatown-of-talking-animal-films---review/.

[38] Mike Budd, "Introduction: Private Disney, Public Disney," in *Rethinking Disney: Private Control, Public Dimension*, ed. Mike Budd and Max H. Kirsch (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2005), 20

films convey messages to children or provide role models, my analysis considers the main academic and critical understandings of Disney's representational politics, which are most significantly divided regarding constructions of femininity. Following this, I explore alternative perspectives to reveal the multifaceted and paradoxical aspects of Disney's contemporary representations.

Along with accounts of gender constructions, Disney's portrayal of race has recurrently been the focus of studies of the studio's representational politics. As Mike Budd observes, "public critiques of Disney's representations of African Americans and other racial groups are almost as old as the company's habit of caricaturing such groups".[39] Such widespread criticism has been paralleled in academic circles. Numerous authors underline Disney's recurring association of anthropomorphism and "racial stereotypes" regarding Chinese people, African Americans and Native Americans, in films as varied as *Lady and The Tramp* (Clyde Geronimi and Wilfred Jackson, 1955), *The Jungle Book* (Wolfgang Reitherman, 1967) and *Brother Bear* (Aaron Blaise and Robert Walker, 2003).[40] Others authors such as Natchee Blue Barnd argue that Disney applies racial attributes to "clearly marked Others," while whiteness remains invisible yet privileged.[41] Celeste Lacroix also notes that non-white heroines in films such as *Aladdin* (Ron Clements and John Musker, 1992) and *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise, 1996) "embody the exoticised Other woman – one whose sexualised

[39] Budd, "Introduction," 20.
[40] Kimiko Akita and Rick Kenney, "A 'Vexing Implication': Siamese Cats and Orientalist Mischief-Making", in *Diversity in Disney Films: Critical Essays on Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Sexuality and Disability*, ed. Johnson Cheu (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2013), 58; Susan Biller 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*, ed. Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas and Laura Sells (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 93; Prajna Parasher, "Mapping the Imaginary: The *Neverland* of Disney Indians," in *Diversity in Disney Films: Critical Essays on Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Sexuality and Disability*, ed. Johnson Cheu (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2013), 45.
[41] Natchee Blue Barnd, "White Man's Best Friend: Race and Privilege in *Oliver and Company*," in *Diversity in Disney Films: Critical Essays on Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Sexuality and Disability*, ed. Johnson Cheu (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2013), 69.

presence is privileged above all else".[42] Authors analysing more contemporary portrayals of race observe that, "in response to a general increase of cultural sensitivity surrounding political correctness," Disney has adopted a "philosophy of avoidance rather than engagement".[43] Although animated features from the mid-1990s onwards have repeatedly featured diverse leads, scholars such as Sarah Turner note that they both address and *erase* race.[44] The critical and academic – sometimes contradictory – discussions surrounding the production and release of *The Princess and the Frog*, for example, mostly focus on the persistence of Disney's problematic approach to race, from its perceived appropriation of contemporary "colour-blind racism" to its insidious reviving of past stereotypes through anthropomorphised black characters.[45]

Adopting a generic perspective leads to the reconsideration of Disney's racial constructions, potentially moving beyond accounts focusing mainly on the degree of racism present within the films. Genre makes it possible to recontextualise and better grasp both the ambivalent perpetuation and unexpected subversion of Disney's past portrayals of race within the studio's contemporary output, as explored in chapters 2 and 6. In *The Princess and the Frog*, genres of romance such as the fairy tale and the romantic comedy are combined with a traditional hand-drawn animation aesthetic to create a nostalgically sentimental version of the past, framing a fantasized reinterpretation of racial relations. By contrast, in *Zootopia*, Disney's reworking of the grittier action cop buddy film challenges the studio's representational politics

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[42] Celeste Lacroix, "Images of Animated Others: The Orientalization of Disney's Cartoon Heroines from *The Little Mermaid* to *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*," *Popular Communication: The International Journal of Media and Culture* 2 (2004): 222, accessed 17 December 2013, doi: 10.1207/s15405710pc0204_2.
[43] Parasher, "Mapping the Imaginary," 45.
[44] Sarah E. Turner, "Blackness, Bayous and Gumbos: Encoding and Decoding Race in a Colorblind World," in *Diversity in Disney Films: Critical Essays on Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Sexuality and Disability*, edited by Johnson Cheu (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2013), 83.
[45] Ibid, 84; Neal Lester argued that "making the first African American princess a frog dusts off some painful and racially insensitive associations of black children with wild animals." Neal A. Lester, "Disney's *The Princess and the Frog*: The Pride, the Pressure, and the Politics of Being a First," *Journal of American Culture* 33 (2010): 307, accessed 9 July 2018, https://doi-org.bris.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/j.1542-734X.2010.00753.x.

– as developed in chapter 6 – and questions wider social dynamics, including issues of identity related to race: racial constructions, race relations, and bias.

Genre also represents an essential critical framework to reassess one aspect of Disney animated features that has been most analysed and criticised: gender representations. Arguably, there is a consensus regarding early Disney fairy tales such as *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty* (Clyde Geronimi, 1959). Most authors emphasize their reductively retrograde and stereotypical – even "sexist" in Zipes' words – portrayal of femininity, which led Disney to become "synonymous with a certain conservative, patriarchal" ideology.[46] The cycle of late 1980s/early 1990s fairy tales including *The Little Mermaid* (Ron Clements and John Musker, 1989), *Beauty and the Beast* and *Aladdin* was perceived as perpetuating such depictions behind a more progressive façade. For example, Susan Hines and Brenda Ayres emphasize their ultimately superficial feminist impulse, focusing particularly on their narrative closure and the stereotypical design of the princesses.[47] As Whelan observes, such views gradually spread to critical and popular discourses in the 2000s with the creation of the "Disney Princess" brand, merging with criticisms of Disney's monopolistic multimedia conglomerate.[48]

In parallel, other authors have strived to rehabilitate the Disney canon from the perspective of gender. For example, Rebecca-Anne Do Rozio reconsiders the late 1980s/early 1990s princess as a disruptive agent within the patriarchal narrative structure of the fairy tales – a role formerly performed by the female villain.[49] Beyond such widely known heroines, Amy Davis underlines the presence of more "active" and "independent" female characters outside of

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[46] Jack Zipes, "Breaking the Disney Spell," in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*, ed. Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas and Laura Sells (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 36; Eleanor Byrne and Martin McQuillan, *Deconstructing Disney* (London: Pluto, 1999), 1-2.
[47] Brenda Ayres and Susan Hines, "Introduction: (He)Gemony Cricket! Why in the World Are We Still Watching Disney?" in *The Emperor's Old Groove: Decolonizing Disney's Magic Kingdom*, ed. Brenda Ayres (New York: P. Lang, 2003), 7.
[48] Whelan, "Power to the Princess," 183-4.
[49] Rebecca-Anne C. Do Razio, "The Princess and the Magic Kingdom: Beyond Nostalgia, the Function of the Disney Princess," *Women's Studies in Communication* 27 (2004): 57, accessed 17 December 2013, doi: 10.1080/07491409.2004.10162465.

Disney fairy tales, in films such as *The Black Cauldron* (Ted Berman and Richard Rich, 1985) and *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* (Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise, 2001).[50] What particularly characterises these approaches is the emphasis on the evolution of the Disney heroine within the wider Disney canon: what Davis describes as a gradual move away from the "passive" female protagonists of the past.[51] Disney's contemporary animated heroines have mostly been approached from a similar perspective, compared with the studio's earlier depictions of femininity, as exemplified by popular and critical accounts of *The Princess and the Frog* and *Frozen*. Whelan notes that the former's portrayal of lead Tiana eschews the "negative traits" traditionally associated with Disney princesses: Tiana exhibits "enterprise, cleverness, assertiveness".[52] Michael Macaluso observes that, "whereas Disney has usually been criticised for reinforcing traditional… gender norms… *Frozen* is being celebrated for its feminist qualities of sisterhood".[53] In parallel, numerous authors argue that these films merely perpetuate Disney's past gender stereotypes beyond their surface of "seemingly triumphant liberation".[54] Zipes's views on *The Princess and the Frog* epitomise the persistence of academic criticisms of Disney's gender constructions: "Disney animators have never learned to shape the prince and princess other than as clean-cut dolls who are motivated by love".[55]

Such approaches within Disney and animation studies pose two main issues. First, the recurrent binary perspective on Disney's gender constructions, namely regressive/progressive, traditionalist/feminist, or most often in academic works "apparently subversive/actually stereotypical", tends to lead to an impasse, and fails to grasp the complexity of the studio's

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[50] Amy M. Davis, *Good Girls & Wicked Witches: Women in Disney's Feature Animation* (New Barnet: John Libey & Co Ltd, 2006), 224.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Whelan, "Power to the Princess," 182.
[53] Michael Macaluso, "The Postfeminist Princess: Public Discourse and Disney's Curricular Guide to Feminism," in *Disney, Culture, and Curriculum*, ed. Julie C. Garlen and Jennifer A. Sandlin (New York: Routledge, 2016), 73.
[54] Lauren Dundes and Madeline Streiff, "Frozen in Time: How Disney Gender-Stereotypes Its Most Powerful Princess," *Social Sciences* 6 (2017): 8, accessed 12 June 2018, doi:10.3390/socsci6020038.
[55] Zipes, *The Enchanted Screen*, 250.

contemporary reworking of femininity and masculinity. Writing on popular representations of girlhood, Sarah Projansky insists that attention needs to be focused on the "inextricable combination of disruption and containment" at the core of contemporary portrayals of female characters – beyond binary categorisations.[56]

A second issue with analyses of Disney's gender portrayals is their reliance on the "isolationist" tendencies of animation studies. In other words, these are mostly studied within a generic vacuum, or from a very limited generic perspective: relying on the studio's brand name as a generic standpoint – Disney films – and/or on genres mostly associated with the latter: fairy tales. Analysing *Frozen* solely in the light of films such as *Snow White* or *The Little Mermaid* is necessarily limiting; wider influences and subversions beyond Disney animation tend to be missed. For example, Haseenah Ebrahim argues that *The Princess and the Frog*'s and *Tangled*'s "updated representations of heroines… comes at the cost of being forced to share most of their screen time with their respective love interests".[57] This statement fails to acknowledge the significant influence of the romantic comedy on the syntactic structure of the films. It is precisely because princesses share most of their screen time with their love interests, in romantic-comedy fashion, that their construction is "updated." Disney's contemporary fairy tales borrow from the romantic comedy to challenge constructions of femininity stereotypically associated with Disney romance. As the princesses reach an accord with their antagonistic hero and assert their authority through witty exchanges and playful teasing, they are gradually positioned on the same footing as their male counterpart. Therefore, the study of gender is directly linked to the study of genre. Relying on generic frameworks not conventionally associated with animated films also provides a more nuanced account of the growing

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[56] Sarah Projansky, "Mass Magazine Cover Girls: Some Reflections on Postfeminist Girls and Postfeminism's Daughters," in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, ed. Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 69.
[57] Ebrahim, "Are the 'Boys' at Pixar Afraid of Little Girls?" 46.

prominence of female characters in action-adventure films such as *Moana* and *Wreck-It Ralph*, as well as that of males in fairy-tale/romantic comedies such as *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled*. Foregrounding the multi-layered generic influences at work within these films emphasizes the correspondingly multifaceted aspects of Disney's contemporary gender constructions, often more complex than some critical and academic accounts may suggest.

Yvonne Tasker shows that genre and gender are intrinsically linked, observing how the semantics or syntactic structure of a predominantly male genre are significantly altered and problematized when women become the protagonists. Using early-1990s action cinema as a case study, she argues that "the increased inclusion of women in action roles has both contributed to and been part of the ways in which the genre has evolved in recent years".[58] Potential tensions between semantics and the syntactic structure of a film emerge once gender roles are reconfigured in this way. For instance, the protagonists in *Thelma and Louise* (Ridley Scott, 1991) and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (James Cameron, 1991) access technologies such as cars and guns, usually associated with male characters, as semantic "means of empowerment".[59] They leave the restrictive space of their homes and become proactive in violent sequences, challenging the role of victim usually performed by the female character. However, these images of strength are complicated throughout the narratives: characters' generic subversion tends to be contained, to some extent, as they are repositioned into more conventional roles – mother, helper – or literally killed off. Therefore, gender (re)constructions both impact, and depend on film genres.

More contemporary works have further analysed the intrinsic connection between gender and genre. Christine Gledhill argues that such an approach opens new perspectives,

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[58] Yvonne Tasker, *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1998), 68.
[59] Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies*, 139.

considering "gender as a tool of genre".[60] Authors working on the romantic comedy, for example, have adopted such an approach, as illustrated by John Alberti's *Masculinity in the Contemporary Romantic Comedy: Gender as Genre*, and Betty Kaklamanidou's *Genre, Gender and the Effects of Neoliberalism: The New Millennium Hollywood Rom Com*.[61] As Gledhill observes, "genre offers a 'constellation' of cultural, aesthetic, and ideological materials, containing… a more inclusive range of possibilities".[62] Authors that have started to include genre in their analysis of Disney animation have produced particularly intriguing and complex observations on the studio's gender constructions. For example, the interaction between the fairy-tale genre and the musical – from teen to Broadway musical – represents a hybrid generic lens that authors such as Do Razio and Ryan Bunch have used in order to "contribute some nuance" to discussions of Disney's gender portrayals.[63] Bunch particularly insists on bringing "contradictions and complexities to the surface" regarding *Frozen*'s gendered tropes: such generic approaches allow one to move beyond binary categorisations.[64]

A complementary critical concept which transcends potentially reductive dichotomies – regressive versus progressive – regarding Disney's animated gender constructions is post-feminism. In a contemporary cultural moment "seemingly characterised by a multiplicity of (new and old) feminisms which co-exist with revitalized forms of anti-feminism and popular misogyny," Rosalind Gill defines post-feminism as "a relatively stable patterned yet contradictory sensibility".[65] I follow on from academics such as Angela McRobbie, Diane

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[60] Christine Gledhill, introduction to *Gender Meets Genre in Postwar Cinemas*, ed. Christine Gledhill (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 1-2.
[61] John Alberti, *Masculinity in the Contemporary Romantic Comedy: Gender as Genre* (London: Routledge, 2013); Kaklamanidou, *Genre, Gender and the Effects of Neoliberalism: The New Millennium Hollywood Rom Com* (London: Routledge, 2014).
[62] Gledhill, introduction, 4.
[63] Ryan Bunch, "'Love Is an Open Door': Revising and Repeating Disney's Musical Tropes in *Frozen*," in *Contemporary Musical Film*, edited by Beth Carroll and K. J. Donnelly (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 89.
[64] Ibid, 90.
[65] Rosalind Gill, "Post-Postfeminism? New Feminist Visibilities in Postfeminist Times," *Feminist Media Studies* 16 (2016): 612; 621, accessed 3 November 2016, doi: 10.1080/14680777.2016.1193293.

Negra and Yvonne Tasker, who particularly emphasize and explore the ambiguities, sometimes paradoxes of such post-feminist sensibility: the "entanglement" of feminist and anti-feminist ideas, the fusion of "empowerment rhetoric with traditionalist identity paradigms".[66] Post-feminism represents a particularly useful critical concept in order to contextualise and unpack the hybrid gender constructions at work within Disney's animated films, as well as potential tensions between semantics, syntactic structure, and paratext. Disney's pioneering role, longevity and synergistic presence is unique within mainstream animation. Every Disney animated feature, introduced with the iconic fairy-tale castle logo, is intrinsically linked to the studio's past canon, intertextually and paratextually evoking earlier Disney characters. The film texts build on Disney's past images of femininity and masculinity, such as the sentimental fairy-tale princess and the chivalric Disney prince, alternating between their nostalgic revival and more playful subversion. In *Tangled*, for example, the naïve Disney princess is re-envisioned through the lens of the romantic comedy and the action film: she becomes witty and adventurous, yet remains a charmingly pretty heroine who will be turned into a fairy-tale bride in related merchandise and a short film. This often-contradictory gendered dialogue between past and present, film text and paratext, and its wider interaction with live-action cinema is best approached via the concept of post-feminism. Gill observes that critical uses of post-feminism "neither fall into a celebratory trap of seeing all instances of mediated feminism as indications that the media have somehow 'become feminist,' but nor do they fail to see how entangled feminist ideas can be with pre-feminist, anti-feminist, and backlash ones".[67] Using the concept of post-feminism to reassess Disney's contemporary output fruitfully illuminates Disney's multifaceted constructions of gender.

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[66] Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2009), 6; Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker, "Introduction: Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture," in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 18.
[67] Gill, "Post-Postfeminism?" 622.

Some scholars, however, have pointed out the potential limits of post-feminism. Authors such as Benjamin Brabon and Stephanie Genz have observed the "value judgement" inferred by some feminist critics regarding post-feminist texts, sceptically viewed as the "abatement" and "depoliticization of the feminist movement".[68] From this perspective, the typically post-feminist combination of feminism and traditionalist ideas inevitably leads to the dilution or, in Shelley Cobb and Diane Negra's term, the "scrambling of feminist precepts".[69] Another binary subsequently arises, echoing the regressive versus progressive dichotomy: gender portrayals are perceived as either wholly and truly feminist or post-feminist. Imelda Whelehan considers the latter as "boring and frustrating to analyse because [their] message requires little unpacking and lies prominently on the surface".[70] Such an understanding not only creates a new hierarchy among contemporary film texts, but also considerably limits the complexity of post-feminism as a critical tool. Describing a text as post-feminist would necessarily imply that it relies on a superficial empowerment rhetoric, and that its traditionalist and/or anti-feminist basis inevitably determines its construction of femininity. This approach to post-feminism applied to Disney's output would lead to a new critical impasse, suggesting that the inescapable weight of the studio's past gender portrayals uniformly impacts contemporary Disney films and consistently constrains their subversive potential.

Challenging these potential limits, Gill proposes to use the concept of post-feminism with "greater rigour and specificity… interrogating its reach and delineating its precise features":[71] I argue that genre studies provides a particularly fruitful theoretical framework for

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[68] Benjamin A. Brabon and Stephanie Genz, *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 18-9.
[69] Shelley Cobb and Diane Negra, "'I Hate to Be the Feminist Here…': Reading the Post-Epitaph Chick Flick," *Continuum* 31 (2017): 764, accessed 17 January 2019, doi: 10.1080/10304312.2017.1313389.
[70] Imelda Whelehan, "Remaking Feminism: Or Why Is Postfeminism So Boring?" *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 9 (2010): 159, accessed 15 January 2019, http://ojs.ub.gu.se/ojs/index.php/njes/issue/view/56.
[71] Rosalind Gill, "The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism: A Postfeminist Sensibility 10 Years On," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 20 (2017): 612, accessed 14 January 2019, doi: 10.1177/1367549417733003.

such a nuanced and more precise approach. Disney's contemporary output borrows from and reworks numerous generic tropes: as a result, the studio's animated features can be situated on a kind of post-feminist spectrum. The latest fairy-tale cycle, building on an iconic and more conventional Disney genre, could be placed towards the more traditionalist end of the spectrum, while action-adventure gender constructions would be found at the other more empowering end. Such positioning is far from stable, considering the particularly hybrid nature of individual films such as *Frozen*: specific sequences or characters foreground varying degrees of disruption/containment. Disney's post-feminist combination of feminist and anti-feminist ideas is not predictable or fixed: these animated films represent what Brabon and Genz term as "a site of struggle over the meanings of feminism".[72] A focus on genre particularly illuminates their fluid movement across the post-feminist spectrum, and avoids a restrictive application of the term. Disney's contemporary animated films are neither retrograde nor progressive, but rather varyingly combine generic images drawing on the studio's own past canon, other computer animated features, and contemporary live-action genres: they disrupt and preserve aspects of the studio's formulaic gender portrayals in multiple and heterogeneous ways.

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Analyses of gender constructions arguably epitomise the divided nature of critical and academic accounts of Disney's representational politics: consistent criticism – if not condemnation – versus emerging rehabilitation or praise. Using the concept of post-feminism allows analyses to move beyond such binary readings to explore the contradictions at the core of Disney's contemporary gender portrayals. A generic perspective further illuminates the complexities of Disney's version of femininity and masculinity, elaborating on the multiple correspondences between Disney's output and contemporary live-action cinema.

[72] Brabon and Genz, *Postfeminism*, 25.

Conclusion

Within the three main areas of research that have emerged within Disney studies, namely Disney and animation aesthetics, Disney and the promotion of culture and entertainment, and Disney and society, authors have tended to adopt an isolationist, sometimes binary perspective: is Disney animation reducing the potentials of its medium? Are Disney adaptations and merchandising detrimental to literary fairy tales? Are the studio's gender portrayals retrograde or feminist? Yet, as some academics have pointed out, one of the most consistent features of Disney as a studio, company, and brand is its elaborate *combination* of tradition and innovation, from its aesthetic influences to its constructions of femininity. Adopting a generic perspective reveals the multifaceted ways in which Disney strives to renew its animated output, and complicates isolationist understandings of Disney as a monolithic entity. Genre is essential to understand how contemporary Disney aesthetics, narrative conventions, and associated paratexts interact with a wide variety of contemporary filmic tropes, while re-negotiating the studio's animated legacy. The concept of post-feminism further illuminates such a delicate, sometimes uneasy balance within the context of Disney's gender portrayals, challenging binary readings of a key aspect of Disney studies.

SECTION 1: ANIMATING ROMANCE

CHAPTER 1

Reworking the Disney Formula:

The Post-*Shrek* Animated Fairy Tale and Its Ambivalent Paratexts

Introduction

> Fiona: But wait, Sir Knight. This be-ith our first meeting. Should it not be a wonderful, romantic moment?
> Shrek: Yeah, sorry, lady. There's no time.

To Princess Fiona's surprise, Shrek is a rather unconventional rescuer. This pragmatic ogre has not yet slayed the fire-breathing dragon guarding the castle she is locked in. Therefore, he has "no time" for sentimental courting or magical kisses – in other words, for the formulaic tropes of Disney fairy-tale romance.

The release of DreamWorks' *Shrek*, the story of a grumpy ogre falling in love with a beautiful princess, represented a major challenge to Disney's reign over the animated fairy-tale genre. *Shrek*'s self-reflexive and irreverent tone, juxtaposed with the overt parody of animated features such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Beauty and the Beast*, significantly challenged Disney fairy-tale romance. *Shrek* was both critically acclaimed, awarded the first Oscar for Best Animated Feature in 2002, and highly popular, spawning a franchise including three sequels. After this fairy-tale phenomenon, it was difficult for the Disney studio to approach fairy tales, and especially coupledom and princesses, as it had done in the past.

Negotiating the reverberations of *Shrek*'s generic irreverence, the latest cycle of Disney fairy tales, namely *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled* and *Frozen*, adopted and developed an ambiguous generic standpoint: the films oscillate between parody and celebration of classic

Disney fairy-tale romantic tropes. This uneasy oscillation is crystallised throughout Disney's contemporary paratexts. This chapter examines how the various discourses of production, marketing, and reception have reconstructed and reassessed the idea of the Disney fairy tale.

Epitomising scholarly criticisms related to the studio's approach to the genre, Jack Zipes argues that Disney applies a recognisable "formula" when making fairy tales.[1] Zipes identifies stock characters including a "sweet" heroine, "comical animals or objects," and a hero "called on to overcome sinister forces".[2] Clare Bradford observes that the idealised and predictable relationship between hero and heroine, playing a pivotal narrative role, alludes to fantasies of "courtly love and chivalric romance".[3] Princes or soon-to-be princes in *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Beauty and the Beast* and *Aladdin* accordingly court the princesses in song and/or dance; their magical kiss and/or courageous feats save the heroines from the threatening villains.

It is precisely this Disney "formula," the predictable and sentimental construction of fairy-tale romance, that *Shrek* initially ridicules. In DreamWorks' fairy tale, the royal figure is quickly revealed to be a tyrannical character, Lord Farquaad, who has chased all fairy-tale creatures from his kingdom and sent them to Shrek's swamp. Having no interest for romance or coupledom, the bad-tempered ogre only accepts to deliver Princess Fiona as part of a deal with Farquaad: he will regain his cleared-up swamp, while Farquaad will marry Fiona in order to become a proper king.

In this chapter, I argue that Disney's *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled* and *Frozen* have been discussed, marketed, and received in light of DreamWorks' fairy tale. Disney's

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[1] Zipes, "Introduction," xxxii.
[2] Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilization* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 209.
[3] Clare Bradford, "'Where Happily Ever After Happens Every Day': The Medievalisms of Disney's Princesses," in *The Disney Middle Ages: A Fairy-Tale and Fantasy Past*, ed. Susan Aronstein and Tison Pugh (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 180.

contemporary fairy-tale paratexts have directly engaged with the perception of the Disney formula as outdated and mocked by *Shrek*, striving both to distance the studio's contemporary output from its past canon of romances and princesses, and to reclaim and embrace this very same heritage.

First, this chapter analyses the context for such heterogeneity within Disney's contemporary paratexts. I explore the growing criticisms surrounding the Disney formula within both academic and popular discourses, and I analyse the parallels between these critical stances and *Shrek*'s revision of the studio's fairy-tale romance. Secondly, I focus on Disney's uneasy response to DreamWorks' fairy tale, delineating the former's multiple and often contradictory strategies to restore the aura of the Disney fairy tale. Depending on the targeted audience and the film released, Disney's paratexts alternatively emphasized continuity with and departure from the studio's past – sometimes parodying, sometimes embracing the studio's fairy-tale formula.

Building on an expanded approach to genre through the study of Disney's paratexts, this chapter focuses on the competing meanings and labels surrounding the studio's contemporary fairy tales to explore how Disney has re-appropriated and re-oriented perceptions of its iconic generic formula.

***Shrek* Versus Disney's Fairy-Tale Formula**

Shrek's parodic approach to the fairy tale not only crystallised criticisms surrounding Disney's formula, but also pointed to the central role played by the studio in the cinematic evolution and perception of the genre. Disney's post-*Shrek* fairy-tale output was notably marked by DreamWorks' influence, as evidenced through the release of *Enchanted* (Kevin Lima, 2007). The variations throughout the critical reception of these two films foreground

generic differences, but also indirectly hint at some potential convergences between the two studios' perspective on the fairy tale.

Before *Shrek*'s release, the animated fairy tale was undeniably synonymous with Disney. While only a small number of the studio's releases consists of fairy-tale adaptations, they were so popular that Disney has become closely associated with the genre.[4] Animated fairy tales such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Aladdin* stood out both in terms of critical recognition and box-office success. The regular DVD/Blu-Ray re-releases of these animated fairy tales, added to related theme-park rides, merchandising, direct-to-video sequels, and live-action remakes reinforced the close connection between the Disney brand and the fairy-tale. Pauline Greenhill and Sydney Eve Matrix argue that "the fairy tale as interpreted by Disney has… saturated mainstream Euro-North American culture".[5] *Beauty and the Beast* epitomises such enduring popularity. It was the first animated feature to be nominated for Best Picture at the Oscars in 1992, and to be adapted into a Broadway musical in 1994; it spawned two direct-to-video sequels in 1997 and 1998; since 1991, it has grossed $218,967,620 in the United States, thanks in part to its IMAX re-release in 2002 and a 3D reissue in 2012; its title character, Belle, features prominently throughout Disney merchandising; its live-action remake (Bill Condon, 2017) grossed $504,014,165.[6]

Disney's monopoly on the fairy tale has come under closer scrutiny since the 1990s, partly due to the rise of animation studies and Disney studies. Academic criticisms regarding

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[4] Between 1937 and 2012, only nine animated features out of fifty-two were based on fairy tales. Davis, *Handsome Heroes & Vile Villains*, 7.

[5] Pauline Greenhill and Sidney Eve Matrix, "Introduction Envisioning Ambiguity: Fairy Tale Films," in *Fairy Tale Films: Visions of Ambiguity*, ed. Pauline Greenhill and Sidney Eve Matrix (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2010), 7.

[6] "*Beauty and the Beast*," Box Office Mojo, accessed 23 January 2018, http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=beautyandthebeast.htm; "*Beauty and the Beast* (2017)" Box Office Mojo, accessed 23 January 2018, http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=beautyandthebeast2017.htm.

Disney's appropriation of the fairy-tale genre particularly point to the conservatively gendered depictions of their protagonists, and the predictable, simplistic nature of the "Disneyfied" narratives – the formula described by Zipes. Each new fairy tale released by the Disney studio since the early 1990s has been compared to Disney's earlier output, sparking debates on their reworking of the Disney formula, and more particularly on their constructions of gender. The perceived stereotyping of femininity within the "Disney Princess" brand, as developed earlier, added to pre-existing discourses on the formulaic, conventional structure of the Disney fairy tale. According to many authors, only studios and filmmakers outside of, and challenging Disney could make an original, valuable contribution to the genre. For example, Greenhill and Matrix argue that generic experiments and innovations predominate in fairy-tale films "*apart from* Disney"; for Zipes, Disney fairy tales represent a "model to be avoided" and "subverted".[7] Through its explicit parody of the Disney formula, DreamWorks' *Shrek* crystallised the generic approach welcomed and praised by critics and scholars.

From its very opening, *Shrek* both imitates and overtly mocks Disney's fairy-tale tropes. As in *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*, *Shrek* starts with a storyteller reading in voiceover a formulaic story, illustrated on the pages of a beautiful gilded book: a "lovely princess" was locked in a tower, awaiting her "true love" to rescue her. The narrator stops his reading, and unimpressed by this fairy-tale romance ("Like that's ever gonna happen"), tears one of the pages to use as toilet paper: the narrator reveals to be Shrek. Such an opening overtly and irreverently parodies the "old-fashioned and sentimental fairy tale" associated with Disney.[8]

Despite his initial scepticism, Shrek ends up rescuing Princess Fiona, as part of a deal with tyrannical Lord Farquaad. The supposedly naive damsel-in-distress is initially outraged to discover that her Prince Charming is an ogre. Yet, she is far from helpless, turning out to be a

[7] Greenhill and Matrix, "Introduction Envisioning Ambiguity," 7; Zipes, *The Enchanted Screen*, 86.
[8] Kristian Moen, *Film and Fairy Tales: The Birth of Modern Fantasy* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 211.

martial arts expert; far from possessing the admirable singing abilities of her Disney counterparts, she accidentally kills a bird which cannot compete with her high-pitched voice; far from stereotypically pretty, she transforms into an ogress every night. These numerous generic reversals and subversions led Zipes to argue that *Shrek* "explodes standard notions of the fairy tale and normative standards of… femininity"[9]. Yet, if *Shrek* is a Disney fairy-tale parody, this animated feature does not solely humorously critique – or "explod[e]" – these generic codes.

Dan Harries observes, that "by evoking a genre to be spoofed, film parody … also reiterates and reaffirms the conventions that constitute the genre's structure".[10] In the case of *Shrek*, by self-consciously ridiculing Disney's clichéd tropes such as the enchanting opening storybook or the rescue of the innocent damsel in distress, DreamWorks' film also resuscitated the same tropes for the twenty-first century audience. *Shrek* reintroduced Disney's fairy-tale romance within the contemporary animation landscape through its deviations from that very model.[11] The film regularly alternates between subverting the latter and, to some extent, perpetuating it, as epitomised in the final wedding sequence. After a misunderstanding which leads Fiona to accept Farquaad's marriage proposal, Shrek comically interrupts their wedding. He declares his love for her and gives her "true love's first kiss:" she then turns back into an ogress in the style of *Beauty and the Beast*'s monstrous protagonist. This transformation surprisingly challenges Disney's definition of fairy-tale beauty but, notably, not the importance of female beauty in the eyes of a male partner: "but you *are* beautiful", says Shrek to disappointed Fiona. When Fiona and Shrek share a final kiss at the church, about to be shown married, the film knowingly and humorously underlines the formulaic nature of the narrative.

[9] Zipes, *The Enchanted Screen*, 244.
[10] Dan Harries, "Film Parody and the Resuscitation of Genre," in *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, ed. Steve Neale (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 283.
[11] Disney's most recent animated fairy tale at that time, *Aladdin*, had been released almost a decade earlier.

One of Farquaad's guards quickly writes "Awww" on a prompter card that he shows to the congregation, playfully anticipating the satisfaction the audience should feel. Like a properly Disney-trained viewer, Shrek's friend Donkey concludes: "I was hoping this would be a happy ending." Therefore, the film both pokes fun at and resuscitates fairy-tale tropes that explicitly call upon Disney's romantic formula, such as "true love" and happy-ending weddings. While Daniel Downes and June Madeley argue that *Shrek* is a "tangible challenge to the Disney colonization of animated fairy tales", it is also a spectacular reminder of the studio's reign and major influence over the genre.[12] As a parody, *Shrek* both playfully reconfigures semantic fairy-tale elements, replacing Prince Charming and his steed with an ogre and a donkey, and reproduces the syntactic structure of Disney's fairy-tale romances.

The persisting influence of the Disney fairy tale stands out throughout *Shrek*'s critical reception: a great majority of reviewers implicitly used the Disney formula as a reference point. Some praised *Shrek*'s style of humour, contrasting DreamWorks' irreverence with Disney's formulaic cheerfulness and dated version of romance. Ian Nathan (*Empire*) welcomed *Shrek*'s "full-scale parody of the Mousedom's chirpy ethic of old"; Philip French (*Guardian*) considered the film as a "delight" for its wit that "transcends sentimentality"; Elvis Mitchell (*New York Times*) noted that "beating up the irritatingly dainty Disney trademarks… has rarely been done with the demolition-derby zest of *Shrek*".[13] It is that very specificity of tone and humour attributed to *Shrek* that was also criticised by other reviewers, which suggested that, for some sections of the audience, the more sentimental Disney formula was still considered essential to the animated fairy tale. Anthony Lane (*New Yorker*) used terms such as "cynical"

[12] Daniel Downes and June M. Madeley, "The Mouse Is Dead, Long Live the Ogre: *Shrek* and the Boundaries of Transgression," in *Investigating Shrek: Power, Identity, and Ideology*, ed. François Dépelteau, Aurélie Lacassagne, and Tim Nieguth (New York: Basingstoke, 2011), 75.

[13] Ian Nathan, "*Shrek* Review," *Empire*, 29 June 2001, accessed 25 January 2018, https://www.empireonline.com/movies/shrek/review/; Philip French, "*Shrek*," *The Guardian*, 1 July 2001, accessed 25 January 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2001/jul/01/philipfrench; Elvis Mitchell, "FILM REVIEW; So Happily Ever After, Beauty and the Beasts," *The New York Times*, 16 May 2001, accessed 25 January 2018, http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9F00E3DD153AF935A25756C0A9679C8B63.

and "hip" to describe DreamWorks' output, arguing that *Shrek* lacked "the faintest glimmer of charm".[14] Stephen Hunter (*Washington Post*) skimmed over *Shrek*'s "fractured and ironic" aspects, arguing that it is "better seen through a child's eyes".[15] Paul Malcolm (*LA Weekly*) underlined *Shrek*'s more complex stance towards the Disney fairy tale, arguing that it "tries to have its cynicism and keep its daydreams, too".[16] This account grasps more thoroughly *Shrek*'s parodic strategies: foregrounding the predictability of Disney's idealised fairy-tale romances, *Shrek* both mocks and revives tropes of the studio's formula.

Beyond criticism or praise of *Shrek*'s generic approach, DreamWorks' film represented a turning point within discourses surrounding animated fairy tales. It has emerged as a new reference to define some of the major trends regarding fairy-tale adaptations, as illustrated by Bradford's categorisation, contrasting "Disney's reverential and nostalgic approach to fairy tales and the more brash sceptical style exemplified by *Shrek*".[17] Disney's subsequent fairy-tale output complicated such a clear-cut divide.

In 2007, as DreamWorks was releasing the third film of the *Shrek* franchise, Disney returned to the fairy tale with *Enchanted*, reasserting the studio's version of the genre while notably building on *Shrek*'s self-conscious and parodic approach at the same time.[18] Part animated and part live-action, *Enchanted* focuses on beautiful Princess Giselle, sent from the animated fantasy realm of Andalasia to the threatening live-action world of contemporary New York by an evil queen. Giselle's portrayal knowingly embodies the perceived stereotype of the Disney princess from the eponymous brand: she patiently waits for her prince to rescue her,

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[14] Anthony Lane, "Fantasy Land," *The New Yorker*, 21 May 2001, accessed 25 January 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2001/05/21/fantasy-land.
[15] Stephen Hunter, "*Shrek* Is a Fractured Fairy Tale with Its Heart Firmly in Place," *Washington Post*, 28 May 2001, accessed 25 January 2018, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/entertainment/movies/reviews/shrekhunter.htm.
[16] Paul Malcolm, "Trouble in Fairyland," *LA Weekly*, 16 May 2001, accessed 25 January 2018, http://www.laweekly.com/film/trouble-in-fairyland-2133359.
[17] Bradford, "'Where Happily Ever After Happens Every Day,'" 174.
[18] *Shrek the Third* (Raman Hui and Chris Miller, 2007).

praises the virtues of "true love's first kiss", spontaneously bursts into song, and wears sparkling dresses. From a generic perspective, she embodies the Disney fairy tale striving to update its constructions of romance and femininity. Initially appalled at divorce lawyer Robert and his sceptical views on romance and fairy tales, she starts doubting about the "happily ever-after" she is supposed to live with one-dimensional Prince Edward. She ultimately rescues Robert from the evil queen turned fire-breathing dragon, before setting up her own dressmaking business in New York.

These gender reversals and semantic reconfigurations explicitly twist the old-fashioned and predictable Disney formula. Yet, as Cristina Bacchilega and John Rieder argue, *Enchanted* initially "parodies Disney's earlier representations…but it ultimately seeks only to bring new glamour and power to the Disneyfied fairy tale princess image and her romantic plot".[19] After having been poisoned by the evil queen's apple, Giselle is indeed wakened up by Robert's true love's kiss, and the film is concluded by an animated wedding between Prince Edward and Robert's former partner Nancy: the career-oriented woman embraces Edward's sincerity and the promise of a fantasy happy ending.

Critics particularly praised how *Enchanted* both challenges and repeats tropes from Disney's past fairy-tale canon, renewing the perceived Disney formula in the process. Todd McCarthy (*Variety*) noted that Disney "reaches far back into the past for its inspiration and manages to make it feel like something new again"; Ann Hornaday (*Washington Post*) argued that the studio "celebrates the princess cult it invented while skewering its most saccharin conventions… as it indulges in all the dreams of fairy-tale romance while making a few 21st-century adjustments".[20] *Enchanted* "re-shapes the traditions of Disney's animated classics for

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[19] Cristina Bacchilega and John Rieder, "Mixing It Up: Generic Complexity and Gender Ideology in Early Twenty-First Century Fairy Tale Films," in *Fairy Tale Films: Visions of Ambiguity*, ed. Pauline Greenhill and Sidney Eve Matrix (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2010), 29.
[20] Todd McCarthy, "*Enchanted*," *Variety*, 18 November 2007, accessed 25 January 2018, http://variety.com/2007/film/awards/enchanted-1200554452/; Ann Hornaday, "Also Playing," *Washington Post*,

this century," as David Gritten (*Telegraph*) puts it.[21] These reviewers welcomed *Enchanted*'s combination of fairy-tale tropes as displayed before *and* after *Shrek*.

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Shrek's parodic approach towards specific tropes of the Disney formula notably impacted on Disney's output and surrounding critical discourses. As a critical and box office success, *Enchanted* represented a turning point in Disney's approach to the genre.[22] Following from *Shrek*'s parodic perspective, and seemingly taking into account criticisms of aspects of the Disney formula considered as particularly dated and conservative, *Enchanted* set the tone for Disney's subsequent series of 2010s animated fairy tales. The film prefigures Disney's ambivalent generic and paratextual strategy: foregrounding the studio's renewed approach to the fairy-tale genre, while preserving some particularly popular differentiating aspects.

Producing, Marketing and Discussing Disney's 2010s Fairy Tales: Generic Ambivalence

Disney's ambiguous position towards its own formula, striving both to adapt to the post-*Shrek* fairy-tale context and preserve the studio's singularity, is particularly noticeable through the paratexts of *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled* and *Frozen*. Discourses of production, marketing, and reception surrounding Disney's contemporary fairy tales crystallise the competing impulses at the core of the film texts. They are positioned as both departing from and continuing Disney's canon of romantic narratives; both following on from and distancing themselves from DreamWorks' irreverent generic knowingness.

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15 February 2008, accessed 25 January 2018, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/02/14/AR2008021401143_3.html.

[21] David Gritten, "*Enchanted*, Review," *The Telegraph*, 27 December 2013, accessed 3 March 2016, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/filmreviews/10528597/Enchanted-review.html.

[22] *Enchanted* grossed $127,807,262 domestically and three songs from the film were nominated at the Oscars for Best Original Song. See "*Enchanted*," Box Office Mojo, accessed 25 January 2018, http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=enchanted.htm.

Figure 1: *The Princess and the Frog* [movie poster]

The release of *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled* and *Frozen* represented a generic "throwback" for Disney.[23] While the Princess brand had been promoted for almost a decade, the last animated fairy tale released by the studio, *Aladdin*, dated back to the early 1990s. The marketing surrounding *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) drew heavily on nostalgia for earlier Disney fairy tales and the appeal of the princess character. Posters featured Tiana in her princess costume about to kiss Prince Naveen transformed into a frog, thus perfectly mirroring the film's title (Figure 1). Half of the feature film trailer was dedicated to Tiana meeting Frog Naveen, before being turned into a frog herself. Additional snippets included magical transformations, Tiana and Naveen's wedding, and the presence of comic animal characters. Posters and trailers then explicitly displayed tropes from the Disney formula, but also included elements that echoed *Shrek*'s generic knowingness. The trailer voiceover foregrounded the central role of the original fairy tale within the narrative – "everyone thinks they know the story of 'The Princess and the Frog'…" – and Tiana's metamorphosis, turning into a frog herself, was presented as a generic twist. However, the trailer generally embraced and emphasised Disney's fairy-tale legacy, promoting *The Princess and the Frog* as a continuation of "the tradition of Walt

[23] Jason Sperb, *Flickers of Film: Nostalgia in the Time of Digital Cinema* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 114.

Disney's most beloved classics." Jonathan Gray points out that "trailers and other advertising play vital roles in announcing a film's genre and in providing initial generic labels".[24] *The Princess and the Frog*'s marketing explicitly provided the "Disney fairy-tale" label to be applied to the animated feature, specifically evoking the iconic fairy-tale past of the Disney studio.

By contrast, Disney's marketing for *Tangled* and *Frozen* significantly toned down such generic associations. With box office grosses of $104,400,899 domestically, *The Princess and the Frog* was considered as a financial disappointment.[25] President of Pixar and Disney Animation Studios Ed Catmull officially explained this lack of success partly through the presence of the word "princess" in its title: "based upon the response from fans and critics, we believe [global ticket sales] would have been higher if it wasn't prejudged by its title".[26] This reasoning led the studio to change the titles of its subsequent releases, from *Rapunzel* and *The Snow Queen* to *Tangled* and *Frozen*, notably erasing their fairy-tale identity and source – both were loosely based on the eponymous literary works. The way *Tangled*'s producer Roy Conli officially explained these title changes shows that Disney executives implicitly acknowledged persisting preconceptions surrounding Disney fairy tales:

> We wanted to be sure that people understood that this is not simply a rote telling of a fairy-tale they think they already know everything about. We broadened the title to diffuse immediate assumptions and presuppositions… The story is more than a *simple* princess tale, it has elements of thrills, comedy, and magic that are new and unexpected.[27]

This emphasis on the multiple generic influences of the film indirectly refers to criticisms surrounding the predictability – or simplicity – of Disney fairy tales. The marketing for *The*

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[24] Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 51.
[25] "*The Princess and the Frog*," Box Office Mojo, accessed 26 January 2018, http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=princessandthefrog.htm.
[26] Quoted in Dawn C. Chmielewski and Claudia Eller, "Disney Restyles 'Rapunzel' to Appeal to Boys," *Los Angeles Times*, 9 March 2010, accessed 26 January 2018, http://articles.latimes.com/2010/mar/09/business/la-fi-ct-disney9-2010mar09.
[27] Quoted in Jeff Kurtti, *The Art of Tangled* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2010), 45.

Princess and the Frog relied on audiences' knowledge of the source and playfully foregrounded and subverted potential assumptions about the film ("Everyone thinks they know…"): yet, the animated feature was primarily framed as a familiar princess-centred tale. By contrast, *Tangled*'s and *Frozen*'s first teasers and trailers privileged a generic shift, initially presenting the films as significant departures from the Disney formula.

Figure 2 and 3: Feature film trailer 1 for *Tangled* [frame capture]

In *Tangled*'s trailer 1, released five months ahead of the film, the character of Rapunzel was relegated to a secondary role, while Flynn Rider, her male counterpart and ultimately love interest, was introduced as the lead: the kingdom's "fearless", "dangerous" and "greatest thief". Through the character of Flynn, the trailer displayed swashbuckling action and comedy, keeping Disney fairy-tale romance at a distance. When fairy-tale tropes did feature, they were subject to knowing parody, as illustrated through one of the scenes especially produced for *Tangled*'s trailer 1. At the top of Rapunzel's tower, Flynn grandly shouts at Rapunzel the iconic fairy-tale line "Rapunzel, let down your hair", but is interrupted by an enormous mass of hair that knocks him down, to the sound of Pink's rock song "Trouble" (Figure 2 and 3). The self-aware tone of the trailer strikingly recalled DreamWorks' generic approach, and distanced *Tangled* from Disney's earlier animated fairy tales, perceived as more sentimental and traditional.

Rapunzel and *Frozen*'s sisters Anna and Elsa were featured more prominently only in subsequent trailers. Still, their filiation to the Disney formula and past Disney princesses, such as their propensity to sing, were only gradually revealed. It is only in *Frozen*'s official "Elsa"

trailer, circulated almost one month *after* the release of the film, that the musical was foregrounded as a significant generic aspect. By contrast, the heroines' more adventurous character was explicitly put forward, contrasting with the perceived stereotype of the passive and helpless Disney princess. For example, in *Frozen*'s official trailer, Princess Anna is introduced as fearless and bold, rescuing her male companion from wolves, and it is suggested that she will reverse the curse set on her kingdom. The trailer plays with audience's assumptions about Disney's gender constructions, presenting Anna's primary and active role as an unexpected yet welcome twist: "Who will save the day? The ice guy? The nice man? The snowman? Or *no man*?"

Figure 4: *Tangled* [movie poster]; Figure 5: *Frozen* [movie poster]

While both *Tangled*'s and *Frozen*'s marketing promoted action and comedy as their main generic impulses, romance – although playing a pivotal role in the films – was at best only hinted at in trailers. Posters for both films featured the ensemble cast, particularly foregrounding the anthropomorphic comic protagonists (Figure 4 and 5). Each set of characters was depicted as a team, ready for action, not as potential love interests. As opposed to the poster versions of

The Princess and the Frog's Tiana and Naveen, Rapunzel and Flynn, and Anna and Kristoff notably looked off screen, avoiding eye contact.

The study of the discourses of promotion surrounding *Tangled* and *Frozen* reveals Disney's more ambiguous stance towards the studio's own fairy-tale formula and past films, and the particularly heterogeneous nature of Disney's paratexts. *The Art of* series of books, exemplifies such ambiguity. They function as an extended "making of", including selected conceptual art work and interviews. *The Art of Tangled* and *The Art of Frozen*, like trailers and posters, laid great emphasis on *Tangled* and *Frozen*'s departure from earlier Disney fairy tales. For example, John Lasseter describes *Frozen* as "a unique story about two sisters that is so different from any other fairy tale that Disney has ever done".[28] Similarly, head of story Paul Briggs insisted that *Frozen* "wasn't a princess movie but a sibling story;" author Charles Solomon described it as "an exploration of the special bond sisters share" as opposed to "a standard princess finding her prince story".[29] Such statements illustrate Disney's emphasis on a generic shift away from the fairy-tale formula and its predictable romance narrative and stock characters. Yet, this positioning may seem surprising, considering that Anna's sister Elsa barely featured in the official trailer: the theme of sisterhood was only foregrounded in later trailers. This difference of generic emphasis between early and later trailers, and between discourses of promotion and advertising, may point to Disney's initial reluctance to foreground the centrality of female characters that may have been associated with the stock Disney princess.

Nevertheless, at the same time, *The Art of* books did emphasize the presence of the female leads, portrayed as new types of heroines challenging Disney's fairy-tale formula. *Tangled*'s co-director Nathan Greno explained that he wanted to get "Rapunzel out of that tower early in the film, so she's active and not sitting around to be rescued"; Briggs describes *Frozen*'s

[28] John Lasseter, preface to *The Art of Frozen*, by Charles Solomon (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2013), 6.
[29] Quoted in Charles Solomon, *The Art of Frozen* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2013), 14; Solomon, *The Art of Frozen*, 13.

Anna as a character "that doesn't give up… and stand[s] up for what's right"; author Jeff Kurtti notes that *The Princess and the Frog*'s Tiana is "miles away from any other royal maiden in the Disney canon".[30] Such statements suggest that the Disney studio has taken into account past criticisms of the Disney formula, distancing the heroines from the conservative stereotype associated with the Disney princess.

Yet, the legacy of Disney's past fairy tales was not entirely discarded throughout discourses of promotion. Because of the enduring popularity of Disney's canon with sections of the audience and consumers of the Princess brand, mentioning these films as reference points could represent a clever marketing move.

Tangled's directors Greno and Howard described themselves as Disney fans – "both of us have a deep love of classic Disney" – referring to fairy tales such as "*Cinderella*" and "*Sleeping Beauty*" as inspiration.[31] Such reliance on Disney's fairy-tale past helped situate *Tangled* within an identifiable canon. At the same time, filmmakers equally underlined novelty and originality, as exemplified by Greno's observation: "this feels like a totally fresh Disney fairy tale… but at the same time, it feels like the other ones".[32] This emphasis on Disney's fairy-tale heritage also points to the centrality of the genre for the studio and the Disney brand more generally. Howard correspondingly acknowledged viewers' expectations regarding this strong generic association: "we're subject to huge scrutiny every time we come out with something new, especially a film like this, that is right in Disney's pocket. It's what we're supposed to do well – fairy tales, animation, and musicals".[33] This may explain why Disney filmmakers' accounts, and the paratexts surrounding the films more globally, regularly combined, and

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[30] Quoted in Kurtti, *The Art of Tangled*, 84; Quoted in Solomon, *The Art of Frozen*, 54; Jeff Kurtti, *The Art of The Princess and the Frog* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2009), 26

[31] Nathan Greno and Byron Howard, foreword to *The Art of Tangled*, by Jeff Kurtti (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2010), 7.

[32] Quoted in Kurtti, *The Art of Tangled*, 56.

[33] Ibid, 44.

alternated between generic departure and continuity. This delicate generic balance shows that Disney has comparatively less leeway in terms of generic subversion than studios such as DreamWorks; the latter does not possess a large canon of iconic and widely known fairy tales. The discourse characterising *The Art of* books cleverly – though implicitly – embraced the opposition perceived between the two studios, as hinted by *The Princess and the Frog*'s producer Peter Del Vecho: "we're returning to sincere, classic Disney fairy-tale storytelling".[34] In this case, "sincere" storytelling may be opposed to the irreverence and irony of films such as *Shrek*, which some critics perceived as hip cynicism. Describing the tone of *Tangled*, Greno explained:

> "There was an attempt to enliven the story with contemporary attitudes, titled *Rapunzel Unbraided*… When Glen Keane [initially *Tangled*'s director, then animation supervisor] first pitched *Rapunzel*, he really wanted it to be a *sincere* fairy tale; because he is a heartfelt, *sincere* guy who believes in things such as love and true emotion, and he really wanted to share that with the audience. The company had tried to push the film in a satirical direction that made fun of fairy tales. But Glen, rightly so, said 'I can't do this kind of movie'… So it switched back to a *sincere* fairy tale".[35]

This account illustrates the competing impulses which stand out throughout paratexts of the films. Disney strives to stay relevant in a very competitive animation and animated fairy-tale market, which has been profoundly challenged by DreamWorks' films: this may explain the studio's reported attempt at fairy-tale satire. At the same time, Disney continues to build on its much criticised and parodied, but still very popular and lucrative fairy-tale formula. Greno's account within the fan-targeted *Art of Tangled*, underlining the virtues of "sincere" storytelling over satire, notably contrasts with *Tangled*'s self-reflexive trailers, aimed at a wider audience.

Throughout the marketing of and discourses of promotion surrounding *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled* and *Frozen*, Disney adopted an ambiguous positioning towards both the studio's earlier fairy-tale formula and DreamWorks' competing approach. Trailers, posters, and

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[34] Quoted in Kurtti, *The Art of The Princess and the Frog*, 153.
[35] Quoted in Kurtti, *The Art of Tangled*, 12.

The Art of books struck a fragile balance between familiar and new fairy-tale tropes, between "sincerity" and knowingness: between celebration of, and distancing from the Disney formula.

Since the release of *Shrek*'s fourth instalment – to rather mixed reviews – Disney has not only challenged, but also replaced DreamWorks as the most significant producer of animated fairy tales in the early twenty-first century.[36] The spectacular growth of the films in terms of box office revenues – $104,400,899 domestically for *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), $200,821,936 for *Tangled* (2010), and $400,738,009 for *Frozen* (2013), as well as $1,276.5 billion worldwide – indicates that, by 2013, Disney had reconquered its monopoly on the fairy-tale genre.[37] An examination of the critical reception of these films reveals that their success is partly based on their ambiguous positioning in relation to Disney's fairy-tale formula. As Helen Warner notes, while reviews do not directly determine audiences' responses, "they do offer an insight into how [they] are cued to understand texts".[38] Such an overview points to the complexity of labels and meanings associated with the Disney formula and circulated through the studio's fairy-tale paratexts.

Echoing the reception of *Enchanted*, and reproducing discourses of promotion, critics particularly praised what they perceived as a harmonious balance between generic renewal and familiar tropes. For example, Kirk Honeycutt (*Hollywood Reporter*) noted that *The Princess and the Frog* "celebrates old and new"; A. O. Scott (*New York Times*) observed "an updated but nonetheless sincere and unmistakable quality of old-fashioned Disneyness" in *Tangled*; Robbie Collin (*Telegraph*) praised *Frozen*'s "nostalgic yet forward-thinking storytelling".[39]

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[36] *Shrek Forever After* (Mike Mitchell, 2010).

[37] "*The Princess and the Frog*;" "*Tangled*," Box Office Mojo, accessed 26 January 2018, http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=rapunzel.htm; "*Frozen*," Box Office Mojo, accessed 26 January 2018, http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=frozen2013.htm.

[38] Helen Warner, "'A New Feminist Revolution in Hollywood Comedy'? Postfeminist Discourses and the Critical Reception of *Bridesmaids*," in *Postfeminism and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Joel Gwynne and Nadine Muller (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 223.

[39] Kirk Honeycutt, "*The Princess and the Frog* – Film Review," *The Hollywood Reporter*, 24 November 2009, accessed 10 February 2018, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/princess-frog-film-review-93780; A. O. Scott, "Back to the Castle, Where It's All About the Hair," *The New York Times*, 23 November 2010, accessed

Holding on certain aspects of Disney's fairy-tale formula, and more particularly its associated tone and generic tropes, other reviewers were more severe when they perceived that the studio diverted too significantly from its generic past – when the aforementioned balance was not as harmonious. Both their praise and criticism built on the discursive differentiation between Disney and DreamWorks particularly advertised by the former: the opposition between "sincere" Disney and the "cynicism of *Shrek*", as described by Helen O'hara (*Empire*).[40]

The reception of *Tangled*, and more particularly its explicitly self-aware tone, foregrounded in trailers and embodied by the character of Flynn Rider, is a notable case in point. Kenneth Turan (*Los Angeles Times*) described Flynn as out of place within a Disney fairy tale, "a refugee from a *Shrek* sequel"; Scott considered his portrayal as a "crude commercial calculation, a sign… to Disneyphobes that the studio can bring some DreamWorks-style attitude"; Richard Corliss (*Time*) more generally argued that the film "wades into the DreamWorks style of sitcom gags and anachronistic sass".[41] By contrast, aspects that were considered as unique to Disney and its fairy-tale formula, though specifically toned down throughout trailers, were praised. Turan underlined *Tangled*'s "essential sweetness"; Tim Robey (*Telegraph*) described the film as "a traditional romance at heart"; Corliss concluded by stating that "this is your basic, and very enjoyable, Disney princess musical".[42] These reactions suggest that the pre-*Shrek* Disney fairy tale still possessed some appeal to some sections of the audience – as confirmed by *Tangled*'s box-office success. Although numerous reviewers

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26 January 2018, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/24/movies/24tangled.html; Robbie Collin, "*Frozen* Is Squeezably Lovely," *The Telegraph*, 15 April 2015, accessed 19 February 2018, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/film/frozen/review/.

[40] Helen O'hara, "*The Princess and the Frog* Review," *Empire*, 9 December 2015, accessed 26 January 2018, https://www.empireonline.com/movies/princess-frog/review/.

[41] Kenneth Turan, "Movie Review: '*Tangled*,'" *Los Angeles Times*, 24 November 2010, accessed 19 February 2018, http://articles.latimes.com/2010/nov/24/entertainment/la-et-et-tangled-20101124; Scott, "Back to the Castle;" Richard Corliss, "*Tangled*: Disney's Ripping Rapunzel," *Time*, 26 November 2010, accessed 19 February 2018, http://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,2033166,00.html.

[42] Turan, "Movie Review;" Tim Robey, "*Tangled*, Review," *The Telegraph*, 25 December 2013, accessed 19 February 2018, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/filmreviews/8286988/Tangled-review.html; Corliss, "*Tangled*."

appreciated the freshness of *Shrek*'s parodic approach back in 2001, Disney's adoption of a similar tone a decade later was perceived as either lacking originality, or a denial of the studio's own generic identity.

The aspect of Disney's updated fairy-tale approach which was particularly welcomed was the perceived challenge to the conservative characterisation of the Princess, as exemplified throughout *Frozen*'s reception. The late revelation that Anna's handsome prince is a manipulative villain who attempts to kill Queen Elsa, and Anna's success in rescuing the latter thanks to her "true love" for her sister, were particularly commented on, perceived as the triumph of sisterhood over romance. For example, Stephanie Merry (*Washington Post*) characterized it as a "surprising and poignant ending, which subverts so many fairy-tale stereotypes"; O'hara viewed it as "radical in fairy-tale terms", and Collin as "boldly feminist".[43] Such reactions, contrasting sharply with the criticisms of Disney's past gendered fairy-tale portrayals, mirror *Frozen*'s discourses of promotion regarding the female leads, foregrounding renewal over perpetuation of this specific aspect of the studio's formula. Such paratexts participated in positioning *Frozen* as a turning point for Disney in terms of fairy-tale narrative, both in its structure and central themes. Combined with *The Princess and the Frog*'s and *Tangled*'s paratexts, they reveal the complex, sometimes contradictory understandings and expectations related to the Disney formula, and the studio's multiple strategies to re-package its generic legacy.

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[43] Stephanie Merry, "'*Frozen*' Movie Review: Kristen Bell and Idina Menzel Dazzle in Disney's Latest," *The Washington Post*, 26 November 2013, accessed 19 February 2018, http://www.washingtonpost.com/goingoutguide/movies/frozen-movie-review-kristen-bell-and-idina-menzel-dazzle-in-disneys-latest/2013/11/26/3b030292-5390-11e3-9fe0-fd2ca728e67c_story.html; Helen O'hara, "*Frozen* Review," *Empire*, 6 December 2013, accessed 19 February 2018, https://www.empireonline.com/movies/frozen-3/review/; Collin, "*Frozen* Is Squeezably Lovely."

The competing paratexts surrounding the release of *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled* and *Frozen* crystallise Disney's ambivalence towards its own fairy-tale canon, and uneasiness towards the perception of its formula. Following what was considered as a box-office failure – *The Princess and the Frog* – Disney altered its generic discourse, hiding or parodying the presence of fairy-tale tropes throughout the marketing of *Tangled* and *Frozen*. By contrast, subsequent advertising ventures foregrounded a harmonious balance between continuation of and alteration to Disney's own fairy-tale heritage, which was reflected throughout the critical reception. The notable dissimulation and/or subversion of Disney's romantic tropes throughout paratexts reveal that romance is a central genre to approach the studio's multifaceted reworking of its own formula.

Conclusion

"You have to compete with your own past, as well as with other studios".[44] *Tangled*'s visual and design development artist Mac George perfectly summarized the challenges faced by the Disney studio in a post-*Shrek* era. Throughout the 2000s, DreamWorks' franchise had parodied aspects of the Disney formula and its romance narrative, perceived as dated within academic and some critical circles. Although *Shrek* did not fundamentally challenge tropes at the core of Disney's animated fairy tale, such as the importance of true love and happy endings, DreamWorks' hit became a new reference point for the genre which Disney could not ignore. In order to remain relevant and reaffirm its primacy, the studio strived to update its approach to the fairy tale. The analysis of *The Princess and the Frog*'s, *Tangled*'s and *Frozen*'s marketing and reception reveals the competing tensions that Disney had to negotiate, catering for both detractors of the – viewed as – dated Disney formula and Disney enthusiasts.

[44] Quoted in Kurtti, *The Art of Tangled*, 156.

Considering these multifaceted paratexts allows one to explore Disney's ambiguous generic approach within the film texts, and competing impulses towards Disney romantic tropes, narrative and tone. Gray argues that "if a trailer is a window into a movie, windows point in different directions, giving us different angles of vision".[45] Along with production interviews and promotional posters, such paratexts provide indeed multiple and often clashing entry points into Disney's contemporary output. A film like *Tangled*, for example, has been advertised, discussed and received at times as a comedy adventure, a DreamWorks-style fairy-tale parody, and a classic Disney princess musical. Adopting an expanded generic approach, namely considering such paratexts alongside a study of the film texts, reveals the generic ambiguities surrounding the studio's animated fairy tales, and points to their intrinsic multifaceted generic identity.

Before the release of Disney's contemporary cycle of animated fairy tales, *Enchanted* built on and re-appropriated *Shrek*'s parody of the Disney formula through an unexpected generic lens: the romantic comedy. Disney's film transfers sweet, innocent, and animated Princess Giselle into the contemporary live-action city of New York, an iconic setting for romantic comedies, in which she meets cynical divorce lawyer Robert.[46] Although they have contrasting personalities, they will form a couple by the end of the narrative. In generic terms, the Disney fairy tale – embodied by Giselle – is altered by and adapts to this new romantic-comedy setting, and the contemporary romantic comedy – represented by Robert – similarly changes under the influence of the Disney fairy tale. Such generic confluences are pivotal in *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled* and *Frozen*.

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[45] Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 69.
[46] Jeffers McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 89.

CHAPTER 2

Old-fashioned Fantasies?

Reviving Fairy-Tale Romance Through Multi-layered Disney Nostalgia

Introduction

The Princess and the Frog and *Tangled* re-envision romance through the prism of Disney nostalgia. As Disney *animated* features, Disney *fairy tales*, and Disney *products*, these films build on a multi-layered nostalgic basis which impacts their re-appropriation of the idealised, old-fashioned version of romance reclaimed in contemporary post-feminist romantic comedies. Exploring such a multi-layered nostalgic basis is essential to understand how *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled* revive core elements from Disney's fairy-tale formula and interact with the romantic comedy in the process. Developing the convergences between the fairy-tale and genres of romance, *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled* transform the romantic comedy into a magical, reassuringly familiar, purchasable fantasy. Disney's multi-layered nostalgic prism is pivotal to the studio's contemporary return to and reworking of fairy-tale romances.

Such multi-layered nostalgia is hinted at on the opening page of *Disney's Fairy Tale Weddings & Honeymoons*' website, explicitly positioning potential customers within a fairy-tale context: "Whatever a fairy-tale wish is to you, we've got the magic to make it come true".[1] Since the 1990s, Disney has provided wedding and honeymoon services to couples at most theme parks. Weddings are staged as fairy-tale happy endings, in which the bride can be escorted in a glass carriage drawn by six white horses and greeted by uniformed trumpeters,

[1] "Disney's Fairy Tale Weddings and Honeymoons," Disney, accessed 7 February 2018, https://www.disneyweddings.com/.

like Disney's Cinderella.[2] From the invitations to the wedding cake, every detail of the ceremony is inspired by Disney fairy tales: the bride performs the role of the Disney princess for a day. *Disney's Fairy Tale Weddings & Honeymoons* website not only suggests that weddings are essential components of Disney narratives – especially happy endings – but also implies that romance is central to the fairy tale as animated by Disney.

As foregrounded throughout their paratexts, Disney's contemporary animated fairy tales combine elements of adventure and comedy with tropes associated with the studio's fairy-tale formula; yet, romance and coupledom play a central role within the narratives. Disney's construction of the post-*Shrek* Disney couple particularly builds on a genre in which love is similarly central: the romantic comedy.

Using the generic term of the romantic comedy in order to approach *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled*, as well as *Frozen* may seem surprising, at first.[3] In most critical and academic discourses, Disney animated features tend to be approached as family films, children's films, fairy tales – the genre most easily identified with the studio – or Disney films, namely a generically homogeneous group of animated features produced by the same company. Studies of the romantic comedy often define strict boundaries for a genre supposedly targeting a more mature audience, identifying a set of semantic tropes developed exclusively within the context of live-action cinema. Yet, a brief look at *The Princess and the Frog*'s, *Tangled*'s and *Frozen*'s paratexts reveals the strong influence of the romantic comedy in the production and reception of these animated features. For example, Justin Chang (*Variety*) observed that "unlike most tales of its type, in which the heroine spends the whole movie in pursuit of Prince Charming, *The Princess and the Frog* follows the modern romantic-comedy template, granting its amphibious duo plenty of shared screen time and making them polar opposites… who

[2] Chrys Ingraham, *White Weddings: Romancing Heterosexuality in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 89.
[3] *Frozen* will be discussed in relation to the romantic comedy in the following chapter.

initially can't stand each other".[4] Supervising animator Randy Haycock's description of the relationship between protagonists Tiana and Naveen confirms this idea: "For once we have a girl that meets a guy and it follows a romantic-comedy idea where the couple meets and they really don't like each other. And it takes them a while to warm up to each other because they are such opposites".[5] Characters were also approached from this generic lens: *Tangled*'s screenwriter Dan Fogelman explained that Flynn's portrayal was inspired by leads from "classic romantic comedies"; reviewer Stephanie Merry (*Washington Post*) described *Frozen*'s Anna as "more of a contemporary rom-com heroine than an Ariel-the-mermaid type".[6] This shift in the construction of Disney's fairy-tale protagonists and couples – *The Princess and the Frog*'s Tiana and Naveen, *Tangled*'s Rapunzel and Flynn, and *Frozen*'s Anna and Hans/Kristoff – was presented and understood as a move away from the studio's predictable formula. Building on Deleyto's approach to the romantic comedy, our understanding of Disney's *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled*, and *Frozen*, and more particularly their construction of romance and gender dynamics "changes significantly when we take on board the crucial presence of this genre in its narrative structure".[7] The centrality of the leads' antagonistic then romantic relationship, which corresponds to the primary narrative configuration of the romantic comedy, is key to Disney's contemporary reworking of the animated fairy tale.

From a wider generic perspective, Heather Brook argues that there is a "meaningful and lasting connection" between romantic comedies and fairy tales in which romance plays a central role – Jeffers McDonald even describes romantic comedies as "fairy tales for adults".[8] Although

[4] Justin Chang, "*The Princess and the Frog*," *Variety*, 24 November 2009, accessed 28 January 2018, http://variety.com/2009/digital/features/the-princess-and-the-frog-1200477289/.
[5] Quoted in Kurtti, *The Art of The Princess and the Frog*, 32.
[6] Kurtti, *The Art of Tangled*, 96; Merry, "'*Frozen*' Movie Review."
[7] Deleyto, *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy*, 54.
[8] Heather Brook, "Engaging Marriage: Rom Coms and Fairy Tale Endings," in *The Happiness Illusion: How the Media Sold Us a Fairytale*, ed. Nadi Fadina and Luke Hockley (New York: Routledge, 2015), 146; Jeffers McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 14.

modified and updated, specific narrative tropes, characters and settings from popular fairy tales are reworked throughout numerous romantic comedies. Brook considers "Cinderella", for example, as "a staple narrative of mainstream romance".[9] Films such as *Sabrina* (Billy Wilder, 1954), *Pretty Woman* (Garry Marshall, 1990) and *Maid in Manhattan* (Wayne Wang, 2002) explicitly borrow from and rework the syntactic structure and/or key semantic motifs from the fairy tale. Frank Krutnik is one of the very few scholars (briefly) who mentions Disney animated fairy tales – *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast* in particular – as drawing upon the conventions of the romantic comedy like contemporary "pre-teen romances" and "family-oriented Hollywood fare" more generally.[10] Such parallels point to a significant dialogue between fairy tale and romantic comedy. Disney animated fairy tales foreground such generic convergences through a unique nostalgic prism.

Pam Cook defines nostalgia as "predicated on a dialectic between longing for something idealised that has been lost, and an acknowledgement that this idealised something can never be retrieved in actuality, and can only be accessed through images".[11] Disney animated features, and especially fairy tales, overflow with such "images" that allow the mediation between the audience's irretrievable past and their present. Svetlana Boym particularly describes nostalgia as "a yearning for… the time of our childhood".[12] Contemporary Disney animated features provide the fantasy of accessing that past. They appeal to adult, young adult, and teenage audiences partly because they recreate the feel, the tone, and the atmosphere of the animated features from their childhood. The very act of watching a Disney film can be considered as a nostalgic experience. Many reviews of *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled*, and *Frozen* nostalgically referred to past Disney films and/or associated them with fond memories: Merry

[9] Brook, "Engaging Marriage," 145.
[10] Frank Krutnik, "Conforming Passions? Contemporary Romantic Comedy," in *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, ed. Steve Neale (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 137.
[11] Pam Cook, *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2005), 4.
[12] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xv.

(*Washington Post*) described *Frozen* as "a nod to the pleasures of vintage Disney and old fairy tales"; Scott (*New York Times*) compared watching *Tangled* with "entering a familiar old neighbourhood"; Hornaday (*Washington Post*) noted that *The Princess and the Frog* "evokes the most cherished Disney classics".[13]

The enduring popularity of such "classics," according to Jason Sperb, is due to the specificity of their medium: "the oft-noted ontological timelessness of the animation itself".[14] In the case of Disney, the technique of animation employed is central to the remarkable longevity of the studio's animated features. These "classics" were traditionally animated: they were hand-drawn, 2D animated features. The persisting use of this technique and style within cel-animated *The Princess and the Frog*, and its strong influence throughout computer-animated *Tangled* represents a powerful vehicle for nostalgia.

Since Pixar has released the first computer animated feature film in 1995, 3D computer graphics (CG) have gradually "replaced the classical 2D styling of Disney animation to become the dominant aesthetic form of mainstream animation".[15] This evolution was implemented and reinforced by the multiplication of highly successful computer-animated franchises such as *Toy Story*, *Shrek*, *Ice Age*, *Madagascar* (2005; 2008; 2012), and *Despicable Me*. Striving to keep up with the competition, the Disney studio released its first computer-animated feature film in 2000, and abandoned cel animation in 2005 – with the notable exception of *The Princess and the Frog* and *Winnie the Pooh*. As a result of this shift, hand-drawn animation has been increasingly associated with smaller studios, art cinema, and past "classics" when it comes to mainstream American animation. Therefore, nostalgia for Disney films is arguably intrinsically

[13] Merry, "'*Frozen*' Movie Review;" Scott, "Back to the Castle;" Ann Hornaday, "Movie review: Disney's '*The Princess and the Frog*,' Starring Anika Noni Rose," *The Washington Post*, 11 December 2009, accessed 9 February 2018, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/12/10/AR2009121001278.html.
[14] Sperb, *Flickers of Film*, 118.
[15] Chris Carter, "An Analysis of the Character Animation in Disney's *Tangled*," *Senses of Cinema* 67 (2013): 1, accessed 25 April 2014, http://sensesofcinema.com/2013/feature-articles/an-analysis-of-the-character-animation-in-disneys-tangled/.

linked with nostalgia for hand-drawn animation, a style perceived as belonging to the past and only accessible through earlier animated features. Nostalgic longing for the irretrievable past of childhood is mediated through Disney and the 2D style of the studio's contemporary animated films.

Cel-animated *The Princess and the Frog* and computer-animated *Tangled* are particularly representative of Disney's multi-layered nostalgic framework. *Tangled* builds on nostalgia for the past of Disney animation, but this nostalgic feel is actually recreated via computer-generated techniques. The aesthetic of these films crystallises the balance that Disney continuously strikes in terms of nostalgia, always mediated within a context which supposedly prevents or alters it. *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled* revive the pastness of hand-drawn animation, of familiar childhood memories of Disney and fairy-tales despite – or rather thanks to – the contemporary context of digital animation, DreamWorks' self-reflexive parodies, and post-feminist romantic comedies. This chapter focuses on Disney's multi-layered mediated nostalgia, and how it ultimately re-envisions fairy-tale romance. This chapter also investigates the extent to which Disney's formula persists within *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled*.

This chapter starts by examining *The Princess and the Frog*'s and *Tangled*'s multi-layered nostalgic basis for their reconstruction of fairy-tale romance: these nostalgic foundations are essential to fully understand the studio's contemporary generic approach. The first part will focus on the aesthetic of *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled*, examining their nostalgic animated style. Cel-animated *The Princess and the Frog* was produced, advertised and received as an aesthetic throwback to the past of Disney's hand-drawn animation. Such paratextual discourses point to Disney's differentiating aspect throughout the mainstream animation market, and reveal some popular preconceptions on digital cinema that computer-animated *Tangled* cleverly mediated. Relying on state-of-the-art techniques, *Tangled* recreates the organic and stylised aesthetic of 2D animation.

Such a nostalgic return to the perceived warmth and familiar aesthetic of pre-digital animation not only draws back to the past of the medium, but also to the past of the audience. The second part of this chapter explores how *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled* rely on well-known intertextual and paratextual references to Disney's fairy-tale canon in order to revive memories of watching films, consuming products, and visiting spaces related to Disney. The association between the fairy-tale genre and childhood particularly emphasizes this nostalgic experience. Such self-reflexive nostalgia, namely nostalgia for Disney itself, is also mediated. *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled* acknowledge to some extent their status both as Disney fairy tales and Disney products, reproducing the reassuring and childlike fantasy world of Disney theme parks.

Disney's multi-layered nostalgia forms the distinctive basis for *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled*'s re-appropriation of fairy-tale romance. The third part of this chapter analyses the persistence of specific tropes from the studio's fairy-tale formula, such as "true love" expressed in song, and happy endings culminating in a wedding. These tropes not only point to the convergence between the fairy-tale genre and the romantic comedy, but also revive a certain conception of old-fashioned romance and coupledom. Such a nostalgic prism strikingly magnifies fantasies at the core of post-feminist romantic comedies. The specifically multi-layered nostalgic framework of Disney's contemporary animated fairy tales expands the post-feminist concept of reclaiming something that has been lost, supposedly because of feminist discourses: chivalric partners, sincere love, and princess weddings – in other words, idealised fairy-tale romance.

Exploring the fundamental role of nostalgia within the production, reception, merchandising and film texts of *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled*, this chapter elaborates on how Disney revives fantasies of old-fashioned romance. It is precisely such multi-layered nostalgia which allows Disney's contemporary animated films to function as a converging point

between the fairy tale and the romantic comedy, magnifying their similarities and expanding their idealised construction of love and coupledom.

Digital Nostalgia: Recreating Hand-Drawn Aesthetics

Figure 6 and 7: "Disney" and "Walt Disney Animation Studios" opening to *The Princess and the Frog* [frame capture]

Since 2007 – after the acquisition of Pixar – the opening credits for Disney animated features have included two elements: first, the "Disney" opening, preceding every Disney film and depicting a 3D fairy-tale castle circled by pixie dust (Figure 6); secondly, the "Walt Disney Animation Studios" opening. The latter features sheets of gold paper quickly flipped, on which the silhouette then body of Mickey Mouse is gradually drawn.[16] This *mise en scène* explicitly calls upon the production process of past, hand-drawn animated features.[17] The paper finishes flipping as the outline of Mickey turns into an animated scene from the first Disney cartoon with synchronised sound, *Steamboat Willie* (Ub Iwerks, 1928) (Figure 7). The pairing of these two opening credits – the computer-animated fairy-tale castle and cel-animated Mickey Mouse – epitomizes Disney's contemporary aesthetic approach: reviving nostalgia for hand-drawn animation, and mediating such nostalgia through the digital.

[16] Pixar animated films, for example, include Disney's opening, featuring the fairy-tale castle, but are then followed by the studio's own "Luxor" opening credits.
[17] Artists working with hand-drawn animation also created a series of movements in pencil outline on separate sheets of drawing paper, and then flipped through them to ensure that the action moved as desired. Maureen Furniss, *A New History of Animation* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2016), 18.

As Disney's first cel-animated fairy tale released since *Aladdin*, *The Princess and the Frog* not only represented a throwback in terms of genre, but also to the pre-digital era of mainstream animation. Such nostalgic appeal was particularly foregrounded in *The Princess and the Frog*'s trailer, and directly associated with nostalgia for Disney's animated canon. The trailer opens with a quick succession of sketches representing iconic scenes from *Aladdin*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Little Mermaid* and *The Lion King* (Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff, 1994). This series of sketches is gradually animated, dissolving into the final corresponding sequences from the films, accompanied by the following text: "After 75 years of magic, Walt Disney Pictures brings a classic tale to life." The "magic" not only evokes elements of fantasy and wonder present in the aforementioned features, but also directly refers to the animator's skills of bringing "life" to still drawings. Implicitly, this trailer nostalgically alludes to the displacement of traditional hand-drawn techniques in mainstream animation, foregrounding the unique positioning of Disney and its successful hand-drawn canon by contrast. Such displacement was more explicitly addressed in *The Art of the Princess and the Frog*. Kurtti noted that the production included "veteran animation artists of hand-drawn animation… talents overlooked since the advent of computer animation".[18] Supervising animator Eric Goldberg described the former style of animation as "Disney Magic", emphasising the specific "warmth coming from hand-drawn films".[19]

Reviews almost systematically commented on such "Disney magic". Most critics expressed their surprise at what they considered as an anomaly in the digitally saturated animation market, but generally showed nostalgic admiration for it. For example, Catherine Shoard (*The Guardian*) described the hand-drawn animation as "shamelessly retro… all the

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[18] Kurtti, *The Art of The Princess and the Frog,* 1.
[19] Quoted in Kurtti, *The Art of The Princess and the Frog,* 154.

more startling in an age of pixels";[20] Lisa Schwarzbaum (*Entertainment Weekly*) affirmed that the "old-fashioned charmer holds its own beside… the wonder of 3D technology";[21] Chang (*Variety*) noted that it was "an unmistakable pleasure to behold an old-school, hand-drawn toon…at a time when CG, 3D… are all the rage".[22] The use of hand-drawn animation in *The Princess and the Frog* represents an aesthetic throwback especially because it has gradually been replaced by the digital: the return to traditional 2D animation inspires feelings of nostalgia among the audience.

The nostalgic impulse that connects hand-drawn animation and "old-school" Disney is sometimes expressed as a rejection of the current monopoly of computer graphics – or rather, as a critique of the latter's inability to match the artistic quality of 2D animation. Cook observes that, "as reality becomes increasingly virtual, the desire to find some form of authenticity has intensified".[23] In the context of animation, this "authenticity" can be found in the "warmth" of hand-drawn features described by Goldberg, as opposed to the perceived coldness of their digital counterparts. Reviewer Honeycutt (*Hollywood Reporter*) particularly elaborated on this aesthetic contrast: "hand-drawn and painted animation has a richness to its textures, brilliance in its colours and humanity in its characters that digital 0s and 1s can't quite hack".[24] Drawing such an opposition between cel and computer animation has wider aesthetic implications.

What has become standard for mainstream animated features and correlates with the rise of computer animation is the impulse towards a more convincingly photorealistic aesthetic, with more sophisticated representations in the appearance of characters' skin, hair and

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[20] Catherine Shoard, "How *The Princess and the Frog* Really Breaks the Mould," *The Guardian*, 5 February 2010, accessed 10 February 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2010/feb/05/princess-and-the-frog.
[21] Lisa Schwarzbaum, "*The Princess and the Frog*," *Entertainment Weekly*, 18 December 2009, accessed 26 January 2018, http://ew.com/article/2009/12/18/princess-and-frog-2/.
[22] Chang, "*The Princess and the Frog*."
[23] Cook, *Screening the Past*, 4.
[24] Honeycutt, "*The Princess and the Frog*."

clothing.[25] Independent filmmakers still relying on hand-drawn animation have opposed this aesthetic shift. Marjane Satrapi explained in a documentary clip on Oscar-nominated *Persépolis*'s (Vincent Paronnaud and Marjane Satrapi, 2007) production process that she deliberately avoided computer-animation because it produces "perfect images, but human beings are not perfect, so it doesn't look natural". Similarly, Sylvain Chomet valued in his Oscar-nominated film *The Illusionist* (2010) "the strength of 2D… it vibrates and it's not perfect, just like reality in fact".[26] The type of "reality" or naturalness privileged by Satrapi and Paronnaud contrasts with the photorealism of the digital. The imperfections of the animators' line and the natural, spontaneous expressiveness of the hand differ from the perceived "coldness," in Satrapi's words, and artificiality of computer animation. Chomet's choice of hand-drawn animation was, interestingly, motivated by his fondness for 1960s Disney animation: "the *Aristocats*, especially *101 Dalmatians* sum up the energy and aesthetic roughness you just don't get from CGI 3D computerized animation".[27] These accounts suggest that nostalgia is a recurring impulse behind the adoption and reception of hand-drawn animation, particularly noticeable around the time of *The Princess and the Frog*'s release.

The aesthetic approach foregrounded in cel-animated *The Princess and the Frog* is indeed closer to Disney's early classics than Pixar's state-of-the-art imagery. The design of animal characters such as Louis the alligator and Ray the firefly is deliberately stylized and cartoon-like, recalling the crocodile in *Peter Pan* (Clyde Geronimi and Wilfred Jackson, 1953) and *Pinocchio*'s (Hamilton Luske and Ben Sharpsteen, 1940) Jiminy Cricket. By contrast, the design of the same animated creatures in Pixar's *The Good Dinosaur* (Peter Sohn, 2015) tends

[25] The gradual mainstreaming of such a form of animated photorealism throughout the 2000s was due in part to the popularisation of Pixar's modelling and rendering software Renderman, which permitted the production of photorealistic images and visual effects. Helen Haswell, "To Infinity and Back Again: Hand-drawn Aesthetic and Affection for the Past in Pixar's Pioneering Animation," *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media* 8 (2014): 3-4, accessed 9 February 2015, http://www.alphavillejournal.com/Issue8/HTML/ArticleHaswell.html.
[26] "*The Illusionist*," Pathé Films, accessed 12 February 2018, http://www.pathefilms.ch/libraries.files/20100073_en_1_The_Illusionist_Englisch.pdf
[27] Ibid.

towards a photorealistic aesthetic. For example, *The Good Dinosaur*'s fireflies, showcased in close-ups when resting on the protagonist's snout, are more reminiscent of real-life insects than heavily anthropomorphised and caricatured Ray from *The Princess and the Frog*. While the features of Pixar's more prominent characters, such as tyrannosaurs Nash and Ramsey, remain cartoon-like, the detailed texture and tone of their reptilian skin strikingly differ from Disney's bicoloured crocodiles. The latter's numerous scutes, which would be extremely difficult to depict through cel animation, are replaced by a few straight lines suggesting their body shape. Similarly, the simple design of the night sky at the start of *The Princess and the Frog*, echoing the iconic early sequences from *Peter Pan* and *Pinocchio* with its couple of bright shining stars, is at odds with *The Good Dinosaur*'s photorealistic, almost live-action equivalent.

Such an aesthetic may explain viewers' nostalgic praise of *The Princess and the Frog*'s animation style. As Sperb argues, "nostalgia is always more intense during periods of dramatic cultural and technological upheaval".[28] Applied to the animation field, this would mean that the spectacular photorealistic revolution that has taken place within the past twenty years is sometimes discarded in favour of a warmer, simpler alternative, perceived as more reassuring and authentic: Disney's hand-drawn animation.

Despite such interest and praise of hand-drawn animation, Disney chose computer over cel animation for *Tangled*.[29] The relatively disappointing box office of *The Princess and the Frog* turned the film into a cel-animated parenthesis within the studio's series of contemporary computer-animated releases.[30] However, the aesthetic impulse behind the two films is not significantly different. In *Tangled*, Disney translates the nostalgic appeal of hand-drawn animation, undeniably central to *The Princess and the Frog*'s positive critical reception, to computer animation. Chris Carter explains that the latter was approached as "an extension of

[28] Sperb, *Flickers of Film*, 2.
[29] Carter, "An Analysis of the Character Animation in Disney's *Tangled*," 3.
[30] The only exception, to this day, is *Winnie the Pooh*.

the traditional 2D Disney aesthetic”: animators applied the theoretical principles of hand-drawn animation to the digital.[31] This marriage of aesthetic styles, as opposed to the strict distinction made by the aforementioned reviewers and directors, is representative of a wider phenomenon within contemporary media. Sperb notes that, in the early 2010s, several films such as *Hugo* (Martin Scorsese, 2011) and *The Artist* (Michel Hazanavicius, 2011) “toyed with the idea of nostalgia for earlier periods of media history at the dawn of the digital transition”.[32] Set in the late 1920s and early 1930s, these films “do not attempt to conceal… anachronistic differences between old and new as much as celebrate their hybridity in reassuringly nostalgic ways”.[33] Such hybridity is particularly foregrounded throughout sections of contemporary mainstream animation.

Admittedly, cel animation had been enhanced by digital techniques and software since the late 1980s. For instance, Pixar’s Computer Animation Production System (CAPS), a camera system capable of recreating a live-action camera, and the Pixar Image Computer (PIC), allowing animators to convert the ink and paint process from 2D to digital, were bought by Disney and used first in *The Little Mermaid* (PIC) and *Beauty and the Beast* (CAPS).[34] This demonstrates that, as early as the late 1980s, the frontier between cel and computer animation was not as clear-cut as the critical discourse and advertising surrounding subsequent animated films stated. Cel-animated *The Princess and the Frog* itself was the product of such hybridity: numerous backgrounds and visual effects were digitally produced, such as fire, explosions, and pixie dust.[35]

Such hybridity was particularly showcased in Disney’s short feature output released at around the same time as the studio’s animated fairy tales, in films such as *Paperman* (John

[31] Carter, “An Analysis of the Character Animation in Disney’s *Tangled*,” 3.
[32] Sperb, *Flickers of Film*, 3.
[33] Ibid, 6.
[34] Haswell, “To Infinity and Back Again,” 9-10.
[35] Kurtti, *The Art of The Princess and the Frog,* 122.

Kahrs, 2012) and *Get a Horse!* (Lauren MacMullan, 2013). Helen Haswell argues that the aesthetic of these shorts was greatly influenced by Pixar's recent experimentation with traditional 2D animation techniques: the studio aimed to achieve a "look that is altogether non-artificial, analogue, and nostalgic", echoing the organic imperfections of hand-drawn animation described by Chomet and Satrapi.[36] Disney's shorts similarly blend the flat, expressive aesthetic of hand-drawn animation with the "stability and refinement of computer animation".[37] For example, *Get A Horse!* recreates the look of a 1920s black-and-white Mickey Mouse short film. The cartoon characters are propelled into the 3D coloured world of a cinema room, in which the short film they had just inhabited is screened. As Haswell argues, Pixar and Disney's application of the most advanced computer-animation techniques to experiment with an organic aesthetic can be interpreted as a clever strategy, making "digital animation marketable to wide-ranging, intergenerational audiences, including to age groups that could be potentially alienated by the perfection of CG animation".[38] These Disney shorts could indeed be seen as nostalgic vehicles for the studio's hand-drawn animated past. *Paperman* and *Get a Horse!* were released in theatres along with *Wreck-It Ralph* and *Frozen*, respectively. The inclusion of these shorts, functioning as introductions to the main feature-length films, could itself be interpreted as facilitating the transition to the more obviously digital, three-dimensional look of *Wreck-It Ralph* and *Frozen* for an intergenerational audience.

The pairing of *Paperman* and *Wreck-It Ralph* is particularly remarkable in that sense. *Paperman* is characterised by a flat hand-drawn aesthetic, featuring a black-and-white love story set in the 1940s or 1950s in which sheets of *paper* play a pivotal role in reuniting the two lovers. The short is then followed by colourful 3D computer-animated feature-length *Wreck-It*

[36] This challenge to the photorealistic aesthetic that characterises mainstream CG animation is most noticeable in Pixar's short films *Day & Night* (Teddy Newton, 2010) and *La Luna* (Enrico Casarosa, 2011). Haswell, "To Infinity and Back Again," 1.
[37] Haswell, "To Infinity and Back Again," 10.
[38] Ibid, 7.

Ralph, which includes contemporary racing and first-person shooter video games. The choice of these pairings suggests that hand-drawn and computer-animation styles can happily co-exist and complement each other; the shift to the digital is nostalgically framed and mediated.

It is in this context of nostalgia for the analogue and traditional animation, Pixar's influential development of an "organic aesthetic", and Disney shorts' blend of hand-drawn and digital styles, that *Tangled*'s aesthetic can be best understood. *Tangled*'s co-producer and supervising animator Glen Keane, who had worked as a Disney animator since 1974, played a key role in ensuring that the theoretical principles of hand-drawn animation were smoothly transposed from the cel to the computer.[39] One of the techniques used for the preliminary animation work illustrates these efforts to replicate the effects of hand-drawn animation, while relying on state-of-the-art software:

> By using a digital drawing device known as Wacom Cintiq, Keane was able to critique CG animators' work by drawing on top of their animation on the computer. Keane's 'drawovers' and animation notes allowed the character animators to refine their CG animation to create an *organic* feel that resonated with the traditional Disney aesthetic.[40]

Such efforts parallel the nostalgic impulse behind Disney's contemporary animated shorts described earlier, digitally animated yet aiming for an organic, imperfect aesthetic. The adoption of hand-drawn aesthetic tropes in *Tangled* stands out when observing characters' movement. Carter's analysis is particularly enlightening in that respect. Carter observes that *Tangled* includes "moments of broad cartoon motion" reflecting the emotional context of the scene".[41] As opposed to "realistic" motion, which could be understood as imitating movement within a photorealistic context, "broad cartoon motion" features squash and stretch, "smears and timing that is typical of a more stylised cartoon approach".[42] This aesthetic is particularly

[39] Carter, "An Analysis of the Character Animation in Disney's *Tangled*," 3.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid, 19.
[42] Ibid, 15.

noticeable in scenes including slapstick and functioning as comic relief, such as the first encounter between Flynn and palace horse Maximus. Flynn tries to escape with the crown he has stolen and put into his satchel. When he inadvertently throws it away from Maximus, it lands on a tree branch near a ravine. Each one tries to retrieve the satchel before the other, and they wrestle their way forward. Maximus bites Flynn's leg, and the latter falls onto the ground. As Carter observes, Flynn's pose "is in full extension and the animator has stretched the entire body… As Flynn impacts the ground… the body appears flat, and the rib cage and buttocks [are] noticeably squashed down".[43] When Flynn stands up and pursues his chase, his body shape returns to its initial state. These instances of "squash and stretch" are paired with other comic manipulations of the animated body: Flynn is subjected to numerous shocks, bumping into planks for comic effect and without being significantly injured. These instances of slapstick draw on earlier hand-drawn cartoons and contrast with the photorealistic depiction of the body associated with computer animation. Christopher Holliday notes that computer-animated features generally "avoid the physical comedy of stretching, splintering, crumpling, discoloration and squashing" because computer-animated violence is mostly closer to live-action cinema.[44] Films such as DreamWorks' *How to Train Your Dragon* or Pixar's *Up* "frequently make spectators aware of the frailty and fragility of characters' bodies".[45] *Tangled*'s moments of cartoon slapstick subtly and playfully challenge such a computer-animated aesthetic, building on the distinctive style and history of Disney's cel animation.

Such reproduction of what *Tangled*'s producer Roy Conli terms the "Disney feel and look" also relies on multiple intertextual references to Disney's hand-drawn canon.[46] For example, directors Greno and Howard reported that *Tangled*'s colour schemes and shape

[43] Carter, "An Analysis of the Character Animation in Disney's *Tangled*," 13; 16.
[44] Holliday, *The Computer-Animated Film*, 180.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Quoted in Kurtti, *The Art of Tangled*, 32.

language were inspired by Mary Blair's conceptual work for *Cinderella*, and the thick-beamed buildings of the animated kingdom were influenced by *Pinocchio*'s village.[47] Carter notes that, in order "to create a more *organic* feel… [*Tangled*'s] artists adopted a shape language that reduces the use of parallel lines by 'wedging' straight shapes against curves".[48] The imperfect, expressive aesthetic found in Disney's past animated fairy tales – absence of symmetry, curvy architecture – was subtly recreated via computer animation.

This nostalgic aesthetic recreation was particularly praised by reviewers, as illustrated throughout accounts of the musical sequence "I See the Light:" this sequence is representative of Disney's subtle use of computer-animated techniques to foreground effects reminiscent of hand-drawn animation, and even pre-digital art. Rapunzel, Flynn and Pascal the chameleon are sitting in a rowing boat, gazing up in wonder at the night sky illuminated by hundreds of floating paper lanterns released by the kingdom's inhabitants. As directors Greno and Howard point out, the film takes advantage of the expressive lighting made possible thanks to computer animation: countless dots in muted shades of orange and pink are gradually spread across the screen.[49] The scope of this spectacular show of lights is revealed by the computer-generated imitation of a tracking shot, with the "camera" circling Rapunzel and then showcasing the illuminated kingdom through a long shot. Like the characters, the audience is immersed in the experience through the imitation of three-dimensional space.

This sequence was described as an "uncommonly pretty visual experience" by Ann Hornaday (*Washington Post*) thanks to a "dazzling colour palette" reminiscent of Maxfield Parrish's works.[50] Similarly, Dan Kois (*Village Voice*) argued that *Tangled*'s visuals, although

[47] Greno and Howard, foreword, 7.
[48] Carter, "An Analysis of the Character Animation in Disney's *Tangled*," 5.
[49] Greno and Howard, foreword, 7.
[50] Ann Hornaday, "*Tangled*: Disney's Take on Rapunzel Is as Gorgeous as It Is Engaging," *The Washington Post*, 24 November 2010, accessed 12 February 2018, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/23/AR2010112306966.html.

"generated inside a computer… [are] as warm and rich as a painting".[51] Such an emphasis on the artistry and appeal of the 2D look of "I See the Light" is further developed by A. O. Scott (*New York Times*): "it departs from the usual 3D insistence on deep focus and sharply defined images, creating an experience that is almost tactile in its dreamy softness".[52] Considering these accounts, it seems that what makes "I See the Light" a particularly remarkable sequence is the way computer animation successfully imitates and magnifies the organic aesthetic of pre-digital art and animation. Such praise echoes reviewers' admiration for the "retro" aesthetic of *The Princess and the Frog*, nostalgically referring to the organic appeal of cel animation, as exemplified by Tom Huddleston's (*Time Out*) review: "with its sensuous, hand-drawn animation, soft pastel palette… this is an exercise in retro recreation".[53] Paradoxically, it was thanks to the latest developments in computer animation that it was possible to create *Tangled*'s particular aesthetic, distanced from the perceived coldness and artificiality of the digital. Therefore, *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled* build on and sustain viewers' nostalgic longing for traditional cel animation, in spite of the potentially alienating use of state-of-the-art digital technologies. Because nostalgia is such a key element in the production, advertising, reception and consumption of Disney products, and animated fairy tales more particularly, the studio has accommodated hand-drawn and computer-animated aesthetics, toning down tensions between the two styles.

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The Princess and the Frog and *Tangled*'s aesthetic represents the first layer of mediated nostalgia which forms the basis for Disney's construction of fairy-tale romance. Following *The*

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[51] Dan Kois, "*Tangled* Looks and Feels Great, So Why Is Disney Selling It Short?" *The Village Voice*, 24 November 2010, accessed 13 February 2018, http://www.villagevoice.com/film/tangled-looks-and-feels-great-so-why-is-disney-selling-it-short-6429266.
[52] Scott, "Back to the Castle."
[53] Tom Huddleston, "*The Princess and the Frog*," *Time Out*, 26 January 2010, accessed 10 February 2018, http://www.timeout.com/london/film/the-princess-and-the-frog.

Princess and the Frog, *Tangled* appropriates the style of cel animation through computer animation, transposing the feel of the analogue to the digital. This sense of nostalgia, namely this return to the organic warmth of hand-drawn animation, is permitted and conveyed through state-of-the-art computer graphics. Such an aesthetic functions as a unique framework for Disney's nostalgic mediation between fairy-tale fantasies and contemporary romance.

Before turning to a detailed analysis of *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled*'s re-appropriation of genres of romance, it is essential to address another layer of Disney nostalgia, which directly impacts on the studio's generic reworking: Disney's self-reflexive nostalgia. *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled* overflow with intertextual references, building on Disney's rich canon and the aura of the Disney brand itself. A specific mood and atmosphere are recreated in order to act as baits, drawing the intergenerational audience in through nostalgic childhood memories.

Self-Reflexive Nostalgia: Reviving Memories of Watching, Visiting, and Consuming Disney

As Kristen Drotner points out, because Disney "for so long has been associated with children's culture, nearly all ages have met the brand's narratives, characters, and merchandise".[54] Television programmes, DVD reissues, and live-action remakes sustain such nostalgia, endlessly reviving and readapting past Disney films. The film texts themselves are multi-layered nostalgic experiences: *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled* reveal the extent to which Disney quotes the studio's past animated films, from subtle references to more obvious narrative elements. This network of references is multifaceted, as these fairy tales also recreate the atmosphere of another set of iconic Disney products: Disney's theme parks. The

[54] Kristen Drotner, "Disney Discourses, or Mundane Globalization," in *European Culture and the Media*, ed. Ib Bondebjerg and Peter Golding (Bristol: Intellect, 2004), 109.

reproduction of such familiar tropes facilitates nostalgia among older audiences for childhood memories of consuming Disney and watching the studio's animated features. As the opening of each film shows, fairy-tale storytelling is the entry point for this nostalgic, self-reflexive experience.

The Princess and the Frog particularly facilitates viewers' nostalgia from the start, with a scene which may have been – or still be – experienced by the audience: children (Tiana and Charlotte) are being read a fairy tale by an adult (Tiana's mother). Added to the fairy-tale décor of Charlotte's room, overflowing with princess dolls and costumes, a fairy-tale book is introduced. The illustrations and formulaic plot are reminiscent of Brothers Grimm's "The Frog Prince": a beautiful princess kisses a frog, who is transformed into a handsome prince, "they were married and lived happily ever after." Featuring a book in the opening of a Disney animated feature is a recurrent trope that goes as far as *Snow White*, repeated in films such as *Pinocchio*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Sword in the Stone* (Wolfgang Reitherman, 1963), *The Jungle Book*, *Robin Hood* (Wolfgang Reitherman, 1973), and *Enchanted*. Writing on *Snow White*, Moen points out that such an opening "draws upon associations between fairy-tale films and illustrated children's books".[55] Therefore, the opening of *The Princess and the Frog* not only explicitly refers to earlier Disney animated features, but also positions itself within the wider fairy-tale genre, explicitly foregrounding its literary heritage and its association with childhood. The little girls' naïve and childlike sense of wonder while listening to the tale crystallises this association.

Contrasting with the opening from most Disney animated features, however, *The Princess and the Frog* features its fairy-tale book as part of the diegesis: the pages do not turn on their own, contrary to *Snow White*'s book, but are turned by Tiana's mother Eudora;

[55] Moen, *Film and Fairy Tales*, 180.

Cinderella's extra-diegetic voiceover is replaced by Eudora's diegetic voice. The book actually plays a pivotal narrative role, introducing the plot about to unfold. Later on, frog Naveen uses the same fairy-tale book to convince Tiana to kiss him, persuaded that the depicted events will come true. Paralleling the fairy-tale story, Tiana will indeed kiss a frog, which will ultimately be transformed into Prince Naveen, although some twists will appear along the way. The film is in dialogue with its source, and recognises its own status as a fairy tale. This overt self-reflexivity reminds the viewers that *The Princess and the Frog*, just like "The Frog Prince", is a fairy tale, a narrative which, at first sight, is rather formulaic and predictable. The Disney audience is not disoriented at first thanks to the familiar and nostalgic patterns introduced, but the fact that the film calls attention to itself as a fairy tale also encourages viewers to think about the genre and their expectations from it – not unlike *Shrek*'s opening. Therefore, in *The Princess and the Frog*, the opening fairy-tale book plays a key role in both connecting the film with a wider intertextual fairy-tale network, including past Disney fairy tales and their literary heritage, and self-reflexively underlining potential twists – Disney fairy-tale nostalgia is mediated through contemporary generic updates.

Tangled's use of self-reflexivity relies on different narrative strategies. The opening does not feature a book but a "Wanted" poster of Flynn Rider, accompanied by the latter's voice over: "This is the story of how I died. Don't worry, this is actually a very fun story and the truth is, it isn't even mine. This is the story of a girl named Rapunzel, and it starts with the sun. Now, once upon a time…" His falsely dramatic tone and the "Wanted" poster overtly mislead the audience who may expect a swashbuckling adventure instead of a traditional fairy tale. In an effort that calls to mind Disney's post-*Princess and the Frog* marketing, Flynn's labelling of *Tangled* as a "very fun story" seems to distance the film from the Disney formula and its literary heritage. It evokes more explicitly *Shrek*'s opening, dismissing the solemn aura of the genre. Yet, the misleading aspect of Flynn's opening lines is short-lived. The formulaic fairy-tale

phrase “once upon a time”, followed by the mention of predictable tropes and characters (“the kingdom was ruled by a beloved King and Queen”, “a princess was born, with beautiful golden hair”) restores the fairy-tale genre after its apparent dismissal.

Flynn’s introductory voice-over actually re-establishes earlier fairy-tale tropes, underlining the folkloric origins of the genre, and refers to another strand of Disney fairy tales. Flynn does not solely tell a story: he directly involves the audience in his narration, drawing their attention to specific elements and making sure they follow the tale: “Oh, you see that old woman over there? You might want to remember her. She’s kind of important;” “all right, you get the gist;” “I’ll give you a hint.” What Moen describes as the link between fairy tales and the spoken word of the storyteller, surrounded by a circle of listeners, is made explicit through Flynn’s lines.[56] This folkloric dimension had been embraced in Disney animated fairy tales such as *Pinocchio*, in which narrator Jiminy Cricket, standing near the fairy-tale book, directly asks viewers: “I’ll bet a lot of you folks don’t believe that… about a wish coming true... do you? Well, I didn’t, either… but let me tell you what made me change my mind. One night a long time ago…” Similarly, in *Aladdin,* after the musical prologue “Arabian Nights”, a peddler greets the viewer as a potential customer and soon begins the tale: “This is no ordinary lamp! It once changed the course of a young man’s life… Perhaps you would like to hear the tale? It begins on a dark night…” In these three instances, *Pinocchio*, *Aladdin* and *Tangled* all start by misdirecting the viewer/listener, taking their disbelief into account and gradually drawing them into the tale. Although *Tangled* dismisses Disney’s fairy-tale book openings, it revives the tradition of oral storytelling present in past Disney fairy tales: nostalgic intertextual references are subtly inserted through self-reflexive narration.

[56] Moen, *Film and Fairy Tales*, 182.

Through different strategies, both *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled* self-reflexively draw on the nostalgic experience of listening to fairy tales and watching Disney films. The openings invite viewers to experience Disney's latest fairy tales as a seemingly new, yet highly familiar childlike experience. *The Princess and the Frog*'s and *Tangled*'s settings themselves also play a key role in creating such a familiar atmosphere: magic kingdoms and castles are central within the animated fairy-tale worlds.

Disney's animated fairy tales all open with a fairy-tale castle, whether it is pictured on the opening fairy-tale book, as in *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*, introduced as the first animated image of the film, as in *Snow White* and *Beauty and the Beast*, or at the end of the credits' song, as in *The Little Mermaid* and *Aladdin*. In addition to intertextually re-introducing the familiar world of Disney films, the fairy-tale castle also calls upon the iconic sight of another Disney fantasy: the company's theme parks. The settings of *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled*, and more specifically their fairy-tale kingdoms and castles, are transformed into an animated version of Disneyland. The reproduction of such a reassuring and enchanting space – the "happiest place on earth" – notably reinforces the nostalgic atmosphere and feel conveyed within the films: with it comes a very specific vision of what a fantasy world is.

Susan Willis describes Disney World (Florida, USA) as "an immense nostalgia machine whose staging and specific attractions are generationally coded to strike a chord with the various categories of its guests".[57] For example, the rides at the Magic Kingdom Park span several decades of the studio's animated fairy-tale history, potentially appealing to all ages. Visitors can step inside the castle from *Cinderella* (1950), "relive magical moments" from *The Little Mermaid* (1989) at the "Under the Sea" attraction, or "meet" (an actress performing) Rapunzel

[57] Susan Willis, "The Problem with Pleasure," in *Inside the Mouse: Work and Play at Disney World*, ed. The Project on Disney (London: Rivers Oram, 1995), 10.

from *Tangled* (2010) at the "Princess Fairy-tale Hall".[58] These examples hint at the particularity of the Disney theme parks: their "overall narrative character".[59] As Shelton Waldrep explains, the visitors' "experience is of a three-dimensional cinematic event that includes processions, sets, costumes, sound effects, and props": visitors are made to feel as if they were walking into a real-life Disney animated fairy tale.[60] Such an impression is conveyed at the very entrance of the park, from which the iconic fairy-tale castle from the Magic Kingdom can be spotted. As Martha Bayless explains, the castle "provides a cue that the visitor is about to enter the filmic narrative of the park. It is the focus of the establishing shot… that sets the scene for the story".[61] The castle also echoes the first sequences from Disney animated fairy tales, and the studio's opening logo. Correspondingly, in *Tangled*, the kingdom's castle is displayed after Flynn's first lines. *The Princess and the Frog* features Charlotte's house in the introductory shot of the film: the design of this large mansion with elaborate turrets evokes that of a fairy-tale castle.

Figure 8: *Tangled* [frame capture]

The intrinsic link between these real-life magic kingdoms and their animated counterparts explicitly stands out in *Tangled*. The production team took research trips to

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[58] "Magic Kingdom Park," Walt Disney World, accessed 14 February 2018, https://disneyworld.disney.go.com/en_GB/destinations/magic-kingdom/.
[59] Scott Bukatman, *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 16.
[60] Shelton Waldrep, "Story Time," in *Inside the Mouse: Work and Play at Disney World*, ed. The Project on Disney (London: Rivers Oram, 1995), 81.
[61] Martha Bayless, "Disney's Castles and the Work of the Medieval in the Magic Kingdom," in *The Disney Middle Ages: A Fairy-Tale and Fantasy Past*, ed. Susan Aronstein and Tison Pugh (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 46.

Disneyland in order to "learn how to best capture the charm of a classic storybook in 3D," in co-director Howard's terms.[62] This multidimensional intertextuality, calling upon memories of both past Disney films and visits to Disney parks, reinforces the sense of nostalgia present in the film. *Tangled*'s kingdom recreates Disneyland's harmonious and reassuringly safe setting. Such a feeling of security and cosiness comes from Disney's specific approach to the architecture and design of its theme-park castles. Bayless explains that medieval castles in their historical context were "martial displays of power… not palaces but fortifications, emblems of authority and intimidation".[63] By contrast, the parks' fairy-tale castles are conceived to be "inviting play spaces".[64] Disneyland's castle, for example, is both large and small, avoiding the intimidating effect of medieval fortresses. *Tangled*'s castle and kingdom were designed with the same approach. Kurtti observes that "the world of the film has been scaled to feel charming, cosy, and inviting… surfaces and environments curve to envelop the viewers".[65] Similarly, production designer Douglas Rogers describes the kingdom's village as "friendly, accessible, intimate… you would have a great afternoon exploring it".[66] When Rapunzel first visits the kingdom, she is correspondingly delighted, gazing at the castle in admiration and excitedly pointing at it while uttering an enthusiastic "wow" – just like a child visiting Disneyland for the first time (Figure 8). Hearing a band playing music, she spontaneously starts dancing and invites inhabitants to join her, forming an improvised – Disney – parade of sorts. Innocent fun and friendly play seem to prevail in *Tangled*'s animated theme park.

Such an atmosphere becomes rather problematic in *The Princess and the Frog*. Despite a more recognisable, "realistic" setting compared to *Tangled*, the film also recreates Disney's familiar theme-park feel through a nostalgic reconstruction of the American past. While Disney

[62] Greno and Howard, foreword, 7.
[63] Bayless, "Disney's Castles and the Work of the Medieval in the Magic Kingdom," 39; 41.
[64] Ibid, 39.
[65] Kurtti, *The Art of Tangled*, 31.
[66] Quoted in Kurtti, *The Art of Tangled*, 136.

fairy tales tend to be vague in terms of temporality, building on the otherworldly "once upon a time" opening phrase, *The Princess and the Frog*'s historical context is explicitly signposted. At the end of the opening sequence, a streetcar passenger reads a newspaper covering President Wilson's election. After a flash forward, Tiana's father appears on a picture in soldier uniform; a medal hanging on the frame hints at his death during World War I. The second featured song, "Down in New Orleans," does not leave any doubt on the location. The film then becomes a multi-layered nostalgic experience. *The Princess and the Frog* combines aesthetic nostalgia for hand-drawn animation, self-reflexive nostalgia for earlier Disney fairy tales and their associated childhood memories, and historical nostalgia: the film crystallises nostalgia for the past of animation, Disney's past, and the American past. Such multi-layered nostalgia forms the basis for the transformation of 1920s New Orleans into the fantasy land of Disney theme parks.

Henry Giroux and Grace Pollock explain that some Disney theme-park attractions are constructed as an "unproblematic celebration of the American people," experienced through sentiment and nostalgia.[67] "Lands" such as "Main Street, USA" and "Frontierland" reconstruct an idealised American golden age – whether that be "small-town Middle America of the early 1900s" or the "Old West" – creating an intensely nostalgic experience.[68] From a genre perspective, such attractions function in the same way as what Cook terms the "nostalgic memory film". The latter includes heritage cinema, period melodrama, westerns and remakes, and "reconstructs an idealised past as a site of pleasurable contemplation and yearning".[69] Cook notes that memory films tend to put on display "an array of period artefacts… to satisfy the audience's desire to consume, rather than engage critically with history".[70] The Disney parks

[67] Giroux and Pollock, *The Mouse that Roared*, 36.
[68] "Main Street, U.S.A.," Disneyland Resort, accessed 15 February 2018, https://disneyland.disney.go.com/au/disneyland/main-street-usa/; "Frontierland," Disneyland Resort, accessed February 15, 2018, https://disneyland.disney.go.com/au/disneyland/frontierland/.
[69] Cook, *Screening the Past*, 4.
[70] Ibid, 201.

remarkably concretise such an uncritical desire to consume the past – or rather, a fantasized version of it – as illustrated in Disney's New Orleans Square. The latter is a nostalgically romanticised 19th-century version of New Orleans, functioning as a theme-park parallel to *The Princess and the Frog*'s 1920s animated counterpart. Both versions of New Orleans include local architectural and culinary ingredients: for example, Tiana cooks gumbo and bakes beignets, and Disneyland's "French Market Restaurant" serves jambalaya and Cajun meat loaf.[71] *The Princess and the Frog* also features allusions to 1920s fashion and music, quoting iconic jazz musicians such as Louis Armstrong and Sidney Bechet. The design of the film was reportedly inspired by the "ethnic American art from Harlem renaissance artists such as Aaron Douglas", especially notable in Tiana's dream sequence "Almost There".[72]

However, this recreated fantasyland notably avoids more problematic historical aspects. Indeed, the 1920s was also marked by the reestablishment of the Ku Klux Klan, Jim Crow segregation laws, race riots, and Southern lynching.[73] Disney's perspective on this troubled past is comparable to that of the "nostalgic memory film" described by Cook. At first glance, the animated re-construction of New Orleans is that of a joyful melting pot, in which both African Americans and whites dance and play jazz music in the streets, and a rich white southern belle (Charlotte) can be best friends with the daughter of her black seamstress (Tiana). This simplified and nostalgic fantasyland uses motifs signifying "1920s New Orleans" and "Louisiana" to viewers, while glossing over the more sensitive aspects of the period. Segregation laws, for example, are only hinted at: the resulting racial order is recreated in a way which both suggests that it was the unquestioned norm, and that both races lived harmoniously

[71] "French Market Restaurant," Disneyland Resort, accessed 27 July 2018, https://disneyland.disney.go.com/au/disneyland/french-market-restaurant/.
[72] Kurtti, *The Art of The Princess and the Frog,* 50.
[73] Ajay Gehlawat, "The Strange Case of *The Princess and the Frog*: Passing and the Elision of Race," *Journal of African American Studies* 14 (2010): 420, accessed 11 April 2012, doi: 10.1007/s12111-010-9126-1; Montré Aza Missouri, *Black Magic Woman and Narrative Film: Race, Sex and Afro-Religiosity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 173.

under these laws. A particularly representative example is Tiana's journey from Charlotte's house to her own home. When she and her mother Eudora step into the streetcar, the white driver's wordless salutation, followed by their silent walk to the back, hints at the "mutually recognized – and respected – colour line".[74] Tiana gazes at the window, amazed at the opulence of the mansions from the white Garden District, which gradually dissolve into the significantly more modest houses from the black Ninth Ward. Such a smooth transition admittedly acknowledges the economic discrepancies between the two districts, and the strict separation between the two communities; yet, the dissolve also prevents viewers from lingering on such stark differences, and from subsequently interrogating the causes and implications of African Americans' living conditions. This sequence exemplifies how *The Princess and the Frog* avoids fully addressing the economic issues and racial tensions underlying 1920s New Orleans' problematic social order. The animated film transforms the segregated city into an enchanting fairy-tale world where – American – dreams come true.

Such a transformation frames Tiana's successful narrative trajectory. Thanks to her determination and strong work ethic, she ultimately manages to buy her own restaurant. Although she learns early on from white real estate agents that she has been outbid ("a little woman of your background would have had her hands full trying to run a big business like that") there are few social and economic obstacles impeding her subsequent upward mobility. As Montré Aza Missouri points out, *The Princess and the Frog* affirms that "even the most disadvantaged of the socio-economic stratification (young poor black women) should be capable of achieving the American dream," since "racial injustice and economic struggle are non-existent" – or rather, glossed over and heavily downplayed.[75] Tiana's entrepreneurial success contributes to Disney's idealised picture of 1920s segregated New Orleans. Through

[74] Gehlawat, "The Strange Case of *The Princess and the Frog*," 420.
[75] Aza Missouri, *Black Magic Woman and Narrative Film*, 169.

The Princess and the Frog's nostalgic vision, the latter becomes another magic kingdom, an idealistic fantasy place. Bayless notes that, "to enjoy oneself requires precisely that horrors and oppressions be overcome and effaced. The fairy-tale world of Disney narrative is a dream vision in which all can end happily".[76] Therefore, the disjunction between *The Princess and the Frog*'s enchanting multicultural and jazzy 1920s New Orleans, and the prospects of African Americans in the Jim Crow era, is fundamental to Disney's familiar, reassuring, and nostalgic fairy-tale atmosphere.

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Developing further Disney's multi-layered nostalgia, *Tangled* and *The Princess and the Frog* recreate the atmosphere surrounding, and the feel of watching and consuming the Disney brand through an intertextual and paratextual network related to fairy-tale storytelling. The opening sequence of each animated film acknowledges their status as fairy tales, mediating some DreamWorks self-reflexive elements with more familiar Disney tropes. As the story world unfolds, *Tangled* and *The Princess and the Frog* recreate the fantasyland of Disney's theme parks in which innocent fun and play prevail, and – in the case of the *The Princess and the Frog* – the more problematic aspects of the American past are magically downplayed and glossed over.

This nostalgically enchanting setting, intrinsically linked to the childlike world of fairy tales, contributes to the nostalgic basis for Disney's construction of fantasy romance. Evoking both the past of animation and the past of Disney fairy tales, *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled*'s multi-layered nostalgia is essential to contextualise and understand their celebratory return to old-fashioned and traditional depictions of fairy-tale love, building on the studio's iconic formula. The distinctive multi-layered nostalgic atmosphere and feel developed through

[76] Bayless, "Disney's Castles and the Work of the Medieval in the Magic Kingdom," 54.

The Princess and the Frog and *Tangled*'s aesthetic, intertextual references, and borrowings from the nostalgic memory film constitute the ideal framework to revive earlier portrayals of romance idealised in contemporary post-feminist romantic comedies.

Postfeminist Nostalgia: Re-mediating Fairy-Tale Romance

Writing on Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*, Deborah Ross explains that:

> Neither age, divorce, nor parenthood has yet made me cynical enough to see the ending of this movie without a sob of satisfaction. But then Disney did begin training me to react in just that way from a very early age (the first movie I ever saw, at the age of five, was *Sleeping Beauty*).[77]

Ross's "sob of satisfaction" points to many viewers' embrace of the predictability of the Disney formula, including a happy ending featuring the reunited couple blissfully waltzing, as in both *Sleeping Beauty* and *Beauty and the Beast*. Such familiar tropes echo the reassuring, simpler but irretrievable times of childhood and fairy-tale stories in which love seems like a magical fantasy – before "divorce" and "parenthood." Such reclaiming of enchanted fairy-tale romances is at the core of contemporary romantic comedies, and is magnified throughout *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled*.

Writing on *Enchanted*, Bacchilega and Rieder note that viewers must willingly suspend their disbelief in order to "indulge in the guilty pleasures of unreconstructed romantic fantasy".[78] Indeed, in spite of *Enchanted*'s parodic and knowing approach towards Disney's fairy-tale romance, sincere "true love" triumphs over irony and cynicism. This ultimate return to "unreconstructed" romance particularly characterises contemporary romantic comedies. As opposed to the 1970s wave of radical and nervous romantic comedies which "discredited monogamy and romantic idealism," Krutnik explains that more recent romantic comedies

[77] Deborah Ross, "Escape from Wonderland: Disney and the Female Imagination," *Marvels & Tales* 18 (2004): 63, accessed 4 May 2014, doi: 10.1353/mat.2004.0016.
[78] Bacchilega and Rieder, "Mixing It Up," 32.

identify "love as something from a long-lost era that needs to be rediscovered in the modern world".[79] This idea manifests literally in films such as *Kate and Leopold* (James Mangold, 2001) and *Enchanted*, in which a character from a (fantasy) past – a nineteenth-century Duke in the former, a fairy-tale princess in the latter – is thrust into modern-day New York, and brings dreamy romance to cynical and pragmatic professionals.

Contemporary romantic comedies also remobilise "the signifiers of old-fashioned romance" by invoking or re-adapting "keynote romantic texts of the past".[80] For example, *Never Been Kissed* (Raja Gosnell, 1999) repeatedly refers to Shakespeare's "As You Like It"; *You've Got Mail* (Nora Ephron, 1998) is a remake of Ernst Lubitsch' classic *The Shop Around the Corner* (1940); in *Easy A* (Will Gluck, 2010), generically knowing teenage heroine Olive longs for the romance and "chivalry" portrayed in earlier 1980s teen films such as *Sixteen Candles* (John Hughes, 1984), *Can't Buy Me Love* (Steve Rash, 1987) and *Say Anything* (Cameron Crowe, 1989). Such a dialogue with the past foregrounds romantic-comedy nostalgia for earlier depictions of love. These films "reference times when, it is assumed, romance was more straightforward".[81] In this context, nostalgia characterises a feeling of longing for idealised past romances in which male leads were perceived as "chivalric," cynicism was supposedly absent, and love triumphed in unequivocal happy endings.

In the context of Disney animation, the "keynote" romantic texts from the past are earlier animated fairy tales such as *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast* and *Aladdin*. Such films evoke times perceived as more simple and carefree to the audience: the irretrievable past of childhood and innocence. *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled* nostalgically revive old-fashioned romance building on the perceived sincerity and straightforwardness of these earlier animated fairy tales.

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[79] Krutnik, "Conforming Passions?" 138; 140.
[80] Ibid, 139.
[81] Jeffers McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 86.

Figure 9: *Tangled* [frame capture]

Fairy-tale romance is crystallised in the recurring Disney trope of the romantic duet, through which the protagonists either become aware of their nascent romantic feelings, or declare their love to each other, often combining song and dance. Examples include *Cinderella*'s "So This Is Love," *Sleeping Beauty*'s "I Know You," and *Aladdin*'s "A Whole New World." *Tangled*'s "I See the Light" follows on from these duets; the evolution of the characters' feelings, hinted at in previous sequences, is made "crystal clear" – as they sing it – and represented as a narrative shift. Once Rapunzel's initial wish – leaving her tower to see the flying lanterns released on her birthday – is granted, she slowly realises that her "new dream" is to be with Flynn. This transition is made explicit in her voice-over lyrics. As she happily gazes at the night sky, she then pauses, pondering, and turns to Flynn ("All at once, everything looks different. Now that I see you"). The subsequent verse is sung by Flynn: while he observes her, his voice-over also expresses a new awareness of his romantic feelings ("Now she's here, shining in the starlight. Now she's here, suddenly I know"). As he concludes his verse, he takes her hand, she looks back at him joyfully, and both diegetically sing in unison the chorus, amorously gazing at each other (Figure 9). This mutual acknowledgement is expressed as a

revelation by the protagonists. In *The Princess and the Frog*, Naveen similarly realises his love for Tiana during the romantic song "Ma Belle Evangeline." The metaphor of the light here emphasizes Tiana's beauty in Naveen's eyes, as a close-up of her face accompanies the line "Look how she lights up the sky." Such a phenomenon evokes what Brook describes as a key fairy-tale motif, regularly reprised in romantic comedies: the "awakening," at which point "the true nature of one or both of the protagonists' feelings for each other are realised".[82] Rapunzel and Flynn both finally "see the light", literally and metaphorically. Such a pivotal moment of straightforward, sentimental, magical romance is permitted through the intimate and enchanting setting: Flynn and Rapunzel are rowing on a boat, while a multitude of lanterns light the night sky with their warm muted glow, evoking hand-drawn animation aesthetics. The kingdom's castle stands in the background, evoking Disney's paratext and intertext associated with childlike wonder and fairy-tale fantasies. "I See the Light" exemplifies how Disney's multi-layered nostalgic feel and atmosphere uniquely frame and form the basis for Disney's return to earlier depictions of old-fashioned, formulaic romance.

Such nostalgic revival is further developed in sequences featuring the princesses being rescued by their chivalric partners, as exemplified in *Tangled*. Flynn ultimately performs the role of the courageous and fearless Disney Prince mounting on his powerful steed, echoing *Sleeping Beauty*'s Prince Phillip. In a spectacular action scene, he escapes from guards in order to reach Rapunzel, held captive by villainous Mother Gothel. As he enters the tower, the latter fatally stabs him. While Rapunzel tries to save Flynn, he uses a shard of glass to cut her magical healing hair, breaking the enchantment that maintained Gothel alive, but sacrificing himself as a result. Such sequences foreground the hero's bravery, selflessness, and complete devotion to the heroine, reviving an old-fashioned conception of the male romantic lead that contemporary

[82] Brook, "Engaging Marriage," 147.

romantic-comedy heroines often long for. For example, in *Bridget Jones's Baby* (Sharon Maguire, 2016), the lonely pregnant protagonist, locked outside her house, wonders whether "knights in shining armour" still exist. The appearance of her love interest Mark Darcy, who carries her to the hospital, magically answers her question. Bridget's happy ending culminates with her wedding to her chivalric "knight" – the familiar conclusion of fairy-tale romances.

Bradford notes that the set-piece finales of Disney fairy tales predictably "comprise weddings, celebrations, and scenes in which newly married lovers depart for their new lives".[83] Before the 2000s, only a few Disney fairy tales actually featured onscreen weddings: *Cinderella* and *The Little Mermaid*. Yet, matrimony played a central role within fairy-tale narratives. A recurrent plot of the pre-*Shrek* Disney fairy tale was for the young woman to come to terms with the necessity of an arranged marriage before finding her "true love", as in *Sleeping Beauty* and *Aladdin*. Matrimony, or its prospect, was inherent in Disney's happy endings. From Snow White dreaming about her future husband, as epitomized in "Some Day My Prince Will Come", to Jasmine wanting to marry "for love", Disney fairy-tale heroines all experience a happy ending through – future – marriage.

In numerous romantic comedies, the happy reunion of the lead couple also culminates with the representation of a wedding, "strongly associated with romantic closure".[84] Brook argues that in films such as *The Wedding Planner* (Adam Shankman, 2001) and *27 Dresses* (Anne Fletcher, 2008), or any variation or adaptation of the *Cinderella* tale, the final onscreen (or offscreen) wedding is the "promise of happiness ever after".[85] The contemporary persistence, or return, of the wedding trope is especially striking considering that earlier romantic-comedy strands such as the nervous romance deliberately avoided it. Such a revival can be understood when taking into consideration the post-feminist sensibility at the core of

[83] Bradford, "'Where Happily Ever After Happens Every Day,'" 180.
[84] Brook, "Engaging Marriage," 150.
[85] Ibid.

mainstream contemporary romantic comedies. Tasker and Negra argue that post-feminism combines "empowerment rhetoric with traditionalist identity paradigms".[86] In high-profile romantic-comedy franchises such as *The Princess Diaries* (2001; 2004), *Bridget Jones* (2001; 2004; 2016) and *Sex and the City* (2008; 2010) knowing comments on gender roles and coupledom are juxtaposed with the protagonists' embrace of conventional femininity, expressed through their dreams of soul mates and grand weddings. Angela McRobbie explains that such "very traditional forms of happiness" were often criticised within second-wave feminist discourses.[87] Staging weddings as affluent and fantasized spectacles, post-feminist romantic comedies nostalgically reclaim the "treasured pleasures" of traditional femininity, supposedly taken away by the "censorious" politics of second-wave feminism.[88] Negra argues that this phenomenon has become more noticeable since the 2000s: the bridal industry has intensified, along with the expansion in ancillary "rituals" like bridal showers and bachelorette parties.[89] In parallel, the prominence of weddings within popular culture targeted to women has heightened, evident in the lavish coverage of weddings on television and the emergence of "wedding films" such as *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (Joel Zwick, 2002) and its sequel (Kirk Jones, 2016), *Bride Wars* (Gary Winnick, 2009), and *The Big Wedding* (Justin Zackham, 2013).[90]

[86] Negra and Tasker, "Introduction," 18.
[87] McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, 20.
[88] Ibid, 20-1.
[89] Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (London: Routledge, 2009), 52.
[90] Ibid.

Figure 10 and 11: *The Princess and the Frog* [frame capture]

This romantic-comedy return to fantasies of grand weddings is magnified through Disney's multi-layered nostalgic lens. *The Princess and the Frog* closes with Tiana and Naveen's double wedding, both as frogs and humans. The magical aura of Tiana and Naveen's first ceremony is epitomized through the couple's metamorphosis. The other-worldly quality of its setting, with the couple surrounded by anthropomorphised animals, bathed in sunlight, and surrounded by beautiful flower beds, nostalgically echoes *Snow White*'s happy ending. In the latter, the prince's kiss magically awakens the sleeping princess, while the dwarves and various forest animals jump and dance out of joy. This exhilarating and magical atmosphere is reproduced in *The Princess and the Frog*: Tiana's kiss, as a princess, turns both protagonists back into humans, while all the bayou animals cheer and cry tears of joy. The smooth transition between the "frog" ceremony and the official "human" romantic-comedy ceremony preserves the former's enchanted aura (Figure 10 and 11). The two are linked through a match on action, namely Naveen holding Tiana in his arms, and a dissolve: the tall trees framing the couple are magically replaced by the pillars of a church, their foliage by chandeliers, and the animals by cheering human guests. This double ceremony, nostalgically drawing on and reviving the fantasy of Disney's fairy-tale weddings – newly-wed Tiana and Naveen even leave the church on a Cinderella-style horse-drawn carriage – magnifies the nostalgic reclamation of old-fashioned romantic stagings within contemporary romantic comedies. When Tiana throws her wedding bouquet, Charlotte enthusiastically catches it, like the heroines of *27 Dresses* and *Bride Wars*. This double wedding is immediately, almost magically followed by the resolution

of Tiana's difficulties, depicted through a montage including Tiana buying her restaurant, renovating it with Naveen's help, and successfully opening it: fairy tale and post-feminist romantic comedy converge through the nostalgic revival of romantic happy endings.

This idyllic revival is, to some extent, reproduced in *Tangled*. In the final sequence, Rapunzel is portrayed as a happy daughter, embracing her new-found parents, a happy princess, greeting some of the kingdom's inhabitants, and a happy future bride. While Flynn jokingly steals Rapunzel crown, she grabs it back, and kisses him, while his voice-over comments: "I know what the big question is. Did Rapunzel and I ever get married?" Although his knowing tone adds a degree of playfulness, suggesting an unexpected gender reversal ("I am pleased to tell you that after years and years of asking, and asking, and asking, I finally said yes"), Rapunzel's inclusion within the voice-over restores a more traditional closure:

> Flynn: All right, I asked her.
> Rapunzel: And we're living happily ever after.
> Flynn: Yes, we are.

This last mention of their off-screen wedding, although added as a side note, insists on the connection between the Disney fairy-tale happy ending and matrimony, nostalgically resurging in the studio's latest output. As the final lines of the voice-over accompany the happy-ending kiss, the shot of Rapunzel and Flynn dissolves into that of the kingdom's castle. This recurring, framing image, both brand logo and generic signifier, symbolizes the scope of Disney's multi-layered nostalgia: the basis for the revival of Disney's fairy-tale formula and wedding closure. *Tangled*, like *The Princess and the Frog*, foregrounds and magnifies the nostalgic impulse of contemporary romantic comedies through the reappearance of Disney's magical fantasy weddings.

In the years following the release of *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled*, the animated fairy-tale wedding was reproduced and expanded throughout different outlets and products from the Disney company. The animated short *Tangled Ever After* (Nathan Greno and

Byron Howard, 2012) premiered in theatres before *Beauty and the Beast 3D* in January 2012, and was featured on the *Cinderella: Diamond Edition* Blu-ray and DVD set in October 2012. The parallel between *Tangled Ever After* and *Cinderella* stands out through their idealised depiction of a grand fantasy wedding. Although *Tangled Ever After* focuses mainly on animal sidekicks Maximus and Pascal and the series of comic mishaps following their loss of the wedding rings, it is framed by the staging of a traditional and impressive ceremony, notably absent in the original film. Rapunzel's voice-over directly reinforces the enchanted and idyllic aura of Disney's past fairy-tale weddings: "Everything was perfect, just like I always dreamed it would be," "it was a magical day." The staging of Rapunzel's entrance into the church especially emphasizes the marvellous aspect of the ceremony: as she steps into the light, all the guests turn around to admire her, and several characters, including the groom, are astonished by her bridal beauty. This "Cinderella" moment – being the prettiest at the ball and impressing the prince/male lead – is at the core of the nostalgic reclamation of wedding fantasies within contemporary post-feminist romantic comedies, as exemplified in *27 Dresses*'s long wedding finale.

Disney expanded these romantic fantasies through merchandise, such as the "Rapunzel Wedding Soft Toy Doll," adding to a multitude of wedding-themed children's products.[91] However, children represent a small target for Disney's wedding business. The fairy-tale wedding fantasy is mostly commodified for adult women: Disney Stores offer a wide range of wedding products, from Mickey Mouse wedding rings to bridal flip-flops.[92] The official *Disney's Fairy-Tale Weddings & Honeymoons* website has best capitalised on adults' nostalgia for old-fashioned, romantic happy endings. Chrys Ingraham observes that Disney has become a major player in the wedding-industrial complex and the more recent intensification of the

[91] "Wedding," Disney Store, accessed 18 February 2018, http://www.disneystore.co.uk/search?q=wedding.
[92] "Wedding," Shop Disney, accessed 18 February 2018, https://www.shopdisney.com/search?query=wedding.

bridal culture.[93] Ingraham argues that the many "weddings, happily ever afters, and romantic promises" closing Disney animated fairy tales represent the "foundation for Disney's success" with their Fairy-Tale Wedding business at Disneyland and Disney World.[94] From the mid-2000s onwards, Disney's onscreen fantasy weddings have multiplied, staged in *Enchanted* (2007), *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), *Tangled Ever After* (2012), and the live-action remake *Cinderella* (Kenneth Branagh, 2015). This multiplication conspicuously coincided with the creation of a line of bridal gowns, "Alfred Angelo Bridal Collection" for *Disney's Fairy-Tale Weddings*, inspired by the iconic costumes and looks of Snow White, Cinderella, Aurora, Ariel, Belle, and Jasmine.[95] The release of the latest wave of animated fairy tales paralleled the addition of dresses inspired by Tiana, Rapunzel, and *Frozen*'s Elsa. Disney's enchanted fairy-tale aura is also reproduced throughout every aspect of the wedding experience as provided by "Disney's Fairy-Tale Weddings:" from the "rustic yet romantic appeal" of a "Rapunzel-inspired reception", to a *The Princess and the Frog*-inspired cake as "the perfect marriage of Disney magic and wedding elegance".[96] The semantic tropes and general tone used throughout the website help nostalgically revive Disney's old-fashioned fairy-tale fantasies, transposing their magical and romantic atmosphere onto the "real" purchasable weddings. *The Princess and the Frog*'s "wedding inspiration" particularly crystallises how Disney fairy-tale and theme-park

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[93] Ingraham, *White Weddings*, 87.
[94] Ibid, 87; 103.
[95] "The Disney Fairy-Tale Bridal Collection," Disney's Fairy-Tale Weddings & Honeymoons, accessed 14 March 2016, https://www.disneyweddings.com/disney-boutique/bridal-gowns/. The Alfred Angelo Disney Fairy-Tale Bridal collection is no longer available on the Disney website, and is now stocked on *Serenity Brides*' website.
[96] Korri, "Decor: Rapunzel 'Disney *Tangled*' Inspired Reception," *Ever After Blog* (*Disney's Fairy-Tale Weddings & Honeymoons*), 9 March 2015, accessed 18 February 2018, https://www.disneyweddings.com/ever-after-blog/869-decor-rapunzel-disney-tangled-inspired-reception/; Korri, "Wedding Cake Wednesday: *The Princess and the Frog*," *Ever After Blog* (*Disney's Fairy-Tale Weddings & Honeymoons*), date n/a, accessed 18 February 2018, https://www.disneyweddings.com/ever-after-blog/161-wedding-cake-wednesday-the-princess-and-the-frog.

nostalgia form the basis for the studio's revival of conventional, old-fashioned depictions of romance, magnifying the nostalgic impulse of romantic comedies:

> "There's no wedding like a southern wedding, so this Mardis [sic] Gras season I'm dreaming of colourful southern belle traditions, king cake… and of course New Orleans Square in Disneyland. Built in a romantic yet festive setting of 19th-century Louisiana, New Orleans Square provides a year-round celebratory affair reminiscent of the Old South".[97]

Echoing *The Princess and the Frog*'s enchanted wedding, such a description foregrounds the multi-layered sense of nostalgia experienced through Disney's contemporary fairy tales. Nostalgia for childhood experiences of consuming Disney products (theme parks) and nostalgia for the American past as displayed in Disney's fantasy worlds are combined to frame a dreamlike romantic experience. Such multi-layered nostalgia forms the basis for Disney's transformation of romance into a nostalgic fairy-tale fantasy, epitomized through "Disney's Fairy-Tale Weddings".

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With *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled*, Disney revives a certain conception of old-fashioned romance, magnifying and expanding the convergences between fairy tales and contemporary romantic comedies. The films display love as enchanting ballads, magical kisses, and fantasy weddings, and male leads as chivalric heroes. Building on Disney's multi-layered nostalgia, the animated features strikingly epitomise the romantic-comedy tendency to reclaim earlier depictions and experiences of love. From *The Princess and the Frog*'s happy ending, to *Tangled Ever After* and Disney's "Fairy-Tale Weddings," contemporary romance is turned into a reassuringly familiar, magical, and purchasable fantasy.

[97] Korri, "Happy Mardi Gras from Disney Weddings," *Ever After Blog* (from *Disney's Fairy-Tale Weddings &* Honeymoons), 9 February 2016, accessed 18 February 2018, https://www.disneyweddings.com/ever-after-blog/1071-happy-mardi-gras-from-disney-weddings/?cb=0185.

Conclusion

"All my life, I read about true love and fairy tales. Tia, you found it!" Towards the end of *The Princess and the Frog*, Tiana's friend Charlotte is moved to tears to see frog Naveen and Tiana reunited and declaring their love to each other. Her comment directly associates the fairy-tale genre with a very specific construction of romance, namely unconditional and magical "true love," which also draws back to her memories of fairy-tale storytelling as featured in the opening sequence. Her elaborate princess costume and emotional response reveal how much she holds on to this nostalgic conception of romance – magnifying romantic-comedy heroines' reclamation of old-fashioned fantasies of fairy-tale love. Her reaction mirrors to some extent the audience's potential "sob of satisfaction" on seeing a Disney fairy-tale narrative reassuringly unfold as expected, paralleling childhood memories of watching and consuming the studio's story worlds. The simple, stylised design of the hand-drawn frogs adds to the comfortingly familiar experience.

Disney's contemporary animated fairy tales rely on multi-layered nostalgia which forms the basis for the studio's distinctive approach to romance. *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled* build on and sustain nostalgia for the warmth and organic feel of traditional hand-drawn animation, for childhood memories of listening to fairy tales, and for the wider multifaceted experience of the Disney brand. Disney relies on nostalgia for a romanticized and irretrievable past, providing the ideal context for a fantasized reconstruction of old-fashioned romance, at the converging point between fairy-tale "true love" and romantic-comedy coupledom. Such positioning follows on from more contemporary trends and techniques which mediate such nostalgic throwbacks.

Computer technology recreates the feel of hand-drawn animation: *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled* sustain a specific sense of nostalgia for the "old-school" aesthetics of 2D animation. In *Tangled*'s case, state-of-the-art imagery is used in order to reproduce the nostalgic

feel of a style which is gradually becoming obsolete in mainstream animation, associated with the irretrievable past of the medium.

Post-*Shrek* self-reflexive fairy-tale tropes echo earlier aspects of the genre: the opening of each film builds on intertextual references to Disney's canon of fairy tales, pointing to their literary heritage while adding a degree of knowingness to the storytelling. The childlike, fairy-tale atmosphere of *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled* represents another nostalgic layer for the overall experience. Such nostalgia also heavily relies on the brand power of Disney itself. The films recreate the idealized and romanticised fantasy lands of the studio's theme parks.

Such multi-layered nostalgia smoothly conveys and frames a return to nostalgic old-fashioned fantasies. Disney's idyllic fairy-tale romance resurfaces through pivotal love ballads, and culminates with the formulaic tropes of true love's first kiss, and an idealized, enchanted wedding ceremony. From short sequels to bride dolls, the merchandising surrounding the fairy tales reinforces the key role of weddings as conventional happy endings. Disney's "Fairy-Tale Weddings" expand further nostalgic fairy-tale fantasies, magnifying the post-feminist reclamation of earlier romances and traditional weddings as staged in contemporary romantic comedies. *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled* reinforce the convergences between the two genres, reviving some tropes from the Disney formula in the process. The studio's signature style of magic and childlike enchantment uniquely crystallises and re-envisions the sense of nostalgia surrounding fairy-tale romance at the core of contemporary romantic comedies.

The Princess and the Frog's and *Tangled*'s nostalgically mediated aesthetic and reassuringly familiar atmosphere and settings distinctly frame the representation of romance within the films. Their multi-layered nostalgic display, building on past animation style and fairy-tale storytelling, and memories of Disney's canon and brand, constitutes a specific prism

which magnifies the fantasy and idealised version of romance as mediated through postfeminist romantic comedies.

With their numerous intertextual references, and their recreation of idealized fantasylands, Disney's *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled* also revived the aura of the Disney formula for the twenty-first century audience. Their nostalgically familiar tropes were reintroduced and mediated through contemporary digital, self-reflexive, and post-feminist techniques and impulses. Positioned at the converging point between fairy tales and romantic comedies, Disney's *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled* reveal the fundamental role that nostalgia plays not only within Disney films, theme parks and products, but also within contemporary digital media. By re-appropriating post-feminist sensibilities, especially regarding constructions of romance, the films also point to the contradictions of such cinema.

"Well, you could imagine what happened next." This line, part of Flynn's final voice-over in *Tangled*, hints at the more implicitly subversive approach developed throughout the latter and *The Princess and the Frog*. It relies on viewers' knowledge of and nostalgia for earlier animated fairy tales and romance. Beyond Disney's nostalgic representation of old-fashioned "true love," the films playfully acknowledge the predictability of Disney's fairy-tale fantasy and happy endings, as hinted at through Flynn's line. Contrary to Charlotte's emotional response to the Disney formula in *The Princess and the Frog*, here Flynn appears more playful and ironic. Such a tension between nostalgic idealization and knowing acknowledgement of fairy-tale romance crystallises Disney's often ambiguous generic approach throughout the studio's contemporary animated fairy tales, and what Tasker terms the "doubleness" of post-feminism.[98] The potentially rigid closure of Disney's animated fairy tales, sanctioning "true love" with a traditional wedding and Disney merchandise, is also preceded by persisting generic

[98] Yvonne Tasker, "*Enchanted* (2007) by Postfeminism: Gender, Irony, and the New Romantic Comedy," in *Feminism at the Movies: Understanding Gender in Contemporary Popular Cinema*, ed. Hilary Radner and Rebecca Stringer (London: Routledge, 2011), 70.

questioning and parody at work throughout the films. *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled* not only nostalgically idealize romance, but also knowingly mock it. Chapter 3 explores how, from this ambiguous post-feminist generic standpoint, Disney playfully re-envisions the studio's fairy-tale formula.

CHAPTER 3

Performing the Disney Couple:

Romantic Parodies and Playful *Mise En Scènes*

Introduction

> Anna: Wolves. What do we do?
> Kristoff: I've got this. You just... don't fall off and don't get eaten.
> Anna: But I wanna help.
> Kristoff: No.
> Anna: Why not?
> Kristoff: Because I don't trust your judgement.
> Anna: Excuse me?!
> Kristoff: Who marries a man she just met?
> Anna: It's true love!

On their way to the North Mountain, *Frozen*'s Princess Anna and ice harvester Kristoff are attacked by wolves, but the unlikely Disney couple struggles to cooperate. As the Disney male figure, Kristoff wants to lead the adventure sequence, positioning Anna in the passive, predictable role of the Disney princess. Anna is correspondingly pretty and naïve, believing in "true love" and smitten with handsome prince Hans, whom "she just met." Yet, she also possesses efficient action skills – knocking a wolf away with a lute – and quickfire repartee.

This humorous sequence raises generic questions related to Disney's construction of romance, especially in the light of the nostalgic impulses analysed in chapter 2. This chapter explores how Disney, in parallel to the studio's revived idealisation of fairy-tale love and coupledom, also relies on the self-reflexive and comic tropes of the romantic comedy to challenge these same representations. The sentimental and old-fashioned Disney couple is re-imagined as a witty, knowing, and initially antagonistic duo, and the foundation of Disney's fairy-tale romance – "true love" – is significantly called into question. *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled*, and most strikingly *Frozen* not only revise the Disney formula through the romantic comedy: through their status as Disney *animated* fairy tales, they also humorously

magnify the playful tensions characterising romantic-comedy couple dynamics and expand the comic impulses of live-action genres of romance.

In *The Princess and the Frog*, Tiana is a poor but ambitious waitress who, employed at the masquerade ball of her friend Charlotte, meets self-confident but gullible Prince Naveen, transformed into a frog by a voodoo sorcerer. The unexpected outcome of Tiana and Naveen's kiss – she is also turned into a frog – leads the unlikely couple to venture into the Louisianan bayou to reverse the spell. A similarly unlikely couple forms in *Tangled*, in which cunning thief Flynn tries to hide in Rapunzel's tower. Having been secluded all her life, the "lost princess" asks him to act as her guide to the kingdom before he can reclaim his loot. In *Frozen* similarly naïve but resourceful Princess Anna asks Kristoff to take her to the North Mountain to bring her estranged sister Queen Elsa back to the kingdom. Her conflicting relationship with Kristoff partly stems from her hasty engagement to chivalric Prince Hans, who is revealed to be a dangerous villain.

In the previous chapter, I argued that Disney's multi-layered nostalgia, essential to *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled*, constitutes a specific prism which magnifies the idealised fantasy of fairy-tale romance reclaimed in post-feminist romantic comedies. John Alberti observes that "contemporary romantic comedies of all kinds oscillate between generic unconsciousness and self-consciousness, between wish-fulfilment narratives that try to disguise their generic machinery and self-conscious metanarratives that foreground that machinery".[1] Similarly, Disney's nostalgic framing of romantic "wish-fulfilment" narratives is mediated at several levels. As examined earlier, the nostalgic atmosphere of the fairy-tale storytelling experience is mediated through DreamWorks-style self-reflexivity: *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled* foreground from the start their status as Disney *fairy tales*. Such an

[1] Alberti, *Masculinity in the Contemporary Romantic Comedy*, 4.

acknowledgement of their generic "machinery" – as analysed in their opening – also affects their old-fashioned and formulaic construction of romance. The nostalgically idealised displays of romantic ballads, sentimental declarations, magical kisses, and happy-ending weddings are strikingly juxtaposed with, framed and/or preceded by "self-conscious" generic moments. Building on Alberti's terms, such "self-consciousness" regarding Disney's romantic "machinery" reassesses the studio's nostalgic celebrations. I argue that *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled* and most strikingly *Frozen* borrow from the self-reflexive and playful impulses that also characterise the romantic comedy in order to renew Disney's romantic fairy-tale formula, mocking and questioning its foundational tropes.

Such knowing revision extends to the specific ideals of femininity and masculinity tied to Disney's fairy-tale conventions. As Alberti points out, "we can understand gender identity in the movies as inherent features of their narrative syntax".[2] *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled* and *Frozen* also rework the Disney fairy-tale narrative by re-envisioning the studio's emblematic icons, namely the Disney Princess and Prince, through borrowings from contemporary romantic-comedy gendered tropes.

The first part of this chapter will focus on how *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled* and *Frozen* call into question the foundation of Disney's fairy-tale romance: the concept of "true love". Building on the self-reflexive impulses of the contemporary romantic comedy, and its tendency to develop double narratives, *Frozen* explicitly questions the very primacy of romance within the Disney formula, foregrounding Anna and Elsa's sisterly relationship. The plausibility and authenticity of fairy-tale romance are also consciously challenged. A certain knowingness can be perceived in the playful staging of romantic songs, emphasizing the almost contrived development of "true love": Disney coupledom then becomes a self-conscious performance.

[2] Alberti, *Masculinity in the Contemporary Romantic Comedy*, 11.

This theatrical aspect also affects the figures of the Disney Prince and Princess. The second part of this chapter explores how *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled* and *Frozen* construct fairy-tale masculinity and femininity as a humorously excessive performance, which in the case of *The Princess and the Frog*'s and *Frozen*'s villains is revealed to be a dangerous masquerade. Building on constructions of masculinity characterising contemporary romantic-comedies, including what Jeffers McDonald describes as "*homme*-coms", these films particularly challenge the representation of the chivalric and devoted hero associated with nostalgic fairy-tale romances.[3] More remarkably than the Princess figure, the character of the Disney Prince is repeatedly mocked through parodic re-stagings of past Disney fairy tales combined with a re-appropriation of *homme*-com comedy tropes.

Such reconstructions impact on the couple's gendered dynamics. The third part of this chapter explores how Disney's contemporary animated fairy tales build on the romantic and screwball comedy to reposition the sentimental protagonists as playful adversaries. Love at first sight and idealised courting are replaced by pragmatic pacts and witty exchanges, positioning the Disney Princess on the same footing as the Prince. The antagonistic tensions of romantic and screwball comedies are also humorously expanded through the characteristic freedoms of animation, especially anthropomorphism in *The Princess and the Frog*. These generic expansions parodically subvert the formulaic Disney couple.

Exploring the more playful and subversive generic dialogue between the Disney fairy tale and the romantic comedy, this chapter elaborates on how *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled* and *Frozen* both re-appropriate specific romantic-comedy tropes to challenge the studio's formula, and rely on their status as *animated* fairy tales to expand and transform the romantic comedy.

[3] Tamar Jeffers McDonald, "*Homme*-Com: Engendering Change in Contemporary Romantic Comedy," in *Falling in Love Again: Romantic Comedy in Contemporary Cinema*, ed. Stacey Abbott and Deborah Jermyn (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 146.

Questioning the Primacy and Authenticity of Fairy-Tale Romance and True Love

"What do you know about true love?" Elsa's question to her sister Anna, following her hasty engagement to Prince Hans, crystallises *Frozen*'s self-reflexive challenge to Disney's construction of fairy-tale romance. The film continuously and explicitly interrogates a concept at the core of Disney's fairy-tale canon – or rather, of its generic "machinery" – through romantic-comedy self-consciousness and the central narrative function attributed to the sisterly plot. *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled* develop such generic questioning in a more implicit way, reframing another foundational trope of Disney's fairy-tale romance, namely the love duet, as a knowingly mediated *mise en scène*. To some extent, *The Princess and the Frog*'s "Ma Belle Evangeline," *Tangled*'s "I've Got a Dream," and *Frozen*'s "Fixer Upper" construct Disney's formulaically sentimental courting as a contrived performance.

Admittedly, *The Princess and the Frog*'s, *Tangled*'s, and *Frozen*'s generic self-reflexivity is not completely new within Disney's canon of feature-length animated fairy tales. As early as in *Cinderella*, characters have directly underlined the implausibility of fairy-tale romance. The Duke, for example, makes fun of the King's unsuccessful plans to find a wife for his son at the ball:

> You, Sire, are incurably romantic. No doubt you saw the whole pretty picture in detail. The young Prince bowing to the assembly. Suddenly he stops. He looks up. For, lo, there she stands. The girl of his dreams. Who she is or whence she came, he knows not, nor does he care, for his heart tells him that here, here is the maid predestined to be his bride. A pretty plot for fairy tales, Sire. No! It was foredoomed to failure.

What makes this self-reflexive comment particularly funny is that at the very moment the Duke describes the fairy-tale "plot", the Prince sees Cinderella and walks towards her to start a waltz, followed by the romantic duet "So This Is Love." This generically knowing piece of dialogue represents a small ironic parenthesis in a film which opens and closes with the song "A Dream Is a Wish Your Heart Makes," and ends with an idealised fairy-tale wedding. Such self-reflexive

parentheses become the core of *Frozen*'s narrative, questioning foundational tropes of Disney's nostalgic fairy-tale romance by borrowing from specific aspects of the contemporary romantic comedy.

Jeffers McDonald notes that the romantic comedy is particularly inclined towards self-reflexivity.[4] She observes that 1970s "nervous" romantic comedies notably tended to display their "own awareness of themselves as romantic comedies within traditions, and both affection and frustration towards the way romantic love had been traditionally portrayed".[5] More contemporary romantic comedies regularly include, or develop such self-referential moments: "the narrative seems to stop and take a bow, overtly acknowledging itself as an artefact".[6] In *(500) Days of Summer* (Marc Webb, 2009), for example, sceptical heroine Summer argues to hopeless romantic Tom that "there is no such thing as love, it's a fantasy"; in *Friends with Benefits* (Will Gluck, 2011), heroine Jamie claims that she must "stop buying into this Hollywood cliché of true love"; *Trainwreck* (Judd Apatow, 2015) opens with the protagonist's father stating that "monogamy isn't realistic". While most of these romantic comedies nostalgically reclaim what characters describe as the "fantasy" or "cliché" of unrealistic romance by the end of their narrative, their self-aware acknowledgement of their "generic machinery" at least momentarily threatens the stability and challenges the idealisation of such predictable romantic tropes.

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[4] Jeffers McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 2.
[5] Ibid, 94.
[6] Ibid.

Figure 12 and 13: *Frozen* [frame capture]

This generic context frames and impacts on *Frozen*'s self-referential reflections on the concept of true love. This ideal is voiced by Princess Anna in her song "For the First Time in Forever." She expresses her excitement at seeing the kingdom gates open for Elsa's coronation, and her enthusiasm at meeting new people, enthusiasm that quickly shifts to meeting "the one" and finding "true love." Singing to cute little ducklings and waltzing with the bust of a man, her portrayal is reminiscent of past dreamy and innocent Disney princesses such as Aurora and Ariel (Figure 12 and 13). Just like Snow White, she meets a "beautiful stranger tall and fair" right at the end of her song; a romantic duet and a marriage proposal quickly follow.

Frozen then questions the plausibility of such a sudden fantasy-like romance, particularly the Disney fairy-tale trope of love at first sight that Anna labels as "true love." Such questioning is first voiced by Elsa who, shocked by this precipitous engagement, refuses to bless her sister's wedding because she "can't marry a man [she] just met." Anna's convictions ("you can if it's true love") are further challenged by Kristoff in a subsequent sequence that is particularly self-reflexive and generically knowing. On their way to the North Mountain, Kristoff asks Anna about the snow storm started by Elsa, and she casually explains: "I got engaged but then she freaked out because I'd only just met him." He repeatedly voices his disbelief at what he considers to be Anna's misplaced trustfulness: "You mean to tell me you got engaged to someone you just met that day?!" He opposes her fantasized conception of true love, especially the instant chemistry associated with love at first sight ("Hans is not a stranger"), to his more down-to-earth vision of romance, checking how much she actually

knows of Hans through a series of questions. As Michelle Law points out, "Anna's idealism quite self-reflexively mirrors the romanticism of the Disney princesses of the past, whereas Elsa and Kristoff represent the modern voices of reason"; or rather, the contemporary voices of self-conscious romantic comedies.[7] Through Kristoff's pragmatic approach, Disney's formulaic fairy-tale romance is gradually, though playfully, called into question.

What completes this general questioning of Disney tropes is the final twist involving "true love's kiss." This narrative trope is crucial in *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Enchanted* and *The Princess and the Frog*. Convinced by magical troll creatures that her heart, accidentally frozen by her sister, will be healed through "true love's kiss," Anna goes back to Hans. However, he refuses to kiss her: he is revealed to be a traitor, marrying her solely to access the throne. Anna's naiveté, reminiscent of the endearing romanticism of past princesses, is almost fatal for her. By that point in the narrative, Hans is the third character to point out the foolishness of her hastiness: "you were so desperate for love you were willing to marry me, just like that".

Frozen not only questions, but also redefines fairy-tale true love. Its manifestation is not a romantic kiss, but Anna's sacrifice towards her sister Elsa: she throws herself between the latter and Hans, who was wielding his sword against her. This last generic twist also operates a narrative shift of focus from the romantic couple to the sisters. This shift was particularly put forward throughout *Frozen*'s discourses of promotion and critical reception – as seen in chapter 1 – challenging the primacy of romance within the Disney fairy tale. This participates further in the renewal and subversion of the Disney formula, and calls upon tropes from other strands from genres of romance. Brook points out that in some contemporary romantic comedies, "the centrality of the romantic relationship as opposed to a same-sex friendship is inverted".[8] This

[7] Michelle Law, "Sisters Doin' It for Themselves: *Frozen* and the Evolution of the Disney Heroine," *Screen Education* 74 (2014): 16-25, accessed 2 June 2015, https://issuu.com/atompublications/docs/law_frozen.
[8] Brook, "Engaging Marriage," 152.

generic inversion is noticeable in films such as *Sex and the City* (Michael Patrick King, 2008), *Bride Wars*, and *Bridesmaids* (Paul Feig, 2011). Such an inversion can also concern a primary focus on familial bonds as opposed to romance, as in *Practical Magic* (Griffin Dunne, 1998) and *Monster-in-Law* (Robert Luketic, 2005). Authors such as Hilary Radner argue that "few" of these films are "romantic comedies per se", preferring generic labels such as the "wedding film" or the "girly film".[9] However, I follow on from Deleyto in arguing that these films both borrow conventions from the romantic comedy and "contribute to its historical change".[10]

It is in the light of such romantic comedies that *Frozen* can also be approached. The evolution of Anna and Elsa's relationship is actually central to the plot, alternating with and sometimes supplanting the romance narrative. After accidentally striking Anna with her ice powers at the beginning of the film, Elsa is separated from her sister, and secluded in the kingdom's castle. Having lost all memory of the incident, Anna is left confused and saddened by her sister's isolation. Spanning their childhood and teenage years, the song "Do You Want to Build a Snowman" emphasizes the physical and emotional distance growing between them. Years later, they awkwardly then joyfully bond with each other during Elsa's coronation party, but this moment of sisterly bliss is short lived. Elsa refuses to bless Anna and Hans' wedding, which leads to an argument during which Elsa's powers get out of her control. From that moment, Anna's explicit quest to reach her sister, and her more implicit quest for a true romantic partner (from Hans to Kristoff) are juxtaposed, and their primacy alternates.

The implicit romantic quest gradually takes precedence during Anna and Kristoff's journey to Elsa's ice palace. While Anna and Elsa manage to bond over a common childhood memory, Elsa has a flashback about the incident she caused as a child and refuses to join Anna and go back to Arendelle. She panics as she learns that she caused an eternal winter over the

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[9] Hilary Radner, *Neo-Feminist Cinema: Girly Films, Chick Flicks and Consumer Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 29.
[10] Deleyto, *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy*, 50.

kingdom: her fear bursts out through a sharp snowflake that strikes Anna and freezes her heart. As Anna, Kristoff and Olaf are chased by a gigantic snowman, the narrative seems to definitely relegate the sister plot to the background: the question at the heart of the film seems to go from “will Elsa and Anna reunite?” or “will Elsa stop the winter?” to “will Anna be kissed and saved in time by her true love?” As Anna grows weaker and a race against time is put in place, all narrative elements seem to suggest that first, Anna will be saved by true love’s kiss, and that her true love is actually Kristoff. Throughout the song “Fixer Upper,” the trolls – Kristoff’s “family” – try to convince her that Kristoff is a perfect match for her. Although the romance plot is central in this passage, and the growing chemistry between Kristoff and Anna is especially foregrounded, the song can also be applied to the underlying sister plot. Foregrounding Anna’s final act, one of the trolls sings to her: “love’s a force that’s powerful and strange.” As Law observes, “by drawing audiences in with familiar tropes and characters, we are lulled into a false sense of expectation, but are ultimately surprised by the outcome”.[11] Indeed, the song actually does not apply solely to romantic love, but primarily to sisterly love, which will rescue both Elsa and Anna.

Although Anna’s initial partner turns out to be a villain, the concept of romantic true love is not challenged at first. Olaf the snowman finds a desperate Anna, who admits that she was wrong about Hans, and that she does not “even know what love is.” Like the trolls, Olaf’s reply, which could be at first interpreted from the perspective of the romance plot, implicitly applies to the relationship between the sisters, and announces Anna’s self-sacrifice: “Love is... putting someone else’s needs before yours.” However, in order for the final generic reversal to entirely function, the end of his line, just like the trolls’ song, misleads Anna (and the viewers): “…like, you know, how Kristoff brought you back here to Hans and left you forever.” When

[11] Law, “Sisters Doin’ It for Themselves,” 24.

both Anna and Kristoff realise and acknowledge their feelings, the sense of urgency rises. The shots alternate between Anna and Olaf's efforts to escape from the castle, and Kristoff's quickly riding towards Anna despite a snowstorm. Considering Disney's past fairy-tale canon, the expected ending seems to be Kristoff's kiss, which will save Anna's life. Indeed, the construction of this sequence contains several intertextual references to *Sleeping Beauty*, which seems to reinforce the predictability of the outcome. Kristoff, like Prince Phillip – or even Flynn in *Tangled* – bravely rides his steed through the frozen fjord waters, while a series of obstacles rise in front of him: the white-out wind pushes him back, ships capsize in front of him, while ice is threateningly cracking underneath. The ice spikes that block Anna and Olaf's path are reminiscent of the thick thorny bushes circling the castle where *Sleeping Beauty*'s Aurora rests. The couple calls each other's names, before Anna finally catches a glimpse of Kristoff. As they run towards each other, Anna hears Hans' sword being drawn from his scabbard, as he attempts to kill Elsa. Torn between romantic and sisterly love, Anna gives a final longing look at Kristoff, and throws herself in front of Elsa. She freezes to solid ice at that instant, which causes Hans's sword to shatter completely, the force of which knocks him out. When Anna starts to thaw, and Elsa expresses her surprise and admiration at her bravery ("You sacrificed yourself for me?!"), the former confesses: "I love you."

The shift from romance to sisterhood not only puts the sister plot back into the foreground, but also notably revises the definition of true love, as performed within Disney fairy tales. This declaration of love not only reconciles the sisters, but also allows Elsa to bring back summer in Arendelle and by extension defeat Hans. *Frozen*'s final sequence, featuring the reunited sisters embracing each other and ice skating among their people, significantly subverts Disney's romantic fairy-tale happy ending. As Negra observes, through all these twists to the Disney formula, "*Frozen* discredit[s] romance with the formerly idealized prince and valorises

sororal love and care as a more than fitting replacement".[12] Following on from the aforementioned contemporary romantic comedies, *Frozen* ultimately privileges sisterhood and friendship over the love story.

However, *Frozen*'s alternation of romance and sister plot sometimes leads to tensions within the narrative. Such tensions seem to parallel Anna and Elsa's troubled relationship: their difficulties to reunite mirror Disney struggling at reconciling its nostalgic and subversive impulses towards its fairy-tale formula, its emphasis on romance with the foregrounding of sisterhood. Radner explains that contemporary romantic comedies "often exhibit a profound ambivalence about certain issues – in particular the role of romance, marriage, and work in a woman's life – made manifest through the doubling of characters and/or the use of double narratives".[13] For example, the syntactic structure of *Bride Wars* and *Bridesmaids* comprise double narratives: the friendship plot is framed and impacted upon by the romance plot. The powerful ode to female bonds at the end of both films takes place during a wedding ceremony. Even if the grooms/boyfriends remain secondary characters, they still play a pivotal role within the heroines' lives and the syntactic structure of the films.

The use of double narratives, namely the romance plot and the sister plot, is central to *Frozen*'s generic compromise, epitomized in the multiple happy endings. After *Frozen*'s villains are expelled from Arendelle, Anna is shown with Kristoff, offering him a brand-new sled. Out of joy and excitement, Kristoff sweeps Anna up high overhead and spins her around, in a gesture recalling many past princes with their princesses, exclaiming "I love it! I could kiss you…" Then, he drops her, suddenly embarrassed, and awkwardly asks for her permission, another notable generic subversion considering the hardly consensual first kisses in *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty*. Anna grants it, and they exchange a passionate kiss, that co-director

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[12] Diane Negra, "Postfeminist Perfectionism and Failure in *Frozen*" (keynote address 2 presented at Symfrozium: A Study Day on Disney's *Frozen* [2013], University of East Anglia, Norwich, 12 May 2015).
[13] Radner, *Neo-Feminist Cinema*, 37.

Jennifer Lee labels as a "true love's kiss, alright" in the script.[14] Romantic "true love" is then followed by sisterly love. Elsa is shown among her people, creating an ice rink, when Anna joins her and they skate together. The sisters are finally reunited, and Anna has also found romance. This use of double narratives and characters crystallises Disney's generic compromise. *Frozen* features a romantic happy ending, perpetuating a trope central in both romantic comedies and Disney fairy tales, and pointing to the convergences between the two genres observed in the previous chapter. The ending also foregrounds sisterhood, subverting Disney's romantic formula through the re-appropriation of other romantic-comedy strands. Building on the ambivalence of contemporary romantic comedies, and the doubling of romantic-comedy narratives, *Frozen*'s ending reveals the more ambiguous aspects of Disney's relationship with its own generic past: striving to both preserve *and* renegotiate the studio's romantic heritage.

Frozen's borrowing of another recurring romantic-comedy trope illustrates further Disney's ambivalent positioning towards the formulaic depiction of fairy-tale romance, between questioning and preservation: the inclusion of "the unsuitable partner," who reveals by contrast the rightness of the true romantic interest.[15] Rosalind Gill notes that the romantic-comedy heroine, from the lead of the *Bridget Jones*'s franchise to that of *27 Dresses* and *Enchanted*, first "chooses the wrong man, gets hurt and humiliated and fails to notice that the hero is in love with her".[16] Kathleen Karlyn explains that "true" romantic-comedy "lovers remain sexually apart because they are often unaware of their attraction to each other. The drive of the comedy is to bring them to such an awareness".[17] The same syntactic structure is at work

[14] "*Frozen*, Written by Jennifer Lee," IMSDb, accessed 30 January 2018, http://www.imsdb.com/scripts/Frozen-(Disney).html.
[15] Jeffers McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 11.
[16] Rosalind Gill, *Gender and the Media* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 227.
[17] Kathleen Karlyn, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 129.

in *Frozen*: after Hans is revealed to be the villain, Anna must revise her understanding of true love, and comes to realise that Kristoff is, to borrow from the romantic-comedy lexicon, "the one." Her narrative trajectory first questions, then reintroduces fairy-tale romance. She and Kristoff are initially brought to such an awareness in typically Disney fashion: through song.

Yet, *Frozen*'s reinterpretation of the romantic ballad trope strikingly contrasts with *Tangled*'s nostalgically sentimental "I See the Light". In "Fixer Upper", the romantic Disney duet is turned into a cheerfully playful, contrived *mise en scène*, during which the trolls try to convince Anna that Kristoff is an ideal match for her. They comically list Kristoff's qualities ("you'll never meet a fellow who's as sensitive and sweet"), and stage a makeshift wedding ceremony for the couple. Despite the artificial and unspontaneous nature of the love song – the couple notably does not sing – Anna and Kristoff's feelings for each other start to genuinely surface. At the end of the song, Kristoff looks at Anna with admiration, as the trolls dress her in moss lit by shimmering crystals. As opposed to Hans and Anna's apparent love at first sight, Anna and Kristoff's romance is developed more gradually. Even after the song, they need the help from secondary characters (Olaf for Anna, Sven for Kristoff) in order to fully acknowledge that they are in love with each other, acknowledgement that will only be properly formulated at the end of the film, and sealed with the traditional Disney kiss. Such an update of Disney's fairy-tale romance blends contemporary romantic-comedy tropes, such as the unsuitable partner and double narratives, with a degree of constructedness and playful generic knowingness: in contemporary Disney fairy tales, true love actually requires some time and staging in order to blossom.

The Princess and the Frog's "Ma Belle Evangeline" adopts a more ambiguous perspective, subtly and gradually infusing nostalgic sentimentality within a more self-conscious generic framework. As in "Fixer Upper", the song is not performed by the lovers but by a comic sidekick, adding a degree of artifice to the romantic sequence; unlike "Fixer Upper", it is a slow

and naively sentimental ballad, in which Ray the firefly expresses his love for Evangeline, a star he mistakes for a firefly. Tiana and Naveen are at first, like the audience, surprised at and sceptical of Ray's mistake. Yet, they decide not to tell him the truth, maintaining the illusion of this fantasy romance. Although Tiana is aware of its impossible nature, she is charmed by Ray's sincere and innocent love – literally "wishing upon a star" – which inspires the frog couple, as they start waltzing together. At first hesitant, Tiana then indulges in the pleasures of the dance, unconsciously participating in another romantic fantasy: she becomes a dreamy Disney heroine who realizes her true feelings for Naveen.

Such a smooth transition from generic knowingness to nostalgic idealization of fairy-tale romance shows that, in Disney contemporary animated fairy tales, the two impulses ambiguously coexist. As Louis the alligator and Ray the firefly see the couple starting to dance, they actively add to the already romantic atmosphere typical from Disney ballads. While Tiana and Naveen are waltzing in the moonlight, Louis starts accompanying Ray with his trumpet, and the latter lights up some waterlilies around the dancing couple. When Tiana and Naveen get under the water, Ray projects his firefly light through pink and green leaves. This makeshift spotlight, with its rosy and natural hues, both reinforces the romantic cosy setting of the waltz, and its constructed aspect. "Ma Belle Evangeline" both nostalgically idealizes the fairy-tale fantasies of sincere romance and nascent true love, and hints at the fact that these are indeed stagings. Seeing Naveen and Tiana laughing and waltzing, Ray and Louis exchange a knowing look, functioning like an implicit generic comment: they know that the "magic" is predictably about to happen, and that the couple is falling in love. This is confirmed by Tiana and Naveen's ability to dance harmoniously together. Borrowing from the classical Hollywood musical, this trope is "a standard motif… which foretold the successful establishment of the couple".[18] This

[18] Jeffers McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 93.

staging nostalgically echoes the romantic *mise en scène* of “Kiss the Girl” in *The Little Mermaid*, in which Sebastian the Crab actively creates “the mood” with the help of numerous animals, and “Beauty and the Beast,” in which Lumiere and Cogsworth encourage the Beast’s efforts to seduce Belle. However, in these scenes, self-reflexivity and generic knowingness are not aimed at mocking or questioning Disney’s fairy-tale romance. While the secondary characters hint at the artificiality of the setting, the lead couples are not performing. During these sequences, the protagonists’ feelings are represented as sincere and genuine: at the end of “Ma Belle Evangeline”, Naveen does gaze amorously at the heroine, like Kristoff at the end of “Fixer Upper.” Nostalgic and spontaneous romance burgeons despite a contrived and artificial setting.

The theatrical aspect of Disney’s fairy-tale romance is more explicitly acknowledged in *Tangled*’s “I’ve Got a Dream”. The first character in the film who mentions romance explicitly and expresses his dream to find true love is not naïve princess Rapunzel, but Big Nose, one of the ruffians she encounters at a roadhouse. The patrons first appear scary and threatening, but actually “ain’t as cruel and vicious as [they] seem.” Compassionate and endearing Rapunzel asks whether the ruffians ever had a dream, in order to prevent them from capturing Flynn. Won over by her spontaneity and enthusiasm, they all reveal in song their secret dreams, and Big Nose explains that “despite my extra toes / And my goiter, and my nose / I really want to make a love connection.” While he describes his romantic fantasy (“Can’t you see me with a special little lady / Rowin’ in a rowboat down the stream”), he places himself in a big barrel that he uses as a boat, and rows with Shorty, a little old patron dressed as a cherub and holding a pink umbrella, acting as the “special little lady.” The discrepancy between the romantic cliché that Big Nose is describing, and his mock staging humorously reframes romantic courting and ballads as constructed in Disney fairy tales. This sequence suggests that love as staged in the studio’s earlier animated films is an outdated, humorous performance.

This parodic *mise en scène* reassesses and qualifies, yet does not replace the highly nostalgic and idealized construction of romance at the core of "I See the Light", the romantic ballad featuring Rapunzel and Flynn described in the previous chapter. This unmediated duet surprisingly reproduces Big Nose's staging: Flynn is also "rowin' in a rowboat" with a "special little lady". Compared with "I've Got a Dream", "I See the Light" notably lacks the latter's parodic impulses. The couple's "true love" blooms as they watch the floating lanterns illuminating the night sky, and end up sincerely revealing their feelings for each other. From the perspective of "I've Got a Dream", "I See the Light" becomes clichéd and naïve, nostalgically echoing earlier Disney musical sequences such as *Cinderella*'s "So This Is Love" and *Aladdin*'s "A Whole New World", while Big Nose and Shorty's staging explicitly mocks such a depiction of romance. *Tangled*'s uneasy inclusion of both knowingly parodic "I've Got a Dream" and genuinely romantic "I See the Light" points to Disney's generic compromises: like contemporary romantic comedies, the studio's fairy tales alternate between romantic consciousness and self-consciousness.

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The Princess and the Frog, *Tangled*, and most explicitly *Frozen* challenge the primacy and authenticity of Disney's fairy-tale romance as crystallised through the concept and manifestation of true love. Such generic questioning relies on the self-reflexive impulse of the romantic comedy, as well as on the syntactic structure of romantic comedies privileging family and friendship bonds and/or developing double narratives. In the case of *Frozen*, this alternation of storylines foregrounds Disney's generic compromises. Throughout Disney's contemporary fairy-tale canon, playful and parodic *mise en scènes* frame and/or blend with more idealised displays. Such a generic oscillation, characteristic of the romantic comedy, allows Disney to both qualify *and* sustain to some extent its nostalgic celebration of old-fashioned romance, preserving *and* mocking its own formula.

Disney's approach to its fairy-tale characters, namely the Princess and the Prince, more notably contrasts with past formulaic portrayals. *The Princess and the Frog*'s, *Tangled*'s and *Frozen*'s emphasis on the theatricality of fairy-tale courtship, as illustrated through the staging of the romantic songs, also affects the gendered construction of the romantic protagonists. Conventional fairy-tale femininity and most strikingly masculinity are framed as comically excessive, or even dangerously superficial performances.

Performing and Mocking the Figure of the Disney Prince/Princess

"I would do it! I would kiss a frog! I would kiss a hundred frogs if I could marry a prince and be a princess." In the opening of *The Princess and the Frog*, young Charlotte excitedly expresses her fairy-tale fantasy, inspired by the storybook Eudora is reading to the girls. In this predictable narrative, the protagonists are mere stock characters – "beautiful princess", "handsome prince" – idealised illustrations drawing back to Disney's fairy-tale formula. Relying both on gendered tropes from the contemporary romantic comedy, and parodic references to Disney's earlier fairy-tale canon, *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled* and *Frozen* repeatedly mock these fantasized figures. Fairy-tale femininity and masculinity become a knowing performance – from playful excess to dangerous masquerade.

In both *The Princess and the Frog* and *Frozen*, the old-fashioned figure of the chivalric and courteous prince, nostalgically reclaimed in post-feminist romantic comedies – as observed in chapter 2 – is notably performed by a villain: this shift of characterisation strikingly deconstructs the fantasy of fairy-tale masculinity. When villain voodoo sorcerer Dr Facilier turns Prince Naveen into a frog, he gives Naveen's servant Lawrence the appearance of the prince via a talisman tied to a necklace. For most of the film, princehood represents a literal masquerade, allowed through a prop Lawrence puts on. When Lawrence-as-Naveen makes his entrance at Charlotte's *masquerade* ball – where all characters are also wearing disguises of

sorts – he replicates the heavily codified princely entrance of Disney's past heroes. Properly courteous and regal, he bows to the guests, walks towards Charlotte, and invites her to waltz, perfectly leading the dance like *Cinderella*'s and *Sleeping Beauty*'s princes. Lawrence's performance revives a type of romantic and chivalric masculinity which appears archaic and hollow, contrasting with Naveen's spontaneity, enthusiastic nonchalance, and dislike of royal protocol – he notably happily dances to and plays jazz music with New Orleans' inhabitants. Lawrence's contrived behaviour is reinforced by the theatrical aspect of the romantic waltz: Charlotte gives a strong whistle, the spotlight falls on her and follows the dancing couple, while all the guests gaze at them. This *mise en scène* not only explicitly deconstructs the fantasy waltzes from Disney fairy tales such as *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Enchanted* – here, the romantic mood depends on backstage intervention – but also the associated romanticism of the Disney prince. Lawrence's marriage proposal, rapidly following the masquerade ball sequence, is not motivated by courteous love, but by the considerable wealth of Charlotte's father. As his character merely functions as Facilier's executant, his performance remains strikingly contrived, and is ultimately ridiculed when the spell is broken: his tall, young and handsome looks are gradually replaced by his initially small, stout, grey-haired appearance.

Such a performance takes a more threatening turn in *Frozen* through the character of Prince Hans. He is introduced at the end of Anna's song "For the First Time in Forever" – the "beautiful stranger tall and fair" she was longing for. She bumps into his horse, and he courteously helps her to her feet, bowing before properly introducing himself. When he learns that she is a princess, he drops to his knees, head bowed, and "formally apologise[s]" for the incident. Regal, handsome, and chivalric, Hans is introduced as the epitome of the classic fairy-tale prince. Lovingly staring into his eyes before leaving, Anna seems instantly smitten, which seems also to be the case for Hans. The subsequent sequences between Anna and Hans work to

complete the recreation of the formulaic Disney fairy-tale couple: a second unexpected encounter at the coronation party, a romantic duet ("Love Is an Open Door") and a marriage proposal. In "Love Is an Open Door", Hans's elaborate performance of fairy-tale masculinity is further developed through intertextual references. Like *Sleeping Beauty*'s Prince Phillip in the musical sequence "I Know You", he catches the princess by surprise, spontaneously starting a waltz with Anna. Outside the castle, the couple casts dancing shadows on the sails of ships in the docks, particularly recalling the way Cinderella and her Prince are framed throughout their romantic duet "So This Is Love." Both couples also strut on a bridge ledge in the moonlight. As a result, the image of past Disney princes is intertextually superimposed onto Hans: the nostalgic aura of old-fashioned fairy-tale masculinity is subtly attached to him. His portrayal during the rest of the film further develops his status as the ideal fairy-tale hero. Left in charge of Arendelle by Anna, he loyally follows her orders, opening the castle to the inhabitants and supervising the distribution of food and clothes. When she goes missing, he leads a group to the North Mountain to find her, fights a gigantic snowman, and seemingly rescues Elsa from thugs.

However, such bravery, courteousness, and selflessness, namely Hans's fairy-tale masculinity, is revealed to be a treacherous performance. When Anna is brought back to the castle by Kristoff, she urges Hans to kiss her, desperately needing "an act of true love" to be saved. In a performance reminiscent of *Snow White*'s, *Sleeping Beauty*'s and *Enchanted*'s heroes, Hans gives the weakened princess a tender smile, gently and slowly leans in to kiss her, but stops an inch from her face. The unexpected nature of this act is echoed by the sudden halt of the soft romantic non-diegetic music. While Hans reveals his true motive, he puts out the candles and the fire of the room to accelerate Anna's "freezing," notably taking one of his gloves off – or rather, part of his princely costume. As the room gets darker and he delivers his threatening monologue, he gradually comes out as a villain: his aim was to marry Anna to

access the throne. He sees her potential death as an opportunity to charge Elsa with treason and become the sole ruler of Arendelle. Anna's initial surprise and incomprehension is followed by anger at having been fooled; from a generic perspective, this represents a drastic departure from the Disney fairy-tale formula and associated construction of masculinity. One of his final lines to Anna not only debunks the aura of the Disney prince, but also reveals the gender imbalance behind such an idealisation of male heroism. Stating that Anna is "no match for Elsa," he repositions himself as the formulaic fairy-tale rescuer, notably putting his glove back – like Lawrence putting on Facilier's enchanted necklace: "I, on the other hand, am the hero who is going to save Arendelle from destruction." Framed in a low-angle shot, he appears in a position of power, as opposed to weak and fragile Anna. This image of heroic masculinity, nostalgically reassuring in the context of post-feminist romantic comedies and exemplified by Flynn at the end of *Tangled*, here takes a sinister turn, revealing the foolishness of Anna's belief in this fairy-tale fantasy. This sequence also shows that Hans's initial courtly and selfless behaviour was a deceptive performance, his romantically spontaneous proposal only a calculated move.

Earlier Disney fairy tales did feature such prince/princess impersonators: *The Little Mermaid*'s Ursula passes as young and pretty Vanessa, seducing Eric with her beautiful – Ariel's – voice; like Vanessa/Ursula, *Beauty and the Beast*'s Gaston urges the lead to get married, proposing to Belle at the start of the film. DreamWorks' *Shrek* franchise reframed the figure of "Prince Charming" as a self-seeking rogue. However, these protagonists are introduced as (potential) villains from the very beginning of the films. Their acts are threatening and violent, and their views on gender roles are straightforwardly retrograde, if not misogynistic, as illustrated by Gaston's comment on women reading ("soon [they] start getting ideas, and thinking…"). In this context, the debunking of Hans's initially respectful, courteous, and gentle princely performance is all the more radical. By featuring Anna punching him in the face at the end, and having him expelled from the kingdom, Disney explicitly distances its

contemporary gender constructions from such an archaic, potentially harmful portrayal of fairy-tale masculinity.

Like Lawrence-as-Naveen's, Hans's performance of masculinity is reminiscent of Disney's early princes from *Snow White*, *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*: performance that is dramatically challenged by the end of each film. Following on from more contemporary portrayals from *The Little Mermaid* and *Aladdin*, the characterisation of the true romantic leads of *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled* and *Frozen* more comically revises the iconic figure of the Disney prince through both intertextual Disney parodies and contemporary romantic-comedy gendered tropes.

Figure 14: *Tangled* [frame capture]; Figure 15: *Frozen* [frame capture]

Disney's contemporary animated fairy tales notably mock the aura of the male leads, from their stunning good looks to their dignified presence. When Flynn climbs into Rapunzel's tower in *Tangled*, looking for a place to hide from the palace horse chasing him, Rapunzel is terrified: before he even notices her presence, she knocks him out with a frying pan. As he lies unconscious on the floor, Rapunzel takes a moment to observe him. With the handle of her frying pan, she removes the hair hiding his closed eyes, stops and gazes at his face. The computer-generated "camera" adopts Rapunzel's point of view: a medium close shot frames Flynn's handsome features, idealistically foregrounded through a ray of sunlight. Both out of curiosity and attraction, she slowly approaches him. This sequence is reminiscent of *The Little Mermaid*, in which Ariel, after having rescued Prince Eric from a shipwreck, lovingly gazes at the unconscious prince. As Ariel lies next to him on the beach, and gently removes a strand of

hair from his face, she whispers "he's so beautiful," and sings her longing to see him smiling at her. This idealised display of nascent romance, and especially of the fantasy of fairy-tale masculinity and its otherworldly handsomeness, is quickly subverted in *Tangled*: as soon as Flynn wakes up, Rapunzel hits him again with her frying pan. Through the reversal of *The Little Mermaid*'s configuration – Rapunzel traps the hero instead of rescuing him – the charming figure of the fairy-tale hero is playfully mocked. Throughout the rest of the sequence, Flynn's body is subjected to a surprising amount of violence, mitigated through slapstick comedy. As Rapunzel struggles to hide Flynn in her wardrobe, pushing his unconscious body with a broom and throwing it away while tied to her hair, he repeatedly falls down on the floor like a rag doll (Figure 14). *Frozen* similarly relies on slapstick comedy through the portrayal of its male lead: Kristoff is shown hitting his head against a cliff; blindfolded, he runs into a pole (Figure 15). Through such physical comedy, the hero momentarily loses the aura of dignified bravery and strength surrounding the stereotypical Disney Prince – qualities that are both reassessed and magically resurface by the end of each film, as observed earlier.

Added to the parodic re-envisioning of Disney princes' handsomeness and dignity, *Tangled* playfully foregrounds the theatrical aspect of their courteousness. Flynn, like *The Princess and the Frog*'s Naveen, is initially portrayed as self-centred and over-confident. Both leads represent animated versions of the romantic-comedy "player" described by Rosalind Gill and David Hansen-Miller.[19] This gendered trope, exemplified by Neil Patrick Harris's Barney in sitcom *How I Met Your Mother* (2005-2014) and Ryan Gosling's Jacob in *Crazy Stupid Love* (Glenn Ficarra and John Requa, 2011) characterises confident, rich male leads "living a

[19] Rosalind Gill and David Hansen-Miller, "'Lad Flicks': Discursive Reconstructions of Masculinity in Popular Film," in *Feminism at the Movies: Understanding Gender in Contemporary Popular Cinema*, ed. Hilary Radner and Rebecca Stringer (London: Routledge, 2011), 44.

seemingly enviable life of parties" and "casual sex with beautiful women".[20] Gill and Hansen-Miller note that such a construction of "virility is externally imposed upon an emotionally vulnerable boy" who ultimately "lets go of his self-interest, rejects his foolishness, and engages in adult responsibilities".[21] Naveen's characterisation follows on from the player trope. He introduces himself as self-assured and seductive, bragging about his success with women ("all women enjoy the kiss of Prince Naveen," "I've dated thousands of women"). His player ideal is crystallised in the song "When We're Humans," describing a life of "great big part[ies] every night" with "a redhead on my left arm, a brunette on my right, a blonde or two to hold the candles". Such a playboy attitude hides a degree of vulnerability: lazy and frivolous Naveen admits later in the film that, because of his sheltered princely life, he actually strongly lacks self-reliance and independence.

The Princess and the Frog and *Tangled* reveal that player masculinity, like Hans's and Lawrence's fairy-tale masculinity, represents an artificial facade: Naveen and Flynn rely on contrived lines and behaviours that only represent a more contemporary version of the archaic and idealised Disney Prince persona. Indeed, in *Tangled*, Flynn easily switches from chivalric courting to more contemporary flirting, which underlines the theatrical aspect of both versions of masculinity. When Rapunzel interrogates Flynn, he clears his throat, and offers an eloquent and formulaically romantic answer: "I know not who you are, nor how I came to find you, but may I just say…" Then, he pauses, smiles confidently and flirtatiously raises his eyebrows: "Hi. How ya doin'? The name's Flynn Rider. How's your day going'?" This generic contrast, from fairy-tale prince to romantic-comedy player, is reinforced when Flynn attempts to cajole Rapunzel into letting him go through his "smoulder:" raised eyebrows, half-closed eyes, and

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[20] The screenplay of both *Tangled* and *Crazy Stupid Love* was written by Dan Fogelman, which might point to generically gendered similarities between the two films through the characters of Jacob and Flynn; Gill and Hansen-Miller, "'Lad Flicks,'" 44.

[21] Gill and Hansen-Miller, "'Lad Flicks,'" 41; 44.

seductive pouting. Rapunzel's unimpressed look, added to her accidentally dropping Flynn's chair ("you broke my smoulder!"), playfully mocks the constructedness of such self-confident masculinity. Indeed, like Naveen, Flynn's performance hides his vulnerability. His very name is based on a storybook adventure character: he is actually a poor orphan named Eugene. Such fantasy masculinity appears as superficial and clichéd as his courtlier performance of the enamoured prince. The characterisation of Naveen's and Flynn's masculinity gradually evolves towards more sincerity and spontaneity, especially within their romantic relationships: as they let go of their player persona, they also abandon their contrived performances.

By contrast, the portrayal of *Frozen*'s Kristoff stands out from the start through a relative absence of theatricality. The film playfully insists on his lack of both princely courteousness and romantic-comedy player attitude, borrowing rather from gendered tropes from contemporary *homme*-coms such as *Knocked Up* (Judd Apatow, 2007) and *I Love You, Man* (John Hamburg, 2009). Alberti observes that such male leads "are not only unromantically attached and even alienated… but also socially unattached and isolated".[22] Kristoff lives alone, with a reindeer as sole companion; his rather unrefined manners and gruff attitude notably contrast with Prince Hans's courtliness. A degree of "gross-out" humour, what Jeffers McDonald describes as a key ingredient of *homme*-coms, is recurrently associated with his character.[23] When he cleans the dash of his sled, he spits on it: the spit flies back and hits Anna in the face. His list of questions to Anna about Hans ends with the rather unexpected "What if you hate the way he eats? What if you hate the way he picks his nose… and eats it?" To Anna's shock ("Excuse me, sir. He's a prince"), Kristoff casually replies that "all men do it." His comments and behaviour playfully trivialize the chivalric and dignified aura of fairy-tale males.

The song "Fixer Upper" further develops Kristoff's "unmanly" qualities – in the trolls'

[22] Alberti, *Masculinity in the Contemporary Romantic Comedy*, 35.
[23] Jeffers McDonald, "*Homme*-Com," 153.

words – which particularly stand out within the context of a Disney fairy tale. From "the grumpy way he talks" to the fact that he is "socially impaired" and his behaviour and manners are characterised by gross-out elements ("he always ends up sorta smelly," "he only likes to tinkle in the woods"), Kristoff embodies the Disney version of the *homme*-com lead. Gill and Hansen-Miller note that such films privilege a construction of masculinity perceived as more "ordinary" and "authentic" by undercutting behaviours "traditionally valued as masculine" within romantic comedies, contrasting with the nostalgically idealised chivalry of romantic leads.[24] Transposed to the Disney context, such authenticity corresponds to Kristoff's absence of performance: it is precisely because he is not falsely courteous and dignified like Hans that, as the trolls sing it, he is "the honest goods". *Frozen* favours Kristoff's "sensitive and sweet" masculinity, constructing a lead that is slightly less self-assured with women, but whose behaviour relies on an understanding of romance as consensual and respectful – notably asking Anna whether he may kiss her.

While *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled* and *Frozen* playfully mock the chivalric fantasy of Prince Charming, these films seem to lack a similarly parodic approach when it comes to the heroines. For example, the slapstick comedy associated with the princesses' – human – body is significantly less violent and humorously repetitive than with their male counterparts. Although Rapunzel gently hits herself with the handle of her frying pan, and Anna is covered up with snow falling from a tree, the Disney Princesses keep their innocent charm and enthusiastic romanticism – if not always their graceful presence. The parodic subversion of the princesses' aura focuses most strikingly on one character, which rather functions as comic relief: *The Princess and the Frog*'s Charlotte. Her portrayal represents a playfully excessive version of the Disney Princess, expanding and caricaturing every stereotypical aspect associated

[24] Gill and Hansen-Miller, "'Lad Flicks,'" 43.

with the character. Charlotte does not solely dream about fairy-tale princes, she actively – hysterically – chases Lawrence-as-Naveen. When the latter arrives at her masquerade ball, she meticulously stages herself. Unlike the uncalculated, innocent way Cinderella attracts the Prince's attention, Charlotte whistles for a spotlight to follow her, spreads glitter around her, hides behind a fan, and bats her eyelashes while staring at the prince. Her explicitly seductive behaviour contrasts with the naïve demureness of past princesses: she sees courting as a playful "fray". Her very appearance playfully challenges Disney Princesses' innate and effortless beauty, a quality often signified in the very name of the heroines, and/or enhanced through enchanted transformations. Charlotte's portrayal reveals that Disney prettiness is hard work: she is repeatedly seen powdering her face, reproducing Snow White's perfect complexion. In her bedroom, functioning as the wings of princess performance, she is shown putting on mascara and rearranging her bustier. Her overly large and glittering pink dresses represent caricatures of the elaborate ball attire of protagonists such as Cinderella and Belle. The film notably matches such excessive and contrived princess behaviour with Lawrence's performance of the courtly enamoured Disney prince: two outdated fairy-tale tropes revised, to some extent, through Tiana and Naveen's more authentic and less formulaic romance, updated through romantic-comedy borrowings.

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The Princess and the Frog, *Tangled* and *Frozen* subvert the gendered fantasies associated with the figure of the Disney Prince and Princess: demure, innocent femininity and dignified, chivalric masculinity. Such archaic gender constructions are re-envisioned as playfully excessive or dangerously artificial performances: *The Princess and the Frog*'s, *Tangled*'s and *Frozen*'s princes are arrogant playboys or villains, and Charlotte's version of the Disney Princess is a comic caricature. These films subvert Disney's gendered fairy-tale aura by relying both on tropes from the contemporary romantic comedy, and parodic references to the

studio's earlier fairy-tale canon. *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled* and *Frozen* point to a more authentic vision of masculinity, which qualifies the nostalgic idealisation of fairy-tale chivalry.

Such a gendered revision impacts on the construction of fairy-tale femininity and on the gendered dynamics of the couple. The Princess's characterisation is generically repositioned partly due to the less sentimental version of romantic coupledom within the films. As men are mocked and their authority challenged, the Disney Princess becomes a witty, playful opponent, reproducing the gendered relationships of the screwball comedy.

From Sentimental Lovers to Playful Adversaries

The challenges posed by *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled* and *Frozen* to the authenticity of Disney true love and the gendered characterisation of the studio's fairy-tale figures impact on the portrayal and trajectory of the animated couple, and more particularly on their inherent balance of power. Re-appropriating the syntactic structure and couple dynamic of the romantic and screwball comedy, Disney contemporary animated features construct the protagonists as playful adversaries who vie with each other through wit and action skills to reach a common goal. In the process, the predictable role of the Disney Princess is notably revised. Such a generic rivalry is comically expanded in *The Princess and the Frog* through the freedoms of the animated medium, foregrounding another facet of Disney's dialogue with the romantic comedy.

Clare Bradford's listing of the "conventional components" of Disney fairy-tale coupledom includes "love at first sight" and "the propensity for lovers to daydream".[25] These narrative elements are foundational to Disney's formulaic depiction of "courtly love and chivalric romance".[26] *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled* and *Frozen* rework such a

[25] Bradford, "'Where Happily Ever After Happens Every Day,'" 180.
[26] Ibid.

sentimental depiction of fairy-tale coupledom first by parodying the protagonists' idyllic encounter. While supposedly conducive to love at first sight, it is instead staged and developed through what Jeffers McDonald terms the "hallmarks" of romantic comedy: initial mutual antipathy and subsequent accord.[27] When *The Princess and the Frog*'s Tiana first meets Naveen at a masquerade ball, she is dressed as a princess, while the latter has been transformed into a frog. As the amphibian silently stares at her, she jokingly asks if he wants "a kiss," re-enacting the story from the fairy-tale book introduced in the opening sequence. Tiana is horrified when Naveen actually replies to her, and expresses further disgust when he pleads for his cause: she must kiss him for him to be human again. She only accepts when he mentions the wealth of his family and the possibility of a reward: she needs money to secure the down payment of her restaurant. This deal is of course quickly compromised when Tiana turns into a frog herself. This first encounter playfully subverts Disney romantic tropes of "love at first sight" and magical kisses. It also introduces the antagonism that will characterise Tiana and Naveen's initial relationship, reworking Disney's sentimental formula through the syntactic structure of the romantic comedy. Tiana angrily blames Naveen for her unexpected metamorphosis ("you mean to tell me this all happened because you were messing with the Shadow Man?"), while the latter accuses her of lying to him ("a waitress? Well, no wonder the kiss did not work!"). Such animosity is stirred up further through the opposite characterisation of the protagonists. Tiana is introduced as ambitious and hardworking, but sometimes too stern, while frivolous Naveen is more irresponsible and nonchalant. Both must overcome their differences to cross the bayou and find a way to reverse the spell.

Knowing fairy-tale subversion through romantic-comedy tropes is more straightforwardly foregrounded in *Tangled*'s first proper encounter between Rapunzel and

[27] Jeffers McDonald, "*Homme*-Com," 147.

Flynn. It is only when he is tied to a chair, looking more like a suspect ready to be interrogated than a potential love interest, that their first conversation starts. When Rapunzel, overcoming her fear, steps into the light to face and question her intruder ("Who are you, and how did you find me?"), Disney's fairy-tale romantic atmosphere, conducive to the predictable "love at first sight", is both recreated and quickly mocked. A harp chord, followed by a grand crescendo in the orchestral soundtrack, parallels Rapunzel's movement from the shadows. Standing in front of him, she is bathed in the sunlight shining on her blonde hair, giving her an angelic glow. Flynn is at first voiceless, staring at her beauty in surprise and admiration: his stunned expression evokes Aladdin's first amorous look at Jasmine as he sees her at the market, or Prince Phillip's wonder at watching Aurora dancing in the woods. It is only when Rapunzel repeats her question that Flynn can formulate an answer, blending princely courteousness and player flirt. However, Flynn's seductive words are quickly replaced by teasing, patronising lines, ("All right Blondie," "Yeah. No can do."), and quick-fire repartee. When Rapunzel refers to "fate" and "destiny" to explain Flynn's presence in the tower, recalling the numerous chance encounters of past Disney couples, Flynn dismisses the sentimental fairy-tale reference by just stating that "a horse" brought him there.

This parody of what Zipes terms the romantic "prince-meets-princess encounter" is furthered through the use of rom com "hallmarks": again, "initial mutual antipathy" followed by a "subsequent accord".[28] Threatening Flynn with her frying pan and keeping him tied to a chair, Rapunzel offers him a "deal": she will free him and return his satchel if he agrees to act as her guide and take her to see the lanterns released on her birthday. This antagonistic relationship is emphasized by their contrasting characterisation: Flynn is an experienced, cunning and cynical thief, while Rapunzel is a cheerful and naive princess who never left her

[28] Zipes, *The Enchanted Screen*, 88; Jeffers McDonald, "*Homme*-Com," 147.

tower. This sequence knowingly mocks sentimental romance as represented throughout earlier Disney fairy tales through the hallmarks of the romantic comedy.

Such a narrative framework also contextualises Anna's romantic trajectory in *Frozen*. If she does not ultimately form a couple with Hans, it is not solely because he is revealed to be a manipulative villain. From the generic perspective of the romantic comedy, their love is not plausible: their encounter is too idealised, and their romantic bond is too sudden. Such sentimentalism is formulaically anachronistic considering Disney's generic updates, initiated in *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled.* Applying Jeffers MacDonald's generic template, Anna and Kristoff's relationship – like Tiana and Naveen's and Rapunzel and Flynn's – is characterised by "initial mutual antipathy" before they reach a "subsequent accord":[29] When Anna first meets Kristoff, he appears as a threatening and laconic character covered in snow, not really appreciating Anna's awkward joke about his ice business ("Oh, that's a rough business to be in right now"). Anna asks Kristoff to take her to the North Mountain in exchange for supplies, and later a new sled. Their antipathy is fuelled by their opposite personalities: the cute, talkative, friendly and naïve princess clashes with the solitary, down-to-earth, initially gruff ice harvester. By presenting Kristoff as an alternative to Hans, *Frozen* borrows from the romantic comedy, and more particularly from the protagonists' initially antagonistic relationship, in order to renew the portrayal of the sentimental Disney fairy-tale couple.

As Su Holmes points out, such a generic subversion impacts on the gender dynamic within the couple, emphasizing "the importance of a more egalitarian and 'modern' relationship".[30] *Frozen*, as well as *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled*, borrow from the configuration underlying romantic comedies, which Kathleen Karlyn describes as "comedies

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[29] Jeffers McDonald, "*Homme*-Com," 147.
[30] Su Holmes, "Cold and Hungry: Discourses of Anorexic Femininity in *Frozen* (2013)," *Auteuse Theory: A Blog on Women's Cinema*, 21 November 2014, accessed 2 August 2018, http://auteusetheory.blogspot.co.uk/2014/11/cold-and-hungry-discourses-of-anorexic_21.html.

of equality".[31] The latter "centre on the relationship between the sexes, establishing a conflict along a male/female line. For such a conflict to be dramatic, the sides must be well matched, at least temporally. Women must be allowed more power, or men less, than they are allowed in conventional forms of representation".[32] In the context of Disney, the "conventional forms of representation" correspond to the formulaic gender portrayals from the studio's past fairy tales.

Each film starts by reintroducing the stereotype of the passive and dreamy Disney Princess, so that its subsequent challenge particularly stands out, rebalancing the Disney couple. Like early princesses such as Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora, grown-up Anna and Rapunzel are introduced within a domestic and restrictive space: their castle or tower. During their first song, they are shown in the middle of stereotypically feminine – in light of Disney's fairy-tale canon – activities. Rapunzel sweeps and mops the floor, Anna sings her longing for romance, and both interact with cute little animals in the process. By contrast, (young) Kristoff and Flynn are introduced outside, in action-oriented sequences including chases or manual labour. In *The Princess and the Frog*, the conventional version of fairy-tale femininity is performed by Charlotte: while Tiana is waitressing, she is the one longing for the arrival of Prince Naveen in New Orleans. Still, Tiana follows on from past Disney princesses through her innocence regarding courtship and relationships. Like Rapunzel, and unlike players Naveen and Flynn, it is made clear that Tiana is not used to romance – she cannot even dance.

Such a generically gendered divide, based on the dichotomy between male action, experience and pragmatism, versus female passivity, sensitivity and innocence, is gradually challenged throughout the films through the narrative repositioning of the Disney princess. Initially damsels in distress – Rapunzel is trapped in her tower, Anna gets lost in the mountains – the heroines are gradually included within the initially male-dominated action sphere. At first

[31] Karlyn, *The Unruly Woman*, 118.
[32] Ibid.

scared and impressed by the heroes, they manage to assert their authority, impose a deal on them, and actively take part in chases and other fast-paced adventures outside of their domestic space. This shift is epitomised through *Tangled*'s playful subversion of Rapunzel's stereotypical props of femininity. She uses her frying pan as a weapon that Flynn enthusiastically adopts; her beautiful magical hair also functions as a lasso, swing and rope. Anna similarly surprises Kristoff with her action skills, effectively rescuing him from wolves and escaping from a giant snowman. This repositioning of the Disney princess recontextualises, to some extent, the final, more conventionally chivalric acts of the Disney heroes, especially in *Tangled.*

Such a gendered reconfiguration of power also manifests verbally: Disney's contemporary animated fairy tales foreground the gradual empowerment of heroines within the couple through their use of humour and irony, challenging the supposed authority and experience of the male characters. Numerous sequences foreground the clever banter between male and female protagonists, playfully teasing each other through dialogues borrowing from the style of romantic and more particularly screwball comedies. The latter are mostly approached as a 1930s and early-1940s subgenre of the romantic comedy, exemplified through films such as *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934) and *Bringing Up Baby* (Howard Hawks, 1938). Jeffers MacDonald observes that some popular screwball tropes became "integrated into the wider romantic form", including the protagonists' adversarial relationship and the use of slapstick comedy.[33] Screwball comedies specifically stand out through the leads' sustained "discord": the genre uses "the energy of the couple's friction and mutual frustration to drive the narrative forward".[34] *Frozen* builds on this dynamic through the depiction of Kristoff and Anna's exchanges. During their conversation on true love, their lines are spoken

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[33] Jeffers McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 18.
[34] Ibid, 20.

rapidly, almost overlapping and fuelled by moderate animosity ("Doesn't sound like true love / Are you some sort of love expert?"): Anna and Kristoff appear as equal screwball adversaries. In *The Princess and the Frog,* both class snobbery and "reverse class snobbery", which Jeffers MacDonald describes as typical of screwball comedies, further motivate Tiana's and Naveen's fast-flung insults and wordplay.[35] Such dialogues reinforce the adversarial nature of their relationship:

> Naveen: You know, waitress, I finally figured out what is wrong with you…
> You do not know how to have fun. There. Somebody had to say it.
> Tiana: Thank you, 'cause I figured out what your problem is too.
> Naveen: I am... too wonderful?
> Tiana: No, you're a no-'count, philandering, lazy bump on a log […]
> Naveen: Stick in the mud.
> Tiana: Listen here, mister. This stick in the mud has had to work two jobs her whole life while you've been sucking on a silver spoon chasing chambermaids around your... your ivory tower!
> Naveen: Actually, it's polished marble.

These sequences foreground the heroines' pluck and repartee, contrasting with past coy and gullible fairy-tale princesses. As Krutnik observes, screwball comedies "define love as a kind of creative gamesmanship with lovers engaging in duels of wit to secure the terms of compatibility. Testing, teasing and teaching one another… protagonists reveal their ability to love by avoiding the banalities of sentimental love-speak to communicate through indirection".[36] Borrowing from this generic dynamic, Rapunzel and Flynn's, Anna and Kristoff's, and Tiana and Naveen's battles of wits demonstrate their intellectual compatibility: their screwball skills put them on the same footing. Such re-appropriation of the romantic and screwball comedy also playfully subverts the formulaic portrayal of Disney fairy-tale couple and its associated sentimental courting – or "love-speak".

Tiana and Naveen's animosity is humorously brought out further through the very physical form of the characters: their anthropomorphic state as frogs. Characteristic components

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[35] Jeffers McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 20; 23.
[36] Krutnik, "Conforming Passions?" 140.

of the animated medium, anthropomorphism combined with slapstick comedy reinvent and expand the possibilities of what Deleyto terms the "space of romantic comedy".[37] In the context of live-action cinema, this space "transforms reality by protecting the lovers from the strictures of social conventions and psychological inhibitions".[38] In Disney's contemporary animated fairy tales, the re-appropriation of the "space of romantic comedy" also creates a more playful and dynamic construction of romance, protecting the animated couple from the strictures of the Disney formula. This animated re-appropriation also expands the comic potentials and boundaries of this generic space. In *The Princess and the Frog*, anthropomorphism combined with slapstick comedy further the parody of both the sentimental romantic-comedy duo and Disney couple.

Figure 16 and 17: *The Princess and the Frog* [frame capture]

While some elements of cartoon slapstick are present in *Tangled* and *Frozen*, they are central to the couple dynamic in *The Princess and the Frog*. Numerous swift physical actions and chases take place between the two protagonists, as illustrated in the following examples. As soon as Tiana kisses Naveen, she is turned into a frog: she throws herself onto him out of anger, as if she was trying to strangle him. The two of them fall down, rebound, and land on drums, the player of which attempts to hit them with drumsticks. After having escaped from Charlotte's masquerade ball, the two frogs find themselves in the Louisianan bayou, rowing on a small raft to get back to New Orleans. While Naveen is playing a tune on a makeshift ukulele,

[37] Deleyto, *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy*, 18.
[38] Ibid.

an alligator swims threateningly towards them. Out of fear and panic, Naveen and Tiana run into each other's arms, with the former adopting a protective posture. However, when the alligator reveals to be friendly jazz-loving Louis, playing Naveen's tune with his trumpet, Naveen enthusiastically joins him, and forgetting about Tiana, lets go of her body. She then falls down, flat on her back, her twisted legs over her head (Figure 16). Later in the film, Naveen feels hungry and tries to catch a bug with his tongue, while Tiana is also uncontrollably drawn to the bug. Their tongues ultimately intertwine, and both are thrown into each other's arms, this time completely stuck (Figure 17). These three sequences comically restage and parody traditionally romantic demonstrations of love – an embrace, a kiss – expanding the slapstick inherent in screwball comedies. As Jeffers McDonald explains, "the screwball comedy, fuelled by animosity, can direct its aggression into the humorous incidents it invents to punish the beloved whether by embarrassment, insults… [or] real violence".[39] In *The Princess and the Frog*, the violence used against Tiana's and Naveen's bodies, and conveyed through cartoon comedy, adds to their dynamic antagonism. As Wells notes, early animated shorts such as Mickey Mouse cartoons often featured a succession of accidental and random events of a mostly slapstick and destructive nature.[40] These purely comic devices bring no harm but destabilization and disorder: bodies are impossibly fragmented and stretched.[41] This phenomenon is further illustrated when Louis the alligator tries to help Tiana and Naveen stuck in their embrace, but only aggravates the couple's predicament. Louis presses their bodies against one another, turns them around as if playing with a Rubik's Cube, so that the couple ends up as one entangled mass, standing on one leg, with their tongues endlessly wrapped around their bodies.

Such a treatment of the prince's and future princess's animated bodies destabilizes the well-defined order of the Disney fairy tale. While slapstick is integral to earlier animated films

[39] Jeffers McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 19.
[40] Wells, *Understanding Animation*, 161.
[41] Ibid, 189.

such as *Snow White* or *The Little Mermaid*, it is principally focused on the secondary characters and animal sidekicks, such as the dwarves or Sebastian the crab. By having both protagonists turned into frogs for most of the film, and being the vehicle for most cartoon comedy, *The Princess and the Frog* remarkably and playfully trivialises the idealized and sentimental aura of Disney fairy-tale couples. Chivalrous and grand gestures are replaced by both physical and verbal fighting. The magical power of the couple's amorous kisses is parodied through their anthropomorphic reframing: animal instincts replace sentimental courting.

Such an anthropomorphic transformation also allows further freedom in the depiction of the couple's relationship. Wells observes that the representation of animals in cartoons "in some ways reconciles the problems of representing 'adult' behaviour in animated human beings, especially in relation to sex and violence".[42] To some extent, the violence involved in the slapstick sequences is therefore comically mitigated through the animal form of the protagonists. Such anthropomorphising also facilitates the comedy of the second kiss sequence: the way Tiana's and Naveen's bodies are impossibly intertwined would have been impossible to stage if the characters had still possessed their human form. The comment of Ray the firefly underlines the risqué potential of such a scene: "Girl, I guess you and your boyfriend got a little carried away, am I right, am I right?" The live-action equivalent of such sequences is mostly found in 12-rated romantic comedies such as *The Proposal* (Anne Fletcher, 2009), in which the protagonists accidentally bump into each other naked in their bedroom.[43] Deleyto notes that the comic space of the romantic comedy "generally affords the characters a franker confrontation with their sexuality".[44] This confrontation has a more literal and humorous manifestation in *The*

[42] Wells, *Animation*, 56.
[43] "*The Proposal*," British Board of Film Classification, accessed 29 January 2018, http://www.bbfc.co.uk/releases/proposal-video-0.
[44] Deleyto, *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy*, 34.

Princess and the Frog, thanks to the freedom allowed by animated tropes of slapstick and anthropomorphism.

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The Princess and the Frog, Tangled, and *Frozen* humorously subvert Disney's formulaic portrayal of the fairy-tale couple by borrowing from the syntactic structure and couple dynamic characteristic of romantic and screwball comedies. Repositioning the loving protagonists as playful adversaries, these films parody the outdated sentimentality of and unbalanced power relations inherent in Disney's past representations of fairy-tale coupledom. They not only re-appropriate such romantic-comedy tropes, but also expand their comic potential through the freedoms of animation, as illustrated in *The Princess and the Frog*. This example reveals the extent of Disney's generic dialogue with the romantic comedy, as well as the multifaceted revisions made towards the studio's own romantic configurations.

Conclusion

The Princess and the Frog, *Tangled*, and *Frozen* mock and question Disney's formulaic portrayal of fairy-tale coupledom by re-appropriating tropes from the romantic comedy. The studio's latest wave of fairy tales is characterised by a self-reflexive and playfully subversive impulse towards Disney's past construction of fairy-tale romance, and more particularly its old-fashioned sentimentality and associated gendered configurations. The very plausibility and primacy of love as depicted in Disney fairy tales is called into question. Coupledom appears as a humorously knowing, or dangerously contrived performance, which challenges the fantasy of the enamoured fairy-tale prince and princess. *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled*, and *Frozen*'s status as *animated* films also expand the comic boundaries of the romantic-comedy space, which reveals the broad scope of Disney's dialogue with the genre.

The Princess and the Frog, *Tangled*, and *Frozen* question the authenticity and centrality of romance within Disney fairy tales, focusing on its foundational principle: true love. Relying on the self-reflexive mode characteristic of romantic comedies, *Frozen* questions and redefines this principle, ultimately foregrounding sisterly love. Yet, romance is not entirely discarded: the film borrows from romantic-comedy double narratives, alternating between and sometimes juxtaposing sister plot and romance plot. Such a balance both reassesses and preserves to some extent Disney's more nostalgic impulses towards the studio's romantic formula. The love songs crystallise such an ambiguous generic standpoint. These sequences are constructed as playfully artificial *mise en scène*: Disney romance appears as a staged performance.

Such theatricality also affects the iconic figures of the Disney fairy tale: the princess and prince. The latter's romantically chivalric and regal aura is particularly belittled. *The Princess and the Frog*'s and *Frozen*'s villains reframe princehood as a dangerously contrived, archaic performance. The characterisation of male heroes builds on the gendered tropes of the contemporary romantic comedy – and more particularly *homme*-coms – to foreground more playfully the artificial aspect of fairy-tale courting. Throughout the films, fairy-tale masculinity evolves towards more spontaneity and authenticity, epitomised through the portrayal of *Frozen*'s Kristoff. Parodic intertextual references to Disney's past fairy-tale canon also re-envision the Disney Princess as an excessive caricature of femininity, as exemplified through the portrayal of Charlotte.

Disney fairy-tale femininity is most notably challenged within *The Princess and the Frog*'s, *Tangled*'s, and *Frozen*'s depiction of coupledom. Borrowing from the syntactic structure and couple dynamic of romantic comedies, these films gradually reposition the Princess figure on the same footing as the hero. They challenge their formulaically sentimental relationship in the process. Old-fashioned fairy-tale tropes such as love at first sight and romantic daydream are playfully subverted through the couple's quick-fire exchanges and fast-

paced adventures. The specificity of the animated medium, and more particularly cartoon slapstick combined with anthropomorphism, expand the adversarial and comic impulses of screwball comedies. Such a subversion of coupledom epitomises the multifaceted dialogue between Disney fairy tales and genres of romance.

Through their re-appropriations of specific romantic-comedy tropes, *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled*, and *Frozen* challenge and mock the predictable construction of Disney true love, of the Disney Prince and Princess, and the Disney couple: they remarkably revise Disney's romantic fairy-tale formula.

Yet, such generic challenges and parodies are paradoxically framed by and infused with Disney's multi-layered nostalgia. Within the same films, and more particularly in *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled*, sentimental romance and coupledom are both knowingly debunked and idealised. Such ambivalence parallels and magnifies the generic oscillation observed by Alberti, at the core of contemporary romantic comedies: between generic "self-consciousness and unconsciousness", playful subversion and nostalgic celebration of old-fashioned romance. Through the specific freedoms of their animated status, *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled*, and *Frozen* expand the comic impulses behind the portrayal of adversarial coupledom within romantic comedies. At the same time, *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled* foreground the fundamental role of nostalgia within more straightforwardly sentimental portrayals from the genre, relying on the unique nostalgic appeal of Disney animation, fairy tales, and products. These animated features not only borrow from romantic-comedy tropes to challenge and mock Disney's fairy-tale formula: they also magnify and expand the paradoxical tendencies of the romantic comedy.

Such paradoxes also crystallise the ambiguities of post-feminism, surfacing throughout Disney's fairy-tale canon. Replacing *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled* and *Frozen* within contemporary discourses on representational politics, the films are neither progressive nor

retrograde, but subtly combine both impulses. They *both* knowingly subvert Disney's formulaically stereotypical and traditional gender politics *and* celebrate aspects of old-fashioned and sentimental romance. Contemporary princesses are *both* witty and active, *and* still predictably cute and cheerful; their heroes are *both* sensitive and respectful, *and* courageous and chivalric if need be. These hybrid characters exist within updated yet familiar fairy-tale worlds, where princes can be villains and their courting a contrived performance, but more traditional fantasies, such as musical declarations of love and grand weddings, nostalgically persist.

From a wider generic perspective, the sheer financial success of Disney's latest animated fairy tales, and most spectacularly *Frozen*, reveals the actual centrality of the romantic comedy within the contemporary Hollywood landscape. Far from a niche genre which typically meets low critical esteem because of its association with a predominantly adult female audience, as observed by Stacey Abbott and Deborah Jermyn, the romantic comedy actually surfaces in a multitude of films, including notable blockbusters.[45] In order to understand this wide-ranging presence, films usually excluded from analyses of the romantic comedy – children's films, mainstream animated features – must be considered: their semantic and aesthetic differences are central in their re-envisioning of the genre. The study of *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled* and *Frozen* from this generic lens reveals some notable convergences and fruitful hybridisations with genres of romance, such as fairy-tale masculinity and *homme*-com, anthropomorphic slapstick and screwball comedy, Disney nostalgia and romance. Such a study also reveals the scope of Disney's continuous dialogue with Hollywood genres, re-appropriating tropes from both animated and live-action films in order to renew its formula while maintaining the studio's iconic identity, perpetuating its major presence within mainstream cinema.

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[45] Abbott and Jermyn, "Introduction – A Lot like Love," 2.

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The Princess and the Frog, *Tangled*, and *Frozen* have revived a genre which has come to signify Disney, both as an animation studio and entertainment conglomerate: the fairy tale. Acknowledging DreamWorks' parodic challenges to Disney's iconic canon, these animated features and their surrounding paratexts represent a delicate balancing act. Following on from and expanding tropes from contemporary and post-feminist genres of romance, *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled*, and *Frozen* question and mock the studio's own fairy-tale formula: archaic depictions of courting, stereotypical portrayals of femininity and masculinity. At the same time, they reclaim and preserve the nostalgic pleasures of sentimental romance and old-fashioned happy endings. Such an ambiguous re-appropriation of the fairy-tale formula reveals the studio's efforts to update its generic approach and image, while maintaining a degree of familiar singularity based on the specificities of the animated medium and Disney's own canon and paratexts.

Through Disney's contemporary cycle of animated fairy tales, the studio looked inwards in terms of genre, foregrounding the multiple convergences and hybridisations taking place between genres of romance and Disney's output. Beyond such familiar generic territory, the past decade has also been characterised by new generic incursions for the studio, coinciding with Disney's significant expansion of its multimedia properties. Interacting most notably with tropes from Pixar and Marvel, Disney's contemporary output notably reworks a variety of action-adventure genres, looking outwards to renew the studio's generic formula of fairy tales and romance. The following chapters turn to the centrality of Disney's generic dialogue with action-adventure cinema through an analysis of aesthetic styles, characters' narrative trajectory, and constructions of gender and race within *Bolt*, *Wreck-It-Ralph*, *Big Hero 6*, *Zootopia*, *Moana*, and *Frozen*, focusing specifically on Elsa's portrayal. Considering the predominance

of action-adventure genres within contemporary Hollywood, what makes Disney's generic reworking stand out?

SECTION 2: ANIMATING ACTION ADVENTURE

CHAPTER 4

Animating the Digital Action-Adventure Spectacle

Introduction

Disney's *Bolt*, *Wreck-It Ralph*, *Big Hero 6*, and *Moana* approach the action-adventure genre through a three-layered reworking of its digital spectacle. These films playfully reproduce action-adventure visuals and thrills, self-reflexively question the *mise en scène* behind such a dazzling experience, and expand the generic boundaries of the potentially empowering action spectacle.

Early in *Bolt*, a member from the television network (Mindy) warns the director from the action series "Bolt": "The show's too predictable. The girl's in danger, the dog saves her from the creepy English guy, we get it. There's always a happy ending. And our focus groups tell us 18-to-35-year-olds are… not happy with happy." At one level, Mindy's self-reflexive line playfully mocks the clichés of action-adventure films, such as stereotypical villains and helpless females. At a deeper level, it hints at Disney's struggles in the 2000s to renew its generic approach and aesthetic style: the critical and box office failure of cel-animated features such as *Brother Bear* and *Home on the Range* (Will Finn and John Sanford, 2004) starkly contrasted with the considerable success of Pixar's and DreamWorks' computer-animated films.[1] The recurring "happy ending" mentioned by Mindy evokes the predictable cheerfulness

[1] Chris Pallant terms "Neo-Disney" the period between 2000 and 2004 during which Disney continued to release hand-drawn animated films while computer-animation was gradually becoming the norm in mainstream cinema. These films represented a departure in terms of narrative, aesthetic style, and use of music, including *The Emperor's New Groove* (Mark Dindal, 2000), *Fantasia 2000* (Hendel Butoy and Eric Goldberg, 2000), *Atlantis: The Lost Empire*, *Lilo & Stitch* (Dean DeBlois and Chris Sanders, 2002), *Treasure Planet* (Ron Clements and John Musker, 2002), *Brother Bear* and *Home on the Range*. They failed to preserve the market share enjoyed by the studio during the previous decade, facing strong competition from DreamWorks and Pixar. See Pallant, *Demystifying Disney*, 123.

and datedness of Disney's animated films. With *Bolt*, *Wreck-It Ralph*, *Big Hero 6*, and *Moana*, Disney expanded its generic scope: between 2008 and 2016, the studio not only revised the iconic Disney fairy tale, but also ventured into and positioned its output firmly within action-adventure cinema.

The selected case studies reveal the breadth of Disney's generic explorations and re-appropriations. *Bolt* focuses on a dog which is unknowingly the lead of a television show. The latter features his fast-paced adventures as a "super dog", helping his owner Penny to find her father captured by villain Dr Calico. *Wreck-It-Ralph* follows video-game "bad guy" Ralph on his quest to prove his worth, venturing into several games including first-person shooter "Hero's Duty" and kart racing game "Sugar Rush". *Big Hero 6* depicts a team of young superheroes led by teenage genius Hiro and his robotic nurse "Baymax", investigating the death of Hiro's brother. In *Moana*, the title character sets out on a perilous journey across the ocean to find demigod Maui and save her island from destruction.

These synopses hint at the multifaceted action-adventure influences observable in Disney's contemporary output in terms of narrative, character dynamic, aesthetics, and gender constructions. *Bolt*, *Wreck-It Ralph*, *Big Hero 6*, and *Moana*, unlike *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled* and *Frozen*, distance themselves from Disney's iconic fairy-tale genre – both *Wreck-It-Ralph*'s Vanellope and Moana refuse the "princess" label. Instead, these films generically look outwards. Still, like their fairy-tale counterparts, they distinctly re-envision generic tropes and boundaries through their status as both *animated* features and *Disney* films. In this chapter, I argue that *Bolt*, *Wreck-It Ralph*, *Big Hero 6*, and *Moana* rework the digital action-adventure spectacle in three interrelated ways. Disney's animated films knowingly and playfully reproduce the visuals and thrills of the genre; they challenge the artifices of such action performances and displays; and they generically expand the empowering potential of the action-adventure experience for the protagonists. Relying on such a generic perspective reveals the

extent of Disney's dialogue with contemporary Hollywood cinema, beyond fairy-tale romance, and opens up new areas for the study of the action-adventure genre.

The action-adventure genre dominates contemporary mainstream animation, as exemplified by successful computer-animated franchises such as Pixar's *Toy Story*, Blue Sky's *Ice Age*, DreamWorks' *Kung-Fu Panda* (2008; 2011; 2016) and *How to Train Your Dragon* (2010; 2014), and Illumination's *Despicable Me*. Action adventure was initially privileged by newer studios to differentiate their output from Disney's, which has been mostly associated with the hand-drawn fairy tale and the musical.[2]

Yet, although not as iconic as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* or *Beauty and the Beast*, numerous Disney animated films have followed on from the action-adventure genre. They initially borrowed from subgenres such as the swashbuckling and pirate film, as in *Peter Pan*, *The Sword in the Stone*, and *Robin Hood*. With growing competition from other animation studios, Disney's generic influences started to diversify from the mid-1990s onwards, including sword-and-sandal in *Hercules* (Ron Clements and John Musker, 1997), war film in *Mulan*, and science fiction in *Lilo & Stitch* and *Treasure Planet*. Simultaneously, these animated features toned down their musical heritage, with films such as *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* including no diegetic songs. Disney also relied increasingly on computer-generated imagery, as epitomised in *Mulan*'s Huns' charge sequence, particularly foregrounded in trailers. In the film, the considerable number of computer-animated Huns is emphasized through long shots and crane shots. A digitally simulated camera tracks across the landscape, giving an impressive, vertiginous feel to the scene.

Following the disappointing box office results of early 2000s hand-drawn animated features, and Pixar's influence, Disney has largely shifted to computer animation – with the

[2] Daniel Goldmark, "Pixar and the Animated Soundtrack," in *The Oxford Handbook of New Audiovisual Aesthetics*, ed. Claudia Gorbman, John Richardson, and Carol Vernallis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 215.

notable exceptions of *The Princess and the Frog* and *Winnie the Pooh*.[3] This move was accompanied by the studio's adoption of the action-adventure film as recurring generic template, with films such as *Bolt*, *Wreck-It Ralph*, *Big Hero 6* and *Moana*. Such a generic predominance within Disney and mainstream animation partly comes from the contemporary "overlap of the ageing-down action movie" and "the ageing up family film".[4] This phenomenon is exemplified by the multiplication of superhero live-action films based on comic books, and the growing number of animated features labelled as "family films," but rated PG for "action violence".[5] Within this saturated digital action-adventure milieu, where does contemporary Disney stand?

Looking at the critical reception of *Bolt*, *Wreck-It Ralph*, *Big Hero 6* and *Moana* may suggest that Disney's generic identity and originality has dissolved into a genre that is ubiquitous in mainstream cinema. In terms of narrative, for example, reviewers noted the formulaic nature of films such as *Big Hero 6* in light of the contemporary abundance of Marvel superhero live-action films relying heavily on digital effects and computer animation. Peter Debruge (*Variety*) criticised the fact that the "filmmakers felt obliged to resort to a final battle with a less-than-special villain" characterised by "relatively generic… power hungry schemes".[6] Jordan Hoffman (*Guardian*) similarly described the "interminable third act featuring a deadly, mayhem-causing portal to another dimension" as an unavoidable feature of this "kid version of *The Avengers*".[7] Debruge questioned the very point of Disney's addition to

[3] Chris Pallant, "Neo-Disney: Recent Developments in Disney Feature Animation," *New Cinemas* 8 (2010), 113-14, accessed 23 April 2015, doi: 10.1386/ncin.8.2.103_1; to this date, the Disney studio has not communicated any plans to release a new hand-drawn animated feature in the foreseeable future.
[4] Eric Lichtenfeld, *Action Speaks Louder: Violence, Spectacle, and the American Action Movie* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2007), 322.
[5] Ibid, 322-23.
[6] Peter Debruge, "Film Review: *Big Hero 6*," *Variety*, 23 October, 2014, accessed 24 February 2018, http://variety.com/2014/film/festivals/film-review-big-hero-6-2-1201337195/.
[7] Jordan Hoffman, "*Big Hero 6* Review: An Adorable Robot Bounces through Mayhem," *Guardian*, 7 November 2014, accessed 24 February 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/nov/07/big-hero-6-review.

the genre, considering that the "Disney Marvel Universe is already filled to bursting with big heroes".[8]

Yet, the originality of Disney's version of the computer-animated action-adventure film surfaced in specific ways. Reviewers particularly noted the comic and endearing friendship between young protagonist Hiro and his healthcare robot Baymax: Hoffman argued that this duo helps "differentiate [*Big Hero 6*] from usual fare"; Dan Jolin (*Empire*) underlined that "it's in the burgeoning… friendship between Baymax and Hiro that we find *Big Hero 6*'s most humorous moments"; Michael Rechtshaffen (*Hollywood Reporter*) particularly remarked that "Baymax handily steals the show… to maximum comic effect".[9] Elements specific to Disney were also observed at the aesthetic level. Although critics praised *Moana*'s state-of-the-art computer animation, they also focused on how smoothly the style of hand-drawn animation was incorporated throughout the film. Debruge admired Moana's "expressions… reflecting all the subtleties of performance possible in hand-drawn animation"; Collin (*Telegraph*) particularly noted the design of the ocean wave: "the effortless expressivity of that single, curved line… is an invisible triumph of tactile visual thinking".[10]All in all, what was repeatedly foregrounded was a fruitful balance between "technological prowess" and a "hand-drawn aesthetic that feels genuinely expressive and spontaneous",[11] as Collin observed. Such comments echo the praise surrounding *Tangled*'s computer animation. Reviewers appreciated "I See the Light" partly because the musical sequence skilfully rendered the organic quality of

[8] Debruge, "Film Review: *Big Hero 6*."
[9] Hoffman, "*Big Hero 6* Review;" Dan Jolin, "*Big Hero 6* Review," *Empire*, 19 July 2016, accessed 24 February 2018, https://www.empireonline.com/movies/big-hero-6/review/; Michael Rechtshaffen, "*Big Hero 6*: Film Review," *Hollywood Reporter*, 23 October 2014, accessed 24 February 2018, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/big-hero-6-film-review-742707.
[10] Peter Debruge, "Film Review: *Moana*," *Variety*, 7 November 2016, accessed 24 February 2018, http://variety.com/2016/film/reviews/moana-review-walt-disney-animation-studios-1201911413/; Robbie Collin, "*Moana* Review: Disney's Beautiful CG Spectacle Will Warm Your Soul," *The Telegraph*, 1 December 2016, accessed 24 February 2018, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/films/0/disneys-dazzling-moana-cg-animation-has-never-felt-warmer/.
[11] Collin, "*Moana* Review."

cel animation. Reviewers also welcomed the presence of Disney's familiar generic tropes. For example, Scott underlined that *Moana* included both "visual and musical showstoppers", reminiscent of "*The Little Mermaid*" for Devon Coggan (*Entertainment Weekly*) and "*Frozen*" for Nick De Semlyen (*Empire*).[12] This brief overview of the critical reception of Disney's action-adventure animated films reveals that, beyond fairy-tale romance and princesses, the presence of humorously lovable characters, musical sequences, and hand-drawn animation style are perceived and praised as essential components of Disney features. These specific visual and generic tropes form the basis for the studio's distinctive approach to the action-adventure film.

Tasker describes the action-adventure genre as the combination of "adventure," namely "narratives of quest and discovery," and "action," associated with "scenes of combat, violence, and pursuit".[13] Considering that such sequences and narratives are "ubiquitous" within Hollywood cinema, Tasker approaches action adventure as an "over-arching term" in order to acknowledge its multiplicity and hybridity.[14] Disney incorporates the multiple qualities of action adventure throughout its contemporary output. For example, *Bolt*'s thrilling explosions and chases are combined with a narrative evoking the spy movie; *Wreck-It Ralph*'s video game sequence "Hero's Duty" calls upon tropes from science fiction and the war film, with its army of soldiers fighting "cy-bugs". Tasker observes that, despite the varied iconography of action-adventure genres, they share a common emphasis on impressive set design and special effects, presenting an awe-inspiring cinematic spectacle.[15]

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[12] A. O. Scott, "Review: *Moana*, Brave Princess on a Voyage with a Chicken," *New York Times*, 22 November 2016, accessed 24 February 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/22/movies/moana-review.html; Devon Coggan, "*Moana*: EW Review," *Entertainment Weekly*, November 7, 2016, accessed 24 February 2018, http://ew.com/article/2016/11/07/moana-ew-review/; Nick De Semlyen, "*Moana* Review," *Empire*, 2 December 2016, accessed 24 February 2018, https://www.empireonline.com/movies/moana/review/.

[13] Tasker, *The Hollywood Action and Adventure Film*, 2.

[14] Ibid, 3; 19.

[15] Ibid, 12.

The concept of spectacle is at the core of the action-adventure genre, based on visual displays "at which we might wish to stop and stare… 'larger than life' representations".[16] Digital effects favour such contemplation, from *Moana*'s breath-taking seascapes to *Bolt*'s stirring stunts. The action-adventure spectacle not only dazzles the audience, but also strikes and impacts them. The high speed of perilous chases exemplifies the "centrality of movement" in action-adventure films, creating a "sensational" cinema.[17]

Larger-than-life representations and dynamic movement characterise another kind of spectacle: the musical. Geoff King notes that both the Hollywood musical and action adventure overflow with "energy and intensity, on both the actions of the characters and the dynamics of cinematography".[18] Punctuating the films, action set-pieces and musical numbers have also been compared for the structural function they share: both play "an important role in dramatizing the themes of a movie and drawing audiences in emotionally".[19] Another key parallel is the concept of performance. Numerous musicals are "about putting on a show," revealing their "own inner gears to the film audience".[20] This self-reflexive dimension also applies to action adventure to some extent. Protagonists often knowingly comment on the impossibility of stunts, or on their breath-taking, over-the-top nature. For example, in *The Last Action Hero* (John McTiernan, 1993), movie character Jack Slater struggles to replicate his feats in the "real" world ("Damn it, that hurt!").

Action-adventure spectacle, or rather the *performance* of it, is at the core of Disney's reworking of the genre in *Bolt*, *Wreck-It Ralph*, *Big Hero 6*, and *Moana*. This chapter focuses on the three most distinctive layers of this reworking. At surface level, these films remarkably and playfully reproduce the dazzling visuals of live-action action-adventure through computer

[16] Geoff King, *Spectacular Narratives: Hollywood in the Age of the Blockbuster* (London: Tauris, 2000), 4.
[17] Tasker, *The Hollywood Action and Adventure Film*, 49.
[18] King, *Spectacular Narratives*, 102-3.
[19] Tasker, *The Hollywood Action and Adventure Film*, 16.
[20] Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), 23; 42.

animation. I pay attention to the way certain aspects of animation aesthetics typically associated with Disney are preserved, representing a potential selling point throughout Disney's discourses of promotion. I also examine how these films preserve the thrills of the genre, while mitigating its photorealistic violence and excesses.

Bolt, *Wreck-It Ralph*, *Big Hero 6*, and *Moana* not only humorously reproduce impressive live-action action-adventure displays, but also foreground and challenge their artificial nature. At a second level, I explore how they self-reflexively interact with the techniques of both computer animation and pre-digital animation to re-envision the action spectacle as an illusionistic *mise en scène*, depending on the performance of its actors and audience. After having unveiled the action-adventure staging and undermined the action hero's status, they reconstruct a more authentic, unmediated performance.

In parallel, some specific action spectacles are staged as exhilarating and empowering experiences for the protagonists. At a third level, I examine how Disney animated features expand the generic borders of action-adventure by drawing on the studio's musical roots. In the process, they reimagine and bring further the relationship between the two spectacular genres, as epitomized in their explicit merging in *Moana*. I particularly look at the ways this phenomenon is enhanced through the intrinsic connection between the musical and the animation medium.

Exploring the multi-layered reworking of the digital action-adventure spectacle in *Bolt*, *Wreck-It Ralph*, *Big Hero 6*, and *Moana*, this chapter elaborates on two interrelated points: the extent to which the studio questions and re-envisions the action-adventure genre, and how Disney updates and differentiates its generic and aesthetic approach in the process.

From Live-Action to Animation Milieus: Playfully Transposing the Dazzling Digital Spectacle of Action Adventure

Bolt, *Wreck-It Ralph*, *Big Hero 6*, and *Moana* reproduce the dazzling digital spectacle of action adventure by relying on Pixar's state-of-the art technological tools and aesthetic. At the same time, they foreground a particularly humorous approach towards the excesses, thrills, and photorealistic impulses of the digital action spectacle. They build on and develop a sense of knowingness already at the core of some action-adventure films. *Bolt*'s, *Wreck-It Ralph*'s, *Big Hero 6*'s and *Moana*'s playful approach is also based on elements typically associated with Disney and its aesthetic style. As live-action action-adventure films rely more and more on computer-generated imaging, and computer-animated action-adventure films are multiplying, Disney's challenge is to preserve its singularity as an iconic *animation* studio, while relying on the same digital tools and generic framework.

In live-action cinema, digital imaging is mainly used to render "impossible vistas and impossible bodies" onscreen, elements that would not have been convincing with analogue technology in earlier decades.[21] Even when action adventure borrows from fantasy, protagonists' exploits are depicted in a photorealistic way, as if they had occurred in front of the camera.[22] This implies credibility and seamlessness in the inclusion of visual effects.[23] Such an effort to erase any trace of digital intervention is consistent with the style of mainstream live-action cinema. Lev Manovich observes that the latter "pretends to be a simple recording of an already existing reality" while hiding the artifices of its construction.[24] In this context, digital characters perceived as unbelievable may compromise the level of photorealism established

[21] Lisa Purse, *Digital Imaging in Popular Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 25.
[22] Ibid, 6-7.
[23] Janet K. Halfyard, "Cue the Big Theme? The Sound of the Superhero," in *The Oxford Handbook of New Audiovisual Aesthetics*, ed. Claudia Gorbman, John Richardson, and Carol Vernallis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 184.
[24] Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 298-99.

within the rest of the film.[25] For example, Lisa Purse explains that the negative reception surrounding early digital superheroes such as *Spider-Man* (Sam Raimi, 2002) and the *Hulk* (Ang Lee, 2003) came from their inconsistent depiction, which clashed with their readily recognisable urban setting.[26] Incoherent character stretching and an unconvincing sense of body mass led some reviewers to describe the Hulk as an overly cartoonish character.[27] The transition from the live-action actor to its digital alter ego was perceived as "the central problem" of the genre for Scott Bukatman, as it severed the connection between the two and undermined the aesthetic fluidity of the film.[28]

Computer-animated films, in which "everything belongs to a shared level of reality", provide an interesting contrast to live-action films which only partially rely on the digital.[29] Unlike mainstream live-action cinema, animation principally foregrounds its artificial character: Manovich notes that "its visual language is more aligned to the graphic than to the photographic".[30] Both depending on exaggeration and caricature, *and* building on the dazzling potentials of the digital, computer animation is particularly suited to adapt the larger-than-life spectacle of action-adventure, as exemplified by Pixar's computer-animated films. For example, *Toy Story*'s (John Lasseter, 1995) images and visual effects imitate the photorealism of live-action cinema: the toys' bodies and actions function "plausibly" within a recognisable and familiar environment.[31] This "reality illusion," produced through Pixar's Renderman software, was reinforced through the simulation of a mechanical camera and its accompanying effects, such as lens flares and motion blur.[32] However, Pixar distinguished its aesthetic from

[25] Purse, *Digital Imaging in Popular Cinema*, 60.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid, 58-61.
[28] Scott Bukatman, "Why I Hate Superhero Movies," *Cinema Journal* 50 (2011): 121, accessed 11 November 2014, doi: 10.1353/cj.2011.0030.
[29] Scott Bukatman, "Secret Identity Politics," in *The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero*, ed. Angela Ndalianis (New York: Routledge, 2009), 116.
[30] Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 29.
[31] Telotte, *The Mouse Machine*, 165.
[32] Ibid.

live-action imagery by maintaining a certain degree of caricature, notably in character design. This approach came from initial technological limitations, but also from the "uncanny effect" produced by images perceived as "too clean and perfect".[33] More recent films such as *The Good Dinosaur* (2015) do achieve photorealism, but the detailed rendering of the background landscapes – lush vegetation, glistening water – is still balanced with the heavily caricatured leads. Such a hybrid aesthetic, blending photorealistic backgrounds and camerawork, and cartoon-like protagonists, is also noticeable in contemporary anime. Films such as *Wolf Children* (Mamoru Hosoda, 2012), *Your Name* (Makoto Shinkai, 2016), and *A Silent Voice* (Naoko Yamada, 2016) include highly stylised hand-drawn characters following on from the aesthetic style of manga within digitally animated environments. Cityscapes and rural scenery are showcased through sweeping camerawork, the presence of which is signalled through numerous digitally constructed lens flares.

Disney's computer animation follows on from such a hybrid aesthetic initiated by Pixar. As Disney acquired Pixar in 2006, the subsequent internal reshuffling meant that it was actually "Pixar's hierarchy" that would drive Disney animation forward, both at a boardroom level – John Lasseter became chief creative officer of both studios – and artistically.[34] Disney's computer-animated features released under the new leadership similarly replicate the photorealistic visuals and effects of live-action cinematography, while depicting caricatured protagonists and stylized worlds.[35] *Big Hero 6*'s first flight sequence exemplifies such a state-of-the-art aesthetically hybrid animation. Protagonist Hiro flies on robot Baymax over the fantasy cityscape of San Fransokyo, which blends visual tropes from American and Japanese

[33] Telotte, *The Mouse Machine*, 160-61; A sensation known as the "uncanny" occurs when "a viewer senses an odd disconnect between the images seen and his or her expectations of how they should appear – a subconscious warning that what we see is 'not right'". This idea is based on the concept of "the uncanny valley". See Furniss, *A New History of Animation*, 372.
[34] Pallant, *Demystifying Disney*, 130-31.
[35] Ibid, 137-38.

architecture and environments. The simplicity of the characters' design is epitomised through Baymax's minimalist facial features: two dots linked by a straight line. This stylised look stands out from the photorealistic cloudy sky in the background. The lighting convincingly and beautifully reproduces the late-afternoon rosy light of the sun, reflected on an imaginary camera as the simulation of lens flares appear onscreen. This seamless combination of animation and live-action aesthetics, namely stylised and caricatured protagonists with photorealistic cinematography, echoes comparable sequences in Pixar's *The Good Dinosaur*. Arlo, a heavily caricatured young dinosaur befriends a human child named Spot, who behaves like an animal. These two anthropomorphised characters run through the natural landscape: Spot sits on Arlo's back, and Arlo throws him upwards, into the clouds, soaring into the photorealistic sky like Disney's Hiro and Baymax.

Although contemporary Disney appears to have aesthetically converged with Pixar, the studio strives to foreground its persisting singularity. Disney has always subtly combined innovation and tradition regarding animation aesthetics, building on its long history of cel animation: this is what distinguishes the studio's approach to the digital action-adventure spectacle.

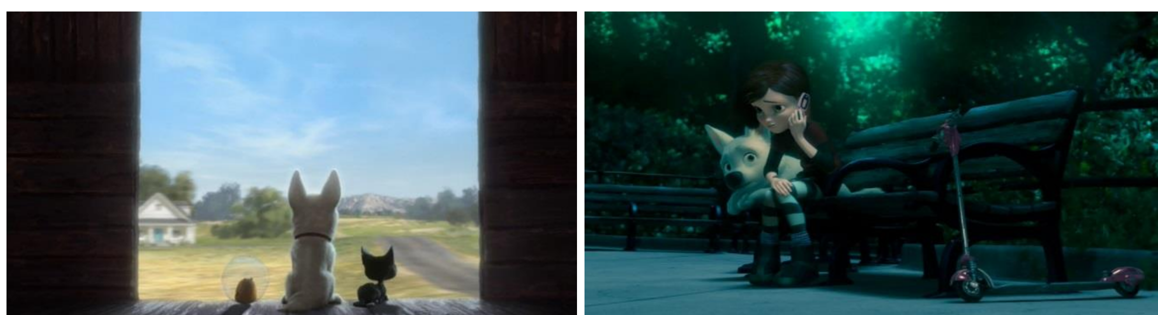

Figure 18 and 19: *Bolt* [frame capture]

The discourses of promotion surrounding *Bolt*, the first computer-animated feature entirely supervised by Disney's new leadership, positioned the film within the continuity of Disney's past hand-drawn releases. *The Art of Bolt* particularly emphasized the "painterly style"

of the film.[36] Such an aesthetic was reportedly inspired by “classic Americana painters” such as Edward Hopper, and rendered through the reproduction of a “brushstroke effect” in the backgrounds.[37] For example, as Bolt and his animal friends Mittens and Rhino travel through the United States, the American landscape unfolds through a montage of painterly sequences featuring motorways, country fields and snowy mountains (Figure 18). *Bolt*’s painterly style is mostly noticeable in sequences evoking the road movie genre, and characterising the real non-mediated world of the film. By contrast, art director Paul Felix underlines that the aesthetic of the action-adventure television programme shown within the film leans towards photorealism, borrowing more explicitly from the look of live-action cinematography.[38]

The transition from the world of *Bolt* to the television show epitomises these generically-dependent aesthetic variations. The film opens with the moving adoption of lovable puppy Bolt by young Penny at an animal rescue centre. Naturalistic lighting and muted, painterly colours help create a warm, intimate atmosphere to depict the new happy family. A title card (“Five years later”) introduces a shift to the action-adventure show “Bolt”. Several cuts to black punctuate a phone conversation between Penny and her “father,” creating a disorienting sense of tension enhanced by saturated colours and a play on expressive shadows (Figure 19). Functioning as a credit sequence, it provides the synopsis for the television show: Penny’s father is a scientist who has been mysteriously kidnapped, but managed to transform Bolt into a super-dog in order to protect Penny. This variation of aesthetic styles points towards the singularity of Disney’s computer animation, framing the studio’s generic commentary. *Bolt* alternates between two-dimensional styles and photorealistic digital effects to contrast specific genre moments in the film. Action-adventure sequences stand out as particularly dazzling, playful and ultimately parodic reproductions of live-action action spectacle.

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[36] Mark Cotta Vaz, *The Art of Bolt* (Chronicle Books: San Francisco, 2008), 11.
[37] Ibid, 122.
[38] Quoted in Cotta Vaz, *The Art of Bolt*, 122.

Disney most spectacularly demonstrates its parodic mastery of live-action action adventure later in the "Bolt" episode, with a thrilling chase throughout the city and its beltway. It starts as a typically thrilling and well-executed action sequence. The increasing speed of Penny riding her scooter and Bolt running along is enhanced by the accelerating digitally simulated camera movement: the camera tracks with them as they zigzag between cars and trucks and avoid a growing number of henchmen on motorcycles. This dynamic pace slows down at key moments of the chase to showcase Bolt's spectacular powers, most notably through a process called "speed ramping." Particularly popular in contemporary live-action action-adventure films, it enables an "intensified focus on the body in motion" through the alteration of speed within a shot.[39] For example, it occurs when Bolt jumps high over a helicopter, a few inches from the rotor blades, in order to avoid a missile. As the action almost halts, the audience is encouraged to stare in amazement at Bolt's impressive feat. The pace accelerates again when Bolt successfully lands on his feet. The missile which was tracking him hits the helicopter instead, leading to a spectacular explosion displayed in a way that effectively reproduces the "impact aesthetic" of live-action action-adventure.[40] The same exploding helicopter is shown four times in a row via multiple reframings. The four shots rapidly succeed each other, taking the audience closer to the smoke and fire which fill the screen in the third shot. However, this striking and staggering sight, typical of action-adventure spectacles, is playfully undermined through the fourth shot of the roaring explosion. Shown in an extreme long shot, it turns into a silent yellow dot lost between skyscrapers, its sole impact being the fall of a plastic cup in the foreground. These contrasting shots playfully subvert the necessarily increasing scale of "thrills and destruction" typical of action film style, subverting their dramatic scope.[41]

[39] Lisa Purse, *Contemporary Action Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 68.
[40] Ibid, 59.
[41] King, *Spectacular Narratives*, 100.

The last scene of the episode brings *Bolt*'s action-adventure parody further. The chase culminates when Penny and Bolt are trapped on a road with cars, SUVs, and helicopters heading towards them. Bolt's "super-bark" triggers a shock wave that throws these all into the air. Smoke, debris, and vehicles fill up the screen, hurled towards the digitally simulated camera and displayed from multiple angles, taking the audience both to the heart of and above the chaotic scene. Efficiently imitating the "impact aesthetic" introduced earlier, the scene also stands out through its excess: the considerable number of vehicles, the disproportionate effect of tiny Bolt's "superbark." The scene becomes a genre joke, a playful nod to what Tasker describes as the "gleeful and spectacular destruction of property" which frames the climactic battle scenes of live-action action-adventure films such as *The Avengers*.[42]

Throughout the film, Disney subtly yet consistently mocks the formulaic visual and aural tropes of live-action action adventure, as in the television programme that "Bolt" fan Rhino is introduced watching. Although the television set remains off screen, a tough male voice ("Hey man, this time, we'll do it my way") and bullet sounds are heard. Playfully mocking genre clichés such as the witty one-liner and the shoot-out, this sequence also hints at action-adventure excessive gun violence, notably absent from *Bolt*. When Bolt finds his way back to Hollywood, he passes in front of film posters, including one which points to the stock *visuals* of the stereotypical live-action action film. Knowingly entitled "Blast Radius," it features a suited man walking ahead, gun in hand, with a fireball and explosions in the background. This poster mocks further the systematic reliance on violence and destruction of live-action action cinema.

Bolt's multifaceted generic playfulness also characterises Disney's wider action-adventure animated canon. *Wreck-It Ralph*, for example, parodically repurposes the process of

[42] Tasker, *The Hollywood Action and Adventure Film*, 186.

speed ramping, humorously defusing the tension underlying the live-action action spectacle and undermining the aura of the action hero. In the video game "Hero's Duty," Ralph is attacked by a tiny cy-bug. He leaves the game in an escape pod, but fails to keep the vehicle under control, as the cy-bug clings onto his face and blinds him. The pace is slowed down at the very moment his pod flies at characters' eye level. Two characters (Felix and Calhoun) look up: Ralph appears in slow motion, struggling against the cy-bug. Instead of displaying the "postures of mastery" described by Purse as typical of action adventure, here speed ramping foregrounds Ralph's comical helplessness, grimacing and screaming while being overpowered by a small "cy-bug".[43]

Many live-action action-adventure films, such as the *Lethal Weapon* or *Charlies' Angels* franchises, mock their own conventions at times, or knowingly foreground the impossible nature of digitally enhanced action feats.[44] Other animated films re-appropriate live-action digital effects like speed ramping, as exemplified in *Shrek*'s parodic *Matrix*-style fight between Princess Fiona and Robin Hood's Merrymen. What further distinguishes Disney's playful approach is the addition of generic tropes specifically associated with early animation. *Bolt*, *Wreck-It Ralph*, *Big Hero 6*, and *Moana* rely on episodes of cartoon comedy to both counterbalance and subvert live-action tension and violence. Echoing Chuck Jones's Road Runner gags, these sequences rely on repetition, and present the animated body as indestructible – or rather, the slapstick as harmless.

In *Moana*, for example, some spectacular and potentially dangerous action feats are undermined through cartoon comedy. As Moana jumps from a cliff to reach Maui and get her boat back, she lands flat on her belly, a few inches from the boat. Finally on board with the help

[43] Purse, *Contemporary Action Cinema*, 68.
[44] Jonathan Romney, "Arnold through the Looking Glass," in *Action/Spectacle Cinema: A Sight and Sound Reader*, ed. José Arroyo (London: British Film Institute, 2000), 35; Purse, *Digital Imaging in Popular Cinema*, 20.

of the sentient ocean, she starts her prepared speech; Maui interrupts her by throwing her overboard. The same scene reoccurs straight away, then a third time later in the film. Its repetitive nature and harmless effect render the act more comic than potentially violent. The sequence of the "Kakamora" attack is another example of action-oriented tension counterbalanced with cartoon humour. The Kakamoras are silent, small pirates wearing coconut shells as armour/helmet, with static facial features drawn onto them. Although Moana actively hits them with an oar, their diminutive stature and simplified, caricatured aesthetic – angry eyes, pointy teeth – lends a comedic tone to the action.

This cartoony, almost endearing appearance also gives the Kakamoras a particularly appealing look, which playfully defuses their threatening potential. They contrast significantly with the frightening skeleton pirates from the live-action Disney film *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* (Gore Verbinski, 2003). Although both pirate crews are computer-animated, Verbinski's pirates tend towards a photorealistic rendition of decaying corpses, within the context of a live-action action-adventure film borrowing from the horror genre. By contrast, the Kakamoras' design exemplifies Disney's play with the conventions of action-adventure through the caricatured style of hand-drawn aesthetics.

Their appearance also represents a playful nod at the studio's own animation style: as Moana initially exclaims, "they're kind of cute!" The addition of animated cuteness within an action-adventure context undermines further the threat posed by the digital villain or monster. Art director of characters Bill Schwab describes the Kakamoras as "cute-scary"; in *Wreck-It Ralph*, the ravening cy-bugs were conceived as both "creepy" and "cute".[45] "Disarming cuteness" has been a staple part of Disney animation since the 1930s, which has recurrently been satirised and parodied.[46] From the introduction to *Red Hot Riding Hood* (Tex Avery, 1943)

[45] Quoted in Jessica Julius and Maggie Malone, *The Art of Moana* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books: 2016), 114; Jennifer Lee and Maggie Malone, *The Art of Wreck-It Ralph*, (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2012), 79.
[46] Steven Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 104.

to the portrayal of Puss in Boots in *Shrek* 2, harmlessly cheerful, big-eyed characters have functioned to mock Disney's sentimental impulses. The studio's contemporary output acknowledges and re-appropriates these parodies. Cuteness is not only attributed to lovable sidekicks – such as Pua in *Moana* or Olaf in *Frozen* – but also to hordes of little villains, such as the Kakamoras and cy-bugs.

Playing with characters' and viewers' generic expectations, as illustrated through Moana's comment, Disney's aesthetic of cuteness also characterises unlikely action heroes, such as Bolt's hamster sidekick Rhino. Although he is small, fluffy – as a film extra exclaims, "you're so cute with your little whiskers" – and rarely leaves his hamster ball, he single-handedly delivers Bolt from a dog catcher's truck. This efficiency comes from his passion for and knowledge of the action-adventure genre. His recurrent comments on the ongoing action spectacle both help contextualise the narrative and mock the predictable tropes of the genre, such as the "pep talk" to the action hero and the importance of his sidekicks. Like Fred in *Big Hero 6* ("We're under attack from a super-villain, people"), Rhino's characterisation represents one of Disney's many strategies for playful generic knowingness.

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Bolt, *Wreck-It Ralph*, *Big Hero 6* and *Moana* skilfully and humorously reproduce the dazzling spectacle of action adventure. Through their transposition of the genre from the live-action to the animated milieu, they alternate between photorealistic visuals and effects, building on Pixar's state-of-the-art digital tools, and a painterly and caricatured aesthetic. Such balance forms the basis for Disney's generic commentary. *Bolt*, *Wreck-It Ralph*, *Big Hero 6* and *Moana* parodically foreground action-adventure formulaic tropes through spectacular yet knowingly excessive sequences, and more subtle genre jokes. In the process, they further develop the playful tendencies of action-adventure cinema. These films also rely on tropes specific to both

hand-drawn cartoons and Disney's aesthetic style to humorously defuse action-adventure violence and tension.

While these elements underline the singularity of Disney animated action-adventure films, their differentiating aspect goes beyond playful transposition. Characters such as Rhino represent some of the most explicit examples of Disney's wider self-reflexive strategies. *Bolt*, *Wreck-It Ralph*, *Big Hero 6* and *Moana* rely on animation as a form to foreground and challenge the illusory aspects of the digital action spectacle.

Questioning and Distancing the Action Spectacle: Illusion, *Mise En Scène*, Performance

Bolt, *Wreck-It Ralph*, *Big Hero 6* and *Moana* question the *mise en scène* behind the digital action spectacle, relying on Disney's unique status as a studio that both possesses a long history of hand-drawn animation, and is now releasing successful computer-animated films. Disney's distinctive animation aesthetic does not solely serve a humorous purpose, parodically subverting the excesses and tension of live-action action adventure. *Bolt*, *Wreck-It Ralph*, *Big Hero 6* and *Moana* also self-reflexively build on both pre-digital and digital animation styles to deconstruct the elaborate yet artificial action-adventure performance.

In order to approach the specific kind of self-reflexivity at work in Disney's action-adventure animated films, the "backstage musical" provides a useful generic framework. Such a perspective builds on and explores further the affinities between action films and musicals introduced earlier. Richard Dyer describes the backstage musical as an early trend of the wider Hollywood musical, including films such as *Gold Diggers of 1933* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1933) and *42nd Street* (Lloyd Bacon, 1933), in which narrative and number are kept clearly separated: musical performances occur independently, on stage or in cabarets.[47] Jane Feuer applies this

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[47] Richard Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia," in *Hollywood Musicals: The Film Reader*, ed. Steven Cohan (London: Routledge, 2002), 26.

generic label more widely, considering later musicals such as *Easter Parade* (Charles Walters, 1948) and *The Band Wagon* (Vincente Minnelli, 1953) which adopt a more integrated approach towards numbers, but also unveil and explore the "backstage" world behind some of the performances. These films take the audience to places they would not have access to, such as the wings, detailing the elaboration and practice of musical productions.[48] The penchant of backstage musicals for revealing their "own inner gears" demystifies the "illusion" of the live performance: these films reveal the stage paraphernalia used to create the "magic," and show the performers out of character.[49] The overall effect is to reframe the production as "an act of extreme calculation," and as a routine, a mere "job".[50]

Disney's animated films function as backstage action-adventure films, demystifying the digital action spectacle in ways which resonate with their live-action musical counterparts. *Bolt* is a *mise en abyme,* depicting the shooting of the eponymous action-adventure television programme. After Bolt's spectacular "super bark," a bell rings: seemingly dead extras stand up and leave what turns out to be a television set, with a fake airport background being lifted, and a film crew carrying surprisingly light car props. Cat-actors practice their "evil laugh" and one-liners, while Bolt does not understand that their behaviour is a teasing performance. The subsequent episode deconstructs further the extreme calculation behind the display of Bolt's superpowers. For example, the bars he bends are made of rubber, the weapon destroyed through his "heat vision" is automatically dismantled at a distance by a crew member. The "heat vision" itself cannot be seen – it was displayed in the earlier episode – which suggests that it would be digitally added in postproduction.

This visual trick not only foregrounds the digital mediation at the core of the action spectacle and performance, but also reveals the extent to which the viewer's gaze is

[48] Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*, 42.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid.

manipulated. The second episode alternates between the "wings" of the television show, namely the control room in which the director gives his instructions, and the television set, where hidden cameramen accordingly "widen out camera 3" and "track with" Penny and Bolt. Revealing the artifices of both live-action cinema and the action performance, this particular emphasis on the manipulation of the gaze also functions as a comment on the very act of watching the action spectacle. The first episode already hinted at such constructedness, beginning with Penny and Bolt spying on the villain through binoculars. The audience share their viewpoint: a henchman is sitting with his back at the camera, in the foreground, looking at a screen on which Dr Calico (the show's villain) explains his plans. These multiple frames, including the frame of the binoculars and the frame on which Calico is projected, is accompanied by a multiplication of diegetic audiences, which sets the tone of the television episode: theatricality, explicit stagings, and more particularly digital mediation will be at the core of the action spectacle. Similarly, the subsequent display of Bolt's spectacular feats systematically include characters *watching*: Penny looking up at the car thrown in the air by Bolt, the helicopter driver looking up at Bolt jumping above him. Along with the use of speed ramping, this self-conscious display does not solely invite audiences "to be amazed and to enjoy the spectacle", as Tasker notes of action movies.[51] These meticulous stagings play a key narrative role, hinting at the constructedness of Bolt's world: like the latter, the audience must learn to decode the extreme calculation behind the action spectacle. Such decoding is permitted through incursions into the backstage world of the action-adventure television show.

[51] Tasker, *The Hollywood Action and Adventure Film*, 69.

Figure 20: *Big Hero 6* [frame capture]

Wreck-It Ralph and *Big Hero 6* also deconstruct the illusion on which the action spectacle rests, especially the digital component of its *mise en scène*. *Big Hero 6* takes the audience behind the scenes of digital production, showing Hiro designing the super suits of his friends on his computer screen before fabricating them. His "pre-production" work for Baymax includes the transfer via motion capture of martial arts combat moves onto a chip he installs into Baymax's access port – like the digital filmmaking process itself (Figure 20).

While the work of digital animator Hiro goes relatively smoothly, the illusionist dimension of the digital action performance is deconstructed more explicitly in *Wreck-It Ralph*, most strikingly through the depiction of video game character Vanellope. As a "glitch," her digital representation is unstable: her animated body repeatedly breaks into dozens of pixels. Alan Meades notes that glitches subvert game spaces, exposing the incoherent inner workings of digital technology.[52] Building on Meades's point, Vanellope's depiction challenges the seamless inclusion of digital effects within live-action cinema, foregrounding instead the constructedness, and potential anomalies, of the digital spectacle.

[52] Alan Meades, "Beyond the Animated Landscape: Videogame Glitches and the Sublime," in *Animated Landscapes: History, Form and Function*, ed. Chris Pallant (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 281.

Digital mediation is central in *Wreck-It Ralph*, opening with a computer-animated *mise en abyme*: the screen of an arcade game ("Fix-It Felix") inhabited by pixelated, 2-D 8-bit characters, is framed by the more photorealistic 3-D world of the arcade. The borders of the screen are reminiscent of a proscenium. On this 2-D stage, 8-bit Ralph is introduced as the "bad guy" who wrecks the building that "good guy" Felix fixes, helping the "Nicelanders." As the digitally simulated camera passes through the screen of the arcade game console, the aesthetic shifts from 2-D to 3-D. This "alternative reality behind the screen" evokes the wings of the musical.[53] As the audience is taken into the backstage world of "Fix-It Felix", the game is revealed to be a performance, a mere routine for Felix and his friends ("Quittin' time… Good job everyone!"). Out of character, Ralph actually appears kind-hearted and suffers from his marginalised position: his 3-D portrayal differs notably from his simplistic 8-bit stage persona.

This self-reflexive use of digital animation, and more particularly the ostentatious shifts from one animation style to another, are specific to Disney action-adventure films. Other animated features, such as Pixar's, also develop a self-reflexive approach through animated *mise en abyme*. Christopher Holliday observes that computer-animated film narratives "commonly grant spectators the intrigue of a puppet/puppeteer relationship… creatively 'doubl[ing]' the kinds of interaction between animators and their digital objects".[54] Examples include the *Toy Story* franchise, in which toys are acted upon by children, and *Ratatouille* (Brad Bird, 2007), in which Remy the rat controls Linguini's moves while he cooks by pulling on his hair. *Wreck-It Ralph*'s characters are also being acted upon by gamers. The explicitly different 2-D aesthetic of the former's performance foregrounds the constructedness of the game and correspondingly, of the action feats of 8-bit Ralph and Felix. Disney action-adventure films

[53] Aylish Wood, *Software, Animation and the Moving Image: What's in the Box?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 87.
[54] Holliday, *The Computer-Animated Film*, 131.

tend to imitate 2-D or pre-digital animation for generic purposes, challenging the authenticity of the action performance.

Figure 21: *Wreck-It-Ralph* [frame capture]

Disney's animated action-adventure output relies on self-reflexive *mise en scène* not only to demystify protagonists' feats, but also to question the very definition of the "action hero", revealing the importance of the diegetic audience in attributing this label. For example, in *Wreck-It Ralph*, the settings and characters of "Fix-It Felix" are recreated through an elaborate cake for an anniversary party. Their malleable texture is reminiscent of plasticine figurines: this pre-digital, alternative version of the game reinforces the marginalised position of Ralph as a villain. While all the Nicelanders are found on the roof of their building with Felix receiving a medal, Ralph is found at the bottom, alone, in the (chocolate) mud. He is depicted as a deranged monster scarily waving his arms, with red eyes, an angry grimace, and missing teeth (Figure 21). Ralph tries to re-appropriate this heavily mediated representation of himself by animating the cake figurine: he traces a smile on its face, places it on top of the building, and adds a medal to it. One Nicelander opposes this animated alternative by putting the figurine back into the mud, stating that Ralph is "just the bad guy who wrecks the building." While in the previous sequence, Ralph was introduced as a sympathetic character with spectacular – though initially destructive – wrecking abilities, this little stop-motion staging reasserts his "action villain" label. The sequence also shows that such denominations depend on a *mise en*

scène staged and commented upon by an audience: the Nicelanders surrounding Ralph genuinely perceive him as a dangerous and scary character, correspondingly depicted through the cake figurine.

In *Moana*, the depiction of the audience assessing the feats of action hero and demigod Maui is part of an elaborate, yet ultimately illusory re-enactment of his spectacular feats. During his song "You're Welcome," his past exploits are animated on his skin, as his tattooed alter ego "Mini-Maui" is shown lassoing the sun, harnessing the breeze, and pulling islands from the sea. Imitating the caricatured aesthetic and minimalist, expressive line of 2-D hand-drawn animation, this staging includes a cheering crowd – Mini-Maui's action-adventure spectators – lifting Mini-Maui up. In this re-enactment, the spectators actually reflect Maui's distorted perception of his own abilities and aura as an action hero. Later in the film, he struggles and needs Moana's help, learning to work within an action team.

Figure 22: *Moana* [frame capture]

The second half of the song pushes the *mise en scène* further through an aesthetic more strikingly and explicitly contrasting with the computer-animated style of the film. 3D Maui pulls a tapestry down, creating a flat décor resembling cut-out animation, in which he is shown fighting various monsters (Figure 22). This fantasy staging, including ornamented backgrounds and stylised characters, acts as a diversion, fooling Moana while Maui attempts to steal her boat. The discrepancy between the flat cut-out "illusion" and the 3-D, more recognisably

computer-animated "reality" is revealed at the end of the song. The colourful cut-out stage is replaced by a dark cave in which Maui traps Moana, and the cut-out flower garlands and fruit she had been offered turn out to be photorealistic rocks and algae. This aesthetic clash underlines the heavily mediated aspect of the action hero performance, and parallels the contrast between Maui's idealised action persona, invincible and admirable, and his true character, self-centred and brash.

Throughout Disney's animated films, the artifices behind the protagonists' action feats are gradually deconstructed, leading to a more authentic performance. When Bolt finds himself out of the set by mistake, he is at a loss to know why his superpowers do not work. His heroicness is comically undermined: for example, his head gets stuck between fence bars he cannot bend. His abilities become ridiculously unbelievable out of a heavily mediated action context. When he uselessly stares at the lock of a door truck, stating that it will "burst into flames and melt," alley cat Mittens is more "concerned" than impressed. Such instances are numerous in *Bolt*, humorously furthering the demystification of action stunts and effects initiated throughout the backstage sequences of the television programme.

Feuer argues that, in backstage musicals, "demystification is always followed by a new mystification": performers are placed back on their pedestal and the seamless final live show is celebrated.[55] In the context of the action performance, the same process takes place: *Bolt*, *Moana*, as well as *Big Hero 6* and *Wreck-It-Ralph* all end with a spectacular action sequence. Yet, these final performances are devoid of most of all the digital and/or pre-digital artifices that constituted the action *mise en scène*: characters are not onstage anymore. Bolt saves Penny as the television set burns into flames: his action stage and the wings are literally destroyed. Although he has realised by then that he does not possess super strength or speed, he still

[55] Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*, 43-4.

manages to lead her to safety (near a vent). His bark is realistically amplified through the vent, creating an echo that helps firemen locate them. His performance is closer to a rescue dog than a "super" dog. Action films such as *Mission: Impossible – Ghost Protocol* (Brad Bird, 2011) and *Iron Man 3* (Shane Black, 2013) include such sequences in which the protagonist is successful despite missing his high-tech gadgets or super suit, but they are only temporary. In fully abandoning the props and effects of the digital action *mise en scène*, *Bolt* deliberately avoids the re-mystification characterising live-action performances. The film also provides a genre lesson, favouring believability over the impossible situations of the action spectacle.

Moana also moves towards a more genuine and unmediated action performance. When Moana ultimately confronts Te Ka, a threatening lava monster, Maui accepts to stand back and only acts as a helper. Yet, athough 2-D Mini-Maui and other tattoos remain motionless, Maui is still self-consciously performing. He uses his magical fish hook not only as a weapon, slicing Te Ka's arm and hand, but also to transform into a giant hawk, a bug, a whale, and a man-shark hybrid. His playful transformations bring comedy to the violent action fight, functioning as the animated visual equivalent of a live-action one-liner. This shift from humorous verbal asides to visual gag relies on the transformative abilities of the animated form.[56] When his hook is broken by Te Ka, he loses his action prop and must re-adapt his performance: he starts a haka, ready to selflessly sacrifice himself. This traditional war dance functions as a diversion, while Moana attempts to restore the heart of "Mother Island" Te Fiti. When she realises that Te Ka and Te Fiti are one and the same goddess, the violent action spectacle ceases, and Maui goes from actor to spectator. The ocean between Te Ka and Moana parts; Te Ka threateningly crawls towards Moana, but she calmly walks ahead, in slow motion, and starts singing. Her soft, clear, angelic voice contrasts sharply with both Maui's aggressive chant and Te Ka's shrieks. When the latter

[56] The transformative and fluid potential of the animated form will be developed further in the following chapter, focusing on the protagonists' powers.

faces Moana, she stops, soothed by Moana's empathetic song. This peaceful and dreamlike sequence redefines the action spectacle. It not only puts violent displays aside, but refocuses attention on the core of Moana's performance, namely her voice, which leads to her unmediated communion with Te Ka/Te Fiti. In this particular sequence, the type of action feat privileged in live-action cinema is put in the background – or rather, *Moana* reconfigures the action sequence into a musical piece.

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This sequence from *Moana* ultimately distances the violent and heavily mediated action spectacle which previous Disney action-adventure animated films have questioned and deconstructed. Functioning as backstage action films, *Big Hero 6* and more particularly *Bolt* self-reflexively demystify the digital *mise en scène* behind action stunts and spectacular effects. *Wreck-It Ralph* and *Moana* reproduce animation styles and aesthetics that explicitly differ from photorealistic computer animation – cut-out, plasticine, hand-drawn animation – to foreground the *constructed* aspects of the action performance and action labels. Disney animated action-adventure films self-reflexively draw on the multiple stylistic potentials of animation, both digital and pre-digital, to unveil the artifices of the digital action spectacle. Privileging an unmediated action performance, Disney's animated action heroes ultimately discard their illusory props, favouring a more believable, and in the case of *Moana*, more peaceful outcome. The latter's alternative explicitly and seamlessly merge action adventure and musical, re-envisioning genre boundaries.

Expanding the Spectacle: The Action Musical

Moana's generic fusion, directly combining action adventure and musical, distinguishes Disney's animated output further within the wider digital action-adventure milieu. The musical is a genre that is intrinsically linked with the studio, almost as iconic as the fairy tale. Such

centrality points to the key role of musical tropes within action-adventure animated films less directly associated with this genre, such as *Wreck-It-Ralph* and *Big Hero 6*. Through the dynamic and communal impulses of the musical, *Wreck-It-Ralph, Big Hero 6* and *Moana* reframe the artificial and mediated action performance as empowering and expansive. By including action within the musical, Disney updates one of its most iconic genres; by foregrounding the musical within action adventure, and more specifically through the theme of space, the studio also brings forward and re-envisions the affinities between the two genres.

Big Hero 6 foregrounds the parallels between action heroes' theatrical appearance and that of musical performers. Action heroes' power, strength and sometimes threatening aura often come from their costume and/or props, namely weapons and gadgets. A recurring trope consists in showing them preparing their gear, making their own costume, and "suiting up" – most strikingly in superhero films – which is often framed as an empowering and exhilarating experience. *Big Hero 6* re-stages this generic ritual and makes its connection to the musical more explicit. Hiro builds his team's super-suits, based on each member's science projects, in what looks like a workshop – the wings, in musical terms. Digitised models of Honey's high-tech purse, Gogo's maglev discs, and Wasabi's plasma blades dissolve into the final suits. They test their gear in Fred's patio, surrounded by columns and framed by flower pots – a stage of sorts. For Hiro's team, such a theatrical context is not constraining. On the contrary, action practice echoes the liberating energy and expressiveness of the musical performance: Gogo glides around in circles, Fred jumps high in the air, and Baymax loops into the sky. Scott Bukatman argues that superheroes' "soaring acrobatics… inherit the musical's emphasis on virtuoso bodily performance".[57] In action-adventure cinema, the spectacle of the empowered body in action, and particularly its strength, agility and persistence, is central.[58]

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[57] Bukatman, "Secret Identity Politics," 115.
[58] Purse, *Contemporary Action Cinema*, 3.

The analogy with the musical works to foreground the importance of such movements, reframing often violent action gestures and moves as "choreography".[59] In Disney's earlier hand-drawn action-adventure musicals such as *Hercules* and *Mulan*, diegetic songs accompany the lead's often rough action practice. In the former, for example, Captain Shang uses a staff to demonstrate combat moves and martial arts while singing "I'll Make a Man Out of You". This weapon, expertly handled by his recruits at the end of the song, evokes the cane used by Fred Astaire in his tap-dancing routines: the action prop (staff) becomes a dancing prop.

While *Moana* ultimately discards violence, it preserves and develops such merging of action-adventure and dancing moves. Sailing is represented as an elaborate choreography introduced in the song "We Know the Way," repeated by Maui during and after the Kakamoras' attack, and later by Moana. This includes, for example, raising one's hand to the sky, as a compass, jumping to one end of the boat and using one's body weight to shift its direction, and holding and swinging on the mast – the action-adventure equivalent of the musical protagonist swinging on a lamp post in *Singin' in the Rain* (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, 1952).

Big Hero 6's action practice and *Moana*'s sailing lessons also notably take place during a musical montage. The latter crystallises the generic fusion between musical and action adventure, namely between sailing and dancing: while Maui teaches Moana, the lyrics of "Logo Te Pate" – the song used as soundtrack – describe "the sway and energy expressed in the dance".[60] These musical montages are reminiscent of teen musicals in the sense that the selected non-diegetic songs "refer to the narrative either directly or thematically".[61] The inclusion of Fall Out Boy's "Immortals" (*Big Hero 6*), and more significantly Rihanna's "Shut Up and Drive" (*Wreck-It Ralph*) and Te Vaka's "Logo Te Pate" (*Moana*) also plays a key narrative and

[59] Tasker, *The Hollywood Action and Adventure Film*, 49.
[60] These lyrics are the English translation of "Logo Te Pate," a song released in 2011 by the South Pacific band Te Vaka. See "LOGO TE PATE (Listen to the Pate)," *Te Vaka*, accessed 25 February 2018, http://www.tevaka.com/listen__lyrics/.
[61] Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*, 133.

generic function. These songs frame action practice as an empowering physical and musical performance, following the protagonists' progress as they familiarise themselves with their elaborate costumes and props. For example, "Shut Up and Drive" foregrounds Vanellope's excitement at her racing progress and her thrill at her car's speed.

Mutually enhancing one another, action adventure and musical merge further in *Moana*. *Moana*'s "How Far I'll Go" revisits Disney musical tropes through its exploration of the concept of space, following both musical and action genres.

Dyer explains that musicals are "discourses of happiness:" the musical set pieces offer solutions or respite to the problems set up within the narrative.[62] In this sense, they are utopian: they express hopes, wishes, alternatives, "'something better' to escape into".[63] Dyer points out that one manifestation of this musical bliss is "the motif of expansion… the way a number develops outwards from its moment in the narrative, opening up spatially and temporally".[64] Spatial expansion often gradually involves more people and movement, and therefore more energy throughout the performance.[65]

Expanded space and movement are often at stake within Disney musical set pieces, especially during the protagonists' solo. Throughout these songs, Disney heroes and heroines express their utopian yearning for "a better world beyond the confinements of [their] present situation".[66] This constraining environment, such as Belle's "provincial life" in *Beauty and the Beast*, often manifests explicitly and physically. For example, in *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, Quasimodo longs to be "out there," accepted by and living among Paris' people, outside the confines of the cathedral. Similarly, *Tangled*'s "When Will My Life Begin?" introduces Rapunzel trapped in her lonely tower; in *Frozen*'s "For the First Time in Forever," Anna

[62] Richard Dyer, *In the Space of a Song: The Uses of Song in Film* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 101.
[63] Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia", 20.
[64] Dyer, *In the Space of a Song*, 101.
[65] Ibid, 28.
[66] Byrne and McQuillan, *Deconstructing Disney*, 24.

excitedly waits for her castle's gates to be opened. Disney protagonists' desire for another life corresponds to a generic longing for spatial expansion. Their static, constrained position – both metaphorically and literally – is made all the more unbearable considering the musical context of the films. In *The Little Mermaid*'s "Part of Your World", Ariel longs for the human world partly for the physical freedom she associates with it. She wishes to "walk," "run," sings that "legs are required for jumpin', dancin'": she desires to be part of a liberating musical performance.

The cinematic construction of action-adventure space also depends on physical expansion. Tasker notes that adventure narratives frequently "involve a journey into uncharted, unfamiliar or dangerous terrain".[67] The journey itself is at the core of the sea-adventure subgenre described by Brian Taves. With its open settings – the "high seas" – and naval iconography, it particularly develops themes of exploration, widening the borders of action-adventure space.[68]

Moana's narrative conflict, initially between Moana and her father, manifests in opposite generic interpretations of space, as introduced in the first musical piece "Where You Are." Moana longs to sail and explore the ocean beyond her island's reef: as a toddler, then a little girl and a teenager, she tries to go on a boat against her parents' wishes. Her sea-adventure approach to space clashes indeed with her father's, who always brings her back to the village, among the harmonious singing and dancing of her people. His conception of space – "the village of Motonui is all you need" – prevents the spatial expansion inherent in sea-adventure films, and notably limits that of the musical as well. "Where You *Are*" praises the virtues of tradition, stability, and ultimately – metaphorical – stasis: "no one leaves". While the song gradually involves more villagers joining in the singing and dancing, preserving the sense of "belonging"

[67] Tasker, *The Hollywood Action and Adventure Film*, 52.
[68] Brian Taves, *The Romance of Adventure: The Genre of Historical Adventure Movies* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), 30.

and "togetherness" also intrinsic to the musical, their dynamic performance remains spatially limited.[69]

Figure 23: *Moana* [frame grab]

Moana's solo "How Far I'll Go" epitomises this generic conflict between the action-adventure space, potentially isolating for her, and the musical space, associated with community but unbearably restrictive at the start of the film. She starts singing "at the edge of the water," which represents the physical barrier that confines the Disney heroine. As she stands still, the digitally simulated tracking camera momentarily features her village in the background, representing her duties *on* the island as the daughter of the chief. The anaphoric second verse of the song ("every turn I take, every trail I track, every path I make, every road leads back") reinforces this sense of immobility. As Dyer points out, repetition and redundancy within song sequences tend towards "a sense of temporal stasis, of not going anywhere":[70] this parallels Moana's spatial limitations. Indeed, as she walks away from the shore, backgrounds succeed each other, featuring woodlands, the village, and her starting point, namely the shore: she appears to be spatially stuck. This sense of entrapment is reinforced in the first chorus as she steps onto a boat. Although she is swinging from the mast, looking towards the horizon, the boat remains on the ground: sea adventure remains a fantasy (Figure 23). Momentarily giving

[69] Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia," 24.
[70] Dyer, *In the Space of a Song*, 24.

up this dream of expansion, Moana walks back again to the village, surrounded by her people: adults harvest coconuts while children happily play around. Within this idyllic community, her role as a future chief is symbolised by a mountain towering the village, on which she is expected to put a stone. Arriving at the top and about to perform this ritual, she holds back at the spectacular view from the mountain: the endless, glistening seascape.

This stunning, limitless panorama leads her to excitedly return to the shore: time seems to accelerate as the musical sequence moves firmly into action adventure. Moana vigorously jumps up and slides along a curved palm tree, using a long leaf to hold onto. This athletic, energetic stunt foregrounds Moana's action-adventure potential – or rather, dancing skills. This move is indeed spectacularly repeated when she retrieves the heart of Te Fiti from the Kakamoras' ship. In order to escape, she throws an arrow attached to a rope towards Maui's boat: as it stretches, she holds onto her oar and slides away, hanging on the rope. "How Far I'll Go" continues as Moana races towards the ocean: she runs past the village's cabins, and reaches the shore where geysers erupt along her path. This sense of physical dynamism, matched by the energetic singing performance of Moana (Auli'i Cravalho), allows the musical and sea-adventure subgenre to converge. The song concludes as she sails towards the distant horizon: the musical space has finally expanded, and the sea adventure can begin.

Moana's first attempt at sailing is unsuccessful not only because she lacks practice, but also – and mostly – because she is isolated: *Moana* recurrently frames sailing and its associated journeys of exploration and adventure as a *communal* activity. This sense of togetherness is epitomised in the subsequent song, "We Know the Way". This musical "flashback" introduces Moana's ancestors as "voyagers", sailing across the ocean and discovering new islands. Throughout their journey, they are shown singing in harmony, performing the dance/sailing moves that Moana learns during "Logo Te Pate". In the latter, navigating is also represented as a collaborative activity, based on the team effort of both Moana and Maui. While in the song "I

am Moana" – partly reprising the melody of "How Far I'll Go" – the heroine considers abandoning her quest, it is the presence of both her grandmother's spirit and the voyaging ghosts of her ancestors that helps her overcome her self-doubt. In the final sequence, reprising "We Know the Way," she leads, teaches, and sails amongst her people, reviving a tradition of communal exploration. The sense of togetherness and energy conveyed through the musical and sea adventure are finally merged. The final shot features the Disney heroine looking ahead, while her island stands far in the background: the generic expansion taking place in *Moana* parallels the expanding borders of the Disney musical.

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Disney's contemporary animated films build on and re-envision the generic affinities between musicals and action-adventure films. They rely on the specific tropes of the Disney animated musical, especially from the perspective of musical space. Through this generic reworking, *Wreck-It Ralph*, *Big Hero 6*, and most strikingly *Moana*, expand the boundaries of action adventure, and throw a new light on the action-adventure spectacle. They reframe it as an empowering performance, ultimately communal and expansive in *Moana*, and above all, dynamic and liberating. In the process, they also update and energise one of Disney's most iconic genres.

Conclusion

Relying on the specific aesthetic and generic roots of Disney animation, *Bolt*, *Wreck-It Ralph*, *Big Hero 6* and *Moana* revisit the action-adventure genre in three interrelated ways. They playfully and parodically reproduce the dazzling visuals and effects of the digital action spectacle, they question and deconstruct the *mise en scène* behind such thrilling displays, and they generically expand the liberating potentials of the action performance. Through this distinctive, three-layered reworking, Disney's contemporary computer-animated films stand

out within the action-adventure milieu, foregrounding a knowingly playful and self-reflexively challenging generic approach. The digital action-adventure spectacle appears as a humorously excessive, artificial and heavily mediated performance, gradually replaced by a more genuine and empowering musical alternative.

Bolt, *Wreck-It Ralph*, *Big Hero 6* and *Moana* match the photorealistic cinematography of both the studio's live-action and animation competitors, providing dazzling, thrilling action sequences. Such mastery of action-adventure iconography forms the basis for a playful and knowing approach towards the excesses of the genre. Destruction, tension and violence are subverted and counterbalanced through the studio's reliance on slapstick, cartoon caricature, and endearing Disney cuteness.

These references to Disney's hand-drawn animation style, along with the painterly aesthetic of the films, not only help differentiate Disney's action-adventure output: they also foreground the artificiality and constructedness of the action spectacle. In *Wreck-It Ralph* and *Moana*, these heavily mediated performances are restaged in mini animated sequences which explicitly contrast with the photorealistic computer-generated world of the framing narrative: they stand out through their theatricality. *Bolt, Big Hero 6*, along with *Wreck-It Ralph* focus on the illusion behind the digital spectacle: these backstage action films carefully deconstruct the making of visual effects, settings and props.

Whereas the excessive, heavily mediated action spectacle is demystified, a more liberating and genuine alternative is privileged: the musical. Disney's contemporary animated films build on and further develop the existing affinities between action adventure and the musical. They re-envision the action spectacle as a dynamically empowering and communal performance, which particularly stands out in *Moana*. Merging the musical with the sea-adventure subgenre, *Moana* also renews the Disney musical, iconic within the studio's generic history, and expands its boundaries.

Disney's multi-layered reworking of the digital action-adventure spectacle leads *Bolt*, *Wreck-It Ralph*, *Big Hero 6* and *Moana* to stand out within a saturated action-adventure milieu. Building on the studio's signature style of animation and musicals, these animated features playfully comment on and re-envision the performance of action adventure.

From a wider perspective, studying Disney animated features through an action-adventure lens reveals some of the studio's recurring approaches both towards genre and its own formula. Despite notable syntactic differences between animated fairy tales and action adventures, the concept of a playfully knowing generic performance – of the action spectacle, of Disney coupledom – seems to be key throughout the studio's contemporary canon. As pointed out in chapter 3, the generic performance of gender is a central component of Disney's self-reflexive *mise en scène.*

Dyer wrote in 2000 that action-adventure heroes had mostly been white males, and asserted that any alternative would "still… feel exceptional for some time to come".[71] The multiplication of cinematic action heroines from the 2000s onwards has challenged to some extent his statement. The mainstreaming of the action heroine has led to generic revisions and tensions, altering the performance of action spectacle.

In parallel, since the 2000s, another type of action performance has developed, bringing the spectacular dimension of the genre further: the superhero film. Super protagonists are endowed with extraordinary abilities, which are sometimes difficult to master. The leads of *Wreck-It-Ralph*, *Big Hero 6*, *Moana*, as well as *Frozen*'s Elsa must learn to control, throughout each film, their potentially overflowing powers.

To what extent is the action spectacle reconfigured when performed by a female – or anthropomorphic in *Big Hero 6* – character? In what ways does gender impact on the

[71] Richard Dyer, "Action!," in *Action/Spectacle Cinema: A Sight and Sound Reader*, ed. José Arroyo (London: British Film Institute, 2000), 20.

empowering yet challenging performance of super-heroism? The following chapter explores another facet of Disney's dialogue with the genres of action adventure, focusing on the gendered implications of the studio's generic reworking of the superhero film.

CHAPTER 5

Overflowing Powers:

Disruption and Containment in the Gendering of Disney's Superheroes

Introduction

At the end of *Wreck-It-Ralph*, Vanellope is revealed as the "Rightful Ruler" of the kart racing game Sugar Rush. While she had been marginalised and excluded from racing, her crossing of the finish line resets the game, and the other characters finally remember that she is a princess. This restored status is conveyed through the magical appearance of a pink sparkling dress and a crown, that she quickly discards: "look, the code may say I'm a princess, but I know who I really am, Ralph, I'm a racer with the greatest superpower ever," she exclaims. She then excitedly "glitches" around, quickly appearing and disappearing throughout the frame. This short scene encapsulates the central generic influences characterising the portrayal of Disney's contemporary animated characters. Vanellope shifts from the fairy tale ("princess") – an iconic Disney genre – to the action-adventure film ("racer") and a genre more unusual for the studio: the superhero film ("superpower").

This chapter explores how *Wreck-It Ralph*, *Frozen*, *Big Hero 6* and *Moana* subvert and rework constructions of gender characteristic of the superhero genre. Disney's animated films rely on the comic potentials and aesthetic freedoms of the animated medium to challenge, to some extent, contemporary portrayals of superheroes and superheroines. This distinctive animated prism reveals, and at times magnifies contrasts between male and female characters' exertion of their extraordinary powers and heroic feats.

The emergence of the superhero genre within Disney animated features coincided with Disney's purchase of Marvel Entertainment in December 2009, which represented an extremely profitable deal. After the acquisition of Pixar in 2006, Disney could then significantly expand

its brand and appeal to a wider market.[1] Having access to a large library of new characters, Disney could also release in-house films based on Marvel comics, the central source of what has become the "undeniably dominant American film genre": the superhero film.[2]

Big Hero 6 is the direct product of this acquisition. The film features a super-team of college students, led by teen Hiro and robotic nurse Baymax. They investigate the death of Hiro's brother Tadashi, facing a dangerous masked villain in the process. This Disney animated superhero film not only follows on from Marvel tropes, but also foregrounds issues surrounding the construction of gender within the genre. Through the portrayal of Hiro and Baymax, *Big Hero 6* questions the relationship between masculinity/femininity, superpowers and control.

These themes actually run through most of Disney's contemporary animated releases. The studio's recent output features characters endowed with extraordinary but potentially unruly and/or dangerous abilities, including Ralph and Vanellope (*Wreck-It Ralph*), Elsa (*Frozen*), Maui and Moana (*Moana*). In *Frozen*, Queen Elsa's extraordinary but dangerously strong powers trap her kingdom in an eternal winter, which drives her sister Anna to set off on a perilous journey to bring her back. In *Wreck-It Ralph*, Vanellope also possesses uncontrollable abilities: as a "glitch", her body can dematerialise and "teleport" itself, and potentially disrupt the appearance of props and characters she touches. As a result, she is marginalised and banned from racing in Sugar Rush, which leads her to team up with Ralph. Like Vanellope, Ralph is feared and rejected in his own video game ("Fix-It Felix") because of his "bad guy" persona, and more particularly due to his wrecking powers and uncontainable angry outbursts. Determined to prove his worth as a hero, he leaves his game to win a medal that he loses in Sugar Rush. Vanellope accepts to assist him if he helps her enter a race. Moana makes a similar deal with Maui. The imposing brash demigod agrees to accompany her on her journey to restore

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[1] Pallant, *Demystifying Disney*, 144.
[2] Jeffrey A. Brown, *The Modern Superhero in Film and Television: Popular Genre and American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 1.

the heart of Te Fiti. The ocean "chose" Moana to accomplish this feat, developing a particularly powerful bond with her, which she initially struggles to comprehend and manage. In return, she accepts to help Maui find his magical fishhook, the source of his spectacular but – at first – unreliable shapeshifting abilities.

This chapter focuses on the *gendered* performance of such overflowing, potentially disruptive superpowers. These super gender constructions specifically take Disney's reworking of the digital action-adventure spectacle – analysed in the previous chapter – into new directions. Relying on the distinctive comic and expressive potentials of animation, Disney's gender portrayals re-envision constructions of masculinity and femininity as displayed within the superhero film. These animated films foreground underlying tensions in the gendering of live-action super-heroism, pointing to the more problematic framing of empowered live-action heroines in action-adventure cinema.

Although *Wreck-It Ralph*, *Frozen*, and *Moana* were not explicitly marketed as superhero films, the protagonists' depiction was often approached from this generic perspective – *Frozen* being the most striking example. As discussed earlier, *Frozen* extensively relies on and subverts the tropes of the Disney fairy tale, notably through the portrayal of and couple dynamics between Anna, Hans and Kristoff. Yet, Elsa particularly stands out within this romantic fairy-tale configuration: lacking a love interest, her portrayal is also characterised by other generic influences. Her magical abilities were directly described as "superpowers" by co-director Jennifer Lee, and effects supervisor Marlon West compared them to Frozone's from *The Incredibles* (Brad Bird, 2004).[3] Reviewers also referred to the superhero genre: Peter Bradshaw (*Guardian*) noted that Elsa's powers were "the most impressive since Frozone"; Anne Billson (*Telegraph*) described them as coming "straight out of a superhero movie, not unlike that of…

[3] Quoted in Solomon, *The Art of Frozen*, 11; 127.

Iceman… in the *X-Men* franchise"; Scott Foundas (*Variety*) likened her ice castle to "Superman's Fortress of Solitude".[4] The presence of the superhero genre within *Frozen*'s paratexts is not as incongruous as it may seem. Marvel comic-book writer and publisher Stan Lee explained in an interview that the popularity of superhero films is partly due to audiences' fondness for fairy tales: "Fairy tales are all about things bigger than life: giants, witches, trolls, dinosaurs and all sorts of imaginative things… Superhero movies are like fairy tales for older people".[5] Considering Jeffers McDonald's parallel description of romantic comedies as "fairy tales for adults", Disney's *Frozen* can be situated at a converging point between superhero films and romantic comedies, acknowledging the fairy tale as a generic starting point.[6] In the same way as *Frozen*'s playful reworking of fairy-tale coupledom can be better understood from a romantic-comedy perspective, Elsa's fairy-tale characterisation can be reassessed through the generic lens of superhero cinema. The depiction of her "magic" or "sorcery," mentioned by other characters and evoking fairy-tale witches, is particularly close to the overflowing, "bigger than life" powers of superheroes.

Such a reading of Elsa's character, and Disney animated features more generally, are more unusual within the context of genre studies. Contemporary works on the superhero film tend to include analyses of animated features that are only *explicitly* labelled as such, such as Pixar's *The Incredibles*.[7] As in studies on romantic comedies, some authors omit animated films

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[4] Peter Bradshaw, "*Frozen* - Review," *Guardian*, 5 December 2013, accessed 25 February 2018, http://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/dec/05/frozen-review; Anne Billson, "How Disney Reinvented the Superhero," *Telegraph*, 10 December 2013, accessed 25 February 2018, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/10507749/How-Disney-reinvented-the-superhero.html; Scott Foundas, "Film Review: *Frozen*," *Variety*, 3 November 2013, accessed 25 February 2018, http://variety.com/2013/film/reviews/frozen-review-1200782020/.

[5] Quoted in Michael Cavna, "In a Superhero-Heavy Summer at the Movies, Stan Lee Talks about Genre's Appeal," *Washington Post*, 10 May 2011, accessed 25 February 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/the-stan-lee-interview-in-this-summer-of-the-superhero-why-does-the-comic-book-genre-mightily-endure/2011/05/08/AF8NAmiG_story.html?utm_term=.7e503465a82f.

[6] Jeffers McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 14.

[7] Bukatman, "Secret Identity Politics," 116-17; Martin Flanagan, Andrew Livingstone and Mike McKenny, ed., *The Marvel Studios Phenomenon: Inside a Transmedia Universe* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 169-73. See also Claire Jenkins, "Splitting the Nuclear Family? The Superhero Family in *The Incredibles* and

altogether.[8] Jeffrey Brown, for example, passes them over because "animated children's superhero movies are already a distinct genre" – he does not elaborate further on this "difference" – not as "wide-reaching" as its live-action counterpart.[9] Such positioning emphasizes the recurring marginalisation of animated films within live-action focused genre studies, as well as potential preconceptions about animation audiences.

Yet, studying *Frozen*, *Wreck-It Ralph* and *Moana* as superhero films, alongside more straightforward manifestations of the genre like *Big Hero 6* and Marvel's *live-action* output, opens up new perspectives on both the superhero genre and Disney's contemporary canon. This approach relies on an expanded conception of genre, uncovering the fluid boundaries of the superhero film. Superhero tropes resurface in a wide variety of works, and most unexpectedly – and strikingly – in contemporary Disney animated features. These films, actually wide-reaching in box-office terms, transcend potentially reductive categorisations such as "children's films". Following on from Janet Staiger's observations on the male melodrama, using a different generic lens in order to approach specific aspects of a film allows one to "see things perhaps not otherwise visible".[10] In the context of *Wreck-It Ralph*, *Frozen*, *Big Hero 6* and *Moana*, the gendered construction of the protagonists' extraordinary bodies, their relation to issues of power, and their trajectories within the narrative are better understood from the illuminating perspective of the superhero film, as exemplified by Elsa's portrayal. This genre possesses specific gendered tropes which affect the animated construction of Disney's action

Sky High," in *Ages of Heroes, Eras of Men: Superheroes and the American Experience*, ed. Julian C. Chambliss, Thomas Donaldson, and William Svitavsky (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014).

[8] See for example Richard J. Gray II and Betty Kaklamanidou, ed., *The 21st Century Superhero: Essays on Gender, Genre and Globalization in Film* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011); Matt Yockey, ed., *Make Ours Marvel: Media Convergence and a Comics Universe* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017); Brown, *The Modern Superhero in Film and Television*.

[9] Brown, *The Modern Superhero in Film and Television*, 8; 161.

[10] Staiger, "Film Noir as Male Melodrama," 86.

characters, and the way their exertion of power is released and controlled throughout the narratives.

The empowered body is an essential component of the action-adventure spectacle.[11] Semantically, the action-adventure body is strong, agile and resilient, enhanced through or functioning as a weapon.[12] Syntactically, the protagonist's trajectory towards this physically empowered body is articulated through a "narrative of becoming," often involving training in new skills.[13] The display of the extraordinary capacities of the action body, its exertion of powerful movement and mastery of violence, depends notably on its gender. The woman in action-adventure films has often been positioned as "romantic or sexual object of interest for the hero and… a figure in peril".[14] The greater prominence of the action woman from the mid-1980s onwards – with her notable mainstreaming since the 2000s – and her re-appropriation of semantic signifiers of "freedom and power" historically identified as male – cars, guns – has challenged action-adventure iconography and narratives.[15]

Reprising "in spectacular form" the semantics of the action-adventure genre, superhero films emphasise the extraordinary dimension of protagonists' powers and bodies, able to fly or transform effortlessly.[16] Syntactically, the "prominence of origin stories" expands the scope of the action-adventure "narrative of becoming," positioning the acquisition and mastery of superpowers as central to the plot.[17] The superhero genre also spectacularly reprises the male-centred blueprint of action adventure. Since the original *X-Men* (Bryan Singer, 2000), the past two decades have been marked by a significant rise in superhero films – or rather,

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[11] Purse, *Contemporary Action Cinema*, 2.
[12] Ibid, 3; Peter Krämer, "Women First: *Titanic* (1997), Action-Adventure Films and Hollywood's Female Audience," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 18 (1998): 602, accessed 28 February 2015, doi: 10.1080/01439689800260421.
[13] Purse, *Contemporary Action Cinema*, 33.
[14] Tasker, *The Hollywood Action and Adventure Film*, 65.
[15] Tasker, *Working Girls*, 143-4.
[16] Tasker, *The Hollywood Action and Adventure Film*, 180-1.
[17] Ibid, 180.

"manifestations of (predominantly) male heroism".[18] While female characters are still "present yet oddly peripheral to superhero cinema," featuring mostly in ensemble narratives, they play a pivotal role in Disney's animated superhero films, more particularly in *Frozen* and *Moana*.[19]

Disney's super characters struggle with remarkable, but often unpredictable and dangerous faculties. Shahriar Fouladi relies on the concept of "monstrosity" to describe the uncontrollable aspect and destructive potential of superheroes' powers.[20] However, the way Disney's protagonists exert and ultimately master such extraordinary abilities varies significantly depending on their gender. This chapter focuses on how *Wreck-It Ralph*, *Frozen*, *Big Hero 6* and *Moana* negotiate tensions underlying the portrayal of both super masculinity and femininity within contemporary superhero cinema through the specific language of animation.

This chapter first focuses on *Big Hero 6*'s Hiro and Baymax. I explore how the portrayal of teenage Hiro playfully subverts the coming-of-age narrative as depicted in Marvel live-action superhero films, such as the original 2002 *Spider-Man* and *Captain America: First Avenger* (Joe Johnston, 2011). Hiro's relationship with Baymax and their collaborative performance of super-heroism complicates gendered divides as constructed within the superhero genre. The characterisation of robotic superhero/nurse Baymax epitomises *Big Hero 6*'s hybrid construction of gendered superheroes. Staging super-heroism as a balancing act, the film provides a primary framework to understand Disney's gendered approach to super-heroic performance.

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[18] Purse, *Contemporary Action Cinema*, 204.

[19] Tasker, *The Hollywood Action and Adventure Film*, 189. During that period, only three mainstream superhero films have featured female leads: *Catwoman* (Pitoff, 2004), *Elektra* (Rob Bowman, 2005) and *Wonder Woman* (Patty Jenkins, 2017).

[20] Shahriar Fouladi, "*Smallville*: Super Puberty and the Monstrous Superhero," in *The 21st Century Superhero: Essays on Gender, Genre and Globalization in Film*, ed. Richard J. Gray II and Betty Kaklamanidou (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), 161.

The chapter then examines the parodic construction of male super-heroism characterising the portrayal of Ralph and Maui. Relying on the comic potential of animation aesthetics, especially caricature and metamorphosis, *Wreck-It-Ralph* and *Moana* playfully mock superheroes' excessive and unruly performance of masculinity, as showcased through the portrayal of Thor and the Hulk throughout the Marvel Cinematic Universe. I also explore how these films reframe superheroes' narrative of becoming, as protagonists' trajectory towards the mastery of their extraordinary but overflowing bodies, superpowers, and emotions – especially anger – result in selfless superhero acts.

Lastly, this chapter investigates Disney's starkly different treatment of female super-heroism. The portrayals of Vanellope, Elsa and Moana are not characterised by such a playful approach, foregrounding instead a more ambiguous and typically post-feminist narrative of becoming. The figure of Elsa particularly crystallises Hollywood's uneasiness towards the construction of the empowered superheroine. I focus on Disney's use of the specifically creative and disruptive power of animation to translate the artistically expressive and liberating, yet dangerously transgressive potential of superheroines.

By looking closely at the performance of super-heroism in Disney's contemporary animated output, this chapter aims to illuminate the gendered implications of such performances as constructed within contemporary Hollywood, and more specifically the uneasy negotiation of power with male/female anger. I examine how Disney relies on the comic, creative, as well as disruptive power of animation to magnify and challenge such gendered performances – differentiating its animated superhero output in the process.

Disney Does Marvel? *Big Hero 6*'s Teen and Hybrid Superheroes

When *Big Hero 6* was released in 2014, the superhero genre had become particularly prominent throughout mainstream live-action cinema. Major animation studios such as Pixar

and DreamWorks had already re-appropriated some tropes of the genre with the former's *The Incredibles* and the latter's *Megamind* (Tom McGrath, 2010). With *Big Hero 6*, Disney differentiated its superhero output in two significant ways: the film playfully subverts the formulaic male-centred super coming-of-age narrative, and challenges the gendered divide associated with the performance of super-heroism.

As for Disney's post-*Shrek* fairy tales and post-Pixar computer-animated action adventures, the marketing and discourses of promotion surrounding *Big Hero 6* strove to foreground the studio's singularity. *Big Hero 6*'s source material is a relatively unknown comic-book series, which critic Graeme McMillan described at the time as "the most obscure Marvel property to make it to the big screen".[21] This gave Disney a significant level of freedom: as head of animation Zach Parrish explains, they "could adapt it to whatever direction [they] wanted to go" – or rather, easily impose the Disney label onto the Marvel text.[22] Official interviews emphasised the originality of Disney's approach. Co-directors Don Hall and Chris Williams repeatedly referred to "the heart and humour that Disney is known for", specifying that the relationship between Hiro and Baymax was "the core emotional thread of the movie" – aspects that were also pointed by reviewers, as noted in chapter 4.[23] Disney's marketing also relied heavily on the presence of the two protagonists in order to foreground *Big Hero 6*'s singularity within the superhero milieu. The teaser trailer, for example, focuses on Hiro fabricating Baymax' high-tech costume, and the latter's difficulties in putting it on: his large, curvy, inflatable body cannot fit into the imposing and sophisticated armour. This teaser trailer – consisting mostly in footage not included in the final film – parodically references Tony Stark

[21] Graeme McMillan, "Disney's *Big Hero 6*: A Primer on the Obscure Marvel Comic," *The Hollywood Reporter*, 21 May 2014, accessed 7 July 2015, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/disneys-big-hero-6-a-706328.
[22] Quoted in Matt Kamen, "*Big Hero 6* and the Future of Animation," *Wired*, 20 March 2015, accessed 7 April 2018, http://www.wired.co.uk/news/archive/2015-03/20/big-hero-6-animator-interview.
[23] Don Hall and Chris Williams, foreword to *The Art of Big Hero 6*, by Jessica Julius (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2014), 7; Quoted in Jessica Julius, *The Art of Big Hero 6* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2014), 10.

making his Iron Man suit in Jon Favreau 2008's film. Such explicit intertextual referencing, building on Marvel live-action films, seems to downplay Disney's potentially original approach to the superhero genre.

From a syntactic perspective, *Big Hero 6* appears as a rather conventional example of Marvel superhero cinema. The narrative trajectory of fourteen-year-old Hiro can be understood as a male coming-of-age narrative juxtaposed with a superhero origin story. His portrayal echoes 2002's *Spider-Man*'s Peter Parker, a teenager who "possesses an extraordinary talent … yet lacks the mature capacity to channel … that power for the common good".[24] Both Peter and Hiro initially rely on their skills in order to earn easy money: Peter joins in an amateur wrestler competition, while robotics prodigy Hiro takes part in illegal "bot fights". Like Peter's Uncle Ben, Hiro's elder brother Tadashi acts as a mentor. Aware that his little brother is wasting his potential, he urges him to use his "gift for something important" – words reminiscent of Uncle Ben's "with great power comes great responsibilities". Claire Jenkins notes that the traumatic death of mentor figures is a recurrent superhero trope: it is the "catalyst" for the male protagonist's transformation into a true superhero.[25] This is the case for both Peter and Hiro. Their motivation evolves from mere revenge into a drive to protect the citizenry. By the end of each film, they have proved their worth as selfless heroes, successfully saving lives. Hiro's final voice-over echoes Peter's, revealing their maturation as superheroes and confirming the determining influence of their late mentor. Flying around the city with his teammates, Hiro proudly recalls that his "brother wanted to help a lot of people, and that's what we're gonna do". Similarly, Peter reiterates his mentor's phrase and his importance in guiding his superhero

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[24] Martin Flanagan, "Teen Trajectories in *Spider-Man* and *Ghost World*," in *Film and Comic Books*, ed. Ian Gordon, Mark Jancovich and Matthew P. McAllister (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 150.
[25] Claire Jenkins, *Home Movies: The American Family in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 73.

performance: “Whatever life holds in store for me... I will never forget these words, ‘with great power comes great responsibility’”.

Despite these many syntactic similarities, Hiro’s super coming-of-age narrative differs from Peter’s through the very nature of his “extraordinary talent,” and more significantly its semantic, physical manifestation. Following the bite by a genetically engineered “super spider,” Peter does not just become stronger: his transformation is signified by a dramatic body change. Staring at his reflection in disbelief, Peter is delighted to discover a new muscular physique. This humorous display is reprised in more spectacular proportions in *Captain America: First Avenger*. At the beginning of the film, Steve Rogers’s potential as a superhero is seriously limited. He is repeatedly unsuccessful in enlisting into the US army due to his numerous health problems; when finally enlisted, Colonel Phillips doubts his abilities, describing him as a “skinny,” “ninety pounds asthmatic.” Yet, Dr Erskine chooses Steve to test his “super-soldier” serum precisely because “a *weak* man knows the value of strength.” When injected with the serum, the digitally shrunk “little guy” body is replaced by actor Chris Evans’s tall and muscular one; his post-transformation shirtless torso elicits the admiration of both male and female characters.[26] Such films then equate the acquisition of impressive, eye-catching muscles as the essential tool of the superhero. As Brown points out, this type of *physical* transformation is “so conventional now that it has almost become a joke”.[27] In *The Flash*’s “Pilot” episode (2014), for example, Barry Allen is astonished that “lightning gave [him] abs”. *Big Hero 6* playfully acknowledges, then discards this muscular trajectory.

[26] Vfx supervisor Edson Williams explains that the vast majority of shots featuring Steve Rogers before his transformation were done by “digitally shrinking Evans’s own face and body”. Quoted in David S. Cohen, “The Skinny on ‘*Captain America*’ Vfx”, *Variety*, 30 July 2011, accessed 7 August 2018, https://variety.com/2011/film/features/the-skinny-on-captain-america-vfx-1118040631/.

[27] Brown, *The Modern Superhero in Film and Television*, 43.

Figure 24: *Big Hero 6* [frame capture]

Big Hero 6 represents superheroes' spectacular physical transformation as a rather ridiculous masculine fantasy of empowerment. After Hiro and his friends' first encounter with the villain, they take refuge in Fred's house. The bedroom of this superhero fan is overflowing with comic books and collectibles, along with a portrait of himself as an exaggeratedly burly warrior, showing off enormous bulging muscles (Figure 24). This version of the "grungiest, slacker-est member of the team" – in the words of writer Dan Gerson – leaves his friends more perplexed than impressed ("my brain hates my eyes for seeing this").[28]

The superhero "upgrade" that follows contrasts sharply with Fred's parodic comic-book transformation. No member of Big Hero 6's team undergoes a spectacularly muscular metamorphosis. Contrary to Peter Parker and Steve Rogers, Hiro remains the same "gangly" teenager, in the words of executive producer Lasseter.[29] The source of his extraordinary masculinity is his remarkable scientific precociousness, especially his robotics skills, as displayed in the opening "bot fight" sequence. Hiro and his inoffensive-looking, smiley robot are not taken seriously by his imposing and threatening opponent, Yama – he contemptuously calls him "little boy". Hiro turns this to his advantage, catching Yama off guard: the tiny but

[28] Quoted in Julius, *The Art of Big Hero 6*, 124.
[29] Ibid, 81.

actually highly sophisticated robot beats the latter's. This opening sequence sets the tone of the film: appearances are not what they seem in *Big Hero 6*'s superhero world, and its masculine coming-of-age narrative semantically relies on brains, not muscles. Hiro becomes indeed the main engineer of both his team's and his own superhero "upgrade." As described in the previous chapter, he is the one adapting his friends' science projects into super suits and props, acting as a super animator. He also becomes an efficient team leader, elaborating a plan that his friends follow, and advising them to "*think* [their] way around the problem" when they struggle against the villain. This approach to superhero teamwork exemplifies *Big Hero 6*'s intellectualised version of superhero performance, challenging super masculine coming-of-age narratives in the process.

Big Hero 6's move away from Hollywood's construction of male super-heroism is reinforced through a questioning of violence as an inherent component of such a performance, as epitomised in the climax of most superhero films. The latter typically end with the brutal, male-centred fight between superhero and villain, or even between the two leads, as in *Captain America: Civil War* (Anthony and Joe Russo, 2016) and *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (Zack Snyder, 2016). *Big Hero 6*'s repositioning of robotic healthcare companion Baymax in a superhero role significantly subverts such a configuration. Although voiced by a male actor (Scott Adsit), this roundly shaped, inflatable anthropomorphic character strikingly lacks the clear gender markers characterising male superheroes – Hiro first describes him as a "walking marshmallow". Introduced as a "non-threatening, huggable" "robotic nurse", Tadashi's robotics' project is characterised by a complete lack of aggressiveness: his voice is particularly soft and high-pitched, his moves are slow, cautious, almost childlike. Baymax considerably differs from other contemporary "super" robots, such as Tony Stark's sophisticated and deadly hard-shelled creations evoking their muscular human counterparts. Character designer Shiyoon Kim notes that the minimalistic design of Baymax's face – two dots joined by a straight line –

allows the audience to "project onto him whatever they need in that moment".[30] From a gender perspective, this also provides, to some extent, a blank canvas from which to construct a uniquely hybrid superhero performance.

Robotic nurse Baymax initially seems out of place within a superhero context: this apparent generic unsuitability comically stands out when he and Hiro first encounter the villain. While chased, Baymax gets stuck in a window, bumps his head, stumbles over, and is at a loss when Hiro urges him to "kick down" and "punch" locked doors to escape. However, at the end of the chase, he successfully rescues Hiro from a fall by acting as a protective shield, enveloping him with his body which bounces back on the ground. This type of performance, grounded in Baymax's caring skills, tends to be associated with female characters within superhero cinema. For example, *The Incredibles*' Violet repeatedly encloses both herself and her family in force fields to protect them from bullets and explosions, visually paralleling Susan Storm in *Fantastic 4* (Tim Story 2005; Josh Trank, 2015); in *Iron Man 3*, Pepper Potts's first superhero act when donning Tony Stark's suit is to shield him from a falling roof.

In order to catch the villain, Hiro decides to "upgrade" Baymax for him to perform a fiercer, namely more masculine version of super-heroism. He first transfers the moves of a martial arts film character onto a chip, which he installs into Baymax's access port. He then builds a suit inspired by samurai and ninja costumes. Although Baymax worries that this new warrior appearance may undermine his "non-threatening, huggable design," he diligently rehearses a violent but highly controlled choreography relying on his new "fighting database". His second suit includes a rigid red armour, rocket fists and thrusters, echoing Iron Man's spectacular Hulkbuster in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Joss Whedon, 2015). Such a shift towards this new superhero persona does not entirely go smoothly: Hiro struggles to make Baymax's

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[30] Quoted in Julius, *The Art of Big Hero 6*, 90.

big soft body fit into the new armour; Baymax's still naïve and childlike nature comically contrasts with his newly imposing look, as he chases butterflies while Hiro wants him to show off his new gear. Yet, Baymax adapts quickly, convinced that these upgrades will help catch the villain, and improve Hiro's emotional state as a result. However, Baymax's performance takes a dangerous turn when Hiro and his friends finally apprehend the villain. Turning out to be Tadashi's former professor (Callaghan), he reveals that he escaped from the explosion that killed Tadashi, while the latter went to save him. Holding Callaghan responsible for his brother's death, Hiro furiously orders Baymax to "destroy" him, removing his initial healthcare chip. With only his fighting chip left, Baymax becomes an excessively aggressive killing machine, determinedly aiming his rocket fist at Callaghan, and brutally pushing away the other team members trying to stop him.

While such a performance may be conventional superhero fare, evoking for example the fight between Tony Stark's Hulkbuster and a mind-controlled Hulk in *Age of Ultron*, *Big Hero 6* quickly interrupts this violent display. When his healthcare chip is restored, Baymax shows Hiro Tadashi's test videos, reminding him of his brother's original, non-violent purpose when designing the robot: "*help*" people. A more mature Hiro ultimately manages to catch Callaghan with the help of Baymax and his friends, neutralising his "microbots" without resorting to force. The action sequence concludes when Hiro satisfyingly tells Callaghan that "our programming prevents us from injuring human beings," while Baymax's clenched fist appears only a few inches from Callaghan's face. *Big Hero 6* thus suggests that it is only when Baymax's healthcare and karate abilities are combined, namely both his protective and combative skills, that he can be an efficient, exemplary superhero. This balance between qualities that tend to be coded as feminine and masculine in superhero cinema subverts contemporary constructions of male super-heroism. Baymax's relationship with Hiro contributes to *Big Hero 6*'s subversion of this gendered performance. Hiro is indeed the only member of his team not to possess any

high-tech prop: his super suit is Baymax, functioning as an extension of his own body. The duo harmoniously blends the latter's intellectual skills with Baymax's both powerful and caring character, epitomised in their rescue of Callaghan's daughter. Baymax's suit is partly destroyed as he shields them from debris, but he uses his rocket fist to get them both to safety (Figure 25). Visually combining his soft, huggable appearance with what remains of his hard-shelled superhero armour, his portrayal provides a hybrid gendered version of super-heroism, both protective and pro-active.

Figure 25: *Big Hero 6* [frame capture]

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Through the semantic reworking of Hiro's super coming-of-age narrative, the hybrid portrayal of Baymax, and the complementary relationship between these two protagonists, *Big Hero 6* re-envisions contemporary constructions of male super-heroism beyond muscular and violent demonstrations of strength. The representation of Baymax's superhero performance challenges more generally the gender divides characterising superhero cinema. Building on Marvel's live-action intertextual network, Disney's animated superhero film differentiates itself by privileging a balanced performance of super-heroism: between masculine and feminine, physical and intellectualised, combative and proactive.

In the process, *Big Hero 6* also reveals underlying tensions surrounding the contemporary construction of masculinity as displayed in superhero films. Fred's parodic superhero portrait, reimagining the fanboy as a hyper-muscular, godlike figure, playfully hints at the knowing excesses of superheroes' physical portrayals; Baymax's "destroy" mode reveals the potential danger of such excessive, unrestrained demonstrations of power. The move towards a more stable and mastered performance of male super-heroism is at the core of *Wreck-It Ralph* and *Moana*.

Excessive Masculinity, Playful Knowingness and the Unruly Superhero in *Wreck-It-Ralph* and *Moana*

Through the portrayal of *Wreck-It-Ralph*'s lead and *Moana*'s Maui, Disney mocks the construction of contemporary live-action male super-heroism. These films rely on parodic Marvel intertextual references and the comic potentials of animation to magnify the playfully excessive performance of superheroes' masculinity. They also both foreground and subvert the threatening potential of overflowing male anger. Throughout the films, these portrayals evolve towards a more mastered, controlled, and selfless performance of masculinity.

Male superpowers tend to be rooted in superheroes' spectacular *physical* abilities, as exemplified by characters such as Superman, Aquaman, or the Hulk. In comics, this super strength is visually conveyed through superheroes' extreme muscularity: "bulging muscles… impossible abs, biceps and chests highlighted by… skin-tight costumes".[31] Fred's fantasy portrait in *Big Hero 6* comically foregrounds the absurd nature of such muscular excess. On screen, the camera lingers on the correspondingly athletic bodies of actors such as Henry Cavill (Superman) and Chris Evans (Captain America), often showcasing their nude, muscled torsos.

[31] Brown, *The Modern Superhero in Film and Television*, 42.

The excessively sturdy comic-book superhero body is also enhanced through computer animation when impossible to replicate in live action, as is the case for the Hulk, or is reproduced on characters' protective armours, as for Batman and Iron Man.

However, Lisa Purse argues that a "playful knowingness is also evident" in these depictions.[32] In comparison with other action-adventure genres, including blockbuster epics such as *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000), superhero films display a "less serious and more knowing attitude" towards the construction of the male body.[33] They feature "ironic dialogue about gender performativity alongside their hyperbolic declarations of machismo".[34] Excessive muscularity and aggressiveness not only represent the core components of masculine performance, as in the final battles of most superhero films, but can also become a source of comedy, as in *Hancock* (Peter Berg, 2008) and *Thor* (Kenneth Branagh, 2011). In the latter, for example, characters jokingly comment on the superhero's physique ("For a crazy… person, he's pretty cut") or his rather unrefined manners ("No more smashing. Deal?").

Such playfulness towards the extraordinary male body is also noticeable throughout Disney's late 1990s action-adventure animated features, as epitomised in *Hercules*. Parodically reworking sword-and-sandal gendered tropes, the film comically overemphasises the attractiveness of the brawny protagonist. In the opening scene, one of the muses excitedly calls him "hunkules". The song "Zero to Hero", illustrating his rising fame, features a "Hercules Store" in which a multitude of Hercules action figures showcase overly large pectorals: the muse's playful singing line, referring both to the toy and its original, describes a "perfect package pack[ing] a pair of pretty pecs". *Hercules* also underlines the *mise en scène* associated with such a muscular construction. As the muses sing that Hercules's "daring deeds are great theatre," he is shown attending a theatrical re-enactment of his defeat of the Hydra. The latter

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[32] Purse, *Contemporary Action Cinema*, 103.
[33] Ibid, 98.
[34] Ibid.

and the play parallel each other, featuring a strong hero performing his spectacular feat surrounded by a cheering audience.

Disney's more recent animated films build on *Hercules*'s humorously theatrical portrayal of extraordinary masculinity and expand the playful knowingness of live-action superhero films. They particularly point to the constructedness of the excessively brutal and muscular performance of super-heroism. As pointed out in the previous chapter, Disney's animated action-adventure features self-reflexively rely on animated stagings that explicitly clash with the photorealistic aesthetic of the films to demystify the action-adventure spectacle. *Wreck-It-Ralph*, for example, mediates the protagonist's feats through the two-dimensional 8-bit frame of his video game, and later represents these with clay-like characters and settings. Such *mise en scène*, foregrounding the contrived and illusory aspects of the action-adventure spectacle, also relates to the gendered performance of action. *Wreck-it-Ralph* repeatedly pokes fun at representations of brutally violent performances of masculinity, as illustrated in the Bad-Anon sequence. It features a support group of video game villains including powerfully built male characters from games such as Mortal Kombat and Street Fighter II. Although they play very violent roles – as Zangief puts it, "crushing man's skull like sparrow egg between [their] thighs" – their excessive brutality is mediated and contained within the staged setting and 2D world of their own games. In the 3D wings, they reveal a more sensitive, caring character, empathically listening to each other's problems. In the opening scene, Street Fighter characters stop beating each other as soon as the arcade closes, and happily go for a drink at Tappers: brutal muscular masculinity appears as a staged performance.

Moana's portrayal of Maui further develops Disney's playfulness and knowingness towards superheroes' version of masculinity, emphasising its excess through the specific aesthetic of animation. This "Oceanic superhero," in the words of co-director Don Hall,

possesses godlike strength.[35] Voiced by former wrestler and action-adventure actor Dwayne Johnson, he is correspondingly powerfully built – but in a highly caricatured, almost parodic way. Production designer Ian Gooding explains that Maui is constructed as a "square," with disproportionately short legs.[36] His muscles are less marked than his live-action superhero counterparts, or even animated predecessors such as Hercules and *Tarzan* (Chris Buck and Kevin Lima, 1999). While the latter's musculature elicits the admiration and often desire of the female leads, Maui's physique mainly functions as the canvas for his past exploits and as the two-dimensional stage of his alter ego Mini-Maui, tattooed onto his skin.[37]

Figure 26: *Moana* [frame capture]

During the song "You're Welcome," Maui's extraordinary masculinity is rendered as a highly theatrical performance, foregrounded through the presence of Mini-Maui. The latter is animated as a sentient, independent character who mimics and interacts with Maui. At the start of the song, Maui confidently sings "I know it's a lot: the hair, the bod! When you're staring at a demigod," while flexing his pectorals in rhythm with the music. Mini-Maui accompanies his dance move, repeatedly jumping from one pectoral to the other. This comical instance of "Mickey Mousing" – when animated movement and music parallel each other – reveals that

[35] Quoted in Julius and Malone, *The Art of Moana*, 86.
[36] Ibid, 87.
[37] The significant age gap between Moana and Maui, and the corresponding absence of romance narrative, also frames this excessively playful constructions of masculinity.

Maui's flamboyant performance of masculinity is inseparable from his energetic musical performance. Showing off his muscles is one of his many dance moves, drawing attention to Mini-Maui's re-enacting of his extraordinary feats at the very same time. For example, while Maui sings "Also I harnessed the breeze," he flexes his biceps: a digitally simulated zoom in showcases his muscle, onto which Mini-Maui is shown "harnessing" the breeze (Figure 26). This theatrical display, juxtaposing Mini-Maui's action-adventure spectacle with Maui's musical rendition, knowingly foregrounds the excessiveness and artificiality of superheroes' muscular performance.

This excessive display also characterises Maui's conceited and cocky behaviour, reminiscent of Marvel superhero Thor. In addition to semantic similarities in the representation of both superheroes' powers – jumping high in the air while wielding their hammer/fish hook – their narrative trajectory is also comparable. Maui is first introduced stealing the "heart" of "Mother Island" Te Fiti, which leads to the destruction of the island, and the birth of demon "Te Ka". In the 2011 Marvel film, Thor trespasses on the realm of the Frost Giants, confronting their leader and breaking the truce between his kingdom and theirs. Maui's and Thor's arrogance, challenging superhuman entities more powerful than them, not only has dangerous consequences for their people, but also results in the loss of their super props: Thor's hammer is confiscated by his father Odin, and Maui loses his fish hook when hit by Te Ka. Their self-confidence is further undermined when they try to retrieve their super prop. Thor subsequently fails to wield his hammer, as it is protected by an enchantment. As for Maui, he cannot properly shapeshift – turning into a tiny fish instead of a giant hawk – and is quickly overpowered when faced by villain Tamatoa. Appearing vulnerable and weak, he is dragged on the ground and thrown against the walls of Tamatoa's cave, as the latter sings "what a terrible performance… you don't swing it like you used to, man," deconstructing Maui's elaborate staging of male super-heroism.

Maui's shapeshifting struggles echo the issues faced by the protagonists of films such as *Spider-Man 2* (Sam Raimi, 2004) and *Iron Man 3*, in which superheroes experience difficulties with, or lose their powers. As Purse points out, the "superhero movie permits a particular mode of heroic masculinity that is explicitly uncertain, one that brings playful knowingness with a sense of the powerful male body as unruly".[38] In the aforementioned examples, the superhero cannot rely on his superpowers anymore, they escape from his control. The construction of superpowers as difficult to master, unpredictable and unstable, has characterised Marvel Comics' protagonists from the 1960s onwards, and has been predominant in live-action adaptations with franchises such as *X-Men*, *Fantastic 4*, and *Spider-Man*.[39] Shahriar Fouladi uses the term "monstrosity" to refer to the latent danger of these superpowers, which constantly threaten to overflow.[40] While Fouladi's term refers to both genders, it seems that male "monstrosity" stands out through its spectacular manifestation, rooted in the protagonist's rising anger and resulting in his loss of control over his powers. This phenomenon is epitomised through the cinematic portrayal of the Hulk, the "super" alter ego of scientist Bruce Banner who, due to exposure to radioactive rays, transforms into a green-skinned, hyper-muscular giant during bouts of uncontrollable rage.

Ralph's portrayal evokes the threateningly monstrous Hulk: similarly massive, he is also often depicted with his huge fists clenched. Beyond these visual similarities, Ralph also struggles with his role as a powerful but destructive video game super villain. Like Bruce Banner at the beginning of most of his cinematic appearances, his anger easily overwhelms him, which leads his super strength to overflow. During *Wreck-It Ralph*'s anniversary party scene, the cake "staging" described in the previous chapter makes Ralph threateningly furious, and paves the way for an overflowing performance. Seeing himself represented as a deranged

[38] Purse, *Contemporary Action Cinema*, 105.
[39] Fouladi, "*Smallville*," 163.
[40] Ibid, 176.

monster, isolated from all the other characters, he places his little cake alter ego on the top of the cake, instead of Fix-It Felix. A "Nicelander" protests, putting the figurine back into the chocolate mud, arguing that Ralph is "just the bad guy who wrecks the building." Ralph repeats that he is "not," getting so angry that he ends up slamming his fist down on the anniversary cake. At that moment, Ralph appears particularly frightening, revealing the underlying danger and instability of his extraordinary strength.

Yet, overall, Ralph's portrayal functions as a parody of the Hulk. Contrary to the latter's terrifying appearance, Ralph's potentially scary outlook is often defused. While the Hulk's massive body furiously destroys S.H.I.E.L.D's plane in *The Avengers*, Ralph's clumsily bumps into ceilings and walls. While Bruce's growing muscles spectacularly tear down his clothes when he transforms into the Hulk, Ralph noticeably lacks the latter's well-built physique. His large belly only deforms the tight soldier outfit he puts on when entering "Hero's Duty:" the well-defined abdominals reproduced on the suit comically bulge out, echoing Baymax's first attempts at "suiting up." The parody becomes more explicit when Ralph first enters "Sugar Rush:" he falls into a green gooey taffy pool, and when he comes out, he wreaks havoc in the game. Covered in green taffy with twigs and candy stuck to him, this Hulk figure is more amusing than terrifying: he struggles to walk, waves his arms up in the air while shouting, and finally gets trapped in a giant cupcake.

Beyond Ralph's caricatured physique – recalling Maui's "square" shape – *Wreck-It Ralph*'s parodic approach towards Hulk's spectacular masculinity also applies to the manifestation of his anger and aggressiveness. Both Bruce Banner and Ralph playfully use euphemism to describe their monstrous behaviour and its consequences: in *The Avengers*, Banner recalls that the "last time [he] was in New York [he] kind of broke Harlem;" in his introductory voice-over, Ralph explains that he has "got a little bit of a temper" on him, while his 8-bit alter ego furiously shouts and beats his fists against the ground. Yet, whereas Banner's

angry transformations are often both terrifying and spectacular, revealing the scope of his super strength, Ralph is rather prone to temper-tantrums – Vanellope calls him "diaper baby" – which leads him to wreck anything that comes to hand.[41] After an argument with Vanellope, for example, incensed Ralph starts smashing candy trees and stubbornly punches a giant jawbreaker until it cracks.

Moving beyond the initially parodic aspects characterising Ralph's super performance, *Wreck-It Ralph* foregrounds the gradual transformation of the comically strong, childishly quick-tempered protagonist into a real superhero: his narrative of becoming. Fouladi observes that superheroes' monstrous, overflowing powers are "subsequently put under control".[42] In the case of male "monstrosity," anger and its disruptive effects are then steadily mastered. For example, while the first part of *The Incredible Hulk* and *The Avengers* feature Banner as a passive victim of his horrendous metamorphosis, he is seen to spark and channel his rage actively by the end of each film, which allows him to properly perform his superhero role. *The Incredible Hulk* notably includes sequences in which Banner trains with an instructor to mindfully "control" his body, and correspondingly his anger; in the final shot, he calmly sits cross-legged, then smiles at the camera while his eyes turn green, about to transform. Ralph goes through a similar process, striving to use his powers in a more focused and productive manner: he scares away "Sugar Rush" racers who bully Vanellope, builds a racing track for her to practice, and frees her and Felix from King Candy's "fungeon," all thanks to his wrecking abilities. The "mini game" sequence, in which Ralph helps Vanellope "bake" a kart, particularly illustrates Ralph's efforts to moderate and adjust his super strength, alternating between breaking the equipment and fixing his mistakes.

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[41] This is especially the case in the "origin story" adaptations of the Hulk, namely in *Hulk* and *The Incredible Hulk* (Louis Leterrier, 2008).
[42] Fouladi, "*Smallville*," 176.

In the final action sequence, Ralph efficiently destroys harmful cy-bugs that threaten "Sugar Rush," and is willing to sacrifice himself, finally acting as a proper superhero. With his angry grimace and shouting, his clenched fists, and gigantic smashing arms, he is highly reminiscent of the Hulk ultimately fighting alongside the Avengers, both having mastered their rage and channelled their power. Ralph's overall portrayal resonates with what Friedrich Weltzien describes as "the successful performer of masculinity, as displayed in the superhero genre… one who is able to stay in control throughout his transformation" to superhero form.[43] In other words, by the end of the film, Ralph is able to smoothly shift from his regular self to his "Wreck-It-Ralph" superhero performance, without being overwhelmed by his overflowing anger. He successfully overcomes the monstrosity of his superpower, and peacefully returns to his "job" as a wrecker. At the end, he is also recognized and valued for his demonstrations of anger/power and is fully involved within his video game community. He welcomes homeless characters who help him with his wrecking within the game. The "Nicelanders" are "actually being nice" to him, offering a cake on which he finally features with everyone else. By the end of the film, Ralph has mastered his overflowing anger and associated power, and embraced what Fouladi terms as superheroes' "prosocial and selfless" function: the ultimate performance of super-heroism.[44]

Maui's more literally transformative trajectory also consists in a move towards selflessness, as well as cooperativeness. Like Thor, he slowly distances himself from his earlier arrogant super persona, providing the more authentic action-adventure performance described in chapter 4: he gradually lets go of his elaborate *mise en scène* of masculinity. It is only after he confides his "origin story" to Moana, revealing that he actually stole Te Fiti's "heart" for the humans, that he successfully regains mastery of his superpowers, namely his shapeshifting

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[43] Friedrich Weltzien, "Masque-ulinities: Changing Dress as a Display of Masculinity in the Superhero Genre," *Fashion Theory* 9 (2005): 244, accessed 26 February 2018, http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/136270405778051374.
[44] Fouladi, "*Smallville*," 161.

abilities. At the end of his musical training sequence – "Logo Te Pate", as seen in chapter 4 – during which he successfully turns into various creatures, including a shark, a giant hawk, a whale, he notably agrees to let Moana sail. From this moment on, the self-centred superhero becomes a helper, leaving space for Moana's action feats.

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Blending a parodic take on Marvel superhero tropes and the comic potential of animation aesthetics, Disney's contemporary animated features mock the cinematic depiction of male super-heroism and exertion of power. Despite the playfulness of these portrayals, *Wreck-It Ralph* and *Moana* maintain a core aspect of super masculinity: for superheroes' performance to be effective, they must master their excessive and overflowing, namely "monstrous" superpowers. Although not as threatening and dangerous as their live-action counterparts, Ralph's and Maui's unstable powers are similarly intrinsically linked to their uncontrollable anger and/or arrogant self-confidence. Once channelled, they become proper superheroes. In *Moana*, the powerful superhero not only revises his performance, but also lets the action heroine take centre stage.

Disney's contemporary portrayals of fairy-tale femininity build on and subvert a formulaic gendered template that the studio has developed throughout a large and easily identifiable canon. By contrast, the portrayal of *Wreck-It-Ralph*'s Vanellope, *Frozen*'s Elsa and Moana borrows from a genre unusual for Disney: the superhero film. This generic influence re-envisions the characterisation of the post-feminist Disney heroine, beyond romantic frameworks and into new empowering spheres. The studio generically looks outwards in terms of gender construction, potentially avoiding criticisms associated with retrograde fairy-tale princess portrayals.

Considering the paucity of live-action leading superheroines within contemporary Hollywood, how do Disney animated films negotiate female superpower? To what extent does

the narrative of becoming differ when uncontrollable abilities are possessed by a spectacularly powerful superheroine?

"My Power Flurries through the Air into the Ground": The Superheroine as a Creative and Transgressive Figure

In Disney's contemporary animated superhero features, female superpower is constructed both as a creative and disruptively powerful force. From a self-reflexive perspective, the narrative of becoming of Vanellope, Elsa and Moana parallels their practice and mastery of super animating skills. While the depiction of Vanellope's and Elsa's superpowers shares similarities with Ralph's and Maui's – initially causing havoc, out of control, and driven by extreme emotions – the development and outcome of their superhero performance is at times more ambiguous. Disney's depiction of female superpower does not share the parodic impulses of male super-heroism, nor the playful construction of the super lead's body. *Frozen* particularly stands out through its display of containment strategies, diluting to some extent the subversive potential of the superheroine. Moana's performance of super-heroism provides a more harmonious and collaborative alternative to these constructions.

As a "glitch," Vanellope's body uncontrollably breaks into dozens of pixels when she experiences strong emotions, such as joy, sadness or fear. Her digital image is momentarily blurred as a result, her movements become jerky and her voice is artificially modulated. Such "glitching" affects the props and characters she touches, correspondingly breaking down into a multitude of pixels, or even disappearing and reappearing in slightly different locations. This powerful but visually disruptive figure, threatening the aesthetic cohesiveness and stability of the arcade game she inhabits, is considered as a "freak," "an accident waiting to happen": other racers bully and reject her, following King Candy's orders. This patriarchal figure of authority is responsible for Vanellope's marginalised position, forbidding her from racing seemingly to

protect both herself and the other game members. Although Vanellope finds support with Ralph, who encourages her to practice racing, he also urges her to “get that glitching under control.” While she trains, her excitement at her progress makes her glitch, and she loses control of her kart. Later on, during the final race, some “cherry bombs” hit her kart and make her glitch, which affects the trajectory of her vehicle, disappearing and reappearing throughout the racing track. Although she ends up in front of her opponents, her disruptive superpowers are still highly unstable. She repeats to herself that she must keep them “under control, no more glitching”.

Figure 27: *Frozen* [frame capture]

Such a theme of control through concealment and marginalisation of female superpower is intrinsic to Elsa’s narrative trajectory in *Frozen*. She is introduced as a little girl, playing with her younger sister Anna: they slide on an ice rink and off snowbanks Elsa creates, and build a snowman. This joyful display is interrupted when Elsa accidentally strikes Anna with her powers. Her parents take them to a community of trolls for help, who warn them that “there is beauty… but also great danger” in Elsa’s powers: she “must learn to control” them. While speaking, the troll chief conducts the Northern Lights to show the silhouette of an adult Elsa

creating magical snowflakes, surrounded by an admiring crowd (Figure 27). The snowflakes quickly morph into sharp spikes; the human figures panic and attack Elsa's silhouette. This animated staging prefigures the reaction of Arendelle's inhabitants after Elsa's coronation, alternating between fear – calling her a "monster" – and wonder at her powers. Echoing *Wreck-It-Ralph*'s animated cake sequence, this representation of Elsa's superpowers is heavily mediated, imitating pre-digital techniques such as silhouette animation and shadow play: a highly theatrical, nightmarish staging which aesthetically clashes with the colourful and more photorealistic world of the film. Like Ralph, Elsa is being "animated;" unlike him, she has no control over this artificial construction of her super performance. She is a helpless viewer in front of a threatening *mise en scène* which emphasizes the menace that her powers seem to represent. Such a sequence contrasts sharply with the humorous tone of *Wreck-It-Ralph*'s, in which the cake version of the protagonist looks more ridiculous than genuinely dangerous.

Such a contrast between the depiction of the female and male superhero figure is further developed throughout *Frozen*. Unlike Ralph, the Hulk, and Maui, Elsa does not initially train and master her overflowing powers. She becomes afraid of her unstable abilities, which get stronger as she grows older, so that she cannot touch anything without turning it into ice. Her father – another patriarchal figure of authority – decides to "limit her contact with people," and encourages her to wear gloves: a metaphor for her hidden powers and correspondingly suppressed emotions. Later in the film, on her coronation day, the young woman is shown rehearsing her father's lessons of restraint: "conceal it, don't feel it, don't let it show." Repeating his mantra, her "super" performance consists in dissimulating her superpowers, appearing reserved and distant as a result – an illusion of control.

Wreck-It-Ralph's and *Frozen*'s characters then perceive female exertion of superpowers as particularly harmful and disruptive: the control of female power is equated with its containment and erasure. By contrast, in the context of Disney's diegetic worlds, it is not

suggested that the masculine performance of wrecking, shapeshifting, or super strength should be hidden or interrupted, but mastered. From that perspective, *Wreck-It-Ralph* and *Frozen* seem to reproduce the tendency of mainstream cinema to "undermin[e] female potency as it becomes threatening": when women's powers become too great.[45]

However, Elsa eventually embraces and explores the scope of her extraordinary abilities through an exhilarating musical sequence. After having fled Arendelle, she sings the empowering song "Let It Go," notably throwing away her glove. The song follows on from the superhero genre in the way it reveals Elsa's growing mastery of her powers and enthusiasm in the process. Justin Schumaker observes that superhero films tend to dedicate a significant amount of time to the protagonists' testing and exploration of their superpowers, foregrounding the "majesty" and "delight" these bring.[46] Such thrilling training sessions can be found at the beginning of both *Spider-Man* and its reboot *The Amazing Spider-Man* (Marc Webb, 2012), during which Peter Parker tries out his new superpowers by climbing walls, jumping between buildings, and spinning webs.

The empowering dimension of such sequences is conveyed through the physical manifestation of Elsa's powers. In her hands, snow becomes a three-dimensional fluid and changeable material taking the shape of small snowflakes, then long arabesqued lines stretching into the sky: her creations reveal the "plasmatic" freedom of animation. Sergei Eisenstein uses the term "plasmatic" to describe characters from Disney's early shorts, such as *Hawaiian Holiday* (Ben Sharpsteen, 1937) and *The Moth and the Flame* (Burt Gillett, 1938), specifically their "freedom from ossification" and "ability to assume dynamically any form".[47] Metamorphosis and "plasmaticness" are also intrinsic to the superhero genre. Bukatman argues

[45] Stella Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema: Clothing and Identity in the Movies* (London: Routledge, 1997), 180.
[46] Justin S. Schumaker, "Super-Intertextuality and 21st Century Individualized Social Advocacy in *Spider-Man* and *Kick-Ass*," in *The 21st Century Superhero: Essays on Gender, Genre and Globalization in Film*, ed. Richard J. Gray II and Betty Kaklamanidou (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), 134.
[47] Quoted in Richard Taylor, ed., *The Eisenstein Collection* (London: Seagull Books, 2006), 101; 103.

that "plasmatic fantasy… underlies the entire superhero genre with its transformative bodies" representing "the central fascination of the superhero film".[48] Correspondingly, the malleable, endlessly stretching bodies of Sandman and Venom in *Spider-Man 3* (Sam Raimi, 2007), as well as Groot in *Guardians of the Galaxy* (James Gunn, 2014) are rendered through computer animation. Considering the central aesthetic role of "plasmaticness" both in the superhero genre and within animation, Elsa's superhero practice takes a self-reflexive turn, foregrounding and developing the affinities between animation and the superhero film: she becomes the super-animator of superheroes' "plasmatic fantasy". Her line "it's time to see what I can do, to test the limits and break through" translates her status both as a superheroine gradually mastering her powers, and an animator artistically exploring the limitless potentials of animation. Her creative flurry climaxes with an impressive ice castle rising before viewers' eyes. As ice beams, archways, and a sparkling chandelier are gradually added, the sequence self-reflexively hints at the computer-generated animation process, which parallels Elsa's superhero practice. The completed ice castle is revealed through a long shot: at the top of the mountain, it towers the surrounding landscape and is bathed in sunlight. The finale of this spectacular sequence establishes the artistry and scope of Elsa's superpowers, foregrounding her limitless agency as a super-animator.

This sequence not only demonstrates that animation is the most ideally suited medium to translate the "plasmatic fantasy" of the superhero film: the animated form also enhances the sense of liberation expressed within the musical. In "Let It Go", Disney develops and expands generic affinities between the superhero film and the musical through the specific qualities of animation. As Elsa's animated creations become more and more elaborate, her face lights up, amazed at the scope of her extraordinary abilities and experiencing a growing sense of freedom

[48] Scott Bukatman, *The Poetics of Slumberland: Animated Spirits and the Animating Spirit* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 19; Bukatman, "Why I Hate Superhero Movies," 121.

that she expresses in the chorus. Singing “can’t hold it back anymore”, she designs a snowman, which takes shape out of swirling snow. Her enthusiastic singing at that moment resonates with what Susan Smith describes as the “self-conscious delight in animation’s capacity for bringing things to life”, which constitutes the specific pleasures of the animated musical.[49] Such expression of joy, heightened by the “physical vitality and emotional intensity” characteristic of the musical genre, peak at the end of the song, when Elsa’s spectacular abilities as a super-animator culminate with the creation of the castle.[50] Surrounded by archways resembling icy prosceniums, she moves throughout what looks like a stage, projecting sparkling snow all around. Her large and graceful arm gestures echo the “spiralling… frozen fractals” described in her song. This superhero ballet is concluded by a more explicitly theatrical performance. Standing at the centre of her stage, Elsa energetically takes down her hair, transforms her royal attire into an eye-catching sparkling dress made of ice, and confidently struts out onto the balcony of the castle, singing “here I stand in the light of the day”. “Let It Go” becomes a thrilling song of multi-layered empowerment: what Feuer describes as the “liberating vision… at the heart of the musical genre” intensifies the empowering nature of superhero practice.[51] This elaborate *mise en scène*, crystallising the generic convergence of the superhero film and the musical, is notable because it is self-directed. Contrary to *Wreck-It Ralph*’s cake animation and *Frozen*’s earlier silhouette sequence, “Let It Go” features Elsa as her own animator, designing her own set and costume. Unlike Maui in “You’re Welcome,” she does not rely on a two-dimensional double or a mediated, illusionistic environment. This cohesiveness in direction and animation style allows Elsa’s superhero practice to become, through the musical, a strikingly liberating and empowering experience: her musical performance spectacularly amplifies her artistic and expressive mastery of her superpowers.

[49] Smith, “The Animated Film Musical,” 172.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*, 84.

Figure 28 and 29: *Frozen* [frame capture]

Nevertheless, the specific *mise en scène* accompanying this self-directed liberating experience reproduces to some extent the tensions surrounding the contemporary depiction of the powerful superheroine. When Elsa walks towards the castle balcony and faces the audience at the end of her song, the revelation of her glamorous appearance, emphasized through her off-the-shoulder sparkling dress and transparent stilettos, echoes the last stage of a makeover. Sarah Gilligan explains that the makeover narrative, most noticeable in romantic comedies and teen movies, works "to establish the parameters of acceptable feminine appearance, while also offering viewers the vicarious visual pleasure of witnessing the protagonist's transformation from frump to bombshell".[52] At the end of "Let It Go", the digitally simulated camera first shows Elsa's blurred reflection on the icy floor, then gradually tilts up, following the slit of her dress to reveal her leg, knee, and whole body. Such camerawork, constructing Elsa's body as the object of the gaze, emphasizes the contrast between her earlier demure, maidenly appearance – dark clothes, long turtleneck dress – and her new confidently attractive demeanour (Figure 28 and 29). Elsa's makeover is notably self-directed; unlike romantic-comedy and teen-movie makeovers, or fairy-tale transformations as displayed in *Cinderella*, heterosexual romance is not its goal. Still, *Frozen* conflates Elsa's new-found empowerment as a super-animator, and the culmination of her spectacular abilities, with the inscription of a more glamorous, objectified and sexualised construction of femininity. A similar makeover – or

[52] Sarah Gilligan, "Performing Postfeminist Identities: Gender, Costume, and Transformation in Teen Cinema," in *Women on Screen: Feminism and Femininity in Visual Culture*, ed. Melanie Waters (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 167.

"super makeover" – occurs in superhero films such as *Batman Returns* (Tim Burton, 1992) and *Catwoman*. Shy, childlike and clumsy Selina Kyle (in the former) and Patience Phillips (in the latter) transition to Catwoman's assertive, powerful, and sexually attractive persona when they don their hand-made black leather outfit. Disney replicates, to some extent, such self-orchestrated super makeovers at the end of "Let It Go," portraying Elsa as both subject and object of her creative flurry.

Such merging of female empowerment and glamour foregrounds what Tasker terms as the "doubleness of post-feminism".[53] Within the wider context of action-adventure cinema, it manifests through the combination of heroines' "readily apparent strength and skill with a more traditionally feminine, and often emphatically sexualized, physique", as exemplified in early 2000s female-centred franchises such as *Charlie's Angels* and *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*.[54] Superheroines tend to represent a hyperbolic manifestation of post-feminist doubleness: these spectacularly skilled women are both more powerful and equivalently more sexualised than their action-adventure counterparts. Often scantily clad, the camerawork and costumes reveal a physique both toned and curvaceous, a body that is both physically strong and sexually appealing. For example, blue-skinned Mystique principally appeared "naked" in the original *X-Men* franchise (2000; 2003; 2006) and was played by former model Rebecca Romijn; more recently, in *Wonder Woman*, teammate Sameer playfully exclaims that he is both "frightened and aroused" by the athletic Amazon. Purse argues that such sexual objectification, at times undeniably knowing as in the former example, is a representational trope which functions as a "containment strategy," reducing the threat of female potency.[55] By contrast, male-centred superhero films notably tone down the muscular attractiveness of the leads in pivotal sequences,

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[53] Tasker, "*Enchanted* (2007) by Postfeminism," 70.

[54] Lisa Purse, "Return of the 'Angry Woman:' Authenticating Female Physical Action in Contemporary Cinema," in *Women on Screen: Feminism and Femininity in Visual Culture*, ed. Melanie Waters (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 187.

[55] Ibid, 187; 189.

re-focusing on their extraordinary bravery and feats. For example, neither Spider-Man nor Captain America appear bare-chested in their climactic fight against the villain: such sequences foreground the dramatic scope and effects of superheroes' superpowers, not their bodies. In this context, Elsa's super makeover seems to dilute, to some extent, the spectacularly empowering demonstration of her superpowers. While "Let It Go" showcased a crescendo of animated artistry, which stands out as a particularly striking – and rare – exploration of female superpowers, the use of the final makeover trope seems to reposition Elsa within a more conventional version and display of the superheroine. This shifts the attention from her spectacular powers to the spectacle of her glamorous appearance.

Along with Elsa's makeover, which dilutes – to some extent – the liberating effect of "Let It Go", *Frozen* develops other containment strategies affecting female potency. The film repeatedly points to the danger of unbridled female power, especially when fuelled by strong emotions. While adult superheroes such as Ralph learn to master both their anger and superpower, turning their childish temper tantrums into an efficiently channelled superhero performance, Elsa's powerful anger remains threateningly unruly and frightening, as exemplified in the following sequences. Early in the film, at her coronation party, Elsa inadvertently reveals her hidden powers by breaking from her composed performance. When Anna insistently questions her ("Why do you shut the world out? What are you so afraid of?") Elsa angrily shouts "enough!" Ice then shoots from her hand, forming spikes across the floor. Scared, she flees the kingdom. While singing "Let It Go," she not only embraces her spectacular superpowers, but also expresses her "pleasure at being released from emotional regulation".[56] Yet, this demonstration of limitless agency is short-lived: as Elsa later sings to her sister, "I'm such a fool, I can't be free." Later in the film, her powerful superhero performance is initially

[56] Negra, "Postfeminist Perfectionism and Failure in *Frozen*."

efficient and controlled, but ultimately contained, portrayed as threateningly dangerous. When thugs attack her castle, she manages to single-handedly defend herself: at first helpless and scared, she uses her powers defensively, creating an ice wall that protects her from the thugs' arrows. She then becomes more pro-active and directly attacks the thugs, urging them to "stay away" while shooting ice at them. The more self-assured and powerful she gets, the more menacing and angrier she appears. Her scared expression is gradually replaced by a determined, furious look; she ultimately traps one thug in a cage of spikes, and pushes back the other towards the edge of the balcony. Prince Hans arrives at that very moment, telling her not to be "the *monster* they fear" she is. She stops herself, overwhelmed, and one thug takes advantage of her confusion by shooting an arrow at her; although rescued, she wakes up in chains, imprisoned in the castle.

This sequence reveals the extent to which contemporary superhero and action-adventure cinema still struggles to render the performance of the powerful superheroine, angry yet in control. Negra observes that post-feminist popular culture foregrounds a version of femininity which stays "emotionally within bounds".[57] While *Wreck-It-Ralph*'s lead efficiently uses superpowers that are sparked and fuelled by anger, *Frozen* privileges a more composed, palatable version of femininity, and correspondingly a less potentially dangerous performance. Elsa's superpowers are admired for their artistry – when Anna and Kristoff step into her castle, they are overwhelmed by its beauty – but feared when used in a more aggressive, or even defensive way. Contrary to her male counterparts Ralph and Maui, or the more hybrid duo Hiro and Baymax, Elsa is excluded from the performance of selfless rescues or non-violent but spectacular battles.

[57] Negra, *What a Girl Wants?* 139.

In *Frozen*, female super-heroism is then only permitted within a specifically expressive but harmless context. By the end of the film, Elsa has become more "tempered", using her powers in "de-fanged" ways.[58] Like Ralph, she returns to her people. However, Ralph "learns to embrace his destructiveness and use it for the good of others", properly performing masculine super-heroism.[59] By contrast, *Frozen* concludes with Elsa creating an ice rink for Arendelle's inhabitants and ice skates for Anna, reproducing the way she used her powers as a little girl. While the male lead must abandon his childishness – self-centredness for Maui and tantrums for Ralph – to become an efficient, mature superhero, the dangerously assertive and powerful superheroine seems to regress to her playful, harmless childhood state. Most strikingly, her power as a super female animator is significantly toned down. During "Let It Go," Elsa spectacularly displayed the life-giving potential and expressive, plasmatic freedoms of animation. By contrast, in the final sequence, she creates icy ornaments on the castle walls and freezes fountains: water stops from flowing and its movement, the very essence of animation, halts. Elsa's super performance becomes merely decorative, resulting in beautiful but still, static designs. Therefore, most of "Let It Go" represents a "temporary fantasy", constructing the superheroine as an entirely autonomous, powerful, emotionally and artistically unrestrained woman.[60]

Elsa's ultimate childlike regression not only reveals a stark contrast between constructions of male and female super performance: it also suggests that the super *girl* is a more "palatable figure of strong femininity".[61] *Wreck-It-Ralph*'s young Vanellope remains a visually disruptive character throughout the film, ultimately re-appropriating and mastering her overflowing powers to perform super-heroism. When King Candy, revealed as the villain, traps

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[58] Holmes, "Cold and Hungry."
[59] Davis, *Handsome Heroes & Vile Villains*, 145.
[60] Holmes, "Cold and Hungry."
[61] Jeffrey A. Brown, *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender Fetishism, and Popular Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 167.

her and calls her "glitch," paralleling Elsa's "monster" sequence, Vanellope decides to use her abilities, focusing to channel both her emotions and superpowers. She then glitches, smoothly disappearing and reappearing away from King Candy's kart. When she sees Ralph sacrificially falling into a "Diet Cola" volcano, creating a beacon that will destroy the cy-bugs, she runs to his rescue. Finding a kart, she speedily glitches towards the volcano, combining her racing skills with her newly mastered superpower. Once she catches Ralph, she glitches them both to safety, quickly teleporting with a single move of the head, and efficiently performing a selfless act of super-heroism in the process.

As opposed to *Frozen*, there is no syntactic closure containing the scope or quality of Vanellope's superpowers. Although less jerky and unpredictable, her glitching still represents a particularly disruptive force that she ultimately embraces: as she happily tells Ralph, she is not giving up "the best superpower ever". Unlike Elsa, she also *remains* an empowered "super" animator. Successfully manipulating the pixels of her own digital image, she controls her movements and her own appearance, notably discarding the ready-made glittery pink dress appearing when she is revealed as the princess. Throughout the film, she stays bold, energetic and pro-active; she is also tiny, cute, and girlish – as Ralph points out, "everybody loves an *adorable* winner." Jeffrey Brown argues that girls "can play out the most extreme fantasies of heroism in a liminal realm".[62] As a little girl, Vanellope's powers are not restrained. She is not yet as threateningly dangerous as the more powerful, older Elsa: she does not need to become more tempered or sexualised, and remains a visually disruptive, though childlike, figure.

Moana's portrayal is positioned beyond these two poles of female super-heroism, namely disruptive girlishness and dangerously powerful womanhood. Her extraordinary ability is based on her particular bond with the ocean. Unlike superheroines such as Storm from the *X-*

[62] Brown, *Dangerous Curves*, 166.

Men franchise or even *Frozen*'s Elsa, her relationship with this natural element is not based on mastery: rather, it is collaborative, depicted as a variation on the harmonious super duo Hiro and Baymax. Moana more specifically interacts with an anthropomorphic wave, which represents the ocean's essence. Bringing Baymax's minimalist characterisation further, the wave is silent, genderless, yet expresses a wide range of emotions translated through its shifting shape and movements. It "chooses" Moana to accomplish a mythic quest, namely journey beyond the reef of her island, find Maui and restore the heart of Te Fiti. It is suggested that she is chosen for her compassion and kindness: as toddler Moana rescues a baby tortoise, the ocean wave interacts with her and parts as she walks towards the reef, "giving" her the heart of Te Fiti. This extraordinary scene is interrupted by her father: the wave disappears, she loses the heart, and is brought back to the village. Growing up, she is continuously drawn back to the ocean, but her father, in a way which evokes both *Wreck-It-Ralph*'s and *Frozen*'s patriarchal figures, prevents her from exploring this extraordinary bond, forbidding her to sail. As a young woman, her grandmother gives her the heart of Te Fiti and encourages her to go on her quest: the ocean wave appears in front of amazed Moana ("I thought it was a dream"), magnificently rises up, twirls, and spurts out. The magical aura of this moment of communion is humorously subverted, as the wave crashes on Moana. Evoking the playful but rather unhelpful wave of Disney's *Hawaiian Holiday* – withdrawing when Goofy tries to surf and hitting him with his own surfboard – this sequence comically points to the initial difficulties Moana faces when interacting with the anthropomorphic ocean wave. The latter does not represent a mere superpower: it acts as a super partner and helper whom Moana learns to understand and communicate with. While she initially urges it to "do something, help" when facing the Kakamoras, for example, the ocean wave remains still. However, they gradually and efficiently collaborate.

From a self-reflexive perspective, Moana becomes a super animator like Elsa and Vanellope. The ocean wave represents, to some extent, the essence of the plasmatic animated form: a highly expressive shape which continuously transforms, and playfully interacts with its animator. When Moana raises her arm, the ocean wave responds and comes near: it joyfully gives her a high-five, and sadly takes back the heart of Te Fiti when she is about to give up on her mission.

Like Baymax, the ocean also acts as a protective super partner, leading Moana to Maui's island, helping her reach his boat when he tries to distance her, and shielding her from Te Ka's fireballs. In the final action sequence, the ocean parts at her request, and later gently carries her up to Te Fiti. *Moana* then introduces a different expression of super-heroism and power: Moana's narrative of becoming does not consist in single-handedly mastering her extraordinary abilities. Through her harmonious connection with the ocean, superpowers are constructed as a balanced relationship between the natural elements and the superheroine.

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Through Vanellope's portrayal, *Wreck-It Ralph* self-reflexively constructs female superpower as initially disruptive. Gradually mastering her skills, she becomes her own super animator. This artistic and liberating narrative of becoming is further developed in *Frozen*, as Elsa re-appropriates the plasmatic power of animation. However, her super performance is contained, to some extent, through the post-feminist combination of her empowerment as a superheroine and her sexualisation. While Elsa's portrayal foregrounds the transgressive, ultimately dangerous potential of the powerful and angry super *woman*, Vanellope's culminates with a selfless rescue; the young, less threatening superheroine is not contained. In this context, Moana appears as a different kind of super figure: her superpowers rely on her harmonious cooperation with the expressive and plasmatic natural elements. Her narrative of becoming does not rely on her mastering of the ocean but on a collaborative process.

Relying on the expressive, creative and disruptive potential of animation, Disney's *Wreck-It Ralph*, *Frozen* and *Moana* re-envision female superpower as an artistic and liberating, yet potentially dangerous performance. These animated portrayals also generically broaden the figure of the post-feminist Disney heroine. They strikingly expand the empowering potential of gendered romantic-comedy characterisations which place princesses on the same footing as their princes. Yet, Elsa's depiction points to Disney's notable tendency to position such challenging figures within more conventional frameworks. In the same way as the witty and active fairy-tale women also become sentimental brides, Disney's superheroines possess extraordinarily powerful skills which tend to be contained and more harmlessly reframed by the end of the narrative – unless they're adorable girls. Such characterisations crystallise Disney's signature combination of tradition and innovation regarding constructions of femininity, paralleling the doubleness of post-feminism.

Conclusion

Disney's *Wreck-It-Ralph*, *Frozen*, *Big Hero 6*, and *Moana* foreground tensions underlying the portrayal of super masculinity and femininity within contemporary superhero cinema, relying on the specific language of animation. Focusing on characters endowed with spectacular yet overflowing, monstrous abilities, these animated films frame the exertion of superpowers as a potentially disruptive and dangerous performance that will ultimately be controlled. The nature of this control, between mastery and containment, channelled abilities and restrained power, is arguably what defines the gendering of the "super" performance.

As Disney's first animated film based on a Marvel comic, *Big Hero 6* distinguishes itself through its playful reconfiguring of gender as constructed within superhero films. Hiro's super coming-of-age narrative revises the systematic association of male superpowers with muscularity, providing a more intellectualised performance of super-heroism balanced with

Baymax's action skills. The latter's portrayal challenges further gender divides within superhero cinema, adopting a super performance which combines tropes generally associated with both male and female protagonists, particularly rejecting violent demonstrations of strength. *Big Hero 6* then re-envisions super-heroism as a harmoniously hybrid performance, both through the balanced strengths of the duo Hiro-Baymax, and Baymax's characterisation.

In *Wreck-It-Ralph* and *Moana*, Disney represents such a move towards a balanced performance of super-heroism through Ralph's and Maui's mastering of their own extraordinary bodies, superpowers and emotions. The studio's parodic approach to super masculinity as constructed within contemporary Marvel cinema relies on the comic potential of animation aesthetics, mocking and subverting the unruly exertion of male super-heroism. In *Moana*, the powerful superhero not only revises his performance, but also lets the heroine take centre stage.

However, Disney's playfully parodic gender reworking is replaced by more ambivalent portrayals when it comes to superheroines. Female superpower is constructed both as a creative and disruptive force. *Wreck-It-Ralph*, *Frozen*, and *Moana* rely on the expressive, plasmatic power of animation to self-reflexively portray Vanellope, Elsa and Moana as artistic figures, super animators. However, Elsa's narrative of becoming is not as straightforward as her male counterparts. Like Ralph, Elsa's super performance is at times excessive and overflowing, and is perceived as monstrous when angered; unlike him, neither her unruly emotions nor her powerful abilities are channelled towards the performance of super-heroism, namely within a protective and/or combative context. Her portrayal foregrounds the transgressive and dangerous aspects of the spectacularly powerful woman. The film struggles to contain her subversive potential, whereas *Wreck-It-Ralph*'s little – less threatening – Vanellope enjoys a super narrative of becoming comparable to her male counterparts. Like Elsa, she becomes her own animator; unlike Elsa, she remains a disruptive figure, and conserves her empowering animating

skills. *Moana* appears as an in-between figure: through her connection with the expressive plasmatic ocean wave, she appears as a super animator whose performance of super-heroism is harmoniously communal. *Moana* redefines superheroines' narrative of becoming: echoing *Big Hero 6*, it relies not on self-directed mastery, but collaborative and empathetic acts.

Approaching *Wreck-It Ralph*, *Frozen*, *Big Hero 6* and *Moana* as superhero films opens up new perspectives on the scope of Disney's reworking of contemporary Hollywood genres. Disney animated superhero films particularly point to the gendered implication of superhero performances as constructed within live-action cinema. They challenge the association of masculinity with violence, mock and subvert superheroes' muscular performance, and further develop the sense of playful knowingness characterising Marvel portrayals through the comic potential of animation. They also self-reflexively rely on the expressive and disruptive power of animation to re-envision female super-heroism, while magnifying some tensions surrounding the portrayal of extraordinary powerful females.

The portrayal of Baymax and *Moana*'s ocean wave particularly subverts the gendering of superheroes, revealing the key role of anthropomorphic characters in Disney's generic reconfigurations. Throughout the Disney canon, films featuring anthropomorphic protagonists such as *The Jungle Book* and *The Lion King* have been notably successful. *Zootopia* also features anthropomorphic leads, but in an unlikely generic environment: the action cop buddy film. In an additional effort to challenge the Disney formula, the studio's generic move towards action adventure has been paralleled by an emphasis on buddy relationships, as opposed to romantic – fairy-tale – ones. How does Disney's semantic reconfiguration in *Zootopia*, replacing humans by animals, impact on the representational politics of the genre, resonating with issues related to wider social dynamics? To what extent does Disney's anthropomorphic lens reassess and revise the studio's own recurring set of tropes? The next chapter explores the

gendered and racial implications of Disney’s anthropomorphic re-imagining of the action cop buddy film.

CHAPTER 6

Animal Action Buddies:

Disney's Anthropomorphic Re-Imaginings

Introduction

> Nick: So, are all rabbits bad drivers or is it just you?
> (Judy slams on the brakes, Nick lurches forward).
> Judy: Oops. Sorry.
> Nick: Sly bunny.
> Judy: Dumb fox.
> Nick: You know you love me.
> Judy: Do I know that? Yes. Yes, I do.

As *Zootopia*'s officer Judy Hopps smiles at her new cop partner Nick Wilde, she stomps on the accelerator, Nick puts on his sunglasses, hits the siren, and their patrol car speeds away for new adventures. This final sequence illustrates *Zootopia*'s multiple borrowings from a specific strand of action-adventure cinema, in which a police officer or "cop" is typically paired with a dissimilar, initially antagonistic, and ultimately supportive and complementary partner: the cop buddy film. By the end of the film, rabbit Judy and fox Nick swap banter expressing their affectionate partnership, knowingly flipping stereotypes associated with their colleague's species ("sly fox, dumb bunny"). Such a dialogue, primarily referring to their status as animals, has wider implications: Nick's lines echo stereotypes related to femininity ("are all rabbits bad drivers"), and the inter-species exchange evokes the black/white configuration of numerous action cop buddy films. These parallels crystallize *Zootopia*'s wider generic strategy.

Zootopia stands out within Disney's contemporary animated canon through the exclusive presence of animal characters: the anthropomorphising of action cop buddy tropes forms the basis for *Zootopia*'s reworking and questioning of issues linked to gendered and racial identity. Such reworking can be noticed at three levels. *Zootopia*'s anthropomorphic reconfiguration functions as a lens magnifying and challenging the gendered imbalance of cop

buddy films, and constructions of femininity within post-feminist action-adventure cinema. This generic reworking resonates with wider social dynamics, including constructions and understandings of race within contemporary America. The anthropomorphising of action buddy tropes also frames a more self-reflexive revising. *Zootopia* qualifies and re-envisions Disney's contemporary portrayals of race relations, related to the studio's formulaic sentimental impulses and generic predictability. This chapter examines *Zootopia*'s anthropomorphic reimagining of the action cop buddy film, and how this reimagining impacts on generic gendered roles, wider issues of racial identity, and Disney's own representational and generic dynamics.

The buddy film functions as an "all-male modelling of the conventional Hollywood romance".[1] Like romantic-comedy protagonists, the duo moves from "antagonism to affection and support".[2] The leads' opposite personalities are articulated through differences in "taste, culture, costume:" such contrasts are often juxtaposed with racial or ethnic differences.[3] A particular strand of action-adventure cinema has light-heartedly explored such buddy partnerships. Successful franchises such as *Lethal Weapon* (1987; 1989; 1992; 1998) – recently rebooted as a television series – and *Rush Hour* (1998; 2001; 2007) blend semantic tropes from the action cop film with the syntactic structure of the buddy genre. In these films, the unlikely pair must learn to cooperate despite their dissimilarities and dislike of each other in order to pursue their investigation.

Zootopia's generic dialogue with the action cop buddy film was explicitly acknowledged: co-director Byron Howard described it as a "buddy movie", reviewer John Nugent (*Empire*) as a "buddy-cop movie", and Robbie Collin (*Telegraph*) compared Judy and

[1] Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell, *A Dictionary of Film Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), "Buddy Film," accessed 10 April 2018, http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199587261.001.0001/acref-9780199587261-e-0080.
[2] Tasker, *Working Girls*, 85.
[3] Ibid, 155.

Nick with "Nick Nolte and Eddie Murphy in *48 Hrs.*, albeit considerably cuter".[4] *Zootopia* directly follows on from this generic configuration: Nick's cynicism and "hustler" ways – in Judy's words – clash with her professional zeal and naïve optimism. Despite their antagonism, they must work together: rabbit Judy wittily tricks initially uncooperative fox Nick into helping her, as he is a key witness for a case she is investigating.

Disney's incursion into the domain of action buddy films is a particularly notable generic move: the adoption of the buddy narrative allows the studio to move beyond familiar fairy-tale frameworks. As in *Wreck-It-Ralph* (Vanellope and Ralph) and *Moana* (Maui and Moana), platonic partnerships replace romantic relationships, expanding the playful adversarial dynamics of romantic-comedy influenced *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled* and *Frozen*, while challenging more distinctly their sentimental and nostalgic impulses. Along with the studio's animated superhero films, *Zootopia* illustrates Disney's efforts to generically look outwards, interacting with the wider Hollywood landscape. Such re-appropriation of the action buddy film also allows Disney to take part in a genre that has been central in contemporary mainstream animation. In an initial effort to distance their output from Disney's fairy-tale romances, studios such as Pixar have relied on the buddy narrative, from *Toy Story* to *The Good Dinosaur*. The former focuses on the rivalry between Woody, a vintage sheriff doll, and Buzz, a space ranger, who ultimately become friends through a series of perilous adventures; *The Good Dinosaur* follows unlikely pair Arlo and Spot, a dinosaur and a young boy who must travel together through hostile prehistoric lands. *Zootopia* specifically transposes the buddy narrative to an anthropomorphic framework: animals that are "natural enemies" – a fox and a rabbit – partner up and overcome their differences through their action-oriented journey. Such

[4] Quoted in Jessica Julius, *The Art of Zootropolis* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2016), 28; John Nugent, "*Zootropolis* Review," *Empire*, 25 March 2016, accessed 23 May 2018, https://www.empireonline.com/movies/zootropolis/review/; Collin, "*Zootropolis* Is the *Chinatown* of Talking Animal Films."

a generic move was generally praised, yet met with surprise, as exemplified by the critical reception of *Zootopia*.

Reviewers emphasized two points stemming from *Zootopia*'s generic reworking and pointing to wider popular preconceptions about Disney animated films and mainstream animation more generally: *Zootopia*'s political and racial subtext, and the varied intertextual generic references within the film, transcending the Disney fairy tale. Critics repeatedly framed *Zootopia*'s approach to race and gender as unexpectedly bold and topical. Jen Chaney (*Washington Post*) observed that "the idea that a cartoon starring an adorable bunny, a slippery fox… might have something meaningful to say about race relations, especially in #BlackLivesMatter America, sounds pretty ridiculous. But it's true"; Peter Travers (*Rolling Stone*) stated that "the last thing you'd expect from a new Disney animated marshmallow is balls… This baby has attitude, a potent feminist streak, a tough take on racism"; Rebecca Keegan (*Los Angeles Times*) noted that "the studio known for its fairy-tale castles and doe-eyed princesses has sneaked a tart, subtle examination of bias into… a talking-animals movie".[5] Such critical surprise related to *Zootopia*'s contemporary relevance, and more particularly its topical portrayal of race relations, is framed by generic preconceptions surrounding both Disney and mainstream animation: the typical association of Disney with sentimental and retrograde fairy tales, of animated films with lightweight and childish content. The presence of animal characters reinforces such devaluation, representing a semantic barrier separating juvenile

[5] Jen Chaney, "*Zootopia*: A Delightful Menagerie, With a Worthwhile Message," *Washington Post*, 3 March 2016, accessed 20 May 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/goingoutguide/movies/zootopia-a-delightful-menagerie-with-a-worthwhile-message/2016/03/03/8bed4ac8-defd-11e5-8d98-4b3d9215ade1_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.16113ce83b4a; Travers, "*Zootopia*;" Rebecca Keegan, "Did a Disney Animated Film Really Say That? If It's *Zootopia*, Prepare to Be Shocked," *Los Angeles Times*, 4 March 2016, accessed 20 May 2018, http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-zootopia-production-20160304-story.html.

"cartoons" with "adorable" creatures – in Chaney's words – from supposedly more serious, mature live-action film.[6]

Yet, it is precisely the anthropomorphic nature of *Zootopia*'s characters which allows such a challenging depiction of gendered and race relations. Wells notes that "the animal is an essential component of the language of animation":[7] it also represents a key vehicle for caricature and social critique, expanding the subversive potential of the medium. Anthropomorphism functions as a lens which, as Christopher Holliday more generally observes, permits the "dilution, exaggeration and satirising of the machinations of the human condition", including "behaviour, socio-cultural hierarchies".[8] The representation of animals has itself a rich tradition in art and literature: Wells explains that the "animal story" has proved attractive to animators "because it inevitably works as part of a surreal, supernatural, or revisionist reinvention of human experience".[9] Such reinvention has characterised numerous Disney films featuring animal stories, from *Dumbo* (Ben Sharpsteen, 1941) and *Bambi* to *The Lion King*. *Zootopia* builds on this paradigm, relying on the very specificity of the central duo's animal status to explore human relations, and using the action cop buddy film as a way into issues of identity and social roles, including certain connotations of racial and gendered identity. These are explored through an anthropomorphic lens, transposing the antagonistic dynamics from live-action buddy films to an animated animal story featuring an inter-species partnership. *Zootopia*'s animated animals are endowed with humanlike qualities: they can talk, have jobs, walk on two feet, and use technology. Still, some species remain enemies, and some patterns of behaviour appear at first intrinsically linked with specific animals: prey or predator. This

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[6] Chaney, "*Zootopia*."
[7] Wells, *The Animated Bestiary*, 2.
[8] Christopher Holliday, "'I'm Not a Real Boy, I'm a Puppet:' Computer-Animated Films and Anthropomorphic Subjectivity," *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 11 (2016): 248, accessed 3 November 2016, doi: 10.1177/1746847716661456.
[9] Wells, *The Animated Bestiary*, 60.

dichotomy resonates with generic and wider social dynamics: tensions between species evoke the impact and implications of racial bias, as well as the gendered imbalance underlying the live-action buddy film.

Beyond the buddy genre, reviewers noted and praised the wide range of intertextual references within *Zootopia*, leading the film to generically transcend Disney's perceived formula of fairy tales and sentimental romances, and appeal to a wide audience as a result. Critics such as Collin described *Zootopia* as finding itself "*unexpectedly* – but by no means unwelcomely – in the twilit domain of *film noir*"; Michelle Orange (*Village Voice*) mentioned "crime underworld movies, including *The Godfather* and *Chinatown*".[10] Similarly, Peter Debruge (*Variety*) argued that the film "lends itself *surprisingly well* to a classic *L.A.*-style detective story, a la *The Big Lebowski* or *Inherent Vice*, yielding an adult-friendly whodunit with a chipper 'you can do it!' message for the cubs… Genre-wise, the film couldn't be farther from the terrain of *Frozen* and other Disney princess movies".[11]

Such comments not only point to persisting stereotypes surrounding audiences for mainstream animation – reduced to children and families – but also encapsulates wider preconceived ideas about animated features and genre. Reviewers still tend to approach animated films first as family films, a genre that suffers from "perceived defects" such as excessive "sentiment" and "juvenility".[12] Disney's output epitomises such reductive generic categorisations, being mostly associated with innocence, childishness, and sugar-coated "marshmallow" – in Travers's words – fairy tales.[13] *Zootopia*'s multifaceted generic identity calls into question such preconceptions, which is not entirely surprising considering Disney's

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[10] Collin, "*Zootropolis* Is the *Chinatown* of Talking Animal Films;" Michelle Orange, "Disney's *Zootopia* Paws at Segregated City Life," *Village Voice*, 1 March 2016, accessed 20 May 2018, https://www.villagevoice.com/2016/03/01/disneys-zootopia-paws-at-segregated-city-life/.
[11] Peter Debruge, "Film Review: *Zootopia*," *Variety*, 12 February 2016, accessed 18 May 2018, http://variety.com/2016/film/reviews/moana-review-walt-disney-animation-studios-1201911413/.
[12] Brown, *The Hollywood Family Film*, 10.
[13] Travers, "*Zootopia*".

wider contemporary output. A fairy tale like *Frozen* reworks and converges with genres as varied as the romantic comedy and the superhero film. Through tropes from the action cop buddy film, *Zootopia* more directly challenges the studio's perceived generic predictability, as well as other aspects of its contemporary output: the carefree and cheerful theme-park atmosphere of Disney's enchanted animated worlds, and issues related to the latter's social and racial cohesion.

This chapter examines *Zootopia*'s three-layered questioning of issues linked to gender and racial identity, developed through the anthropomorphising of action cop buddy tropes. At a first level, *Zootopia*'s anthropomorphic lens reconfigures the gendered power dynamics within the buddy partnership. The portrayal of Judy and the difficulties she faces as a "bunny cop", as labelled in the film, as well as her relationship with both Nick and her colleagues, resonate with and challenge the typical positioning of women within the action cop buddy genre. Her very design and framing as an *anthropomorphic* action heroine also re-envision the construction of contemporary action-adventure women, transcending typically post-feminist containment strategies.

Zootopia's subversive strategy not only impacts generic portrayals but also has wider implications: species identity echoes elements of gendered identity as well as certain aspects of *racial* identity. *Zootopia* repeatedly includes explicit references to discourses on and constructions of race, racial relations, and racism mediated through anthropomorphic language and aesthetics. Relying on Nick and Judy's antagonistic buddy relationship, and Zootopia's wider animal dynamics, the film challenges stereotypes associated with specific species, resonating with wider issues of racial identity.

Beyond generic and wider social dynamics, *Zootopia*'s anthropomorphising of action cop buddy tropes frames a self-reflexive revision of Disney's own contemporary representational strategies. *Zootopia*'s antagonistic animal partners and anthropomorphic world

notably contrast with the unproblematic, racially harmonious diegetic configurations of films such as *The Princess and the Frog* and *Big Hero 6*. *Zootopia* qualifies their fantasy atmosphere, reminiscent of Disney's enchanting theme parks, and subtly complicates the wider generic tropes associated with Disney animated films. Sentimental innocence, idealism, and reassuring predictability are conveyed through Judy's characterisation, and humorously challenged by more sarcastic partner Nick, and the wider depiction of Zootopia.

This chapter elaborates on Disney's distinctive reworking of another facet of action-adventure cinema. I argue that, relying on the specificity of the animation medium and the studio's canon and paratexts, *Zootopia*'s anthropomorphic re-appropriation of action cop buddy tropes questions generic and wider social dynamics, as well as Disney's own representational strategies.

***Zootopia*'s Anthropomorphic Lens and the Gendered Dynamics of the Action Cop Buddy Film**

"You'll never be a real cop. You're a cute meter maid though." Nick's line, concluding his first sarcastically witty but particularly confrontational conversation with Judy, crystallises some of the gendered tensions underpinning Disney's anthropomorphising of the action cop buddy film. Following Judy's failed attempt at apprehending him, this antagonistic, unlikely partner mocks her dream of becoming a police officer, belittling her by drawing on stereotypes related to her species: an inoffensive, "cute" bunny. He also notably calls her a meter *maid*, ironically foregrounding her subordinate and correspondingly gendered job status. *Zootopia*'s anthropomorphic lens repeatedly magnifies the gendered imbalance characterising the action buddy film through the difficulties and prejudices that Judy encounters as a "bunny cop". Her positioning at the centre of the narrative and her portrayal as an athletic, strong bunny challenge

the gendered dynamics of the buddy relationship and re-envision the construction of the post-feminist action heroine.

From the start, Judy's ambition appears decidedly unusual: as a child, young fox Gideon Grey mocks her ("What crazy world are you living in where you think a bunny could be a cop?"), her parents worriedly warn her that "there's never been a bunny cop", and she secures her job thanks to a "Mammal Inclusion Initiative". Such insistence on her identity as a bunny might divert attention away from the fact that she is also a *female* recruit. Yet, this species-related exceptional status strongly resonates with the positioning of women within action cop films: Tasker notes that, in this generic environment, the heroine most often "stands alone".[14] This marginalisation parallels the absence of women within buddy films. Despite notable exceptions such as *The Heat* (Paul Feig, 2013), the contemporary cop buddy genre – like the wider action genre – is still predominantly male-centred. Tasker observes that the verbal banter characterising the male buddy dynamic "becomes more transparently sexual when transposed onto the male/female pair": the inclusion of a woman very often leads the buddy relationship to turn into a romantic one.[15] Many romantic comedies could indeed be approached as buddy films due to the initial syntactic parallel between the two genres: a mismatched pair forced to reach a deal. More generally, when female characters are featured alongside an action hero, they are rarely on the same footing as the latter: they tend to be positioned as supportive sidekicks and/or romantic interests, not as buddies/partners.[16]

[14] Tasker, *Working Girls*, 83.
[15] Ibid, 74-5.
[16] Ibid, 85.

Figure 30 and 31: *Zootopia* [frame capture]

Zootopia acknowledges these marginalised positionings: its anthropomorphic lens first literalises and – light-heartedly – magnifies some typically gendered difficulties faced by women entering the male-centred cop narrative, then challenges these configurations through the characterisation of Judy and her integration into a buddy dynamic. Judy's role as Nick's partner is as syntactically important as her individual trajectory as an apprentice police officer. She is the one framing the narrative, from her traumatic yet foundational encounter with a fox, to her joining the police force, and her delivering the commencement address to the new Police Academy graduates. Yet, like the heroines of *Blue Steel* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1989), *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991) and *Fargo* (Ethan and Joel Cohen, 1996), Judy is isolated in *Zootopia*'s police force: she has no opportunity to bond with other women, and while other officers work in teams, she initially has no partner.[17] This sense of isolation is also translated visually. As she first enters the police "bullpen", her portrayal is reminiscent of Jodie Foster's character – Clarice Starling – at the start of *The Silence of the Lambs*. The latter initially misleadingly suggests that this little, frail trainee may be out of place in the FBI: as she steps into the elevator, she is surrounded by taller and sturdier *male* colleagues, which makes her look particularly vulnerable. *Zootopia*'s anthropomorphic lens magnifies such a sense of perceived female fragility. Bunny Judy appears so tiny in comparison with her imposing *male* colleagues – large animals including polar bears, buffalos, tigers and rhinoceroses – that they actually struggle to see her: cheetah Clawhauser needs to lean over his desk, buffalo chief Bogo

[17] The only other female acknowledged in *Zootopia*'s police force is imposing elephant Francine.

to put on his glasses (Figure 30). When Judy interacts with these large male mammals, high-angle shots are mostly used, framing her as a minuscule, defenceless creature (Figure 31). The whole police environment looks hostilely intimidating: even sitting on a chair – or rather, climbing up it – requires an additional effort. The emphasis on Judy's cuteness isolates her further from her male counterparts: she is not taken seriously because of her harmless, diminutive, soft bunny appearance. As illustrated by Clawhauser's inadvertent patronising and Nick's sarcastic mocking – "there's a toy store missing its stuffed animal" – cuteness is associated with the realm of childhood and innocence, which underlines Judy's apparent unsuitability for the tough and dangerous job of a police officer. Therefore, *Zootopia*'s choice of a bunny cop foregrounds the underlying gender imbalance of the action cop film: women are conspicuously rare or marginalised because of generic stereotypes related to female fragility and helplessness.

Disney's specific animation style and *Zootopia*'s anthropomorphic lens question such generic preconceptions through Judy's characterisation as a "tough bunny", in animation supervisor Kiro Lehtomaki's words. As shown throughout the studio's contemporary action-adventure canon, animated cuteness is deceptive: from *Wreck-It-Ralph*'s "cybugs" to *Moana*'s Kakamoras, it functions as a façade masking potential danger and/or mischief. In Judy's case, her undeniable, typically "Disney" cuteness – big eyes, fluffy tail – is combined with a strong, active body. Art director of characters Cory Loftis specifically "accentuated her muscle mass", "giving her heavier thighs and arms than real rabbits have".[18] Lehtomaki's description crystallises the paradox of such a design: "she's a tough bunny, but she's still feminine. She's sweet, but she's not weak".[19] This in-between characterisation particularly stands out in the "Police Academy" montage sequence, building on boot camp film tropes. Judy initially

[18] Julius, *The Art of Zootropolis*, 30.
[19] Quoted in Julius, *The Art of Zootropolis*, 35.

struggles to keep up with her rhinoceros and polar bear counterparts. However, she gradually makes progress both through intensive training – she is shown running and performing sit-ups – and by relying on her skills as a rabbit. Instead of imitating her massive and burly male colleagues to climb an ice wall, for example, she jumps off their backs; thanks to her agility and wit, she knocks a rhinoceros down by bounding over him and using his momentum, kicking his other hand into his face.

Through Judy's anthropomorphic portrayal, *Zootopia* transcends some containment strategies associated with the post-feminist heroine, including the tendency to combine action-adventure empowerment with sexual objectification, framing female effort and stunts as conventionally glamorous. In films such as *G.I. Jane* (Ridley Scott, 1997) and *Edge of Tomorrow* (Doug Liman, 2014), training sequences typically showcase both heroines' flexing muscles and sweating bodies. In *Edge of Tomorrow*, the camera zooms in on Sergeant Vrataski (Emily Blunt) as she finishes an "air plank", and she is shown pushing on her arms in slow motion. By contrast, *Zootopia* does not include lingering shots of Judy while she works out; although she wears tight-fitting gym gear, there is no emphasis on her curves. The "Police Academy" sequence focuses instead on the results of her training, and how she outperforms her peers. Such absence of objectification is particularly notable considering the recurrent sexualisation of female rabbit characters, from the "Playboy bunny" figure to Warner Bros' Lola Bunny in *Space Jam* (Joe Pytka, 1997). *Zootopia*'s portrayal of Judy challenges the figure of the often-sexualised contemporary action woman.

Yet, Judy's in-between characterisation – a tough bunny – echoes other aspects of the post-feminist action heroine: on the surface, her portrayal epitomises the combination of traditionalist paradigms and empowerment typical of post-feminist constructions of femininity. Although athletic, Judy is more agile and graceful than visibly muscular and sturdy: she remains

a conventionally "feminine" cop, a bunny version of frail Clarice Starling.[20] Carol Dole argues that "casting an actress of small stature" – like Jodie Foster – "limits" the "threat" posed by the subversive figure of the gun-wielding female cop.[21] From an anthropomorphic perspective, Disney's choice of a bunny as *Zootopia*'s lead may contain this threat further: Judy would represent a palatable, non-threatening post-feminist figure of female power. Yet, both Judy's and Clarice's appearance are misleading, a semantic trope that both emphasizes their isolation within the male-dominated police force and their exceptional status as a result. Judy's in-between characterisation as a tough bunny allows her to lead action scenes and plays a key role in her relationship with Nick: her naivety, fragility and helplessness, associated with her deceptively harmless cuteness, constitute pivotal performances in her buddy partnership.

Figure 32: *Zootopia* [frame capture]

While Judy's first encounter with Nick echoes the marginalisation of female cops and the gendered imbalance of action cop buddy films – Nick teases and belittles Judy through references to her species and gender ("you're a cute meter maid") – she later challenges this configuration, relying on Nick's very preconceptions. When she apprehends him for the second time and asks him about a missing animal, he neither takes her seriously nor answers her

[20] Quoted in Julius, *The Art of Zootropolis*, 35.

[21] Carol M. Dole, "The Gun and the Badge: Hollywood and the Female Lawman," in *Reel Knockouts: Violent Women in the Movies*, ed. Neal King and Martha McCaughey (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 87.

questions, playfully repositioning her as a cute, inoffensive, subordinate meter maid through anthropomorphic characterisations: he calls her "Carrots", "fluff", and compares her to a "stuffed animal". Feeling unthreatened, he inadvertently reveals his earnings from illegally selling merchandise: Judy takes advantage of his carelessness, using a seemingly harmless carrot pen to record his words. As he refuses to cooperate, Judy pretends to be sad and disappointed: she looks at him wide-eyed, her ears drooping slightly (Figure 32), but quickly abandons her performance of cute harmlessness. She threatens to arrest him for felony tax evasion, tricking him into helping her with her investigation. With a knowing smirk, she notably repeats Nick's earlier condescending yet playful one-liner "it's called a hustle, sweetheart", reversing the power dynamics of their nascent partnership. Such reprise in the dialogue is typical of action cop buddy films such as *48 Hrs.*, in which both leads repeat "you're gonna be sorry you've ever met me / I'm already sorry". This humorous exchange of one-liners illustrates the fruitful potential of the collaboration between the two partners.

Zootopia's anthropomorphising of action buddy tropes, pairing a male fox and a female rabbit, gradually produces a homogeneous partnership: moving from playful antagonism to complementarity and support, Nick and Judy's relationship challenges the gendered imbalance of power of the action cop buddy film. They possess complementary abilities which help them progress in their investigation and ultimately solve the case. Nick's insider knowledge leads them to key witnesses and helps them locate suspects avoiding surveillance cameras; Judy's competency as a trained cop ("top of [her] class at the academy") allows her to take the lead in action sequences, rescuing Nick and getting them both to safety. Their complementarity manifests further through an *exchange* of skills: Judy learns from, and playfully imitates Nick's criminal ways ("it's called a hustle, sweetheart"). As for Nick, he adopts Judy's action cop behaviour and logic: he interrogates a suspect and refuses to leave her behind during dangerous chases. Nick's cynicism leads Judy to become less naïve and more pragmatically sensible.

Judy's ethics and dedication also inspire Nick who starts acting as a supportive partner. Nick stands up for Judy when she is asked to quit and drop the case: like the buddy protagonists described by Jeffrey Brown, they "achieve a level of trust that carries them past their initial antagonism".[22] Their platonic affection allows them to overcome a typical buddy break-up, with Nick jokingly using Judy's carrot pen recorder while she apologises to him – replicating the way she initially tricked him. Their efficiency as partners culminates when, towards the end, they catch the villain together, partly relying on Judy's performance as a vulnerable, defenceless bunny, resonating with the recurrent positioning of women as victims to be rescued in action cop buddy cinema. Pretending to be helpless, she records the villain revealing her plans: she then breaks from her performance, standing arm in arm with Nick, and asserts her success by claiming to the villain, just before the latter gets arrested: "it's called a hustle, sweetheart".

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Zootopia's anthropomorphising of action cop buddy tropes challenges the gendered dynamics of the genre and re-envisions the characterisation of the contemporary action heroine. *Zootopia*'s anthropomorphic lens magnifies the gendered imbalance of the action buddy film, providing Judy with the narrative space and agency that is usually denied to the female cop within the buddy configuration. Building on its inter-species configuration, the film puts male and female partners on an equal footing. Judy's in-between portrayal as a tough, deceptively cute and harmless bunny both challenges generic stereotypes associated with the victimised female cop and transcends post-feminist portrayals of empowered yet objectified live-action action heroines.

Judy's performance of the defenceless bunny has wider implications, beyond generically gendered dynamics: she also performs the "prey" as opposed to Nick's performance

[22] Jeffrey A. Brown, "Bullets, Buddies, and Bad Guys: The 'Action-Cop' Genre," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 21 (1993): 82, accessed 10 April 2018, https://search-proquest-com.bris.idm.oclc.org/docview/1295922073?accountid=9730.

of the “predator”, a species division associated with underlying tensions and discriminations within the world of the film. *Zootopia*’s generic anthropomorphising functions as a way into broader questions of identity, including certain connotations of racial identity, race relations and racial constructions.

“Sly Fox, Dumb Bunny”: Addressing Racial Identity and Dynamics through the Anthropomorphic Cop Buddy Film

> Judy: Y’know, it burns me up to see folks with such backward attitudes toward foxes. I just wanna say, you’re... a real articulate fella.
> Nick: Ah, well, that is high praise. It’s rare that I find someone so non-patronizing.

When Judy first meets Nick, she takes his defence against the hostile owner of an ice-cream parlour who refuses to serve foxes: her selfless action is followed by an awkward, potentially problematic compliment, which Nick ironically welcomes. As reviewer Rebecca Keegan noted, the choice of the adjective “articulate” is “reminiscent of a cringe-worthy comment” Joe Biden made about then-candidate Barack Obama in 2007, describing him as “the first mainstream African-American who is *articulate* and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy”.[23] Writing on the incident, journalist Lynette Clemetson (*New York Times*) observed that “when whites use the word [“articulate”] in reference to blacks, it often carries a subtext of amazement, even bewilderment… When people say it, what they are really saying is that someone is articulate ... for a black person”.[24] This little adjective exemplifies *Zootopia*’s many references to racial tensions and micro-aggressions against minorities in America, from police profiling (“you think I’m going to believe a fox?”), to misplaced appropriation of slang (“a bunny can call

[23] Keegan, “Did a Disney Animated Film Really Say That?”; Lynette Clemetson, “The Racial Politics of Speaking Well”, *New York Times*, 4 February 2007, accessed 10 September 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/04/weekinreview/04clemetson.html.
[24] Clemetson, “The Racial Politics of Speaking Well.”

another bunny 'cute', but when other animals do it, it's a little…") and unwelcome hair touching ("you can't just touch a sheep's wool"). Relying on the initial generic antagonism between partners Judy and Nick, also belonging to different species, *Zootopia*'s anthropomorphising of action cop buddy tropes functions as a tool to interrogate wider social dynamics. The film repeatedly subverts stereotypes related to specific animals, reframes species as partly constructed and potentially constituting a performance: this anthropomorphic lens evokes and re-envisions issues of racial identity and race relations.

Some of the most high-profile action cop buddy films and franchises have notably paired actors from different races and/or ethnicities: for example, black and white leads in the *Lethal Weapon* franchise and *48 Hrs.*, black and Asian protagonists in *Rush Hour*. In this configuration, racial and ethnic differences represent an additional aspect of the partners' dissimilar characterisation, adding to their clashing personalities and working style.[25] Two interdependent narratives then unfold: the growth and development of the leads' friendship despite their differences and potential prejudices, and their overcoming of action obstacles to solve a case and catch the villain. Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell observe that such films acknowledge racial inequality through the "unequal status of the buddies", and that their ultimate friendship reconciles and smooths over such inequality.[26] Mainstream cop buddy films tend not to directly address racism as an issue: tensions are simplified and resolved by the end of the film, presenting audiences with what Philippa Gates describes as "an escapist fantasy".[27] The comedic impulse of the buddy dynamic partly explains such bypassing, leaving a more explicit and thorough questioning of race relations to genres such as dramas, biopics, or documentaries.

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[25] Brown, "Bullets, Buddies, and Bad Guys," 80.
[26] Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell, *A Dictionary of Film Studies*, "Buddy Film."
[27] Philippa Gates, "Always a Partner in Crime: Black Masculinity in the Hollywood Detective Film," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 32 (2004): 22, accessed 15 May 2015, doi: 10.3200/JPFT.32.1.20-30.

Transposing the buddy genre from live action to animation, and most notably transforming human protagonists into anthropomorphic characters, *Zootopia* provides a safe space to play through such social complexities, including race relations and racial constructions. The antagonism of the partners and their initial distrust of each other due to their differing species – fox versus rabbit – is juxtaposed with the wider oppositions and tensions underlying the city of Zootopia – prey versus predator – which functions as a way into wider explorations of social roles and identity. Disney's approach particularly stands out from other animated buddy films such as DreamWorks' *Shrek* and *Shark Tale* (Bibo Bergeron and Vicky Jenson, 2004). The latter reproduce the black/white pairings of their live-action counterparts through voice casting – Mike Myers and Eddie Murphy in *Shrek*, Jack Black and Will Smith in *Shark Tale* – while *Zootopia*'s leads are voiced by Jason Bateman and Ginnifer Goodwin. Such choice distances Disney's portrayals from the stereotypes associated with live-action buddy performances and casting, notably criticised in relation to the *Shrek* franchise.[28] *Zootopia*'s clash of species, the prejudices and rivalry between the animated partners, represent the primary tools to address and rework the representational politics of the genre, and question wider issues of identity.

Zootopia relies on Judy's perspective, and most particularly her unconscious bias and fear of foxes, which impacts on her partnership with Nick, to weave challenging observations into its narrative, resonating with contemporary issues related to racial representation and race relations. Entirely devoid of humans, the basis for Zootopia's world is that animals have "evolved": the division between "vicious predator" and "meek prey" has disappeared and all animals "live in harmony", as Judy explains in the opening scene. Yet, as the film gradually reveals, significant distrust and ingrained fear of predators, which represent a minority of the

[28] Holliday, *The Computer-Animated Film*, 19.

animal population, persists. At first, such fear seems justified: it is young fox Gideon Grey who bullies sheep, and attacks Judy who tries to defend them. As he unsheathes his claws like a switchblade, he appears to be particularly dangerous. Although Judy ultimately outsmarts him, this violent event is foundational within Judy's narrative trajectory, and shows how the film uses anthropomorphism to point to derogatory preconceptions and bias against minorities, and more specifically the idea that one ethnic and/or racial group is naturally inferior to the other. In *Zootopia*'s world, this means more primitive and violent. Such presumed innateness is made explicit through direct references to the "biology" of predators. While cop Judy doesn't explicitly discriminate against foxes ("Gideon Grey was a jerk, who *happened* to be a fox"), her deep-rooted prejudices stand out when she first meets Nick. Her initial impulse is to reach for "fox repellent"; when she realises he is harmless, she unconsciously patronises him. At a press conference, she connects the violence of predators mysteriously going "savage" to their "biology… something in their DNA". This not only hurts Nick and leads to their buddy break up, but also sends journalists into a frenzy plunging the city into chaos. A montage sequence includes news reports of a peace rally marred by protest, where species-related slurs are exchanged ("Go back to the forest, predator!"); in the subway, Judy observes a female bunny who brings her child closer to her when a tiger sits nearby. This scene crystallises *Zootopia*'s magnification of the insidious effects and potentially dangerous consequences of racial bias, based on irrational fear.

Zootopia particularly insists on such irrationality by consistently subverting stereotypes and preconceived ideas related to the supposedly innate qualities or tendencies of each species. This representational strategy not only represents a source of comedy – an elephant lacks stereotypical memory skills; a sloth exceeds the speed limit – but also plays a pivotal role through the narrative. The characterisation of Bellwether exemplifies such a strategy. The harmless looking assistant, working for the more charismatic and imposing Mayor Lionheart,

is revealed to be the villain towards the end of the film, which operates as a major narrative twist since she represents the epitome of the "meek prey". Visual development artist Shiyoon Kim describes her as "a timid lamb with a shy voice and huge eyes, so you'd never think she's actually the villain".[29] Like *Moana*'s Kakamoras and *Wreck-It-Ralph*'s "cybugs," the design of such a vulnerable and fluffy character builds on and subverts the formulaic Disney trope of cuteness, traditionally associated with adorable animal leads such as Bambi and Thumper. Along with Judy's "cute bunny" appearance, Bellwether's characterisation destabilises any certainty related to species within Zootopia's world.

Zootopia not only challenges species-related stereotypes, but also foregrounds their constructed and artificial aspect. When grown-up Gideon Grey apologises to Judy, explaining that his "unchecked rage and aggression" were the manifestation of "self-doubt", it leads Judy to the real reason behind predators' inexplicable behaviour. They are not "reverting to their primitive, savage ways", and are not even biologically predisposed to violence: they are hit with bullet-like pellets of toxic serum made from a poisonous flower causing their uncontrollable aggressiveness. Such a sinister plot is elaborated by Bellwether: in targeting predators, she managed to replace Lionheart as mayor, sustaining a climate of paranoiac fear in Zootopia which allowed her to stay in power. Such a sinister *mise en scène*, building on fears against a specific minority of animals – predators – and fuelled by news media's careless circulation of Judy's misplaced claims, points to the constructed aspect of racial representations, and shows how prejudices are artificially instilled and perpetuated.

Zootopia particularly magnifies the violence of such preconceptions: the anthropomorphic lens of the film shockingly literalises the dehumanising effects of racism, turning marginalised and feared predators into feral creatures. Under the effects of the toxic

[29] Quoted in Julius, *The Art of Zootropolis*, 79.

serum, predators are transformed into wild animals: they run on all fours, grunt and roar – with their pupils vertically slit – and randomly attack their peers. In the context of the film, this behaviour is *not* natural: it is an artificially-engineered transformation – even bunnies can suffer from the toxic effects of the poisonous flower. In the context of an anthropomorphic *animated* film, predators' aggressiveness is even more disturbing: they are thoroughly de-anthropomorphised, practically losing their animated characterisation. As Holliday explains, animation and anthropomorphism are both "rhetorical strategies… invested in degrees of personification, the impression (and impassion) of consciousness, and the presumption of subjectivity".[30] To some extent, the unexpected de-anthropomorphising of predators in *Zootopia* breaks animation rules, preventing the audience from caring for and empathising with these protagonists: lacking their human characteristics, they correspondingly lose their associated animated appeal. From a wider perspective, such de-anthropomorphising also points to racist discourses associating specific races with animals.[31] *Zootopia* touches upon the social and political consequences of such discourses and constructions: the frightening images of predators purposely turned "savage" circulated through television news sustains inhabitants' fears and helps the villain stay in power.

Zootopia not only shows that some ideas and representations related to specific species are constructed and have dangerous potential: it also emphasizes that racial identity itself partly constitutes a performance. Numerous authors, such as Linda Williams, have relied on the term of performance in relation to onscreen understandings of race to examine concepts of "blackface" and "passing" in late 1920s and 1930s melodramas and musicals.[32] Williams

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[30] Holliday, "'I'm Not a Real Boy, I'm a Puppet,'" 249.

[31] For example, Neal Lester notes that black children have been associated with wild animals. This problematic connection has wider historical roots, tracing back to antebellum America and the dehumanization of African-American slaves. See Lester, "Disney's *The Princess and the Frog*," 307.

[32] Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 176.

particularly points to the degree of "overacting" and "artifice" as a pivotal aspect of such cinematic performances of race: use of make-up, presence of exaggerated gestures or restraint.[33] More recently, Whoopi Goldberg's impersonation of a white man in *The Associate* (Donald Petrie, 1996) and discourses surrounding the star personas of actresses and singers such as Jennifer Lopez and Nicki Minaj have demonstrated the potential fruitfulness of this concept, foregrounding the unstable and multifaceted aspect of racial identities.[34]

Zootopia's exploration of species' performance resonates with such discourses, as illustrated in the introductory scene, staging the bygone era of "vicious predators" and "meek prey". The film opens in a dark jungle, where a cute, defenceless little bunny is stalked by a tiger. When it jumps at the bunny, the digitally simulated camera zooms out, revealing an amateur stage production: the "vicious predator" is played by a young jaguar, wearing a tiger costume with huge paws and claws, pretending to maul young Judy. The latter's performance of the "meek prey" is humorously exaggerated: she shrieks and screams "blood, blood, blood", using reams of red papier mâché and ketchup as fake blood. Judy then proceeds to explain the rules of *Zootopia*'s world: animals have evolved beyond such "primitive savage ways", and predators and prey live in harmony. Beyond its expositional function, this scene subtly reveals that "meek prey" and "vicious predator" are archaic and artificial labels in *Zootopia*'s evolved age: these old notions are mere performances that are not founded on any tangible traits or characteristics anymore.

Nick's characterisation and his evolving partnership and friendship with Judy, particularly illustrate *Zootopia*'s reframing of species as a performance, resonating with wider issues of racial identity and representations: his behaviour is gradually revealed to be contrived, developed due to the discrimination he has encountered. At first, he seems to conform to the

[33] Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, 176.
[34] Jess Butler, "For White Girls Only?: Postfeminism and the Politics of Inclusion", *Feminist Formations* 25 (2013): 51, accessed 10 May 2014, doi: 10.1353/ff.2013.0009.

cliché of the "sly fox" – as he describes himself – the anthropomorphic equivalent to the stereotype of the street-smart "hustler" – in Judy's terms – found in action cinema ("I know everybody"). The latter typically possesses a "network of street contacts" and displays an "ease and confidence" within urban environments that seems natural.[35] Yet, Nick's behaviour is revealed to be a performance, contextualised by numerous scenes in which he is prejudiced against, from a police officer dismissing his testimony, to the recollection of a traumatic childhood memory of him being muzzled by young prey animals. His initial witty cynicism ("you can only be what you *are*: sly fox") contrasts with its subsequent heartfelt yet bitter confession to Judy: "if the world's only gonna see a fox as shifty and untrustworthy, there's no point in trying to be anything else." As she gradually realises, Nick is "so much more than that", actually a loyal friend and efficient apprentice cop. Their partnership challenges the "fox/bunny" configuration: Nick and Judy are placed on an equal footing, building on their complementary abilities and exchanging skills.

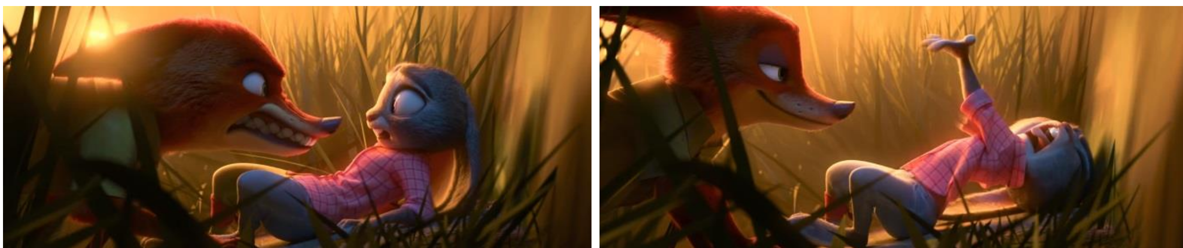

Figure 33 and 34: *Zootopia* [frame capture]

Nick and Judy's final *mise en scène*, demonstrating their efficiency as partners and supportive friendship, represents the culmination of *Zootopia*'s re-envisioning of species' behaviour as performance. When Bellwether and her accomplices corner them, she hits Nick with what she believes to be a capsule of toxic serum. While Bellwether reveals her scheme in a threatening monologue, Nick crouches, growls, stalks and attacks defenceless Judy (Figure 33). Yet, as he appears to bite her, her scream is followed by an over-the-top performance of

[35] Purse, *Contemporary Action Cinema*, 118.

death, miming blood spurting out of her body (Figure 34). Nick playfully interrupts her ("all right, you're milking it"), putting an end to their improvised performance. The latter left time for Judy to record Bellwether's confession, leading to her consequent arrest. This staging directly echoes the opening amateur stage production. As these two stagings frame *Zootopia*'s narrative, they show that foxes and bunnies can easily get in and out of character, namely break from their impersonation of stereotypes and preconceptions related to their own species: the dichotomies sly fox versus dumb bunny and meek prey versus vicious predator constitute mere performances in *Zootopia*'s world. Juxtaposed with Judy's knowing performance of the victimised action heroine, this sequence suggests that aspects of gendered and racial identities can be also understood as performances.

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Zootopia's anthropomorphising of action buddy tropes questions understandings and constructions of race and racial relations – issues that most live-action cop buddy films rarely address. Through the portrayal of initially antagonistic animal leads, as well as the wider underlying hierarchies of Zootopia, the film magnifies the dangerous potentials and dehumanising effects of racism and bias, crystallised through the city's sinister anti-predator paranoia and the de-anthropomorphising of some animals. Consistently subverting species-related stereotypes, Disney's anthropomorphic lens notably re-envisions species as a partly constructed, knowing and fluctuating performative identity, which resonates with wider issues and understandings of social dynamics and racial identity.

Such subtle, complex and nuanced commentary on identity politics appears as a notable departure from Disney's contemporary constructions of race and racial relations. To what extent does Disney challenge its own representational politics in *Zootopia*, as well as the studio's associated generic tropes?

The Anthropomorphic Cop Buddy Film As a Self-reflexive Tool: *Zootopia*'s Revision of Disney's Representational and Generic Approach

> Nick: Tell me if this story sounds familiar: naïve little hick with good grades and big ideas decides… "I'm gonna move to Zootopia, where predators and prey live in harmony and sing Kumbaya!" Only to find… we don't all get along… No one cares about her or her dreams."

As Judy first fails to apprehend Nick, a rather animated conversation follows between the two leads, during which Nick sarcastically describes Judy and her ambitions. Just before concluding that she will "never be a real cop", he specifically mocks her idealistic vision of Zootopia, and her innocent belief that "anyone can be anything". Building on the dynamic between the two soon-to-be partners, this sequence playfully echoes and ridicules the cheerful naivety associated with Disney's animated films, especially the studio's fairy tales: the predictable, "fluffy" narratives and enchanting "happy endings" that Zipes associates with the Disney formula. Judy's innocent optimism regarding Zootopia's social dynamics also resonates with Disney's contemporary portrayal of racial harmony, as illustrated in the fantasy worlds of films such as *The Princess and the Frog* and *Big Hero 6*. *Zootopia*'s anthropomorphising of the cop buddy film complicates and revises to some extent such representational tropes, and playfully challenges the studio's wider generic configurations.

Disney animated films have been particularly focused upon and criticized for their representation of race, often perceived as reductive, offensive or even racist. The studio has strived to distance its more contemporary output from the problematic racial representations that have marked its history. For example, in *Tangled* and *Frozen*, race dissolves into invisible whiteness within exclusively white worlds. Films portraying diverse animated worlds similarly avoid directly engaging with racial issues. In *The Princess and the Frog*, Tiana and Naveen's amphibian "state" – lasting for two thirds of

the film – is another strategy employed to tone down racial tensions in Disney's enchantingly sanitised version of 1920s New Orleans, discarding issues related to miscegenation.[36] Such re-imagining, relying on magical transformations and enchanting fairy-tale worlds, is also replicated, to some extent, in the urban action-adventure world of *Big Hero 6*. Set in the imaginary city of "San Fransokyo", it seamlessly combines American and Japanese architecture and influences – a visual "mix of cultures" that is also reflected in the multicultural cast, including Asian American, Latin American, black, and white actors.[37] *Big Hero 6* never addresses race or race relations as an issue: San Fransokyo appears as a harmoniously hybrid fantasy city.

Figure 35: *Zootopia* [frame capture]

I would argue that *Zootopia* challenges to some extent such idealised social dynamics: the depiction of the city of Zootopia itself reproduces, then complicates such a *seemingly* harmonious configuration, appearing at first as another fantasy land, an enchanting theme park. The city's skyline echoes the triangular shape of Disney's theme-park and fairy-tale castles (Figures 6 and 8): the buildings are reminiscent of turrets, circled by smaller habitations – the "kingdom" – and a river (Figure 35). Judy's enthusiasm on her train journey to the city is reminiscent of Rapunzel joyfully entering

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[36] Aza Missouri, *Black Magic Woman and Narrative Film*, 174.
[37] Julius, *The Art of Big Hero 6*, 80.

Tangled's kingdom for the first time. Numerous reaction shots foreground her excitement and amazement at the breath-taking urban vistas, self-reflexively mirroring viewers' expected admiration at the eye-catching computer animation. Tracking shots take the audience among skyscrapers, above bridges and under beltways, carried as if on a dizzying and thrilling theme-park ride. The dazzling colour palette – sandy Sahara Square, snowy Tundratown, lush Rainforest District – is matched with impressive state-of-the-art digital effects: variations in temperature and climate are notably showcased through lens flares and photorealistic heat blur, condensation and raindrops.

Such an overwhelming and entertaining theme-park experience was, as for *Tangled*, purposely created: co-director Byron Howard explains that Zootopia was designed "almost like Disneyland".[38] Zootopia's elaborate environmentally-based district division most noticeably echoes Disney World's "Animal Kingdom", also visited by the filmmakers "to learn what an *artificially created* environment made by animals might look like".[39] Such a description emphasizes the fabricated aspect of all Disney theme parks; as for the Animal Kingdom, it specifically points to the staged display of animals and their domesticated performance of wilderness. As Stephanie Rutherford observes, they look "docile, organized, and always ready to be 'onstage'".[40] Their more violent behaviour is conspicuously dissimulated, so that the Animal Kingdom appears as a "natural utopia": like Disney's other "kingdoms", it represents a magical space where visitors "escape the anxieties of urbanity, crime, difference, and complication".[41] At first, Zootopia appears as an animated version of the Animal Kingdom: a wonderful theme-park city where

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[38] Byron Howard notably co-directed both *Tangled* and *Zootopia*, which might explain, to some extent, the theme-park correspondences between the two films. Quoted in Julius, *The Art of Zootropolis*, 44.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Stephanie Rutherford, *Governing the Wild: Ecotours of Power* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 78.
[41] Ibid, 52.

"predator and prey live in harmony" – a lion and a giraffe are shown casually standing side by side on an escalator – and "anyone can be anything". The city seems to simply anthropomorphise the harmonious and unproblematic social dynamics of Disney's other fantasy lands – 1920s New Orleans or San Fransokyo.

Yet, the idealistic façade of Disney's contemporary fantasy worlds, reproduced through Zootopia's anthropomorphic utopia, gradually crumbles as Judy and Nick's cop buddy investigation progresses. Inter-species relationships are not as blissfully harmonious as they seem, and underlying prejudices persist. Those surface when some predators' behaviour becomes uncontrollably aggressive. As they are shown stalking and mauling other animals, their portrayal shockingly subverts the sanitized version of wilderness staged at the Animal Kingdom and in other Disney animated films. For example, in *The Aristocats* (Wolfgang Reitherman, 1970) and *The Lion King*, predators courteously cease to hunt their prey as soon as they realise that they are the hero's friend. Their seamless switch from wild deadly violence to harmless anthropomorphism re-envisions inter-species relations as a peaceful cohabitation – Disney's tamed "circle of life" – sharply contrasting with *Zootopia*'s. However, as observed earlier, *Zootopia* relies on a specific kind of anthropomorphism, with entirely "evolved" animals: predators' "savage" outbursts are not natural but purposely triggered. Such aggressive behaviour metaphorically prefigures the violence of the species-related slurs and growing tensions following Judy's press conference. To some extent, the film draws a parallel between unconscious, fearful bias and unchecked feral brutality: both are externally triggered, easily manipulated, and have dramatic consequences for inter-species relations. As artic shrew Mr. Big remarks, "we may be evolved... but deep down we are still *animals*". This remark challenges the peaceful and sanitised foundations of Disney's other animal worlds,

hinting at their latent violence and wild impulses, and problematizes other human-centred, diverse and seemingly harmonious fantasy kingdoms.

While *Zootopia* contrasts with films such as *The Princess and the Frog* and *Big Hero 6* in the way it strikingly exposes racial tensions, it is characterised by a certain degree of ambivalence that perpetuates, to some extent, Disney's problematic approach to race. According to numerous critics, *Zootopia*'s anthropomorphic lens functions as an "allegory for the black and white racial dichotomy found within many Western societies".[42] Gregory Beaudine et al. point out parallels with the experience of predators within the film and that of African Americans within the United States, from their similar demographic numbers (around 10% of the population) to their perception as potentially violent and threatening.[43] As pointed out earlier, the film references, condemns and deconstructs such racial prejudices and discrimination. Yet, the way *Zootopia* frames this undeniably "progressive" positioning is at best "ill-advised", at worst "offensive", as observed by Dan Hassler-Forest.[44] Although predators' wild outbursts are externally triggered by a toxic serum, the opening scene recalls that, "thousands of years ago", predators *did* have "an uncontrollable biological urge to maim and maul". When Judy clumsily explains the attacks by referring to the animals' "DNA", her claim can be interpreted as *both* unknowingly prejudiced – animals have "evolved" – *and* based on the prehistoric past of her anthropomorphic world, which helps contextualise the inhabitants' quickly spreading fear. *Zootopia* awkwardly treads a fine line between challenging and perpetuating potentially harmful racial stereotypes, partly playing into "the very basic

[42] Gregory Beaudine, Aliya Beavers and Oyemolade Osibodu, "Disney's Metaphorical Exploration of Racism and Stereotypes: A Review of *Zootopia*", *Comparative Education Review* 61 (2017): 231, accessed 24 January 2019, https://www-journals-uchicago-edu.bris.idm.oclc.org/doi/10.1086/690061. 231.
[43] Beaudine et al., "Disney's Metaphorical Exploration of Racism and Stereotypes", 228.
[44] Dan Hassler-Forest, "'Life Isn't Some Cartoon Musical': Neoliberal Identity Politics in *Zootopia* and *Orange Is the New Black*", *Journal of Popular Culture* 51 (2018): 367, accessed 24 January 2019, https://doi-org.bris.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/jpcu.12658.

racism" that it is set to reject.[45] African American activists such as Black Lives Matter protesters were indeed often described as "acting like 'animals'" in numerous news outlets, blogs and social media, and portrayals of young Black men as "ominous criminal predator[s]" have been circulated in the United States since the 1970s with often dramatic consequences.[46] From this perspective, *Zootopia*'s construction of race may not be that different from Disney's past and contemporary portrayals, as illustrated through *The Princess and the Frog*'s amphibious black princess.

Paradoxically, both *Zootopia*'s offensiveness and its more progressive political implications are diluted to some degree through the specific anthropomorphic lens of the film. Unlike animated features such as *The Princess and the Frog* and *Big Hero 6*, there are no recognisably raced bodies onscreen: no ethnic or racial human group is explicitly and unequivocally supported or targeted. Voice casting undermines to some extent the parallels drawn by some critics: black actors such as Octavia Spencer and Idris Elba voice both predators and prey. Both prey and predators encounter micro-aggressions that may be associated with African-American experiences: fox Nick is mistrusted by the police, and rabbit Judy objects to being called "cute" as if she was faced with racial slurs – while both are voiced by white actors. As observed by Jennifer Sandlin and Nathan Snaza, *Zootopia* "has to keep in tension the presentation of enough information for the film to allegorically tap into fears and concerns about race… and at the same time displace these concerns into forms different enough that the film cannot be openly and obviously read as direct political commentary".[47] Such tension regarding representational identity politics

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[45] Hassler-Forest, "'Life Isn't Some Cartoon Musical'", 368.
[46] Jennifer Sandlin and Nathan Snaza, "'It's Called a Hustle, Sweetheart': Black Lives Matter, the Police State, and the Politics of Colonizing Anger in *Zootopia*", *Journal of Popular Culture* 51 (2018): 1207, accessed 24 January 2019. https://doi-org.bris.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/jpcu.12714; Kelly Welch, "Black Criminal Stereotypes and Racial Profiling", *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 23 (2007): 277, accessed 27 January 2019, doi: 10.1177/1043986207306870.
[47] Sandlin and Snaza, "'It's Called a Hustle, Sweetheart'", 1199.

crystallises the combination of disruption and containment characterising Disney's contemporary output, as epitomised by the studio's post-feminist constructions of gender.

Zootopia more effectively subverts Disney's contemporary representations of social dynamics through its challenge of the city's figures of authority, supposed to embody Zootopia's idealistic motto of cohesion and harmony. Mayor Lionheart, who launched the "Mammal Inclusion Initiative" and puts pressure on the city's police force to find the missing mammals, has them secretly imprisoned in a disused hospital. He keeps their inexplicable savage behaviour secret from the public to protect both the city ("It could destroy Zootopia") and his own position ("And how do you think they're gonna feel about their mayor, who is a lion?! I'll be ruined!"). More strikingly, the seemingly harmless Bellwether who appears sympathetic to Judy from the outset, supporting her progress and assisting in the investigation – she provides access to surveillance cameras – and replaces Lionheart when he is arrested, is revealed to be the villainous mastermind behind predators' attacks. Police chief Bogo, Judy's boss, is reluctant to have her investigating a case, ignoring her competence and skills for the job. He is also unaware of Bellwether's schemes, unknowingly following the villain's orders. In typical action cop buddy fashion, the representatives of power cannot be trusted: this challenges the stable, seemingly harmonious configuration of Disney's contemporary dynamics.

As the flaws of Zootopia's seemingly utopian system begin to surface, Judy discards the naïve optimism reminiscent of Disney's earlier cheerful and innocent heroines: the evolution of her characterisation plays a central role in *Zootopia*'s revision of Disney's wider generic tropes and associated atmosphere and tone. Like the typical action cop described by Brown, Judy is ready to "act outside the law in order to see justice

done", and stops relying on Zootopia's figures of authority.[48] Her "insubordination", in Bogo's terms, leads her to abandon her meter maid post and rescue Mr. Big's daughter. As she volunteers to find one of the missing mammals, she is denied access to police resources: as a result, she ends up getting help from Nick, whom she initially describes as a "hustler", but ultimately partners with him. His connections lead them to "crime boss" Mr. Big who, upon learning that Judy rescued his daughter, lends his assistance to her investigation. Thanks to his rather unorthodox interrogation methods – threatening to drown animals in icy water – Judy obtains crucial information from a suspect.

Judy's evolving portrayal, and the progress of her investigation, leading her into darker generic spheres such as the crime film through her encounter with Mr. Big, also challenges the studio's wider generic identity, associated with perceived sentimentality, enchantment, and blissful optimism. Her initially – typically Disney – innocent idealism is humorously met with incredulity and/or concern. When she announces to her parents that she will become the first "bunny cop" and "make the world a better place", they try to discourage her by explaining that "it's great to have dreams… as long as you don't believe in them too much". Later in the film, Chief Bogo reminds her that "life isn't some cartoon musical where you sing a little song and all your insipid dreams magically come true. So *let it go*". This knowing reference to *Frozen*'s song mocks Judy's naïve optimism, and parallelly, Disney's formulaic reliance on childlike wonder and sentimental idealism, at the core of the studio's fairy tales and musicals – from *Cinderella*'s "A Dream Is a Wish Your Heart Makes" to Tiana singing "Dreams do come true in New Orleans". Disney's opening title song is precisely "When You Wish upon a Star", inviting audiences to suspend their disbelief and enjoy a fun and familiar fantasy experience. *Zootopia*'s

[48] Brown, "Bullets, Buddies, and Bad Guys," 82.

anthropomorphising of action cop tropes, most particularly in relation to social dynamics and hierarchies, disrupts such a predictable "dream come true" trajectory, forcing Judy to re-assess the world and narrative she inhabits: rougher, less harmoniously utopian. Correspondingly, audiences must adjust to this slightly grittier version of the Disney formula.

While *Zootopia* does end on an optimistic note, its conclusion qualifies to some extent the unequivocal and typically overly optimistic happy endings mostly associated with Disney animated films, self-reflexively pointing to a more complex version of the studio's representational politics and social dynamics. During Nick's graduation ceremony from Zootopia's police academy, Judy gives a nuanced commencement address in which she particularly contrasts her initial innocent and simplistic view of Zootopia to its more complicated reality, especially its tense inter-species relationships: "when I was a kid, I thought Zootopia was this perfect place where everyone got along and anyone could be anything… Turns out… real life is messy". Such an observation symbolises the tonal and generic shift taking place throughout the film. The breath-taking, marvellous, enchanting theme-park world of Zootopia, introduced with Shakira's upbeat pop song, is gradually revealed to be darker, dangerous and corrupted: the fantasy "cartoon musical" has turned into an action cop film. Judy's less naive final advice – "*try* to make the world a better place" – parallels Disney's emphasis on a more mature, self-aware generic approach and understanding of social dynamics.

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Through the anthropomorphising of action cop buddy tropes, *Zootopia* revises Disney's contemporary representational politics, and wider generic tropes and associated atmosphere. The utopian façade of the animal city first reproduces the marvellous enchantment of social cohesion characteristic of the studio's contemporary animated worlds and theme-park

kingdoms – only to crumble when underlying tensions start to surface: Judy gradually discovers the fragile, constructed aspect of Zootopia. As the city becomes the set of an urban action cop adventure, she encounters corrupted, dangerous, and/or unsupportive authority figures, which challenges the naïve idealism of Zootopia's inter-species harmony. In parallel, this reconfiguration also contrasts and questions Disney's unproblematic and fantasy portrayal of race relations characterising the studio's other contemporary animated films, even though a degree of ambivalence awkwardly persists.

Judy's move from a stereotypically wide-eyed and cheerful heroine to a more seasoned action cop parallels Disney's wider efforts to re-envision its generic tropes and atmosphere. As Judy adjusts to Disney's updated generic rules, she mirrors the narrative journey of the Disney audience, whose generic preconceptions are knowingly acknowledged and ultimately challenged.

Conclusion

Disney's *Zootopia*'s anthropomorphising of the action cop buddy genre, transposing the latter's tropes to an exclusively animal world, provides a multi-layered reworking and questioning of issues of gendered and racial identity. Such a generic re-appropriation re-envisions the gendered dynamics of the action cop buddy film, wider social dynamics including understandings and portrayals of race and race relations, and the representational and generic dynamics of Disney's own contemporary canon.

Zootopia's anthropomorphic transposition challenges the construction of the female cop heroine. Judy's portrayal magnifies her live-action counterpart's difficulties within a typically male-dominated generic environment and ultimately challenges the gender imbalance of the live-action buddy dynamic. Judy's in-between status as a tough bunny transcends post-feminist constructions of the action woman, combining her conventional yet misleading Disney cuteness

with a strong, active body. Her anthropomorphic portrayal notably avoids typically post-feminist containment strategies, such as the emphasis on a glamorous, sexually attractive appearance.

Replacing the live-action action cop partners with animated animals from different species, *Zootopia*'s anthropomorphic configuration foregrounds issues and tensions which resonate with wider social dynamics, including certain connotations of racial identity, race relations and racism. The portrayal of species dynamics evokes and foregrounds the dangerous consequences of racial bias and discrimination, and consistently subverts stereotypes supposedly associated with specific minorities and groups. Through predators' externally altered behaviour and its coverage through news media, the film emphasizes the constructed and artificial aspects of racial representations and understandings of race. The characterisation of Nick and Judy challenges such understandings further: species behaviour is also depicted as a knowing performance, pointing to the potentially performative aspects of racial identities.

Zootopia's anthropomorphising of the action cop buddy film also functions as a self-reflexive tool which revises Disney's contemporary representational politics and generic tropes more broadly. The film complicates the studio's idealistic representations of social cohesion and racial harmony characterising films such as *The Princess and the Frog* and *Big Hero 6*. *Zootopia*'s action cop configuration qualifies such enchanting theme-park optimism, and reveals the fragility and difficulties of racial cohabitation. However, *Zootopia*'s anthropomorphic lens also maintains a degree of ambivalence regarding race which dilutes to some extent its more progressive potential. *Zootopia*'s tonal and generic shift more effectively re-envisions Disney's wider tropes and associated atmosphere. Judy's sentimental innocence and optimism, reminiscent of the studio's earlier heroines, are challenged by the more pragmatic or cynical characters she encounters. She gradually revises her understanding of both

Zootopia and the generic narrative she inhabits, mirroring viewers adapting to Disney's playfully revised narrative and generic tropes.

Zootopia's distinctive anthropomorphic approach to genre and social dynamics is reminiscent of Disney's earlier *Bolt* which, by some aspects, touched upon issues of species performance. Like *Zootopia*, *Bolt* pairs two unlikely animal protagonists from differing species, namely sarcastic and world-weary alley cat Mittens and naïve Bolt, unaware that he is the star of his own television show. Like Judy, Bolt tricks Mittens into helping him, as he has been separated from his owner, Penny. Their initially antagonistic relationship – Bolt hates cats, Mittens does not take him seriously – evolves into a buddy partnership as they experience a series of adventures. They notably bond over pleasures specific to their animal status, as Mittens teaches Bolt how to behave like a real dog. Since he has spent all his life on set as an action hero, he needs Mittens' help to learn how to beg for food, bury bones, and fetch sticks. As Mittens notably performs dog postures for Bolt to imitate, such as a "dog face" – head tilted, ears dropped, looking up – the film suggests that species behaviour can easily be taught and learnt, and therefore performed. *Zootopia* brings *Bolt*'s exploration of species' behaviour and relationships further, adding a more explicit degree of reflection relating to contemporary identity politics which not only questions the representational approach of Disney's own canon, but also wider understandings of social dynamics and identity.

Approaching *Zootopia* from the perspective of the cop buddy film reveals the considerable scope of Disney's contemporary reworking and reimagining of the wider action-adventure genre. It also points to Disney's consistent effort to differentiate its output through the specificity of the studio's animated style, language, and generic history. Relying on an iconic Disney genre, the studio's animated features *musically* reinterpret the digital action spectacle; relying on the liberating potentials and freedoms of the animated medium, they self-reflexively empower their superheroines; relying on anthropomorphism and Disney's aesthetic

of cuteness, they challenge the dynamics of cop buddy narratives. Considering the distinctly playful generic reworking and challenging re-envisioning taking place within these films, Disney animated features are pivotal to understand the contemporary persistence of and hybridisations within genres as varied as the musical, the superhero film, the cop buddy film, and action adventure.

Throughout the past decade, Disney has strived to challenge viewers' perception of its formula through multiple generic borrowings and playful parodies, from heroines discarding the princess label and reflecting on the concept of "true love", to characters mocking the predictability of their narrative. Playfully self-reflexive *Zootopia* develops more explicitly Disney's post-*Shrek* subversion of its own animated canon. As the studio's first entry into the action cop buddy film, it also represents another strand of generic exploration for Disney, looking beyond its contemporary post-Pixar/post-Marvel generic expansion.

CONCLUSION

Figure 36: Official trailer for *Ralph Breaks the Internet: Wreck-It Ralph 2* [frame capture]

"Oh, come on! Princesses and cartoon characters? Barf!" In a scene from the official trailer for *Ralph Breaks the Internet: Wreck-It Ralph 2* (Phil Johnston and Rich Moore, 2018), Vanellope is exasperatedly disappointed. Travelling with Ralph through the "Internet," an expansive digital world featuring buildings such as "Google," "Facebook," and "Amazon," she was looking for a website that is "super intense and really nuts," but is directed to "Oh My Disney" instead. The latter is reminiscent of a real website which includes Disney-related games, recipes, and mostly promotional information. The entrance to the animated "Oh My Disney" is designed like Disney's Magic Kingdom and the studio's fairy-tale castle logo; once inside, Vanellope's first sight is a group of fourteen Disney animated heroines spanning the studio's entire canon – from Snow White and Cinderella to Elsa and Moana – cheerfully waving at the website's visitors (Figure 36). *Winnie the Pooh*'s Eeyore, shown sitting next to Vanellope, gloomily protests at her disdain, but both are suddenly interrupted by a figure flying over them. A digitally simulated camera follows the character, panning to reveal a much wider universe, which is thematically divided (Figure 37). The "Disney Animation" area is shown at the centre of the frame, shaped like Mickey's sorcerer hat in *Fantasia*, and surrounded by vintage animated film posters such as *Sleeping Beauty* and *The Jungle Book*. On the right stands

"Marvel", above which Iron man flies, featuring Thor's hammer and Captain America's shield, next to "Pixar", represented by the "Luxo Jr." lamp logo and characters such as *WALL-E'*s Eve and *The Good Dinosaur*'s Arlo. On the left, the "Star Wars" logo appears, under the Death Star and Han Solo's Millennium Falcon, and near "The Muppet Show" and Kermit. Between and around these delimited areas, a multitude of film stills float, from *Steamboat Willie* to *Big Hero 6*, while other animated characters and props, including Dumbo and *Peter Pan*'s pirate ship, can be spotted. Seeing such a vast, varied, colourful world of fun and adventure, Vanellope goes from frustration to excitement, joyfully exclaiming "cool!" like a child at the sight of Disneyland's many attractions.

Figure 37: Official trailer for *Ralph Breaks the Internet: Wreck-It Ralph 2* [frame capture]

This scene showcases the tremendous scope of Disney's contemporary multimedia empire, while knowingly reproducing some popular, critical, and academic preconceptions surrounding the studio's output. Vanellope's initial complaint when entering "Oh My Disney" echoes descriptions of the predictable Disney formula: her reference to "princesses" evokes the studio's iconic yet much criticised and parodied fairy-tale films. The first shots inside "Oh My Disney" confirm this reductive image, featuring a multitude of animated heroines that are synonymous with the Disney fairy tale, and are heavily associated with the generic and merchandising world of children and family films, like *Winnie the Pooh*'s Eeyore. Vanellope's

mention of "cartoons" points to the generic marginalisation of Disney features, partly due to their associated audiences and their medium, animation. Yet, as revealed by the computer-generated camera pan, the Disney studio interacts with elements from a broader universe, from Pixar's digital buddy adventures to Marvel's superhero films. This camera movement, expanding Disney's familiar generic territory, hints at the studio's potentially wider re-appropriations, beyond the realm of "Oh My Disney". From this expanded perspective, Disney animated films are not isolated entities: they do not solely belong to a cohesive canon positioned within strictly delimited generic borders, and cannot be reduced to one generic label.

Like the computer-generated camera pan, my thesis has unveiled some of the many correspondences between Disney's animated films from 2008 to 2016 and contemporary generic trends, transcending conventional understandings of the studio's canon. Repositioning these animated features at the centre of the current Hollywood landscape, I have shown how they re-envision genres in ways that are unique to Disney, relying on the studio's signature aesthetic style, generic history, multifaceted intertext and paratext, as well as the specific language and form of animation.

Such playful and challenging reworkings also correspond to Disney's wider efforts to revisit and expand its own animated canon. Adopting a generic approach to the study of these film texts combined with an analysis of their associated paratexts, my thesis has examined Disney's contemporary feature-length animated output from a different perspective than most academic and popular writing. Such a method challenges well-established understandings of film genres, mainstream animation, and Disney.

From a genre perspective, my study of Disney's animated canon foregrounds hybridity as a pivotal concept to understand the interactions *between* Hollywood genres and Disney films, and the generic inner workings and confluences *within* the studio's animated features. While studies based on the idea of generic purity examine genres as cohesive entities with stable

borders, Disney animated features demonstrate the porousness of genre boundaries. Films such as *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled* foreground key convergences between fairy tales and romantic comedies through their idealised depiction of old-fashioned romance. These films re-appropriate the typical romantic-comedy syntactic structure, namely the presence of a playfully antagonistic couple reaching an accord and ultimately falling in love, within a fairy-tale fantasy framework. *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled* rely on Disney's multi-layered nostalgia to hyperbolically reclaim post-feminist fantasies of chivalric romances and grand weddings. While conventional studies of the romantic comedy discard Disney's output partly because of its semantic specificities – other-worldly settings, magical transformations, familiar princesses and princes – my analysis has shown that these fairy-tale semantics converge with and magnify the nostalgic impulses at the core of post-feminist romantic comedies.

Disney's contemporary output also illuminates and expands the similarities between action adventure and musical often noted within genre studies. Films such as *Wreck-It-Ralph*, *Big Hero 6* and *Moana* re-envision the action spectacle as an exhilarating and empowering musical experience: action moves are reframed as choreography, and training sequences as practice with theatrical props and costumes. The two genres notably and explicitly merge in *Moana*: the expansion of the liberating sea-adventure space parallels that of the communal musical.

Such a focus on generic hybridity is complemented by analyses of discourses of production, marketing, reception, and merchandising, revealing the central role of paratexts in the construction of generic identity. While within Disney's film texts, some genres harmoniously converge – fairy tale and romantic comedy, action and musical – some generic tensions manifest throughout paratexts. Trailers and posters for *Tangled* and *Frozen* noticeably toned down the fairy-tale, romantic, and musical components of the animated films, foregrounding action adventure instead. By contrast, fan-targeted production books and

interviews struck an uneasy balance between distancing and insisting on the fairy-tale roots of the films. Such rewriting not only has marketing purposes, adapting generic emphasis to the audience, but also represents multiple entry points to the exploration of the multifaceted generic identity of the films. Disney's output also points to the importance of paratexts that succeed the release of the films. Merchandise, short films, and theme-park attractions play an essential part in the generic afterlife of mainstream live-action franchises and animated features: they may insist, or even add on specific generic aspects. For example, *Tangled*'s toys and short sequel *Tangled Ever After* emphasize the formulaic fairy-tale closure of the film, contrasting with initial promotional paratexts; *Frozen*-inspired wedding accessories and ceremonies reframe the empowered single lead as a more traditional bride. Paratexts can also impact on the generic tonality within the films themselves: the evocation of Disneyland's Magic Kingdom in *Tangled*, for example, adds a nostalgic sense of familiar enchantment to Rapunzel's fairy-tale journey.

My study of Disney animated films foregrounds the key role of film paratexts and hybridity in the multifaceted labelling, construction, and expansion of genres. Such an emphasis, associated with a semantic/syntactic approach, allows one to go beyond the limited groups of films examined in relation to well-established genres such as the romantic comedy and the musical, typically reduced to film texts explicitly and solely identified as such. Illuminating the particularly diverse body of work interacting with these genres, this perspective favours the entry of non-canonical groups of films into genre studies. This also allows one to move beyond potentially isolating labels – "bad objects" – due to the perceived commercialism, audiences and lightweight content of specific films.

Mainstream animated films such as Disney's crystallise such generic preconceptions and are often marginalised or excluded from genre studies as a result: my study challenges such isolation. The critical reception of *Zootopia* exemplifies how mainstream animated films are primarily and stereotypically associated with the family genre, and correspondingly with

innocent and juvenile content. Yet, the seemingly childlike language and visual tropes of mainstream animated films, such as slapstick comedy, caricature, and anthropomorphic characters, are actually central to their playful re-appropriation of and subtly subversive commentary on genres.

Anthropomorphism is used for its pronounced comic potentials, but it also functions as a lens which calls into question specific generic tropes. *The Princess and the Frog* relies on animal characters and slapstick to subvert the idealised aura of romantic protagonists, and to humorously amplify the adversarial nature of relationships featured in screwball comedies. *Big Hero 6* and *Zootopia* use anthropomorphism to foreground and question more problematic tropes. Baymax's anthropomorphic portrayal, subverting gender divides depicted in superhero films, challenges the demonstration of violence recurrently linked to superheroes' performance of masculine strength and power. In *Zootopia*, the tense inter-species relationships resonate with wider issues related to race relations, racial constructions and bias.

The aesthetic style of animated films participates in their reversal of generic expectations: the caricatured and simplified look of villainous figures in *Wreck-It Ralph* and *Moana* playfully undermines tense and potentially dramatic action sequences. The characters' surprised reaction ("they're kind of cute!") mirrors that of the viewers. Such a stylised aesthetic also subverts the aura of muscular and imposing superheroes typical of live-action cinema. Ralph and Maui appear like caricatured squares; the latter's muscles function as a canvas displaying the demigod's even more stylised, tiny alter ego, re-enacting a miniature version of his spectacular performances.

Maui's animated tattoos evoke the caricatured and flat aesthetic of hand-drawn animation, explicitly contrasting with the illusionistic and photorealistic aesthetic of live-action cinema: such stylistic difference further explains the marginalisation of animation within genre

studies. Many scholars argue that the specificity of the animation medium and its distinct techniques – stop-motion, hand-drawn – call for a separate analytical framework.

Yet, my study has shown that Disney's adoption of specific animation styles and techniques is integral to the studio's re-appropriation of and commentary on live-action genres. The use of computer animation in *Bolt*, and more specifically the impressive reproduction of the photorealistic cinematography and digital effects of live action, forms the basis for a knowing and parodic approach towards the excesses of contemporary action-adventure cinema. By contrast, the use of cel animation in *The Princess and the Frog*, evoking the past of mainstream animation and associated childhood memories of watching the studio's iconic traditionally-animated films, represents an essential layer of Disney nostalgia which amplifies the nostalgic impulses of post-feminist romantic comedies. Cel animation re-envisions the latter's reclamation of old-fashioned and idealised fairy-tale romances. Stylistic variations within the same film also serve a generic purpose. Computer-animated films such as *Wreck-It-Ralph*, *Frozen* and *Moana* include sequences which imitate pre-digital techniques such as plasticene, silhouette and hand-drawn animation, functioning as animated *mise en abymes* which reframe the action performance and the display of protagonists' superpowers as an artificial and theatrical *mise en scène*. These are ultimately replaced by a more spontaneous and unmediated performance.

Applying the perspective of genre studies to the analysis of animated films, my study challenges isolationist perspectives on animation, showing how the specific language and techniques of the animation medium are used to humorously comment on and subvert genres of romance and action adventure.

Combining a focus on live-action genres and the specificities of the animation medium, my study also opens new ways to approach Disney: the studio's contemporary releases re-appropriate a wide range of Hollywood film genres in order to revise Disney's own canon and

expand its generic scope. Such an approach reassesses well-established and reductive understandings of Disney: the studio's output has come to crystallise devaluating popular and academic accounts related to mainstream animation, including emphases on commercialism, childishness, and formulaic narratives.

What particularly stands out throughout Disney's animated output from the past decade is a consistently pronounced sense of knowingness regarding these tropes. From *Bolt*'s network member complaining that the television show she produces is "too predictable" – "there's always a happy ending" – to *Zootopia*'s naïve and wide-eyed Judy being told that "life isn't some cartoon musical", these films explicitly yet playfully acknowledge Disney's familiar predictability, before challenging and subverting the studio's perceived clichés. Disney's contemporary animated features build on the parodies from the studio's competitors, and most specifically DreamWorks' *Shrek* franchise, answering to some extent the numerous academic and popular criticisms regarding Disney's formulaic narratives and stereotypical gender portrayals. These animated films borrow from genres notable for their self-reflexive impulses, such as the romantic comedy, the musical and the action film, to reframe Disney's recurring set of tropes as the basis for a knowing performance. For example, in *The Princess and the Frog* and *Tangled*, fairy-tale masculinity as embodied by the conventional Disney prince is constructed as humorously archaic: it reveals to be a ridiculous masquerade with Lawrence, and a calculated courting technique with Flynn. The characterisation of villains in *Frozen* and *Zootopia* epitomises Disney's self-reflexively subversive impulse. The revelation of prince Hans as a dangerous traitor undermines Disney's formulaic version of fairy-tale romances, initiated through love at first sight and expressed through sentimental duets. *Zootopia*'s portrayal of Bellwether challenges most notably Disney's recurring aesthetic trope of associating cuteness with sympathetic leads and humorously harmless sidekicks or helpers.

Yet, at the same time, specific tropes recurring throughout Disney's canon are preserved and resurface throughout the studio's contemporary output: these animated films crystallise Disney's delicate, sometimes uneasy balance between generic innovation and tradition. The latest cycle of animated fairy tales shows how Disney looked inwards to update and revise one of the studio's most iconic genres. In *Tangled* and *The Princess and the Frog*, the old-fashioned daydreaming couple is re-envisioned as an equally witty and initially antagonistic duo, following on from romantic- and screwball-comedy dynamics. At the same time, Disney's multi-layered nostalgia preserves the more traditional and reassuringly familiar aspects of earlier fairy-tale romances, with the adversarial pair becoming a happily married couple – their wedding inspiring ceremonies that can be held at Disney's theme parks. The studio's action-adventure animated films looked outwards in terms of genre, expanding Disney's generic scope by re-appropriating narrative, aesthetic, and gendered tropes from Marvel superhero films, Pixar animated adventures, as well as wider Hollywood trends. Such broadening of Disney's generic territory was parallelly mediated through more recognisable elements. For example, the shift from romantic to buddy narrative in films such as *Wreck-It-Ralph* and *Moana* is negotiated through the inclusion of more familiar characteristics regarding the heroine. Moana's portrayal builds on a long tradition of Disney leads whose empowerment is expressed through the language of the musical; bold and disruptive Vanellope is unexpectedly revealed to be a princess – an iconic Disney figure – by the end of the film.

Such depictions crystallise the subtle generic compromises, tensions and re-imaginings characterising Disney's contemporary narratives, aesthetics, paratexts, as well as the studio's representational politics. Whereas some popular and academic works apply binary categorisations to Disney's constructions of femininity, the latter actually build on multiple generic influences, on feminist *and* traditionalist tropes, blending *both* disruptive and more conventional elements, in typically post-feminist fashion.

By way of conclusion, I am pointing to perspectives on Disney beyond the studio's contemporary cluster of film texts. I am considering wider contexts related to two central aspects of my thesis, namely generic tropes and issues of gender: the studio's politics of inclusion, and Disney's role in the evolution of Hollywood genres.

While the studio's animated heroines have often attracted the most popular and critical attention, the role of women behind the scenes has come under closer scrutiny within the past decade, paralleling wider debates on diversity within the Hollywood industry. I am turning to a brief analysis of women's roles within the studio, and of the way Disney has strived to showcase and negotiate its – slow – progress in terms of inclusion. The publicity about *Zootopia* provides a fruitful starting point.

An article entitled "The Innovating Women Who Helped Bring *Zootopia* to Life", published on *The Walt Disney Company* website on *Zootopia*'s release day, highlighted the work of female animation supervisors and technical directors.[1] The article particularly foregrounded the supportive and stimulating atmosphere created by their "ever-expanding" number, concluding with rabbit officer Judy's optimistic motto: "anyone can be anything".[2] The way *Zootopia* was promoted is representative of the company's wider public strategies regarding equality and diversity. The Walt Disney Company has recently strived to present itself as "a brand that cares deeply about developing women leaders overall": in a 2015 article, "strong female role models" in films such as "*Cinderella*" were listed along with "Employee Resources Groups like Women@Disney and ESPN Women," which focus on supporting and "inspiring female employees".[3] Such parallel between female characters onscreen and the

[1] "The Innovating Women Who Helped Bring *Zootopia* to Life," The Walt Disney Company, accessed 31 May 2018, https://www.thewaltdisneycompany.com/the-innovating-women-who-helped-bring-zootopia-to-life/.
[2] Ibid.
[3] "Disney's Commitment to Advancing Women Leaders Recognized by Linkage," The Walt Disney Company, accessed 3 June 2018, https://www.thewaltdisneycompany.com/disneys-commitment-to-advancing-women-leaders-recognized-by-linkage/.

increasingly prominent role of women behind the scenes at Disney was epitomised with the release of female-centred *Frozen*, which featured a woman (Jennifer Lee) as co-director for the first time in the studio's history. In *The Art of Frozen*, Lee enthusiastically claimed that "the culture and storytelling are opening up: women characters can be stronger and feistier and drive things. Disney's really embracing it, particularly John [Lasseter]".[4]

Such optimism seems to divert attention away from more deeply rooted gender imbalance and issues at Disney, especially at the directing and creative levels. Even after *Frozen*, all feature-length animated films have been directed by white men. While Lee insisted in *The Art of Frozen* that she did not experience any difficulties as a "*woman* coming in", she described in online interviews her frustration regarding her role as *Frozen*'s *screenwriter*, feeling that she "had the least authority", but "had to trust" she was "the one who knew the whole" – which seems surprising considering her co-director status.[5] In parallel to such implicit hierarchy, a closer look at *The Art of* books points to subtly stereotypical ways of attributing tasks and/or describing staff members' skills. For example, story artist Paul Briggs described his excitement to be cast to storyboard an action-oriented sequence in *The Princess and the Frog*, while Josie Trinidad worked on the romantic dinner sequence: "she made a very tender, charming moment… That's the benefit of casting people to the right sequences".[6] *Zootopia*'s co-director Rich Moore also praised Trinidad on her work as co-head of story: she was "always thinking about emotion and character, while [co-head of story] Jim [Reardon] is focused on comedy and structure".[7] From a genre perspective, such clear-cut gendered division – male action comedy versus female romance and drama – surprisingly contrasts with *Zootopia*'s more

[4] Quoted in Solomon, *The Art of Frozen*, 54.
[5] John August and Aline Brosh McKenna, "Scriptnotes, Ep 128: *Frozen* with Jennifer Lee — Transcript," *Johnaugust.com*, 1 February 2014, accessed 24 May 2014, http://johnaugust.com/2014/scriptnotes-ep-128-frozen-with-jennifer-lee-transcript.
[6] Quoted in Kurtti, *The Art of The Princess and the Frog*, 115.
[7] Quoted in Julius, *The Art of Zootropolis*, 13.

complex onscreen portrayal of femininity. Behind the scenes, the Disney studio is part of a wider industry that has historically been male-dominated, and in which gender bias persists. The "Women in Animation" organization reported that, in 2015, only 20% of the creative jobs were held by women, including just 10% of female directors/producers.[8] Beyond mere numbers, the 2017 #metoo movement, which followed Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein's sexual abuse and harassment scandal, led to disturbing revelations regarding women's working environment at Disney/Pixar. Accusations of enduring "inappropriate conduct with women", including "hugging and other touching", arose against chief creative officer John Lasseter in late 2017.[9] This led him to take a six-month "sabbatical" leave, before assuming a transitional, reduced "consulting role", and ultimately leaving the company in December 2018.[10]

The fact that Lasseter's behaviour was condoned for years, and that Disney executives took so long to take a decision regarding his future at the company – leading to incomprehension and shock on social media – points to a disturbing paradox between the importance of female voices and/or roles onscreen and within the studio.[11] Such ambiguity is reflected to some extent in the paratexts surrounding *Zootopia.* Reviewers such as Peter Debruge referred to *Zootopia* as explicitly addressing gender issues: "the movie is less about race than gender… Judy is

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[8] "50/50 BY 2025," Women in Animation, accessed 3 June 2018. http://womeninanimation.org/5050-by-2025/.
[9] Gene Maddaus, "Pixar's John Lasseter Was the Subject of a 'Whisper Network' for More Than Two Decades," *Variety*, 21 November 2017, accessed 3 June 2018, https://variety.com/2017/film/news/john-lasseter-pixar-disney-whisper-network-1202620960/; Ben Fritz and Erich Schwartzel, "Disney Weighs Return of Pixar Co-Founder John Lasseter After Concerns on Behavior," *Wall Street Journal*, 16 May 2018, accessed 3 June 2018, https://www.wsj.com/articles/disney-considers-letting-pixar-co-founder-john-lasseter-return-1526464166.
[10] Dominic Patten, "John Lasseter Out at Disney at End of 2018; Focusing 'On New Creative Challenges,'" *Deadline*, 8 June 2018, accessed 10 June 2018, https://deadline.com/2018/06/john-lassteter-leaving-disney-end-of-2018-1202406682/.
[11] "Many former female Pixar employees said there was a classic whisper network at the animation company, where young women were advised to keep their distance from the co-founder." Maddaus, "Pixar's John Lasseter Was the Subject of a 'Whisper Network;'"Amid Amidi, "#LoseLasseter Campaign Gains Steam As Disney Considers Bringing Back Alleged Harasser," *Cartoon Brew*, 30 May 2018, accessed 3 June 2018, https://www.cartoonbrew.com/artist-rights/loselasseter-campaign-gains-steam-as-disney-considers-bringing-back-alleged-harasser-158696.html

treated differently because she's a woman".[12] However, co-director Byron Howard surprisingly toned down this aspect of the film, arguing that it is "more species-ist rather than gender-based… The fact that Judy is actually struggling against this is pretty relatable for a lot of people".[13] Such vagueness, leaving gendered parallels open to the audience, is arguably allowed by *Zootopia*'s anthropomorphic lens: undeniably magnifying, but potentially diverting the attention away from hierarchies that are *specifically* gendered or even racial, as observed in Chapter 6. Such promotional discourses may merely reflect Disney's efforts to reach the widest audience possible without alienating viewers who may object to an openly feminist film – it may also reflect the studio's more ambiguous representational politics.

The eviction of Lasseter, followed by his replacement by Jennifer Lee in June 2018, shows that Disney is far from an isolated entity within Hollywood.[14] Whether the company merely responded to wider pressures to maintain its inclusive image ("anyone can be anything"), or genuinely strove to promote and preserve diversity and equality, and a correspondingly healthy and supportive working environment for all, Disney's decisions were influenced by and reacting to wider socio-cultural debates and movements.

This brief overview of women's positioning behind the scenes points to the multi-layered interplay between Disney and the wider Hollywood industry. These interactions not only impact on Disney's film texts and their surrounding paratexts, but also on the inner workings of the studio, notably its politics of inclusion.

Exploring Hollywood's multifaceted influences on Disney leads to considerations regarding the studio's potentially influential role within Hollywood, notably within the history

[12] Debruge, "Film Review."
[13] Quoted in Keegan, "Did a Disney Animated Film Really Say That?"
[14] Lasseter's duties at Disney were split between Peter Docter (Pixar's new chief creative officer) and Jennifer Lee (Disney's new chief creative officer). Brent Lang, "Jennifer Lee, Pete Docter to Run Disney Animation, Pixar," *Variety*, 19 June 2018, accessed 26 August 2018, https://variety.com/2018/film/news/jennifer-lee-pete-docter-head-disney-animation-pixar-1202851411/.

of film genres. Non-canonical films such as Disney's, which are often excluded from live-action dominated genre studies, reveal the enduring and multifaceted presence of genres often perceived as niche or losing momentum within contemporary cinema. For example, authors such as Beth Carroll and K. J. Donnelly rely on films such as *Mamma Mia!* (Phyllida Lloyd, 2008) and *Les Misérables* (Tom Hooper, 2012) to prove the "longevity" of the musical.[15] Although Disney's output tends to be overlooked in studies of the musical, this genre has always been a staple of the studio, from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Bambi*, to *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Lion King*, and now *Frozen* and *Moana*. The musical has consistently thrived, developed, and continues to live within critically acclaimed and popular hits, as demonstrated by Disney animated films.

Figure 38: *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* [frame capture]

As Disney's multimedia empire keeps on expanding, one may wonder about the potential impact of the studio's generic approach on the *evolution* of Hollywood genres. For example, to what extent could Marvel films start to be influenced by Disney's action-adventure animated films? Beyond general intertextual references – *Age of Ultron*'s title robot threateningly singing *Pinocchio*'s "I've Got No Strings", Yondu happily claiming that he is "Mary Poppins" in *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* (James Gunn, 2017) – some more direct parallels seem to develop. For example, the design of *Guardians*' Baby Groot is particularly

[15] Beth Carroll and K. J. Donnelly, "Reimagining the Contemporary Musical in The Twenty-First Century," in *Contemporary Musical Film*, edited by Beth Carroll and K. J. Donnelly (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 2.

reminiscent of Disney's anthropomorphic action heroes and villains: a diminutive, wide-eyed, harmless-looking humanoid tree that a character describes as "too *adorable* to kill", but who is revealed to be particularly threatening and dangerous (Figure 38).

Such interactions point to Disney's potential role within the evolution and transformation of live-action genres, as the studio's post-*Shrek*, post-Pixar, and post-Marvel output consistently and playfully re-envisions and challenges their tropes. My thesis has shown that, to fully understand the generic identity, aesthetics, and gender portrayals of Disney animated films, considering the wider Hollywood context is essential; to fully understand contemporary Hollywood cinema, it may now correspondingly become pivotal to consider mainstream animation, and more specifically, Disney animated films.

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The Godfather [feature film]. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola. Paramount Pictures, US, 1972. 175 min.

Gold Diggers of 1933 [feature film]. Dir. Mervyn LeRoy. Warner Bros., US, 1933. 97 min.

The Good Dinosaur [feature film]. Dir. Peter Sohn. Pixar Animation Studios, US, 2015. 93 min.

Gravity [feature film]. Dir. Alfonso Cuaron. Warner Bros., US and UK, 2013. 91 min.

Guardians of the Galaxy [feature film]. Dir. James Gunn. Marvel Studios, US, 2014. 121 min.

Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2 [feature film]. Dir. James Gunn. Marvel Studios, US, 2017. 136 min.

Hancock [feature film]. Dir. Peter Berg. Columbia Pictures Corporation, US, 2008. 92 min.

Hawaiian Holiday [short film]. Dir. Ben Sharpsteen. Walt Disney Productions, US, 1937. 8 min.

The Heat [feature film]. Dir. Paul Feig. Twentieth Century Fox, US, 2013. 117 min.

Hercules [feature film]. Dir. Ron Clements and John Musker. Walt Disney Pictures, US, 1997. 93 min.

Home on the Range [feature film]. Dir. Will Finn and John Sanford. Walt Disney Pictures, US, 2004. 76 min.

How I Met Your Mother [television programme]. 20th Century Fox Television, US, 2005-2014, CBS.

How to Train Your Dragon [feature film]. Dir. Dean DeBlois and Chris Sanders. DreamWorks Animation, US, 2010. 98 min.

Hugo [feature film]. Dir. Martin Scorsese. Paramount Pictures, US, 2011. 126 min.

Hulk [feature film]. Dir. Ang Lee. Universal Pictures, US, 2003. 138 min.

The Hunchback of Notre-Dame [feature film]. Dir. Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise. Walt Disney Pictures, US, 1996. 91 min.

The Illusionist [feature film]. Dir. Sylvain Chomet. Pathé, France and UK, 2010. 80 min.

I Love You, Man [feature film]. Dir. John Hamburg. DreamWorks, US, 2009. 105 min.

The Incredible Hulk [feature film]. Dir. Louis Leterrier. Marvel Studios, US, 2008. 112 min.

The Incredibles [feature film]. Dir. Brad Bird. Pixar Animation Studios, US, 2004. 115 min.

Iron Man [feature film]. Dir. Jon Favreau. Marvel Studios, US, 2008. 126 min.

Iron Man 3 [feature film]. Dir. Shane Black. Marvel Studios, US and China, 2013. 130 min.

It Happened One Night [feature film]. Dir. Frank Capra. Colombia Pictures Corporation, USA, 1934. 105 min.

The Jungle Book [feature film]. Dir. Wolfgang Reitherman. Walt Disney Productions, US, 1967. 78 min.

Kate and Leopold [feature film]. Dir. James Mangold. Miramax, US, 2001. 118 min.

Knocked Up [feature film]. Dir. Judd Apatow. Universal Pictures, US, 2007. 129 min.

L.A. Confidential [feature film]. Dir. Curtis Hanson. Warner Bros., US, 1997. 138 min.

Lady and The Tramp [feature film]. Dir. Clyde Geronimi and Wilfred Jackson. Walt Disney Productions, US, 1955. 76 min.

La Luna [short film]. Dir. Enrico Casarosa. Pixar Animation Studios, US, 2011. 7 min.

The Last Action Hero [feature film]. Dir. John McTiernan. Columbia Pictures Corporation, US, 1993. 130 min.

Les Misérables [feature film]. Dir. Tom Hooper. Universal Pictures, US and UK, 2012. 158 min.

Lilo & Stitch [feature film]. Dir. Dean DeBlois and Chris Sanders. Walt Disney Pictures, US, 2002. 85 min.

The Lion King [feature film]. Dir. Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff. Walt Disney Pictures, US, 1994. 88 min.

The Little Mermaid [feature film]. Dir. Ron Clements and John Musker. Walt Disney Pictures, US, 1989. 83 min.

The Lego Movie [feature film]. Dir. Phil Lord and Christopher Miller. Warner Bros., US and Australia, 2014. 100 min.

Maid in Manhattan [feature film]. Dir. Wayne Wang. Revolution Studios, US, 2002. 105 min.

Mamma Mia! [feature film]. Dir. Phyllida Lloyd. Universal Pictures, US and UK, 2008. 108min.

The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh [feature film]. Dir. John Lounsbery and Wolfgang Reitherman. Walt Disney Productions, US, 1977. 74 min.

Megamind [feature film]. Dir. Tom McGrath. DreamWorks Animation, US, 2010. 95 min.

Mission: Impossible – Ghost Protocol [feature film]. Dir. Brad Bird. Paramount Pictures, US and United Arab Emirates, 2011. 132 min.

Moana [feature film]. Dir. Ron Clements and John Musker. Walt Disney Animation Studios, US, 2016. 107 min.

Monster-in-Law [feature film]. Dir. Robert Luketic. New Line Cinema, US and Germany, 2005. 101 min.

The Moth and the Flame [short film]. Dir. Burt Gillett. Walt Disney Productions, US, 1938. 8 min.

Mrs Doubtfire [feature film]. Dir. Chris Columbus. Twentieth Century Fox, US, 1993. 125 min.

Mulan [feature film]. Dir. Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook. Walt Disney Pictures, US, 1998. 88 min.

My Big Fat Greek Wedding [feature film]. Dir. Joel Zwick. Gold Circle Films, US and Canada, 2002. 95 min.

Never Been Kissed [feature film]. Dir. Raja Gosnell. Fox 2000 Pictures, US, 1999. 107 min.

Paperman [short film]. Dir. John Kahrs. Walt Disney Animation Studios, US, 2012. 7 min.

Persépolis [documentary clip, online]. Dir. Vincent Paronnaud and Marjane Satrapi. 2.4.7. Films, France and US, 2007. 2 min. http://www.filmeducation.org/persepolis/production-process.html (accessed 22 August 2018).

Persépolis [feature film]. Dir. Vincent Paronnaud and Marjane Satrapi. 2.4.7. Films, France and US, 2007. 96 min.

Peter Pan [feature film]. Dir. Clyde Geronimi and Wilfred Jackson. Walt Disney Productions, US, 1953. 77 min.

"Pilot," *The Flash* [television programme] Warner Bros. Television, US, The CW, 2014. 44 min.

Pinocchio [feature film]. Dir. Hamilton Luske and Ben Sharpsteen. Walt Disney Productions, US, 1940. 88 min.

Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl [feature film]. Dir. Gore Verbinski. Walt Disney Pictures, US, 2003. 143 min.

Pocahontas [feature film]. Dir. Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg. Walt Disney Pictures, US, 1995. 81 min.

Practical Magic [feature film]. Dir. Griffin Dunne. DiNovi Pictures, US, 1998. 104 min.

Pretty Woman [feature film]. Dir. Garry Marshall. Touchstone Pictures, US, 1990. 119 min.

The Princess and the Frog [feature film]. Dir. Ron Clements and John Musker. Walt Disney Animation Studios, US, 2009. 97 min.

The Princess and the Frog [feature film trailer, online]. Dir. Ron Clements and John Musker. Walt Disney Animation Studios, US, 2009. 2 min. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uQBy6jqbmlU (accessed 22 August 2018).

The Proposal [feature film]. Dir. Anne Fletcher. Touchstone Pictures, US, 2009. 108 min.

Ralph Breaks the Internet: Wreck-It Ralph 2 [feature film]. Dir. Phil Johnston and Rich Moore. Walt Disney Animation Studios, US, 2018. n/a.

Robin Hood [feature film]. Dir. Wolfgang Reitherman. Walt Disney Productions, US, 1973. 83 min.

Red Hot Riding Hood [short film]. Dir. Tex Avery. MGM Cartoon Studio, US, 1943. 7 min.

Rush Hour [feature film]. Dir. Brett Ratner. New Line Cinema, US, 1998. 98 min.

Sabrina [feature film]. Dir. Billy Wilder. Paramount Pictures, US, 1954. 113 min.

Say Anything [feature film]. Dir. Cameron Crowe. Twentieth Century Fox, US, 1989. 100 min.

Sex and the City [feature film]. Dir. Michael Patrick King. New Line Cinema, US, 2008. 145 min.

Shark Tale [feature film]. Dir. Bibo Bergeron and Vicky Jenson. DreamWorks Animation, US, 2004. 90 min.

The Shop around the Corner [feature film]. Dir. Ernst Lubitsch. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), US, 1940. 99 min.

Shrek [feature film]. Dir. Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jenson. DreamWorks Animation, US, 2001. 90 min.

Shrek 2 [feature film]. Dir. Andrew Adamson and Conrad Vernon. DreamWorks Animation, US, 2004. 93 min.

Shrek Forever After [feature film]. Dir. Mike Mitchell. DreamWorks Animation, US, 2010. 93 min.

The Silence of the Lambs [feature film]. Dir. Jonathan Demme. Orion Pictures, US, 1991. 118 min.

Singin' in the Rain [feature film]. Dir. Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), US, 1952. 103 min.

Sixteen Candles [feature film]. Dir. John Hughes. Universal Pictures, US, 1984. 93 min.

Sleeping Beauty [feature film]. Dir. Clyde Geromini. Walt Disney Pictures, US, 1959. 75 min.

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs [feature film]. Dir. David Hand. Walt Disney Productions, US, 1937. 83 min.

Space Jam [feature film]. Dir. Joe Pytka. Warner Bros., US, 1997. 88 min.

Spider-Man [feature film]. Dir. Sam Raimi. Columbia Pictures Corporation, US, 2002. 121 min.

Spider-Man 2 [feature film]. Dir. Sam Raimi. Columbia Pictures Corporation, US, 2004. 127 min.

Spider-Man 3 [feature film]. Dir. Sam Raimi. Columbia Pictures Corporation, US, 2007. 139 min.

Spirited Away [feature film]. Dir. Hayao Miyazaki. Studio Ghibli, Japan, 2001. 125 min.

Star Wars [feature film]. Dir. George Lucas. Lucasfilm, US, 1977. 121 min.

Steamboat Willie [short film]. Dir. Ub Iwerks. Walt Disney Productions, US, 1928. 8 min.

The Sword in the Stone [feature film]. Dir. Wolfgang Reitherman. Walt Disney Productions, US, 1963. 79 min.

Tangled [feature film]. Dir. Nathan Greno and Byron Howard. Walt Disney Animation Studios, US, 2010. 100 min.

Tangled [feature film trailer 1, online]. Dir. Nathan Greno and Byron Howard. Walt Disney Animation Studios, US, 2010. 2 min. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2f516ZLyC6U (accessed 22 August 2018).

Tangled Ever After [short film]. Dir. Nathan Greno and Byron Howard. Walt Disney Animation Studios, US, 2012. 6 min.

Tarzan [feature film]. Dir. Chris Buck and Kevin Lima. Walt Disney Pictures, US, 1999. 88 min.

Terminator 2: Judgment Day [feature film]. Dir. James Cameron. Lightstorm Entertainment, US, 1991. 137 min.

Thelma and Louise [feature film]. Dir. Ridley Scott. Pathé Entertainment, US and UK, 1991. 130 min.

Thor [feature film]. Dir. Kenneth Branagh. Marvel Studios, US, 2011. 115 min.

Toy Story [feature film]. Dir. John Lasseter. Pixar Animation Studios, US, 1995. 81 min.

Toy Story 3 [feature film]. Dir. Lee Unkrich. Pixar Animation Studios, US, 2010. 103 min.

Trader Mickey [short film]. Dir. David Hand and Burt Gillett. Walt Disney Productions, US, 1932. 8 min.

Trainwreck [feature film]. Dir. Judd Apatow. Universal Pictures, US, 2015. 125 min.

Treasure Planet [feature film]. Dir. Ron Clements and John Musker. Walt Disney Pictures, US, 2003. 95 min.

Up [feature film]. Dir. Pete Docter and Bob Peterson. Pixar Animation Studios, US, 2009. 96 min.

WALL-E [feature film]. Dir. Andrew Stanton. Pixar Animation Studios, US, 2008. 98 min.

Waltz with Bashir [feature film]. Dir. Ari Folman. Bridgit Folman Film Gang, Israel, 2008. 90 min.

The Wedding Planner [feature film]. Dir. Adam Shankman. Columbia Pictures Corporation, US and Germany, 2001. 103 min.

Winnie the Pooh [feature film]. Dir. Stephen Anderson and Don Hall. Walt Disney Animation Studios, US, 2011. 63 min.

Wolf Children [feature film]. Dir. Mamoru Hosoda. Studio Chizu, Japan, 2012. 117 min.

Wonder Woman [feature film]. Dir. Patty Jenkins. Warner Bros., US and China, 2017. 141 min.

Wreck-It Ralph [feature film]. Dir. Rich Moore. Walt Disney Animation Studios, US, 2012. 101 min.

X-Men [feature film]. Dir. Bryan Singer. Twentieth Century Fox, US, 2000. 104 min.

Your Name [feature film]. Dir. Makoto Shinkai. Amuse, Japan, 2016. 106 min.

You've Got Mail [feature film]. Dir. Nora Ephron. Warner Bros., US, 1998. 119 min.

Zootopia [feature film]. Dir. Byron Howard and Rich Moore. Walt Disney Animation Studios, US, 2016. 108 min.