

**Propaganda in Disney's *Raya and the Last Dragon*:  
exploring the stereotypes around the ideas of a woman and femininity**

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Master's Thesis

University of Helsinki

Faculty of Social Sciences

Global Politics and Communication

Media and Democracy track



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| Tiedekunta – Fakultet – Faculty<br>Faculty of Social Sciences  |  | Koulutusohjelma – Utbildningsprogram – Degree Programme<br>Global Politics and Communication |   |
| Tekijä – Författare – Author<br>Ana Rita dos Santos Ferreira Leandro   |  |  |   |
| Työn nimi – Arbetets titel – Title<br>Propaganda in Disney's <i>Raya and the Last Dragon</i> : exploring the stereotypes around the ideas of a woman and femininity  |  |  |   |
| Oppiaine/Opintosuunta – Läroämne/Studieinriktning – Subject/Study track<br>Media and Democracy   |  |  |   |
| Työn laji – Arbetets art – Level<br>Master's Thesis  |  | Aika – Datum – Month and year<br>April 2022  | Sivumäärä – Sidoantal – Number of pages<br>82 |
| Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract   |  |  |   |
| <p>This thesis sets out to investigate how the ideas of what it means to be a woman and femininity are constructed and propagated through the film <i>Raya and the Last Dragon</i>, the latest Disney Princess film, in the form of stereotypes. Previous studies show that Disney Princess films, from The Walt Disney Company, produce effects on the behaviour and thoughts of children when it comes to gender roles. As propaganda became associated with totalitarian regimes, studies about media effects rarely coin said effects as caused by propaganda. Therefore, propaganda as a field of analysis lacks a body of literature and a consensual set of analysis rules. This thesis contributes to the establishment of propaganda as a field of analysis, by defining it under Jacques Ellul's categorisation.</p> <p>The study relies on a qualitative analysis based on the propaganda analysis model proposed by Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell. The empirical material consists of the film <i>Raya and the Last Dragon</i>, and it is available on Disney+, the streaming service of The Walt Disney Company.</p> <p>The findings of this thesis illuminate how the ideas of a woman and of femininity are constructed in <i>Raya and the Last Dragon</i> and allow to understand, against the literature review, if these constructions have changed and evolved when compared to previous Disney Princess films. The results indicate that the film presents a world where women and men are seen as equal, leading it to break previous stereotypes associated with women and femininity. By presenting a female-centric story, with independent characters who have diverse personalities and clothing, who fight and have no romantic interests, the film subverts the trope of a passive woman in a dress waiting to be rescued by a man from a powerful evil woman. Additionally, the film rotates around the relationship between Raya and Namaari, using the patriarchal trope of plotting a woman against a woman to focus on female friendship. Yet, as the filmmakers are conditioned by their positionality, some stereotypes are still oriented by patriarchal logic and a western perspective, namely the omnipresence of a patriarchal figure that guides the protagonist. In the end, besides its contributions to the field of propaganda analysis, the thesis updates the tradition of studies done on the gendered stereotypes present in the Disney Princess films.</p> |  |  |   |
| Avainsanat – Nyckelord – Keywords<br>propaganda, Disney, feminism, stereotype, princess  |  |  |   |
| Ohjaaja tai ohjaajat – Handledare – Supervisor or supervisors<br>Anu Harju   |  |  |   |
| Säilytyspaikka – Förvaringställe – Where deposited<br>Helsingin yliopiston kirjasto, Helsingfors universitets bibliotek, Helsinki University Library   |  |  |   |
| Muita tietoja – Övriga uppgifter – Additional information  |  |  |   |

## Table of Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| <b>1. Introduction</b> .....   | 1  |
| <b>1.1. Aim of the thesis</b> .....  | 1  |
| <b>1.2. Research questions</b> .....   | 2  |
| <b>1.2. The structure of the thesis</b> .....  | 3  |
| <b>2. Disney Princess films and gender stereotypes</b> .....   | 4  |
| <b>2.1. A brief overview of key concepts</b> .....   | 4  |
| 2.1.1. Patriarchy.....   | 4  |
| 2.1.2. Gender.....   | 5  |
| 2.1.3. Intersectionality.....  | 7  |
| <b>2.2. Disney Princess films and the influence cinema can have on children</b> .....                  | 8  |
| <b>2.3. Gender stereotypes in Disney Princess films throughout the Western feminist waves</b> .....    | 10 |
| 2.3.1. Disney Princesses and the first Western feminist wave .....                                     | 11 |
| 2.3.2. Disney Princesses and the second Western feminist wave .....                                    | 12 |
| 2.3.3. Disney Princesses and the third Western feminist wave.....                                      | 12 |
| 2.3.4. Disney Princesses and the fourth Western feminist wave.....                                     | 13 |
| <b>3. Art as propaganda</b> .....  | 18 |
| <b>3.1. Propaganda meets film</b> .....  | 18 |
| 3.1.1. Ellul's concepts of total propaganda, sociological propaganda, and integration propaganda ..... | 18 |
| 3.1.2. Stanley's concept of flawed ideological belief.....   | 21 |
| 3.1.4. Propaganda as a tool of power elites .....  | 22 |
| <b>3.3. Gender stereotypes as vehicles for propaganda</b> .....  | 23 |
| <b>4. Methodology</b> .....  | 28 |
| <b>4.1. Research problem and research questions</b> .....  | 28 |
| <b>4.2. Empirical material</b> .....   | 29 |
| 4.2.1. Disney Princess film as empirical material.....   | 29 |
| 4.2.2. <i>Raya and the Last Dragon</i> : a summary of the film.....                                    | 31 |
| <b>4.3. Method of analysis: propaganda analysis</b> .....  | 33 |
| 4.3.1. The ideology and purpose of the propaganda campaign .....                                       | 34 |
| 4.3.2. The context in which the propaganda occurs .....  | 35 |
| 4.3.3. The identification of the propagandist and the structure of the propaganda organisation .....   | 35 |
| 4.3.4. The target audience .....   | 36 |
| 4.3.5. Media utilisation techniques.....   | 37 |
| 4.3.6. Special techniques to maximise effect .....   | 37 |
| 4.3.7. Audience reaction to various techniques.....  | 39 |
| 4.3.8. Counterpropaganda .....   | 39 |
| 4.3.9. Effects and evaluation .....  | 40 |
| <b>4.4. Applying intracategorical complexity</b> .....   | 41 |

|   |    |
|---|----|
| <b>6. Analysis</b> .....  | 43 |
| <b>6.1. The ideology and purpose of the propaganda campaign</b> .....                                     | 43 |
| <b>6.2. The context in which the propaganda occurs</b> .....  | 45 |
| <b>6.3. The identification of the propagandist and the structure of the propaganda organisation</b> ..... | 46 |
| <b>6.4. The target audience</b> .....   | 48 |
| <b>6.5. Media utilisation techniques</b> .....  | 50 |
| <b>6.6. Special techniques to maximise effect</b> .....   | 50 |
| 6.6.1. Predispositions of the audience: creating resonance .....  | 50 |
| 6.6.2. Source credibility .....   | 53 |
| 6.6.3. Opinion leaders .....  | 54 |
| 6.6.4. Group norms.....   | 54 |
| 6.6.5. Reward and punishment .....  | 54 |
| 6.6.6. Monopoly of the communication source.....  | 55 |
| 6.6.7. Visual symbols of power .....  | 55 |
| 6.6.8. Language usage.....  | 58 |
| 6.6.9. Music as propaganda .....  | 63 |
| 6.6.10. Arousal of emotions.....  | 64 |
| <b>7. Discussion</b> .....  | 65 |
| <b>7.1. Discussion of the key findings</b> .....  | 65 |
| <b>7.2. Implication of the key findings</b> .....   | 68 |
| <b>8. Conclusion</b> .....  | 70 |
| <b>8.1. Limitations of the thesis</b> .....   | 71 |
| <b>8.2. Contributions for future research</b> .....   | 71 |
| <b>References</b> .....   | 73 |

## **1. Introduction**

The debate on filmmaking being a vehicle of propaganda was never as timely as in the present day. With the line between information and entertainment being blurred across media (Curran & Gurevitch, 1991) and with globalisation still in motion, filmmaking seems to be a form of art accessible to most people. Taking the nature of art and how it is often disregarded, if one considers it to have a propagandistic nature, such disregard can be dangerous for democratic societies. Therefore, it is imminent that there should be research dedicated to art and how it is tangled with propaganda.

### ***1.1. Aim of the thesis***

This thesis combines interdisciplinary efforts from gender studies, film studies and propaganda studies to examine how the ideas of what it means to be a woman and of femininity are constructed and propagated through filmmaking in the form of stereotypes. The topic of research is driven by a personal interest of the researcher in filmmaking as a form of meaning-making and the importance attributed to good screen representation, especially regarding oppressed groups.

The focus of the analysis will be Disney Princess films, more precisely, the film *Raya and the Last Dragon* (Estrada & Hall, 2021). The case study selected is, firstly, supported by the role the United States has in globalisation, which includes its film industry, being widely consumed in a numerous variety of countries (Stojanova, 2017). To understand the way cultural institutions such as schools and mass media can exercise noncoercive dominance through the use of language and symbols by ruling elites, Brian Patrick and Trevor Thrall (2007) bring forward the concept of cultural hegemony, coined by Antonio Gramsci. Cultural hegemony helps understand the power companies such as The Walt Disney Company have in shaping narratives globally. Furthermore, either consciously or not, American values are embedded in American art making it easy for the American culture to disseminate and entrench as the status quo into people's lives globally. Secondly, the Walt Disney Company has proven to be one of the most successful American companies in terms of filmmaking targeted toward children (Tyler, 2021). Hence, as Disney films are so present in the formative years of children, they are relevant tools for education and indoctrination. Thirdly, as will be

presented in the Literature Review chapter, several studies have showcased that the way films, such as the ones in the Disney Princess franchise, construct their characters and the whole franchise around gendered stereotypes has a great impact on the way children behave, dress, talk or think, for instance. Lastly, *Raya and the Last Dragon*, released in 2021, appears as the obvious choice being the most recent film that could be integrated into the Princess Franchise while not having been academically problematised.

Film propaganda has been extensively problematised when it comes to political propaganda and its origin regarding WWI (see e.g., Stojanova, 2017), and The Walt Disney Company has not escaped this analysis when it comes to its participation in state propaganda in WWII (see e.g., Raiti, 2007; Cunningham, 2010). However, sociological propaganda that is attached to all filmmaking (Ellul, 1973; Silverstein, 1987), specifically to The Walt Disney Company and to the Disney Princess franchise has not. In this thesis, propaganda will be defined by using the categorisation developed by Jacques Ellul (1973), being sociological and integration propaganda, the two most relevant categories to apply to filmmaking. As integration propaganda ensures social cohesion, sociological propaganda is produced unintentionally, informed by the societal and cultural myths and stereotypes that surround filmmakers. Moreover, these myths and stereotypes help to originate flawed ideological beliefs, a term coined by Stanley (2015), meaning beliefs founded on surrounding ideologies, that are flawed for the fact that they do not hold the value of singular truth.

Additionally, selecting *Raya and the Last Dragon* ensures that there are no prior studies that touch upon gendered stereotypes regarding this particular film, allowing this thesis to be both innovative across disciplines, while at the same time being part of the continuum of a tradition of analysing the evolution of the stereotypical construction of the ideas of what it means to be a woman and of femininity using stereotypes.

## ***1.2. Research questions***

To guide the research the following research questions were developed:

**RQ1:** How are femininity and what it means to be a woman constructed through gendered stereotypes in *Raya and the Last Dragon*?

**RQ2:** In what way can these portrayals be seen as a part of flawed ideological beliefs, and therefore a form of sociological and integration propaganda?

### ***1.2. The structure of the thesis***

First, the Literature Review chapter will provide an overview of the key concepts that emerge in this thesis, *patriarchy* as understood by Valerie Bryson (1999), *gender* as defined by Judith Butler's (1988) deconstructionist approach and *intersectionality* as first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989). Then, previous studies discussing the impact Disney Princess films have on children's lives from the way they behave to the way they think about gender roles will be addressed. In addition, this chapter also includes studies done on the presence of gendered stereotypes in Disney Princess films. To facilitate the comprehension of the problematic in terms of historical context, this section of the chapter will be divided into four subsections, each dealing with how gendered stereotypes have been portrayed in different waves of the Western feminist movement.

Second, the Theoretical Framework chapter will begin with propaganda in film being defined based on the sociological and integration categorisation proposed by Jacques Ellul (1973). In addition, the concept of flawed ideological beliefs as established by Jason Stanley (2015) will also be provided. The chapter will then analyse stereotypes as vehicles of propaganda, mainly explored from Walter Lippmann's (1922) perspective.

Third, the Methodology chapter will present a description of the data and of how it was collected, as well as the chosen data analysis model – Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell's (2015) propaganda analysis model.

Finally, the Analysis chapter will present the key findings of the thesis which will be further discussed in the Discussion chapter, against the Literature Review, the Theoretical Framework and the research questions. The thesis will end with the Conclusion chapter where the significance of the thesis, its limitations, and suggestions for further research will be stated.

## **2. Disney Princess films and gender stereotypes**

This chapter of the thesis contains an overview of existing literature that builds background and a set of elements to pay attention to while conducting the analysis. The chapter begins by providing a brief overview of key terminology used in the thesis. Then, the chapter goes through studies that showcase the influence films such as the ones in the Disney Princess franchise can have on children because of the gendered stereotypes they embody, justifying the relevance of this thesis. From here, the chapter moves on to summarise how the films from the franchise are in line with the historical and social contexts within which they are made. To conclude, the chapter sheds light on the gaps in literature and research that motivate this thesis.

### ***2.1. A brief overview of key concepts***

According to Martha Cooper (1989), an ideology provides a social order that impacts how arguments are judged and interpreted, and it might assign roles to groups regarding gender, race, religion, and so on. As a way of setting the scene for this thesis, there are certain concepts that should be explained. These concepts are *patriarchy*, *gender*, and *intersectionality* as they are understood in feminist studies.

#### ***2.1.1. Patriarchy***

The term patriarchy is coined in feminist studies to illustrate the power relation that exists between the sexes, which was noticed by identifying “a general pattern of male use and abuse of power” (Bryson, 1999, p.311). Valerie Bryson (1999) brought attention to the way this concept should be applied so that it manages to consider the multiple cultural contexts and their change across time so that it can account for diverse experiences instead of only focusing on a white perspective. Bryson argues that in no way does the concept claim that all experiences are the same, nor that oppression based on sex and gender is worse than that based on race or class. The concept appears of major relevance since besides acknowledging women’s experiences and connecting them into a pattern that unveils the power structures at play, it also singles out, specifically, “the otherwise invisible extent of men’s power” (Bryson, 1999, p.311) in a clear and undeniable way that other concepts such as “sexism” or “gender relations” fail



to – “a permanent reminder that men rather than women are the dominant and structurally privileged gender group” (Bryson, 1999, p.312).

According to Bryson (1999), patriarchy appears as a naturalised system that is upheld by processes of socialisation that occur across spheres from family to education and religion. The power men exert politically and economically comes to be intertwined with power in the private sphere, and by the interaction of these two separate spheres, women’s oppression and subordination come to be legitimised and male power reinforced (Bryson, 1999). Every system privileges a dominant view that mirrors the dominant group’s interests and abilities as the most valuable, while viewing those oppressed as weaker.

### 2.1.2. Gender

As patriarchy has been identified as the system and ideology in place, one must turn attention to the concept of gender as it is a concept that “explores what counts as ‘woman’ and as ‘man’” (Squires, 1999, p.54) hence exploring the roles and stereotypes that uphold or challenge the patriarchal system.

Judith Squires (1999) establishes sex as a matter of biology, and gender as a “set of culturally defined characteristics” (p.54), the terms male and female being indicative of one’s sex, and masculine and feminine indicative of one’s gender. Gender has been discussed, mainly, through three currents of thought: the determinist, the constructionist, and the deconstructionist.

In the context of gender, *Constructionism* emerges from the need to counter biological *determinism* which states that “one’s biological sex determines one’s social and cultural characteristics and roles” (Squires, 1999, p.55). Therefore, constructionism establishes a distinction that accepts sexual difference “while realizing gender androgyny” (Squires, 1999, p.55). In this way, women and men can be expected to perform equally, as “sex becomes politically non-pertinent” (Squires, 1999, p.55).

The *deconstructionist thought* argues that the body is also constructed and transformed in social practice, and thus “the conceptual stability of ‘sex’” (Squires, 1999, p.59) is also questioned. Therefore, “the physical sense of maleness or femaleness is a

consequence, not simply of chromosomes or the possession/absence of a penis, but a personal history of habits of posture and movement, of particular physical skills, the image of one's own body and so on" (Squires, 1999, p.63). The deconstructionist approach acknowledges human biology and the establishment of sex differences, partly, as creations by society, and it acknowledges how society is responsive to those sex differences, making the distinction between sex and gender not so clear anymore (Squires, 1999). As Judith Butler (1988) stated just as discourses around gender are a product of the sexed body so is the sexed body a product of discourse about gender. Monique Wittig (1992) claimed that there was no natural difference between men and women, but rather an appropriation of nature to oppress and deform women's bodies. While constructionism explores "how men and women become masculine and feminine subjects" (Squires, 1999, p.64) separating body and mind, deconstructionism sees them together, socially conditioned to generate gender – with the body as a material target and vehicle of expression of discourse and practices and with the mind as an ideological effect. For instance, associating women with "mother nature" comes from the assuming that women are caring related to a social association that defines women by their reproductive heterosexuality. Within patriarchy, as gender shapes society, "through men and their interests" (Nagel, 1998, p.243), male biology is deemed as the best while female biology is shown as disruptive according to the ways of society. In the context of Disney Princess films, male biology allows princes to be strong and female biology to be defined in opposition as weak. The deconstructionist approach thinks that the female and the male categories should cease to exist as socially constructed categories as these imprison those who are on the margins (Squires, 1999). While this thesis sides with the deconstructionist way of looking at gender, it will use these categories to challenge them and to make the work intelligible (see intracategorical complexity in McCall, 2016). After all, the world behaves as if these categories actually existed (Squires, 1999).

While all men and women live under a patriarchal system, patriarchy operates differently across the cultures and even with its natural installation, the system has suffered several changes that were accompanied by cultural shifts over time. Just because there is an effort to group people's similarities, that does not mean there should be a denial of their differences, which is what the concept of *intersectionality*, explained

next, tries to encapsulate, illustrating that the patriarchal system does not act independently from other categorical systems.

### *2.1.3. Intersectionality*

Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) introduced intersectionality due to the tendency to see different categories of experience of oppression, such as race and gender, as mutually exclusive. These are not cumulative, but trigger a multiplier effect, so they cannot be analysed in isolation and rather in their interplay, showing that identities are composed of different forms of oppression and privilege allowing for a person to be the victim and the oppressor in any given circumstances (Bryson, 1999).

To look at one's experience in a cumulative way, is to look at it from the dominant individual's point of view. Many women who are privileged in many ways but not in terms of their gender (e.g., white women), and take that privilege as a given, have come to fail in understanding that forms of racial or class oppression impact the demands other women make, and that they have contributed to and benefited from the subordination of other women (Crenshaw, 1989; Bryson, 1999). This happens not only in feminism but also in antiracist discourse, wherein both, the more resonant voices are of those who are more privileged either racially or sexually among those groups, white middle-class women, and Black men, respectively, excluding the specific concerns of Black women that do not match with theirs (Crenshaw, 1989; Yuval-Davis, 2006). While Crenshaw provided Black women as the basis for her concept, Crenshaw never denies the interplay between other categories that go beyond race and gender as they have been criticised to do (see e.g., Yuval-Davis, 2006; Nash, 2008). This thesis approaches the subject as Crenshaw did, as it identifies an insufficiency in women's representation if intersectionality is not considered. The thesis recognises that there are other axes at play, and that, additionally, their interplay can vary according to time and place, therefore identity should not be essentialised or homogenised.

bell hooks (1984) identifies the notion of sisterhood as the trend in feminism and appeals to a change to the notion of solidarity so that it is possible to empathetically recognise and celebrate difference without an assumption of sameness. According to Bryson (1999), adopting hooks' perspective would allow for a better judgement of

reality and effective change of the status quo (Bryson, 1999), and by extension make more children feel seen and understood on-screen.

Even though the concept has been acclaimed and deemed necessary, intersectionality has also been criticised. Jennifer C. Nash (2008) points to how intersectionality has dodged away from answering if its subjects should be all identities that are intersectional (e.g., white women) or only the ones with multiple categories of marginalisation (e.g., Black women). While this is a relevant critique that has polarised debate, this thesis will side with Naomi Zack (2005) who understands the particularity of the concept being applied to the experiences of non-white and poor women, yet also accepts its generality to all women, since their social disadvantaged position as women can clash with other social positions that might multiply the disadvantage they are faced with. Besides aligning with this position, this thesis also acknowledges that not only women can be intersectional beings.

## ***2.2. Disney Princess films and the influence cinema can have on children***

A study done by Sarah Coyne et al. (2016) shows that increased exposure to gender-stereotyped media is related to more stereotypical behaviour. While the authors do not identify an inherently negative factor in behaving in a gendered way, they identify that it can be problematic “if girls believe that their opportunities in life are limited because of preconceived notions regarding gender or if they avoid the types of exploration and activities that are important to children learning about the world in order to conform to stereotypical notions about femininity” (p.1921). Their findings suggest that adopting these behaviours during formative years can have implications for future development.

According to *the socialisation hypothesis* developed by Ronald Inglehart (2008), the development of the core values held by people is to a substantial extent limited to childhood and adolescent years – the ‘formative’ years – and afterwards these values are somewhat stable. Hence, as core values can be easily moulded until a certain age, what people watch and read in their younger years, helps them reach an ideology, making it extremely relevant for the course their life will take and how they will look at society.

Movies become a part of the socialisation experience of children and the way characters are depicted aid children form their identities and of others around them (Rogers, 2019), for example, due to the embedded “idealized ways of ‘doing boy’ or ‘doing girl’” (Wohlwend, 2012, p.4). Disney movies are popular across cultural and national boundaries, and if at a macro level the Disney company is “driven by profit that controls a substantial part of popular culture media” (Wohlwend, 2012, p.36), at the micro-level children may internalise values present in the moving images. From its vast market value, the company has audiences from children to adults, controlling media all over the world through ads and products (Wohlwend, 2012). As for the influence these movies have on children, several studies have been conducted; for instance, Elizabeth Yeomann (1999) concluded that children from different racial backgrounds tend to perceive good characters as white whereas Lori Baker-Sperry (2007) found that while children know that fairy godmothers do not exist and talking to animals is impossible, girls still believe that if they are beautiful like Cinderella, one day they will marry a prince. Moreover, Coyne et al. (2016) pointed out that to girls choose not to explore or engage in certain games, so they do not get dirty since princesses are always clean and presentable, and Lori Baker-Sperry pointed out that boys are picked on for liking stories marketed for girls.

The content from the films is not limited to the time children spend watching them. Karen Wohlwend (2012) asserted that while playing with toys from the Disney Princess line or when playing make-believe, children re-enact the expected gendered identities associated with the characters in the films. Wohlwend notes that a false representation of gender, allied with harmful stereotypes, can be dangerous since children perform gender unconsciously while playing, associating certain behaviours and characteristics with each gender. With this in mind, one can understand the effect these films have in shaping the adoption of gender roles by children which is in agreement with Judith Butler’s (1988) theory on gender performativity where gender is institutionalised by a repetition of acts. Adding to this, Wohlwend (2012) also points out that gender performances that do not fit into heteronormative expectations can have immediate consequences for children among their peers in school.

By focusing on the effects Disney Princess films have on children, one is not trying to say that these will replicate in adult life or that they will not mutate. However, attending to Inglehart's (2008) socialisation hypothesis, these effects should be considered relevant. Furthermore, as Anna S. Rogers (2019) referred in her article, the way Disney films control images can lead to a reinforcement of privilege for some and the neglect or oppression of others on a societal level. Thus, these films can develop problematic situations that can scar children deeply. Moreover, Peggy Orenstein (2006) introduced, yet another perspective on the topic, stating that playing princess *per se* is not the problem; the problem lies in the fact that the princess narrative is the dominant one, therefore providing no choice while becoming the hegemonic representation of women to young girls. Considering the impact that these films can have on children's ideals and the way they construct the world around them, "it can only be judged to be beneficial to have diverse characters that can appeal to many audiences" (Rogers, 2019, p.40).

### ***2.3. Gender stereotypes in Disney Princess films throughout the Western feminist waves***

According to Robyn Ryle (2012), as social dimorphism, referring to the existence of two separate genders and sexes, is established as the norm, it is predictable that media content will reflect it. The Walt Disney Company appears to be in a relevant position when it comes to producing films for children which reproduce gendered stereotypes through language and visual symbols. Even more, if one looks at the Disney Princess franchise, one can observe the attention that is paid to establishing the gender roles regarding what it means to be a princess and a prince (and even a villain) and how these films are marketed mainly toward girls. As Disney has been present throughout decades of social, economic, and political change and since it has such a strong presence worldwide, it comes as no surprise that the company has been problematised in a wide variety of ways. Paraskevi Markopoulou (2015) wrote a Master's thesis comparing the folk tales that Disney Princess films are based on, showing that various elements were changed to adapt to the specific traditional stereotypes present at the time of filmmaking. Stereotypes evolve according to different historical socioeconomic contexts (Saukkonen, 2003; Yuval-Davis, 2006) and as films often reflect the reality they are made in, they carry those stereotypes into the representation of their characters.

As the relevance of the thesis has been established in the previous subsection by looking at the influence films can have on children, this subsection goes through studies that capture the presence of gendered stereotypes regarding the ideas of a woman and femininity in previous Disney Princess films. To simplify and better organise this exposition, the next subsections will rely on a narrative going through the four different waves of Western feminism and identifying how the ideas of a woman and femininity are portrayed in each of the waves. This overview is inspired by Yu Masai's (2020) work where they compare how major Disney Princess movies depict women against the background of the United States feminist movements and discuss how gender roles changed from the early beginnings of *Snow White* (Cottrell et al., 1937) to *Frozen 2* (Buck & Lee, 2019) to reflect those movements.

### *2.3.1. Disney Princesses and the first Western feminist wave*

Examined through the first wave of feminism, *Snow White* works at home while the seven dwarves work outside. *Snow White*, *Cinderella* (Geronimi et al., 1950) and *Sleeping Beauty* (Geronimi, 1959) (starring Aurora, which is, notoriously, the princess that speaks the least throughout her film, having only eighteen lines) are all seen as passive characters defined by their beauty that attracts a prince who rescues them from their conditions. The princesses' conditions are provoked by evil old women, which goes to show that a good woman is the passive one, while the powerful one is inevitably evil. These three stories illustrate that no personal effort can change a woman's life, only fate – which usually means a man and a marriage. As the depictions of women are related to those of men, it is important to say that the male protagonists' personality is often conferred to their status as a prince and nothing more.

During the first wave of Western feminism, fighting for access to vote and education and more freedom attributed to women, the only Disney Princess films in which Walt Disney, himself, was involved still reproduce vividly the patriarchy with women “confined to the stereotype of homemaker” (Garabedian, 2014, p.23).

### 2.3.2. *Disney Princesses and the second Western feminist wave*

By the second wave of feminism, in the 1960s, with issues such as sexual liberation and protection and equality of employment, the company was marked by Walt Disney's death in 1966, and a princess movie would reappear only in 1989 with Clements and Musker's *The Little Mermaid*. The princess featured in this film, Ariel, has a personality that conveys her curiosity and that lures her to be independent and rebellious against her father and her fate and to fight for what she wants. Still, she wants a prince and is willing to sell her voice (again to an old female villain), since as stated by the villain, men do not care for what a woman has to say, saying "it's she who holds her tongue who gets her man" (Clements & Musker, 1989, 43:46). Ariel goes from being controlled by her father to being married to a prince. Even if this did not break all the barriers, conservatives were not happy with it and considered it an anti-family story in which the main character, a young woman, wears a bikini and rebels against her father (Masai, 2020). Up until this point, all the villains were female for it was normal to pitch women against women in competition, to deviate attention from the central inequality problem produced by patriarchy. More specifically, these female villains are all old. Elnahla (2015) identified that the trend of "Disney's characterization of older women as huge predatory villains" (p.122) is deeply connected to patriarchy valuing "sexually viable" (Sullivan, 2010) women and "youthful beauty in women" (Elnahla, 2015, p.125). As of consequence of ageing, "women try to compensate it with power" (Elnahla, 2015, p.125) and female villains are born. Additionally, these villains are juxtaposed with the good biological mother, who is usually silent or dead.

### 2.3.3. *Disney Princesses and the third Western feminist wave*

By the third wave of feminism, in the 1990s, *Beauty and the Beast* (Trousdale & Wise, 1991) presents Belle as a feminist who likes reading and chooses to stay single, contradicting Gaston, the villain, who is represented as a misogynist. Even if in the end Belle ends up with a man, the story suffers a shift since it is not the female character who is cursed and saved by the male, but the opposite. Belle saves the Beast by falling in love with him, lifting his curse and turning him back into a prince.



Similarly, in *Aladdin* (Clements & Musker, 1992), Jasmine constantly rejects suitors presented by her father in an attempt to bend the social norms. She also questions the men of the story about wanting to decide her future for her and for treating her as a prize to be won, explores the outside world on her own and helps to fight the villain (this time, a man, as in *Beauty and the Beast*). When Jasmine decides to marry, it is not because of status or obligation, but because of the personality of the man she falls in love with.

Next comes *Pocahontas* (Gabriel & Goldberg, 1995) which from a racial perspective has issues as the story is told from a distorted coloniser perspective, and understood by children as historically accurate (Rogers, 2019). Yet from a narrow gender perspective, it becomes the first Disney Princess film that does not end in marriage but with the protagonist choosing her community over the white man, showing there are more ways to achieve happiness than through a union with a man.

While Masai (2020) does not discuss *Mulan* (Bancroft & Cook, 1998), Rogers (2019) points to her character as a shifting point where a woman pretends to be a man to save her father and her country, demonstrating that women can do the same tasks as men, even if in the end the character denies a prestigious status and rather stays with her family.

These stories come to disrupt traditional gender stereotypes, and for the first time introduce racial diversity through Jasmine, Pocahontas, and Mulan, which draws on the major trend of global feminism during the third wave of feminism.

#### *2.3.4. Disney Princesses and the fourth Western feminist wave*

As the new wave of feminism rises, in the 2010s, paying attention to minority rights, the first Black princess, Tiana, appears in *The Princess and the Frog* (Clements & Musker, 2009) – even though she spends most of the movie as a frog. Tiana appears as an independent woman who wants to thrive in her business (which is inspired by her father's dream), and she succeeds, and in addition, gets married. Her best friend Charlotte is rich and sees happiness dependent on marrying a prince, a message Tiana comes to contradict throughout the movie – although in the end, Tiana marries a prince.

Following the story of Tiana, comes *Tangled* (Greno & Howard, 2010), Rapunzel's story, which Masai (2020) believes does not provide many gendered elements when compared to the works before. Yet Rapunzel should be referenced as she is part of the franchise, and as a female character, she wants to see the world outside her tower, and Eugene, who ends up being her love interest, serves as a guide, with them helping each other on several occasions. Additionally, it is her hair and tears the ultimate saviour instead of a man's kiss (Markopoulou, 2015).

The film that followed, *Brave* (Andrews & Chapman, 2012), revolutionised the Disney Princess franchise's history focusing merely on women's independence, and the possibility for imperfections crossing boundaries for female and male stereotypes, without the presence of male characters (Garabedian, 2014; Masai, 2020). In addition, it is the first film from the franchise that is not based on pre-existing tales.

Then came *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013) which presented not one but two female protagonists, Elsa and Anna, where the explicit end goal was sibling love instead of heterosexual romance. *Frozen* shows Elsa with no romantic interest at all, and Anna, who, being betrayed by a man she fell in love with at first sight, then becomes friends with Kristoff, and falls in love with him. *Frozen* is thus a more complex narrative with a diverse range of relationships explored from the perspectives of the romantic to friendship to familial. Yet, as Rogers (2019) points out, Elsa is depicted as an overemotional female that needs to control her emotions to be able to control her magical powers, upholding the stereotype that a woman is overly emotional, and should repress her emotions. Additionally, Rogers points out that Anna is never independent of Kristoff as he advises her to do something the right way and she sticks to her gut doing things wrongly. While this is portraying the male character as wiser, it shows that even if they have different opinions, Anna is not swayed easily, hence Roger's point does not add up completely.

In the sequel, *Frozen II* (Buck & Lee, 2019), Elsa is encouraged to live as herself even if she is different from what the majority expects of her. Also in this story, Kristoff assumes a supporting role for Anna, never taking the lead, giving her independence, and being sensitive, breaking away from toxic masculinity. Therefore, Rogers (2019)

concludes that, as in most of the previous films, “some traditional views are broken in *Frozen* at the same time as some gender stereotypes persist” (p.38).

Rogers (2019) argues that if Disney Princess films follow societal developments, they should have a gay character in no time. However, contrary to Rogers’s belief, this might take a while as, for instance, in March of 2022, Florida passed the “Don’t Say Gay” bill, which forbids “classroom instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity from kindergarten through third grade and prohibits such lessons for older students unless they are ‘age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate’” (Berger, 2022), illustrating how controversial the topic of sexual orientation or gender identity is, in the US, when it comes to children. Regarding this bill, The Walt Disney Company was caught in a controversial position as the company has made political donations to the bill’s sponsors, yet after the bill was issued, The Walt Disney Company came forward to repudiate the bill and to stand with the LGBTQ+ members of the Disney family (Mahoney, 2022).

For now, the closest there is to a gay character is the ambiguous sexual orientation attached to Elsa, since she has no romantic interest and has stayed away from dancing with men (Fan, 2019). Throughout the *Frozen* films, Elsa felt displaced, different and repressed and it is only when she comes to terms with her powers and with who she is that she is truly happy (witnessed by the spectator through the song *Let it go* and through her magical transformation in terms of clothing and hairstyle), which Robert Geal (2016) interprets as queer coding for coming-out. Jason Fan (2019) concludes that while people wait for characters to be openly non-heterosexual, one can try to do queer readings of existing characters. On this note, Tania Sharmin and Sanyat Sattar (2018) call attention to a pattern, also noticeable in the Disney Princess franchise, of making the villains appear queer, presenting “masculinized women and feminized men” (p.55).

The beauty standards for the Disney Princesses were fixed for over 70 years, even if external beauty lost the focus to give in to internal beauty (Markopoulou, 2015).

Princesses were depicted with stereotypically feminine traits such as a narrow waist and a petite figure. Moreover, as Yuze Liu and Mo Yang (2021) noticed in their article, Disney Princess bodies are captured through the male gaze (see also Mulvey cited in e.g., Sassatelli, 2011). In between the two *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013; Buck & Lee,

2019) movies, there was *Moana* (Clements & Musker, 2016), the return of a protagonist of colour, a Polynesian character. Besides bringing diversity back, Moana also broke the standards for princesses' appearances by being muscular and joined Merida and Elsa by not having a love interest. Moreover, Moana has also been addressed through the ecofeminist perspective (see e.g., Kongwattana, 2018; Hernawati, 2021) as her goal as the princess of the film is to restore the order in nature that was destroyed by "exploitative and manipulative masculinity" (Hernawati, 2021, p.257) represented by the male character Maui.

From an intersectional perspective, Rogers (2019) recalls that there is a lot that can evolve, from the princesses' appearances body wise and racially, to their sexual orientation, social status and defining personality characteristics. It is still unclear the path Disney wishes to follow. As Disney brings out more progressive films with new characters and puts trigger warnings in some of their older movies (Pietsch, 2020), they also turned their attention to their princess classics, revisited them, and aired them in the form of live-action films that do not right the wrongs (Rogers, 2019).

Additionally, in their study, Masai (2020) points to one of the most recent controversies regarding *The Little Mermaid* live-action (which should come out in 2023), in which Ariel, the princess, is going to be portrayed by Halle Bailey, a Black female actor. This led to a debate as Ariel in the animated version is a white person. Disney combated the criticism by saying that since Ariel is a mermaid there should not be a notion of race attached to her, and even if she were Danish like the author of the original tale, it should not mean she would have to be white, for there are Black Danes. As pointed out by fans, Disney should provide minority women stories of their own instead of embedding them into existing stories. Yet as brought up by Annabelle Sreberny (2005), women from minority groups want to be nominated to represent colour-blind roles as well. In the previous live-action films, Disney has cast female actors somewhat similar to the characters in terms of appearance, so this first-step decision can be seen as following the intersectional feminism present in the fourth wave which will allow Disney to make greater progress in the future in terms of intersectional representation of women.

Lastly, comes *Raya and the Last Dragon* (Estrada & Hall, 2021), the latest animated Disney film starring a princess. While there are some semiotic analyses of the moral

messages of the film (see e.g., Tawakkal, Monix, & Watani, 2021; Wulan, 2021) and of the film in general (see e.g., Atmaja, 2021), the film and Raya as a princess have not been problematised through the lens of gendered stereotypes, making it a great case study to update the field of research.

Additionally, another gap was spotted in the way the studies on film's effects on children have been conducted. According to Randal Marlin (2013), as after WWII, propaganda was increasingly associated with authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, and as a practice that has no role to play in a genuine democracy, it led studies of media effects to be rarely labelled as propaganda studies. As the studies of how Disney Princess films have effects on the behaviour and thoughts of children are not coined as propaganda, this thesis will take the interdisciplinary step of analysing *Raya and the Last Dragon* through propaganda lenses.

### 3. Art as propaganda

This chapter presents the theoretical framework that guides this thesis. The first section of the chapter is focused on defining propaganda as established by scholars such as Jacques Ellul (1973) and Jason Stanley (2015), both authors that understand the correlation propaganda has with ideology. The second and last section of the chapter presents the definition of stereotypes as vehicles of propaganda and justifies the need for their usage.

#### 3.1. *Propaganda meets film*

Christina Stojanova (2017) traces the relation between film and propaganda back to the First World War, as for the first time ever, a major conflict was possible to be recorded through moving images. Since cinema had an enormous potential of mobilizing the masses, both literate and illiterate, the interest for this form of art grew which impacted the art itself, seeing there was investments in technology and production structures as well as a cultural and social elevation of filmmaking into a legitimate form of art (Stojanova, 2017).

In totalitarian regimes, propaganda has its own official ministry which makes it difficult to ignore its evident presence, while liberal democracies pride themselves on not allowing it (Silverstein, 1987; Stanley, 2015). However, propaganda lives on in the latter regimes, yet it is not recognized as such which poses a danger of its own. If the danger in totalitarian societies is in not knowing what pieces of propaganda people should take seriously, in liberal democracies one needs to figure out which “apparently nonpropagandistic claims are in fact propaganda” (Stanley, p.47).

##### 3.1.1. Ellul’s concepts of total propaganda, sociological propaganda, and integration propaganda

While the debate around the definition of propaganda has been widely controversial (see Ross (2019) for different propaganda categorisations from neutral, negative, omnipresent, top-down, to heterogeneous), the present Master’s thesis sides with Jacques Ellul’s (1973) propaganda theory which the author coined as *total propaganda*. Ellul calls it total propaganda, because they believe propaganda is not limited to specific

acts or campaigns but is thoroughly immersed in society and culture. Ellul identifies the need for propaganda with the deterioration of traditional religious values which led individuals to feel isolated and in need to establish a valid identity. According to Marlin (2013), what sets Ellul apart from other propaganda theorists is “the diversity of perspectives he brings to the subject” (p. 348). In this thesis, Ellul’s theory is chosen instead of others (see e.g., Lasswell, 1927; Bernays, 1928; Ross, 2002) as Ellul provides a complete overview of the field of propaganda instead of merely focusing on instances of explicit, overt, intentional, political propaganda.

Ellul’s (1973) theory provides a complete classification of the field of propaganda recurring to the use of four pairs of dichotomic categories. Firstly, political versus sociological propaganda. While political propaganda is intentionally planned by a specific agent for specific purposes with a specific target group in mind, sociological propaganda is produced and distributed unintentionally. Ellul points to film as one of the best media for sociological propaganda, and to how filmmakers express propaganda elements without realising it since they are so embedded in them. The author does not seem to find intent as a necessary condition for propaganda to exist, implying that propaganda is almost unavoidable as everything one does is informed and conditioned by societal and cultural myths and stereotypes. Secondly, agitation versus integration propaganda. Agitation propaganda aims to stir action either in support or against something, as opposed to integration propaganda which aims to produce social cohesion, the latter being what is analysed in this thesis. Thirdly, irrational versus rational propaganda. As the name prompts, irrational propaganda appeals to emotions, myths and stereotypes, while rational propaganda appeals to facts and reason. Lastly, vertical versus horizontal propaganda, where vertical propaganda is done from top to bottom aiming to influence from a position of authority, the audience being the passive recipients whereas horizontal propaganda is based on an interaction that appears to be a two-way communication as equals. With such classification one can find a place for the Disney Princess films in the sociological, integration, irrational, and vertical propaganda.

Sheryl Tuttle Ross (2019), however, critiques the definition proposed by Ellul (1973) by pointing out the difficulty in perceiving how propaganda works and the effect it can

have on the mind. Yet, as has been shown (see e.g., Yeomann, 1999; Baker-Sperry, 2007; Wohlwend, 2012; Coyne et al., 2016) the Disney Princess films have an impact on ways of behaving, dressing, and thinking in children, refuting Ross's critique. Additionally, Ross states that Ellul's vision fails to account for a distinction between different moments of propaganda that culminate in distinctive results. While it is a fair critique, it could also be a given that different propagandistic approaches will have different results. In the case of a Disney Princess film that is targeted toward children, the effects will be maximised, attending to Inglehart's (2008) socialisation hypothesis of socialisation. Lastly, Ross (2019) points out that in omnipresent definitions of propaganda, like Ellul's definition of total propaganda, there is no clear distinction between propaganda and ideology, and Ross seems to have a problem with all art being named propaganda, regardless of the intentions of its maker. Yet, the distinction is made, ideology being the set of beliefs and values that represent what the world should look like, and propaganda the tool to make ideology known (see e.g., Stanley, 2015; Jowett & O'Donnell, 2015). As explained by Ellul (1973), as beliefs are informed and conditioned by people's social and cultural context, they will be embedded in the artwork and therefore these are propagandistic, regardless of the maker's intent.

While propaganda of agitation can overthrow regimes and seems to be the focus of several scholars (see e.g., Lasswell, 1927; Bernays, 1928; Ross, 2002), Ellul (1973) describes propaganda of integration as more relevant for people living in developed nations, since it promotes the acceptance of the status quo, as no modern society can operate without the support of the majority of its citizens (see also Silverstein, 1987). This type of propaganda is communicated through main channels of communications, cinema being an example of it, and it is produced by influential and respected people, or as in the case in question, companies such as The Walt Disney Company. Propaganda's omnipresence and the fact that it aligns with the ideologies and beliefs that are mostly accepted in society, make it hard to spot. The growing importance of integration propaganda in maintaining the status quo, and therefore peace in society, makes it important to study.



### 3.1.2. Stanley's concept of flawed ideological belief

Jason Stanley's (2015) characterises propaganda outside the political system, hence making it applicable to all sorts of fields (e.g., filmmaking). Stanley's definition argues against two claims related to the nature of propaganda which he names "insincerity condition" and "falsity condition" (Stanley, 2015, p.42). Stanley draws a co-relation between propaganda and ideology, specifically, *flawed ideological belief*, which explains propaganda being delivered sincerely. Stanley sees that propagandist can believe what they are saying to be the truth, based on the way they view and interpret the world. Therefore, propaganda should not be defined on its insincerity but taking into account the beliefs people sincerely hold. Furthermore, as these beliefs are based on the ideologies that surround people, and as from a constructionist perspective, there is no singular truth, these are flawed. In addition to this, propagandistic claims might not be false but be impacted by the audience's own flawed ideological belief. The audience's flawed ideological beliefs can lead the audience to misinterpret the claims. Therefore, the effectiveness of propaganda relies on the audience's beliefs.

In the case of a successful company such as The Walt Disney Company, propagating messages that are in line with the flawed ideological beliefs held by the mainstream society – integration propaganda – allows them to maintain their legitimacy and keep generating profit. Additionally, the filmmakers responsible for the Disney Princess films also have their own flawed ideological beliefs that might be transparent throughout the films – a case of political propaganda if these beliefs are critically included and a case of sociological propaganda if these are subconsciously included. As described earlier, the way the audience, children, in this case, obtain the messages marked by flawed ideological beliefs leads them to adopt ways of behaving and thinking attached to those beliefs (i.e., regarding gender roles).

Hence, the subject of this thesis deals with the reproduction of flawed ideological beliefs, which can be done unconsciously, but still reverberate the relevant effects on the audience. One's flawed ideological belief can either sustain or challenge the status quo, as stated by Stanley (2015). The flawed ideological beliefs that concern this thesis are those that impact the portrayals of what it means to be a woman and of femininity.

As a naturalised system, patriarchy can be looked at in light of propaganda, as it propagates flawed ideological beliefs regarding the roles women and men should adopt. Therefore, standing with Ellul (1973), is Laura Mulvey (cited in e.g., Sassatelli, 2011; Oliver, 2017) that identified how the dominant order imposes itself in the unconscious of the filmmakers, and how that is reflected in how mainstream Hollywood cinema replicates patriarchy. Mulvey conducted their study by illustrating the use of the male gaze as an example. Yet this thesis highlights how patriarchy has influenced the portrayals of Disney princesses and thereafter how it might influence children regarding gender roles. In the end, the appeal to ideals is done “in the service of goals, power, and interest” (Stanley, 2015, p.63). From Ellul’s (1973) perspective on integration propaganda, the patriarchal system, as a naturalised system (Bryson, 1999), relies on supporting messages from different media. Hence, cinema, and more specifically, Disney Princess films, help patriarchy to grow stronger and sustain itself as hegemonic.

#### *3.1.4. Propaganda as a tool of power elites*

While Walter Lippmann (1922) and Edward Bernays (1928) developed an elite model that focuses on intellectual elites, Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky (1988) presented one related to power elites. The relevance of looking at power elites and the way they reproduce their flawed ideological beliefs comes from what originated this thesis – the concern for the effects Disney Princess films have on children. Any person who talks to another person can reproduce their flawed ideological belief and influence them. However, propagandists that have access to a larger audience, such as The Walt Disney Company, can influence lines of thought and action on a larger scale as well. Normally, those who have access to said audience, have it because of the power relations in place (Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

While this thesis does not agree with a top-down definition that paints citizens as easily brainwashed, without a rational will, it recognises that without the necessary time to think about a subject or if one is too tired to think, one might be influenced (Ellul, 1973). However, this influence does not need to be done, necessarily, by intellectual elites. It is done by those in power, which are not, necessarily, the more intellectual ones, but the ones which are privileged by the system and have access and opportunity and wish to remain in power, so they reproduce the narratives as they see fit (Herman &

Chomsky, 1988), which makes it easy to understand how patriarchy is present in filmmaking. For instance, the existence of said power relations, explains why *Snow White*, *Cinderella* and *The Sleeping Beauty*, films made by white men, were all about passive women working at home, while the first wave of Western feminism, happening at the time, was contradicting this type of representations of women.

As it has been defended by Stanley (2015), propaganda is deeply related to what one believes to be true. Hence, as every person's interpretation of the world is conditioned by their specific context, there is no reason to assume there is such thing as the truth.

Even though Douglas Walton (2007) writes about the concept of truth as if truth existed as a singular truth, Walton's perspective is useful as they identify in propaganda a notion of selectivity, presenting some truths and ignoring others. Walton believes this bias is not "bad" *per se* as it is normal for people to have a bias. If one attends to the feminist standpoint epistemology as explained by Abigail Brooks (2007), one can understand that since women have been imposed, by the patriarchal system, a male worldview, they have a "double consciousness" that allows them to understand their own reality and the dominant one. This awareness of both perspectives gives women the power to "mediate between two worlds" (p.9) and affords them with a uniquely privileged perspective of society as a whole. Whereas the concept of truth mentioned by Walton (2007) is indifferent to this thesis, one can understand each representation of the world as a flawed worldview and understand the bias inherent to each representation based on the context of a person in the spectre of oppression.

### ***3.3. Gender stereotypes as vehicles for propaganda***

To be a part of society, people have to assume their positions concerning several matters, hence their background (e.g., what they watch) influences them in taking positions. These positions "derive from one's ideology" (Stanley, 2015, p.76) and are essential seeing that humankind is limited by time and memory (Ellul, 1973). Lippmann (1922) identified in society a growing complexity that did not allow for the absorption of all information. Therefore, it is inevitable that people need short-cuts, leading to pseudo-environments, bubbles people convey as reality to which they react. However, this reaction has effects in actual reality. Thus, to understand someone's actions one

needs to analyse what that person knows. Meaning that when one receives information, one must acknowledge that that information went through a process of signification marked by another's pseudo environment. If people saw reality objectively, they would all see the same and they would not need ideologies (Lippmann, 1922).

Walter Lippmann (1922) believed that general opinions needed to be transformed from vague to uniform – one general will – to establish some order in the world. Therefore, stereotyping, fitting people and events into boxes is seen as necessary, and not necessarily as a negative technique, as long as people are aware they are using them and can look beyond their own pseudo-environment to consider others'. As Stanley (2015) states, one should not be paralyzed when coming to terms with a world with no neutral stance, one must occupy one's position while, simultaneously, acknowledging that limited position.

Stereotyping, while inevitable and necessary, closes the debate on numerous subjects in order to unite people. It is important to state again, that this thesis attributes the reproduction of these stereotypes to power elites (Herman & Chomsky, 1988), and not necessarily to intellectual elites, as Lippmann (1922) suggested. Nira Yuval-Davis (2006) saw in social divisions, the emergence of naturalised categories. The process of naturalisation ends up homogenising these categories, creating "inclusionary/exclusionary boundaries" (p.199) which assert the self and the other. These categories provide people with positionings that impact their economic, social, political, and cultural status. According to Laura J. Shepherd (2009), the stereotypes constructed around gender dictate the appropriate and inappropriate ways to behave (e.g., "boys don't cry", "that is not ladylike"). Then, to fully understand the use of such categories, it is relevant one acknowledges them as ways of simplifying life, but also their origin as serving someone's interests. As they are created under a patriarchal system, they tend to benefit the idea of a man over the idea of a woman. Furthermore, people are embedded in this naturalised system and develop their flawed ideological beliefs based on these stereotypes. As Simone de Beauvoir (1989) puts it, tradition and cultures have conditioned women into adopting inferior roles through processes of socialisation. Likewise, the Disney Princess franchise can be viewed from this perspective, as both in the older films women are portrayed as damsels in distress saved

by men and marriage (e.g., Snow White, Cinderella, Aurora from *The Sleeping Beauty*, Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*) and in the newer films they need to assert themselves in comparison to men (e.g., Mulan) and to what the patriarchal system expects of them (e.g., Jasmine from *Aladdin*; Merida from *Brave*). The creation of such stereotypes around gender reflects power relations in which dominant groups' interests gain from producing and maintaining such stereotypes (Ellul, 1973; Beauvoir, 1989).

Additionally, in the Anglophone world, there is the ontological assumption of the duality of gender and an unconscious and essentialist commitment to dimorphism which leads to the establishment of two types of people and that each type is represented in a certain way (Shepherd, 2009). Taking a deconstructionist approach, one can see that this division affects how one is expected to perform with their body and mind to fulfil the expectations, from the sports one practices to the clothes one wears, to the way one talks. Butler (1999) identified a matrix of intelligibility in which people's performance of gender must be done within the established boundaries for them to be recognisable to others and themselves. Those who fail to perform their gender correctly are punished in the eyes of society – since there are expectations associated with stereotypes (see also Mittell, 2004).

Pasi Saukkonen (2003) and Yuval-Davis (2006) have drawn attention to the fact that, even in the most consensual societies, stereotypical notions are not invariable, and rather in a constant process of contestation, negotiation, and evolution. Therefore, stereotypes are contingent on their context in time and place, as the Literature Review showcased the evolution of the representation of Disney Princess characters against the four feminist waves of Western feminism. Joan Wallach Scott (2017) looks at the categories of man and woman as empty and overflowing since they have no ultimate and transcendent meaning and “because even when they appear to be fixed, they still contain within them alternative, denied, or suppressed definitions” (p.1074). The acquiring of stereotypes is relational and contextual, and lexically, the word “‘women’ [is] a volatile collective in which female persons can be very differently positioned” (Riley, 1988, pp.1-2), but also historically contingent. According to Julia Kristeva (cited in Squires, 1999), the only constant to femininity is that it is subordinated to a patriarchal order.

Joane Nagel (1998) identified that there was no fixed and essentialist conception of masculinity and femininity due to intersectionality, for the stereotypes that exist for white women are different from the ones that exist for Black women; and those for white men differ from those for Black men. These stereotypes are a product of the interplay of the racial and patriarchal systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989). Yet there are identifiable hegemonic conceptions – whiteness defines hegemonic masculinity and femininity – against which other forms of masculinity and femininity “must compete or define themselves” (Nagel, 1998, p.247). Hence Leah Bassel (2017) established that those who operate on the lines of established stereotypes are more likely to be given a platform and be heard and interpreted with credibility, while the others are increasingly distorted with less control over narratives, explaining why The Walt Disney Company is so successful as it keeps to the hegemonic stereotypes held historically. According to Joseph Raz (1998) “people’s prosperity and dignity derive their concrete forms from the shared social meanings in the societies in which they live” (p.200) and a person should identify with a political society without compromising or conflicting with what makes them who they are. Bringing intersectionality into the centre of this thesis is imperative, as the Disney Princess franchise is influencing children in what they believe to be the correct way to look and act like a woman. Therefore, the films from the franchise should include princess characters that go beyond the hegemonic white, cisgender, heterosexual, and able-bodied princess. As of now, nine of the fourteen Disney Princesses are white; none of them openly displays a love interest that is non-heterosexual and all of them are able-bodied.

To achieve feminism’s goals, it is necessary to think critically about gendered stereotypes and see in which ways these subordinate women, upholding the patriarchal system, and in which ways they challenge both the system and the roles assigned to women. Hence, it is relevant, as the scope of this thesis, to analyse the gendered stereotypes present in Disney Princess films. Additionally, one must also consider that substituting stereotypes for others if needed, should be done carefully, as the point is to liberate and provide choice, and not subscribe people to other boxes.

Lastly, gendered stereotypes appear as vehicles of integration and sociological propaganda as they are constructed to aid navigation in society like integration

propaganda is designed to maintain the peace and status quo. As stereotypes are formed based on the ideology accepted at a given time and place, they are easily adopted by people as flawed ideological beliefs and embedded in their artwork, which is understood by Ellul (1973) as sociological propaganda. Furthermore, gendered stereotypes appear materialised through language and symbols in films (Saukkonen, 2003), i.e., Disney Princess films, as naturalised, impacting the way children think and behave regarding gender roles.

## 4. Methodology

The following chapter outlines the methodological approach that guided the analysis from choosing *Raya and the Last Dragon* (Estrada & Hall, 2021) as the object of analysis to choosing Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell's propaganda analysis model (2015) to conduct the analysis, while keeping in mind intracategorical complexity (Nash, 2008; McCall, 2016). Firstly, the research problem is briefly described as well as the research questions that emerged from it. Secondly, the method for collecting the data is explained and a description of the empirical data is provided. Lastly, the method for the data analysis is described and justified.

### 4.1. Research problem and research questions

Based on the vast literature that supports that the films that children watch can impact how they behave and think about themselves when performing gender – gender is used here as conceptualised by Butler (1988) – and on Inglehart's (2008) socialisation hypothesis, it is imperative that the most popular films are analysed.

As this thesis is concerned with the gendered stereotypes that are generated in such films, and more specifically, with the ones related to the ideas of a woman and femininity, two gaps are identified and addressed in this thesis. While there is some research on gendered stereotypes in film, including the films of the Disney Princess franchise, there is no research on the latest Disney princess film, *Raya and the Last Dragon* (Estrada & Hall, 2021), and thus it is relevant to update the research field and understand what kind of gendered stereotypes are present in this latest film in relation to the ideas of a woman and femininity. Additionally, this thesis applies propaganda theory, which is an aspect that has not been carefully explored and has been overlooked. Propaganda is, in this thesis, defined following Ellul's (1973) categorisation, as sociological and integration propaganda, and following Stanley's (2015) concept of flawed ideological beliefs, that mark the content of messages, regardless of intention.

The following questions guide the analysis:

**RQ1:** How are femininity and what it means to be a woman constructed through gendered stereotypes in *Raya and the Last Dragon*?



**RQ2:** In what way can these portrayals be seen as a part of flawed ideological beliefs, and therefore a form of sociological and integration propaganda?

#### ***4.2. Empirical material***

The Disney film *Raya and the Last Dragon* (Estrada & Hall, 2021) which is available on the streaming service Disney+ for its subscribers, constitutes the empirical material.

When it comes to sampling, Brett Silverstein (1987), who is concerned with propaganda analysis, believes that selecting “examples from very popular sources in order to make the case that a particular example of propaganda is important” (p.57) is enough since many people are exposed to it, as well as if the example comes from “highly respected sources” (p.57).

*Raya and the Last Dragon* (Estrada & Hall, 2021) appears as one of the most obvious choices given the interest in how propaganda operates through filmmaking, especially regarding reproducing, breaking or generating stereotypes around the ideas of women and femininity. Taking into account the effects gendered stereotypes can have on the education of children, it makes sense to choose a film from The Walt Disney Company, and even more, a film from the Disney Princess franchise as these have been studied to have clear gendered stereotypes in them. *Raya and the Last Dragon* is the most recent potential addition to the franchise, and it has not been problematised in concordance with other studies done on the matter.

##### ***4.2.1. Disney Princess film as empirical material***

*Raya and the Last Dragon* (Estrada & Hall, 2021) is a 2021 film, from The Walt Disney Company, with the duration of 1 hour and 47 minutes, directed by the Mexican director Carlos López Estrada and the American director Donald Lee Hall, written by the Vietnamese-American writer Qui Nguyen and the Malaysian writer Adele Lim. It is produced by the Israeli producer Osnat Shurer and the American producer Peter Del Vecho. The film is advertised on Disney+ as “Raya seeks the legendary last dragon to stop the evil threatening humanity” and Raya is described by Potter (2021a) in the website of the official fan club D23 as “one of the newest Disney Princesses on the horizon” who “is a proud Guardian of the Dragon Gem who finds herself on a life-or-

death mission to save the world from the Druun – destructive spirits born out of human conflict who can turn people to stone with a single touch” (Potter, 2021a). Before its release, on February 21<sup>st</sup> of 2021, Disney confirmed on its official news website to have drawn inspiration from Southeast Asian cultures and the director Carlos López Estrada has named Raya the first Southeast Asian Disney Princess. To ensure that every detail of this fantasy world would have a meaningful significance they had a research team travelling to Laos, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, and Singapore to gather information on the culture, architecture, food, and atmosphere. Later on, they also resorted to Southeast Asian specialists for the clothing and fighting choreographies (Moon, 2021; Potter, 2021b).

The initial plan was for *Raya and the Last Dragon* to hit the theatres in November of 2020, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, its release came to be on March 5<sup>th</sup> of 2021. Its theatrical release was limited (at the time, mostly in the United States) and the film relied on the company’s streaming platform, Disney+. It started as Premier Access content, meaning people had to pay an extra thirty dollars to see the film, however on April 23<sup>rd</sup> it was available for free to all subscribers from Latin America and on June 4<sup>th</sup> to the subscribers from other countries. One of the most controversial aspects of the film’s availability was that Disney+ was not yet established in Southeast Asian countries, hence the people who are supposedly being represented in the film, could not watch it, generating questions about the intended audience of the film. At the time of release, only Indonesia and Singapore had access to the streamer, while only Thailand and Malaysia received theatrical releases as their cinemas were open and later in June, the streaming service as well (Moon, 2021).

According to Box Office Mojo, the film made 130.4 million dollars worldwide, which when compared to the 1.2 billion dollars made by *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013) or 1.4 billion dollars made by its sequel (Buck & Lee, 2019) and 644.1 million dollars made by *Moana* (Clements & Musker, 2016), it does not seem like a big number. However, due to COVID-19, which affected theatrical releases, it is impossible to assess if there was an additional reason for this “low” value. If one looks at the films Disney released within the pandemic context, the numbers are as follows: *Soul* (Doctor, 2020) with 120.9 million dollars, *Luca* (Casarosa, 2021) with 49.7 million dollars and one of the

latest, *Encanto* (Bush & Howard, 2021) with 252.4 million dollars. In this light, the revenue made by *Raya and the Last Dragon* does not appear as problematic. In fact, in the week when the film was released for free on Disney+, it became the second-most viewed streaming title in the US (Hayes, 2021), reaching 1.1 billion minutes of viewing (an increase from the previous week when it had 115 million viewing minutes) (Welk, 2021). Of all the streaming titles of 2021, *Raya and the Last Dragon* ended up being the third most-streamed film of 2021 (Hayes, 2022) and according to the tech firm Akamai it was the ninth most pirated film of the year, being the only animated film on the top 10 (Ortiz, 2022). Additionally, the film received praise from the critics with 93% of 290 reviews giving it a positive review on *Rotten Tomatoes*, a Metascore of 75 out of 100 on *Metacritic* as well as being nominated for several awards, including the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature.

In parallel with the critics, according to Kat Moon, a journalist from *Time*, while Southeast Asians and their diaspora were excited to witness their culture being represented on screen, part of the Southeast Asian community was taken aback by the casting choices, as the vast majority of the voice actors were of East Asian descent instead of Southeast Asian descent, and with the choice of merging several and distinct Southeast Asian cultures into a monolith. While one acknowledges the interplay race and culture have with gender, there is not much one can evaluate regarding an experience they are not familiar with. Hence, most of the remarks that will be extracted and analysed from the film will mainly touch on gendered stereotypes as they are understood from the Western perspective. Therefore, the focus of the data analysis will be the female characters that have a prominent role in the way they are presented, in the role they play and in how they establish their relationships on screen.

#### 4.2.2. *Raya and the Last Dragon: a summary of the film*

As to better understand the analysis section, there is the need to provide a summary of the film so the characters and parts of the plot are established and can be easily identifiable.

The story is set in the fantasy world of Kumandra, where humans and dragons used to live together in harmony. The peace was disturbed when monsters known as Druun

threatened Kumandra and its people, as they started turning every living creature into stone. The dragons sacrificed themselves to restore humanity. Their sacrifice was materialised in the form of a blue gem filled with their magic, and every creature turned into stone came back to life, except for the dragons. Instead of remaining united, people fought over who would get to protect the gem, leading to the division of Kumandra into five territories that despise each other: Heart, Tail, Talon, Spine, and Fang. The film follows the story of Raya, the daughter of Chief Benja, who is the Chief of Heart, the territory that was protecting the gem, who 500 years later has to deal with the return of the monsters. As an attempt of uniting Kumandra once again, Chief Benja invites citizens from each land to share a meal in Heart. This is where Raya, as a young girl, meets Namaari, also a young girl and the daughter of Chief Virana, the Chief of Fang. They bond over the fact that they both enjoy dragon mythology and Namaari shows Raya a scroll that implies that all dragons, but one, are dead. This leads Raya to share with Namaari the place where they have been keeping the dragon gem. While it seemed that Raya could trust Namaari, it was all but a set-up prepared by Fang to get the gem, as they believed it would bring them prosperity. Amongst the fighting to keep the gem, the gem ends up breaking into pieces, releasing the Druun once more, and they can only be stopped by pointing a piece of the gem at them. Each land grabs a piece and tries to flee. Several people end up petrified, including Raya's father. Raya manages to flee with her animal companion Tuk Tuk and spends the next 6 years searching for her only hope, the last dragon that was mentioned in Namaari's scroll, that could bring the end of Druun forever and bring her father back.

The spectator follows the protagonist on her journey through the lands of Kumandra as she finds Sisu, the last dragon and makes unlikely friends such as Boun, a young boy from Tail, Noi, a toddler and her animal friends from Talon, and Tong, a giant man from Spine. The adventure leads them to collect all the gem pieces, and throughout the film, Raya and her friends are challenged to trust each other. Additionally, they ultimately need to trust Namaari who is going after them to get the gems, so she can save Fang. Embodying this trusting lesson is Sisu, who ends up dying when Raya does not trust Namaari. In the end, the conflict is resolved when all of the characters put their faith in Namaari, as she proves to be worthy of it.

### ***4.3. Method of analysis: propaganda analysis***

This thesis adopts a relativist ontology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) and a constructionist epistemology (Berger & Luckmann, 2011) that view the ideas of what it means to be a woman and of femininity to be socially constructed, varying according to time, place and several elements that characterise an individual. Furthermore, the thesis relies on qualitative methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), rooted in the interpretivist paradigm (Thomas, 2017), under the assumption that interpretations of reality are culturally derived and historically situated. Hence it is not possible to apply natural science methods to social science phenomena. As Gary Thomas (2017) asserts, the social world is constructed by each person differently, and, therefore, is not straightforwardly perceivable.

Clyde Miller (1939) stated that one of the best ways to deal with propaganda is to analyse it. Therefore, as a definition based on Ellul's (1973) sociological and integrational view of propaganda has been established, comes the time to analyse *Raya and the Last Dragon* (Estrada & Hall, 2021) through propaganda lenses. Even though Silverstein (1987) recognises that Ellul's (1973) concept of integration propaganda has increasing importance in maintaining the status quo and therefore, should be studied, Silverstein (1987) points out that regarding propaganda analysis, there is a lack of "a basic body of literature, a shared set of techniques, rules for evaluating the quality of propaganda research" (p.50).

Silverstein (1987) states that the co-relation between propaganda and ideology, at the moments of making and analysing, could lead scholars to question the science behind the field. Therefore, Silverstein thinks that if there is an accepted research methodology with principles that can be shared by everyone, regardless of their ideology, it would be possible to come to a "shared understanding of how propaganda works" (p.59). The author does not provide this method, yet he cites numerous questions one should pay attention to in order to be able to understand how propaganda takes place: for example, "how does propaganda enter the channels of communication?"; "what forms does propaganda take?"; and "how does propaganda differ for different media?" (Silverstein, 1987, p.54). However, Silverstein acknowledges that these questions are too focused on altering the audience's behaviours, while propaganda analysis should pay more

attention to the message's structure, language, logic and content, which is precisely what this thesis intends to do.

Still today there are not many well-developed propaganda analysis models to choose from. After much consideration, and even if not fitting perfectly, Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell's (2015) propaganda analysis model seems to be the most useful for this thesis. The authors developed this model to be applied to politics and they built it based on their definition of propaganda that accounts for a "deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist" (p.313). As the centre of their theory is the "deliberateness of purpose", it is obvious that this model was not made for an analysis that discards purpose. However, this is still a very straightforward analysis model with room for adjustments. The model consists of ten aspects, and it is relevant that each is understood the way the authors intended. Below they will be explained in they fit into the analysis section of this Master's thesis.

1. The ideology and purpose of the propaganda campaign
2. The context in which the propaganda occurs
3. The identification of the propagandist
4. The structure of the propaganda organisation
5. The target audience
6. Media utilisation techniques
7. Special techniques to maximise effect
8. Audience reaction to various techniques
9. Counterpropaganda
10. Effects and evaluation

#### *4.3.1. The ideology and purpose of the propaganda campaign*

The first aspect of the model is "the ideology and purpose of the propaganda campaign" which could perfectly be two separate categories. By exploring ideology, Jowett and O'Donnell (2015) want to reach "a set of beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors" (p.315) that is agreed on allowing the understanding of the political and social reality. As ideology is a key aspect of this thesis, it is relevant for the analysis to understand

what kind of social order is promoted in this film, from social to political structures. To identify ideology, one must look for verbal and visual cues of representation that “may reflect preexisting struggles and past situations, current frames of reference to value systems, and future goals and objectives” (Jowett & O’Donnell, 2015, p.315). As far as explaining how purpose fits here and how it should be analysed Jowett and O’Donnell (2015) do not go as much into detail as would be expected for a model focused on purpose and intent. They merely suggest what could be the potential purposes of the propagandists generally, from influencing people to adopt beliefs and attitudes, to ensuring the legitimacy of the institution they represent, both an appeal to the masses. Even though this thesis does not rely on the belief that having a purpose is essential to reproduce propagandistic effects and it reflects on how difficult it is to assert what could be one’s purpose, this thinking exercise will be made, nonetheless, for it will also be helpful to then analyse the following aspects.

#### *4.3.2. The context in which the propaganda occurs*

The second aspect of the model entails “the context in which the propaganda occurs” seeing that “successful propaganda relates to the prevailing mood of the times” (Jowett & O’Donnell, 2015, p.316). As explored throughout previous studies regarding the Disney Princess franchise, the historical context socially, economically, and politically has impacted the way characters and their stories appear on the screen, and what type of stereotypes are attached to them. Hence it is important to understand the “public mood”, the identifiable issues, how widely they are felt and what keeps them from being resolved. Attached to the current context should be an understanding of the historical background that can answer “what has happened to lead up to this point in time?” (Jowett & O’Donnell, 2015, p.316). In this moment of the analysis, it is important to pinpoint the beliefs and values that have been prevalent for a long time, and the myths and stereotypes that still cling to the propaganda under analysis and their respective origin.

#### *4.3.3. The identification of the propagandist and the structure of the propaganda organisation*

The third aspect of the model encompasses “the identification of the propagandist” which is closely tied with the fourth aspect in understanding “the structure of the

propaganda organization”. Therefore, these will be analysed together. Usually, according to Jowett and O’Donnell (2015), the source of propaganda is an institution or organisation that has something to gain from propagandistic activities. As for the propagandistic organisation, it tends to have “a strong, centralized, decision-making authority” which is concerned with producing “a consistent message throughout its structures” (Jowett and O’Donnell, 2015, p.317). In the case that there is an organisation involved, the apparent leader might not be the actual leader, but just a member of the organisation enforcing the organisation’s ideology. Additionally, to ensure that a structure works it needs to have a set of goals and means to achieve them, which can result in developing specific objectives. As far as structural decisions go, deciding the media through which the message is sent is crucial to ensure the extent of control an organisation can exercise over their communication, as “whoever owns the media exercises control over the communication of messages” (Jowett & O’Donnell, 2015, p.318). Thus, it is also important to analyse how one becomes a member of the organisation and what it entails to be a member. For instance, “does new membership require the adoption of new symbols, such as special clothing or uniforms, language, in-group references, and/or activities that create new identities for the membership?” (Jowett & O’Donnell, 2015, p.318). Still related to this parameter, it could be fruitful to find out if the organisation has a set of informal rules and values within itself that make up its culture. The latter ensures that the beliefs are being spread, as every member of the organisation agrees and applies them both in social practices and in creating the messages. Additionally, Jowett and O’Donnell (2015) refer that the organisation’s culture resorts to heroes and heroines to personify its values. Lastly, the authors mention exploring a set of formal rules, yet they acknowledge that to fully grasp this detail, would entail infiltration into the organisation. However important understanding the full gist of the structure of an organisation might be, here, The Walt Disney Company, going to such lengths would provide knowledge that is not relevant to the scope of this thesis. Furthermore, this section will be covered with caution not to disperse the topic.

#### *4.3.4. The target audience*

The fifth aspect of the model is “the target audience” which is selected taking into account “its potential effectiveness” (Jowett & O’Donnell, 2015, p.319). Jowett and



O'Donnell (2015) recognise that for traditional propaganda this audience would be a mass audience, yet with modern propaganda, while there are always aspects directed towards a mass audience, it is tailored for certain interest groups or segmented parts of the population. In this view, "a distribution system for media may generate its own audience" (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2015, p.320). Some organisations might still prefer to allure a mass audience with a homogenous and consistent message which will likely be accepted by some and rejected by others. As one of the main concerns of this thesis is precisely the effects these films may have on their audiences, i.e., the children watching the Disney Princess films, attention must be paid to the audience selection and its relation to a success rate.

#### *4.3.5. Media utilisation techniques*

The sixth aspect of the model leans on "media utilization techniques". Jowett and O'Donnell (2015) believe that modern propaganda resorts to all the media available from the film to the press, the internet, books and so on. Thus, one should pay attention to the tone and sound across the different media to determine a consistency that serves a purpose, as well as to the flow of communication from one medium to the other. This aspect concerns itself with how the media are used, how its audience perceives them and what expectations are associated with them based on their techniques. Selecting the media can be related to economic reasons and to target the audience most effectively. The different media will be mentioned in the analysis, but, considering the purpose of this analysis, only the film *Raya and the Last Dragon* will receive the necessary attention.

#### *4.3.6. Special techniques to maximise effect*

The seventh aspect of the model is concerned with the "special techniques to maximize effect". Jowett and O'Donnell (2015) claim that making a list of techniques would not be wise as propaganda can take on numerous techniques. However, Jowett and O'Donnell proceed by providing eleven different techniques to focus on, as techniques that allow messages to be seen and remembered and therefore, acted on by the audience. As this aspect seems to be one of most relevant regarding the analysis of the film itself, each technique will be briefly explained, for they will make for a considerable part of the analysis. Starting with (1) "predispositions of the audience: creating resonance", this

technique maximises effect for it aligns the content of the message with existing opinions and beliefs, implying a good knowledge of the audience. Instead of trying to change attitudes and beliefs immediately, a propagandist makes the audience's concerns visible, which can be spotted through "links to values, beliefs, attitudes, and past behavior patterns of the target audience" (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2015, p.324). After the propagandist establishes themselves as a part of the audience, they can channel the message in a direction they wish to.

Another aspect that can play a role is the (2) "source credibility" as people tend to follow authority figures when knowledge and direction are needed. As these figures carry legitimacy, when they are accepted regarding a certain subject, it is not difficult to transfer that legitimacy to a variety of topics. Regarding this technique, when analysing one must address how the source is perceived by the audience. Questions like "is the propaganda agent a hero?", "does the audience model its behavior after the propagandist's?", "how does the propagandist establish identification with the audience?", "does she or he establish familiarity with the audience's locality, use local incidents, and share interests, hopes, hatreds, and so on?" (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2015, pp.324-325) should be answered.

Related to the previous technique, the presence of (3) "opinion leaders" in the diffusion of the message can also maximise the effects, as legitimacy and credibility are somewhat involved. As far as (4) "face-to-face contact" goes, while the message of a film does not end with the film itself, but lives on with publicity and interviews, for the scope of this thesis this technique will not be approached, yet it is nonetheless recognised as part of the effectiveness of propaganda. Creating (5) "group norms" where the members can clearly identify the source and intent from previously agreed clues, helps generate a "herd instinct in crowds" (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2015, p.326). Associated with the latter, creating a system of (6) "reward and punishment" also makes a message more credible and acceptable.

As previously mentioned, the choice of the communication channel is a key factor so having a (7) "monopoly of the communication source" helps amplify the effect as one can control every aspect regarding the sending, but also the type of feedback allowed. A

monopoly allows an organisation to distribute a repetitious and consistent message throughout time, which will then unlikely be questioned.

Both (8) “visual symbols of power” and (9) “language usage” require a careful analysis of the media messages, in this case, the film *Raya and the Last Dragon* (Estrada & Hall, 2021). By analysing both the visuality and the language present in the film it will be possible to understand how these are being used to convey certain meanings and sustain or break with stereotypes surrounding the ideas of women and femininity.

As one approaches the end of the list, (10) “music as propaganda” appears as an effective technique by combining sound and language into repetition, rapidly becoming familiar. Additionally, music “touches the emotions easily, suggests associations and past experiences, invites us to sing along, and embraces ideology in the lyrics” (Jowett & O’Donnell, 2015, p.329), which leads to the last technique, (11) “arousal of emotions”, that can be a great propagandistic tool, especially for a non-literate audience.

#### *4.3.7. Audience reaction to various techniques*

The eighth aspect of the model regards the “audience reaction to various techniques” which according to the authors should be found by looking at the “behaviour of the target audience” from buying merchandising to the adoption of the propagandist’ language and attire. Questions such as “does the target audience take on a new symbolic identity?” and “over time, does the propaganda purpose become realized and part of the social scene” (Jowett & O’Donnell, 2015, p.330) should be answered. As this would involve a separate study that goes beyond the scope of this thesis, this aspect will be addressed in the Discussion section by turning to previous studies on behaviour. However, even if not fully analysed, this aspect is recognised to be as important as the previous ones. After all, it was the belief that children, as the audience, react and are influenced by what they watch that launched this thesis.

#### *4.3.8. Counterpropaganda*

The ninth aspect of the model studies the existence of “counterpropaganda”. Even though this aspect could be interesting to explore as it tends to exist outside the agreed

beliefs and behaviours of mainstream ideology, it lies outside the scope of this thesis and, therefore it will not be a part of the analysis section.

#### 4.3.9. *Effects and evaluation*

The tenth aspect of the model concerns itself with “effects and evaluation”. The main focus, according to Jowett and O’Donnell (2015), should be to determine whether the purpose of the propaganda was fulfilled or not. Measuring the effects can take form in terms of the growth of the membership and in adjustments made by society to accommodate the propagandistic messages (e.g., adopting language and behaviours). In this thesis, similarly to the eighth aspect, this will not be analysed but instead discussed and paired with previous studies that might help anticipate the effects this particular film, *Raya and the Last Dragon*, had. Regarding the evaluation, besides looking at the achievement of the goals, it pays attention to the means used, posing questions and scenarios about the possibilities of choosing different media and messaging techniques. Additionally, it tries to evaluate if the outcome would have been the same had there been no propaganda.

As noted by Jowett and O’Donnell (2015), answering to a certain extent of these ten aspects allows for a thorough understanding of propaganda. However, the authors still believe a partial analysis is useful for it can be complemented in the future with other studies that might come up. All the applicable aspects of the model will allow to examine and establish *Raya and the Last Dragon* as an instance of sociological and integration propaganda. Moreover, the analysis of the visual symbols and language usage will allow to understand what gendered stereotypes are present in the film when constructing the ideas of what it means to be a woman and femininity. As the stereotypes are established these can be connected to the flawed ideological beliefs carried by the filmmakers.

As the model was conceived for political campaigning, this thesis will test the model when applied to filmmaking and mention any shortcomings in the limitations’ section of the Conclusion chapter.

#### ***4.4. Applying intracategorical complexity***

As the propaganda analysis model proposed by Jowett and O'Donnell (2015) has been explained, it is necessary to attend to one additional tool that will be applied during the analysis – *intracategorical complexity* as defined by Leslie McCall (2016).

While intersectionality has been an important theoretical contribution, there seems to be an agreement that it needs to transcend from its theoretical condition (see e.g., Nash 2008; McCall, 2016). However, there is no consensus on how it should be applied methodologically, also due to lack of discussion. Research should mirror the complexity of social life. With such a complex concept at play, it becomes difficult to analyse a subject that expands across various axes of social life and categories (Nash 2008; McCall, 2016). As noted by Nash (2008), “intersectional projects often replicate precisely the approaches that they critique” (p.6), meaning, for example, cumulative approaches to identity, since it is difficult to analyse all the categories of identity in their interplay. The latter also happens because, as Nash recalls, there is a lack of clarity when listing the different axes theoretically. As this thesis is a study that focuses mainly on the category of gender, most of the remarks will be attached to that in the analysis. However, other components of identity such as race, sexual orientation, age, and ability will be brought up in relation to each other and gender.

McCall (2016) analyses three possible methodological approaches that consider intersectionality in diverse ways, which are *anticategorical complexity*, *intracategorical complexity* and *intercategorical complexity*. The first approach, anticategorical complexity, as the name implies, consists in deconstructing the analytical categories such as gender and race. The method starts with the assumption that these categories are too simplistic to capture the complexity of social life and they help reinforce the regime that one is trying to criticise. Furthermore, anticategorical complexity alerts to the way drawing boundaries and maintaining them across the social process of categorisation can lead to exclusion and hierarchies (McCall, 2016). However, while it has been severely noted that categories, e.g., gender and class, just like stereotypes, can indeed harm people, it has also been made clear that there is a need for organising the mental space with categories, yet this approach does not recognise the latter.

To proceed with a change, one must acknowledge the differences presented by intersectionality, while “strategically mobilizing the language of commonality” (Nash, 2008, p.4), even if temporarily, to construct a coherent agenda. This thesis will take on the second approach presented by McCall (2016), intracategorical complexity, which confirms the dangers of categorising yet does not reject the use of said categories because they are, nevertheless, strategically useful to problematise the inadequacy of the categories in use. Additionally, this method puts marginalised intersectional identities at the centre of the research and analysis to reveal their complex experiences which tend to be under-theorised.

The third approach McCall (2016) presents, intercategorical complexity, uses the analytical categories, temporarily and strategically, to illustrate the relations of inequality among groups and puts these relationships at the centre exposing the relationship between inequality and the categories.

## 6. Analysis

In this chapter, the film *Raya and the Last Dragon* (Estrada & Hall, 2021) is analysed by applying the propaganda analysis model proposed by Jowett and O'Donnell (2015). The chapter is divided into six subsections. The first subsection deals with “*the ideology and purpose of the propaganda campaign*” which is the first aspect presented by Jowett and O'Donnell. The second subsection deals with “*the context in which the propaganda occurs*” which is the second aspect of the model. The third subsection deals with “*the identification of the propagandist and the structure of the propaganda organisation*” which combines the third and fourth aspects presented by Jowett and O'Donnell. The fourth subsection deals with “the target audience”, the fifth aspect of the model. The fifth subsection deals with “*media utilization techniques*”, the sixth aspect presented by Jowett and O'Donnell. The sixth subsection deals with “*special techniques to maximize effect*”, the seventh aspect of the model..

This set of subsections helps to understand how propaganda operates in *Raya and the Last Dragon* and to shed light on the content of the messages the film conveys regarding the gendered stereotypes surrounding the ideas of a woman and femininity.

### **6.1. *The ideology and purpose of the propaganda campaign***

The film presents a utopian world, viewed from a feminist perspective, where the notion of gender seems to be obsolete as the goals of the feminist movement have been completely fulfilled. It can be seen in the way the world of Kumandra is divided and ruled. Between five different regions where each has its traditions, they have their own chiefs, and, throughout the plot, several of them are women. With the way Chief Benja from Heart is training her daughter Raya it is clear that the leadership of the land is passed from parent to child, hence there is no need to be of a certain gender to rule. Additionally, as each land possesses its army of warriors, these can be male or female, with Fang's army being led by the female character General Atitaya. On top of this, the fact that women are in places of power is never questioned or problematised. The story illustrates a world where this has always been this way, as there is no background presented that attests the opposite, so it normalises the ideas of a woman as a leader or a

warrior, without the princess character trying to prove anyone they are wrong about doubting her capabilities.

While this is an example of a visible instance of the gender power structures, there are more subtle hints. The plot is mainly operated by Raya, Namaari and Sisu. While there are side characters that happen to be male and they help, they are in no way responsible for the advice given, for making the decisions and for choosing the direction of the plot (e.g., when Raya and Sisu leave the group behind Boun asks Tong “what do we do now?” and Tong replies “I don’t know”, showing that Raya and Sisu have the control (01:06:43)), nor are they the focus when it comes to the development of complex relationships between characters. As the previous films from the franchise have shown princesses becoming the heroines of their stories and have, somehow, pointed out that they are breaking gendered stereotypes (Masai, 2020), *Raya and the Last Dragon* creates a world of powerful women, where them being princesses and warriors is treated as something normal. The way they depict Raya fighting Namaari ends up being positive as they define being strong by displaying two women fighting each other, instead of plotting Raya against a man to signify that, as a woman, she is as strong as a man. The female characters are the ones that speak for almost the entirety of the film, they are never disrespected, interrupted, or questioned because of their gender by their male peers.

Nevertheless, it is also worth noting that while the genders are seen as equals, this ideology does not provide clear examples of stereotypically feminine appearances and behaviours (apart from Sisu in her dragon form). This world is based on characters inspired by stereotypically masculine behaviours such as being a warrior and fighting. While this is a new trope and diversity of representation is welcome, it should be done carefully so that Raya is valued on her own but not seen as superior to other princesses from the franchise who display a more stereotypical feminine appearance and behaviour. From a feminist perspective, both ways of existing should be celebrated and explored. The representation present in *Raya and the Last Dragon* could lead to developing a flawed ideological belief that understands being equal as the same as becoming a man.



Following the way Kumandra presents a world that could be interpreted as gender blind, regarding intersectionality, specifically race, there are only Southeast Asian characters so there is no way of comparing within the film if the concept of race is also obsolete.

A branch of the feminist ideology that could also be identified in this film is ecofeminism. Ecofeminism was a useful lens to read Moana's (Clements & Musker, 2016) quest (see e.g., Kongwattana, 2018; Hernawati, 2021), and it appears in *Raya and the Last Dragon* in the sense that the discord among humankind, led in a way to the destruction of peace in nature as well. Throughout the film, one learns that many dragons have powers that are related to nature, and that water can keep the Druun away. For instance, as Raya does not trust Namaari leading to Sisu's death, the water of Kumandra disappears and can only be restored by Raya and Namaari's relationship based on trust. This view ends up equating women with nature as nurturing and caring suggesting that only women can have this restorative power.

As for the purpose of the film one can only assume. Jowett and O'Donnell (2015) mention that the purpose is either to provoke a change of attitude or maintain the legitimacy of the company. With *Raya and the Last Dragon* as with previous films from the franchise, the latter seems to be the main purpose. The Walt Disney Company needs to maintain their renowned place in entertainment, hence keeping up with the changes in mainstream society, and passing messages that do not shy too far from it so they can appeal to the majority, an example of integration propaganda. *Raya and the Last Dragon* keeps up with the feminist movement by showing a progressive world where everyone is equal regardless of their gender.

## ***6.2. The context in which the propaganda occurs***

As established, to be successful, propaganda must relate to the current social, economic, and political situation. The Walt Disney Company tends to follow this trend affecting its characters, storylines, and stereotypes accordingly (see e.g., Masai, 2020). This pattern creates in the audience certain expectations of the messages that will appear, and one can assume that a similar thing happens with *Raya and the Last Dragon*.

Within the context of the fourth wave of Western feminism, The Walt Disney Company also has felt the pressure to have more intersectional representation on its screens. By presenting, *Raya and the Last Dragon*, the first Southeast Asian princess, The Walt Disney Company, allows for some intersectional perspective into a traditionally white franchise. While it could be argued that the film represents truthfully the Southeast Asian community, it cannot be denied that the visual representation of Southeast Asians is there, and their existence is validated. In the film, there is still a total lack of representation in terms of sexual orientation and ability, being the former the most advocated for. While one can assume that portraying a princess with a disability would not cause outrage, regarding sexual orientation, The Walt Disney Company would be stepping into dangerous territory if it introduces an explicitly non-heterosexual relationship (see e.g., Berger, 2022). The lack of consensus regarding sexual orientation keeps the topic away, even for the continuous portrayals of heterosexual relationships as Raya joins Merida, Elsa, and Moana in not having a romantic partner or interest in one.

Additionally, this aspect demands that one pays attention to what caused an evolution in this direction. One has to attend to the historical background, which has been explored throughout the corpus of the thesis but can be summed up by the concept of patriarchy which impacted and keeps impacting the stereotypes around the ideas of a woman and femininity.

### ***6.3. The identification of the propagandist and the structure of the propaganda organisation***

At a first glance one could point at the filmmaking team, from the writers to the producers and directors, but looking closely, as *Raya and the Last Dragon* is not an independent project, actually far from it, the company to which the film belongs to earns the name of the propagandist. As the members of the filmmaking team are carefully tied to The Walt Disney Company, they must follow certain guidelines that allow for the company to establish a consistent ideological message throughout all its products that can appease the masses. While the filmmakers might agree with everything, this is not possible to analyse nor is it relevant, as the film exists, nonetheless.

Historically, Disney is connected with overt propaganda content during WWII and for one hundred years it has been producing films with covert propagandistic messages that support the status quo – integration propaganda. When mentioning that today’s context demands intersectional representation, it goes for both on and off the screen. In this subsection comes the moment to analyse what is happening off the screen and who belongs to the team of *Raya and the Last Dragon*. The feminist standpoint epistemology (Brooks, 2007) calls for women and women in disadvantaged groups to come forward so they can tell their story more truthfully and get a chance to work in an industry dominated by white men. This practice would not only settle some gender gaps in the industry but provide more diverse experiences to be on screen, and for women to tell their stories on their terms. In the end, the film will be Disney’s but also the team’s behind it. As mentioned, *Raya and the Last Dragon* is directed by the Mexican director Carlos López Estrada and the American director Donald Lee Hall, two men, written by the Vietnamese-American writer Qui Nguyen and the Malaysian writer Adele Lim, two women, and produced by the Israeli producer Osnat Shurer and the American producer Peter Del Vecho, a woman and a man. These are only the main names in a vast team. While most of the participants are American (which to a degree makes sense, as it is an American company), the writers are both women and connected to Southeast Asia. One cannot know for certain if everyone involved fully agreed with how the story was told, since the “real leader”, the board of the company and its subdivisions, has the final say in all decisions. Therefore, not any story gets to be told in one’s terms without, firstly, aligning with the company’s values. A company as big as The Walt Disney Company must ensure that all its films and products tell a message that is consistent and under the company’s goals and values. Therefore, there are a shared set of informal rules and values that make up Disney culture that must be shared and complied with. As explained, these values tend to change to agree with the status quo, so the mass audience and powerful clients find them acceptable and appealing, as the major goal of the company is to obtain profit and retain its legitimacy as one of the most impactful companies. This is one of the reasons why no Disney film has been openly non-heterosexual, and why it took so long to introduce racial diversity into the films. While filmmakers are not forced to comply and can search for other companies or produce

their stories independently, there is no denying that Disney has the power, the audience and the resources that can enhance the quality.

In the end, whoever owns the company gets to control the messages, which at this point are more than just messages for children, seeing all of Walt Disney's acquisitions from Marvel Entertainment to 20th Century Fox. While the values of the owner can deeply change the direction and the values the company adapts, a historical context and the film *Raya and the Last Dragon* shed light on compliance to the status quo, with profit in mind. Both the company in general and the filmmaking team have something to gain, be that money, credibility, and/or recognition.

As mentioned by Jowett and O'Donnell a propagandistic message might have its hero or heroine to personify it. In this case, they are not real people but the characters of the film, from Raya, the protagonist and the heroine and princess, to all her friends and enemies each with their own perspective on the message. While the spectator is presented with several perspectives, in the end, as happens with films from the franchise, the spectator is supposed to see in the heroine of the story, an example to follow, as they usually display what are deemed to be good qualities.

Another structural decision that comes with making a film is deciding the media through which they can send their message. In this case, the film saw its release in selected cinemas in the United States and on Disney+, in the countries where it is available. Adding to this, as usual, there was publicity around the film and merchandising.

#### ***6.4. The target audience***

One of The Walt Disney Company's concerns has been to create products and experiences that can reach a global audience to maximise profit. As Disney has grown economically and became aware of its potential, its investments in animation technology and nuanced and meaningful storytelling, lead the films to be pleasant to a mass audience, when compared to its previous classic films, which were iconic but far simpler. As far as *Raya and the Last Dragon* goes, by being animated, focused on a young protagonist and with a very on the nose theme on the importance of trusting

people and giving them the benefit of the doubt, in terms of effectiveness, the dedicated focus of this film is children. Yet it is clear from the effort put into the animation techniques that they want to please critics as well.

Even though its main target is children, the company still must abide by messages that are deeply accepted by society, so it does not upset the people who are responsible for the children. Failing at doing this could cause the company to lose its reputation and legitimacy and lead parents and guardians to stop reaching for Disney films for the education of their children. In *Raya and the Last Dragon*, as with previous Disney films, this is noticeable in how diversity in racial and cultural representation is being cautiously introduced, from a Western perspective, yet narratives focused on a sexual orientation that differs from heterosexuality are still waiting in the horizon. On the one side, Disney needs to be careful not to be too diverse for the Western status quo. On the other side, this diversity brings along people that might have stayed away from the company when its films were mainly white. *Raya and the Last Dragon* invites children and adults from Southeast Asia and its diaspora to see themselves represented on the screens. However, as mentioned not everyone had access to the film right away, which makes one question the true intentions of the company.

Finally, when one thinks of the Disney Princess franchise, one immediately associates it with young girls, which tends to be correct. However, from the way the stories of *Brave* (Andrews & Chapman, 2012), in some respects *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013), *Moana* (Clements & Musker, 2016), and now, *Raya and the Last Dragon* have been put together, they are appealing to all children, not just young girls. Regarding Raya, as she lives in a world where everyone seems to be equal and personality traits and behaviours do not seem to be stereotypically assigned to anyone based on their gender, her character and her story can feel attractive to young boys as well, without them feeling displaced and feeling like they are watching a film for girls, while also providing girls with a wider perspective on femininity.

Establishing children as the dedicated focus facilitates the company to understand where the profit comes from. Yet, as exposed earlier by Inglehart (2008), the values one learns in their formative years are unlikely to change in adulthood. All in all, Disney is making money out of films that are shaping young minds. Creating a collective image of what

the world is supposed to look like for children is creating an image of what the future should look like. As also stated earlier, the bigger problem is not in providing children with a way to see the world, but in the monopoly that Disney is close to reaching with its empire, being the major source of children's entertainment, and therefore, the only way to see the world, and less likely to ever be challenged by children (Orenstein, (2006). Films released by the company set the tone for what the company supports and stands for, having the capability of influencing the status quo while being influenced by it, simultaneously.

### **6.5. Media utilisation techniques**

Propagandists tend to use all the media they have at their disposal which explains how from films, Disney goes to selling toys and clothing – which present patterns aligned with the film's messages. This exponentializes the story from being a mere fantasy on-screen to becoming what children want to be like, behave like or dress like in the real world. In this way, they maximise the effect by being remembered and acted on.

The main media technique used is the film itself *Raya and the Last Dragon*. The film and its message are, obviously, not limited to the film, since they are promoted through publicity, interviews, and merchandise, which have to be consistent and can impact the reach of the propagandistic messages. Yet, these are not the main analysis targets of this thesis. As noted earlier, the film was advertised as featuring the first Southeast Asian princess, which creates a set of expectations. For instance, the choice of media should be effective to reach the intended audience, yet people in Southeast Asian countries did not have access to a film supposedly about them.

### **6.6. Special techniques to maximise effect**

#### **6.6.1. Predispositions of the audience: creating resonance**

Starting with the “predispositions of the audience: creating resonance”, *Raya and the Last Dragon* uses this technique by keeping the tone of the story accessible to a Western audience, in the sense that it presents a different culture without delving too deep into its particularities and maintaining Western tropes and stereotypes. As a starter, the fact that the narrative is based on an amalgam of Southeast Asian cultures, instead of

focusing clearly on a specific one, tells that they wanted to keep the film conformed with the type of stereotypes Western might have related to Southeast Asia. From mixing different clothing styles to different landscapes and fighting styles, the film creates for the viewers an easy picture of what Southeast Asia looks like. A picture that might not stray away too much from previous knowledge they might have had.

As Disney has been creating its line of films, it has also planted in the mind of its audience, certain expectations. For instance, the presence of animal companions, which *Raya and the Last Dragon* has a ton of, from Dragons to Tuk Tuk to Ongis, Noi's companions, to Fang's cats, or the existence of magic. These cues help the audience connect and identify with what they are watching. Finally, the tropes of trust and of protecting one's family as the main moral of the story, resonate with the audience, as these are values that tendentially held by the status quo and have stood throughout the time. Of course, this does not mean there is room for change because there is. As Merida, the protagonist from *Brave* (Andrews & Chapman, 2012), opened the space for princesses not to have a love interest or not to sing, it is no longer questioned when that also happens in *Raya and the Last Dragon*.

As developed earlier, Disney accompanies the changes of values in society to create resonance with the audience, which explains why all the female characters of the film are extremely different among themselves and complex, yet all valuable in their qualities, flaws, and motivations. For instance, Chief Virana of Fang instilled in her daughter Namaari to befriend Raya, so she could then betray Raya and steal the dragon gem. Moreover, Chief Virana valued what the other lands thought of Fang and wanted to ensure they would be the ones to save the world and be forgiven for bringing the Druun back. Chief Dang Hu of Talon, defined by one of her people as "the most vicious chief Talon has ever seen", threatens to abandon Sisu at the mercy of the Druun if Sisu does not tell her where the other dragon gem pieces are. These actions are all questionable, according to the status quo. Yet they are done with the interest of their people at heart and under the belief that the dragon gem will bring prosperity to their lands. Therefore, there are no secretly evil motivations behind it. While Noi is still a toddler, she has already turned into a life of a thief, which according to the status quo is

bad, yet as one discovers more about the character, one understands that she did not have many options after her parents were turned into stone by the Druun.

However, the most complex characters are the three main ones, Raya, Namaari and Sisu. Since young, Raya did not think it was a good idea to trust strangers, yet her father was able to educate her in a way that she trusted Namaari and ended up being betrayed. This experience shaped Raya growing up, as her trusting another led to the Druun's return and her father turning into stone. From then on, Raya is depicted with constant mistrust towards others, being one of the most extreme examples of this, her not being able to eat the food prepared by Boun, a young boy from Tail, as it could be poisoned. While on the one hand, *Raya and the Last Dragon* still caters to a patriarchal trope of women competing and of plotting women against each other, on the other hand, the enemy trope is subverted. As Raya and Namaari grow to be enemies throughout the film, Namaari is never presented as the villain. As the moral of the story deals with trust, the true enemy, the Druun flourishes when people distrust each other. Yet, for the characters, it is not always easy to point out the monsters as the enemy, and it is easier to blame people from other lands. While characters such as Raya, Tong or Boun paint Fang as the enemy (e.g., “their blades are specially designed for the stabbing of backs” says Tong (01:06:11); “if it weren't for them none of this would have happened, they're the worst” says Boun (01:06:15)), the film makes it clear that Namaari is only trying to protect her land. In the end, it is because Raya, who is supposed to be the heroine, does not trust Namaari's intentions, that Namaari ends up, accidentally, shooting and killing Sisu. The way the events are constructed shows a story of two strong young warrior women who both want to fight to protect their people but find it hard to agree on the terms, hence no real enemy exists among the two of them. This illustrates a shift Disney has been making so that the films are less supported by a Manichean narrative, and more realistic to mirror the human experience. Shifting from an “evil versus good” perspective to showcasing the flawed human experience, invites the viewers to re-examine what it means to be a villain and opens the door to a more mature audience to connect with the story as well. While two women are plotted against each other, the desirable outcome is them coming together and celebrating trust and friendship.



Additionally, there should not be the denial of the female friendship established between Raya and Sisu, that early on develop fondness towards each other, even if they disagree on how to save the world. As Sisu, in the past, has been entrusted by her brothers when she did not believe in her capabilities, she is an extremely optimistic character that suggests trusting everyone is the way to go. In a very obvious way, this clashes with Raya's lived experience. Personality-wise, Sisu is the most energetic character and the one that brings positivity to the screen with her goofy (e.g., when Sisu discovers that she can put things on credit at the market and starts buying everything) and clumsy manners (e.g., Sisu has no manners at the table when the food is too hot for her), even if sometimes she lacks self-confidence (e.g., Sisu refers to her brothers as "the real mighty ones" (01:07:39) and herself as the kid who did not help with the group project but ended with the same grade as the others). Sisu also ends up bridging the relationship between Raya and Namaari, as she always recognises the humanity and good intentions in Namaari (e.g., "deep down I got a feeling that she wants to fix the world as much as we do" Sisu tells the group (01:06:23); "I know you don't want to hurt anybody. You just want a better world. Like we all do. I trust you Namaari" Sisu tells Namaari (01:17:09)).

#### 6.6.2. Source credibility

As far as "source credibility" goes, the fact that the film is advertised as a Disney film and as adequate for children gives it credibility, as in, people might take children to the cinema without even reading a description of the film because they already assume what it is, a film for children that will not clash with the status quo. This sense of credibility and establishment of identity help maximise the effect of the messages. As previously mentioned, if a source is accepted on a certain issue, it is likely to be able to establish an opinion on another, which shows the immense power Disney always had, and now more than ever, to shape society in the course it sees fit. *Raya and the Last Dragon* is an example of how Disney, still complying with the status quo, is slowly introducing new cultures and ways of existing as a woman.

From the children's perspective, being a princess and the heroine of the story, Raya has the credibility to look and act the way she does. Hence, as mentioned earlier, she will

set the example for children, in opposition to other characters that do not hold the same credibility.

### *6.6.3. Opinion leaders*

While for the “opinion leaders”, The Walt Disney Company could have used a filmmaking crew that was completely Southeast Asian or relied on a Southeast Asian cast to give the film more credibility to stand out as a cultural piece, the absence of opinion leaders does not seem to affect how children receive the message and its potential effects, as they most likely never realise or question these aspects. However, might have made it more legitimate for adults and more specifically, critics and people who belong to the Southeast Asian community.

### *6.6.4. Group norms*

*Raya and the Last Dragon* initiates with the usual Disney intro and logo which the audience can identify immediately. As it starts with Raya as the narrator, the character is rapidly identified as the protagonist, and, since it is Disney, the heroine of the story. The story starts in media res, and Raya quickly explains what led to that point in time and space, providing a context for the source of the problem that needs to be solved during the film. These are some examples of previously agreed clues and patterns, that help generate the identification of the genre – “group norms”.

### *6.6.5. Reward and punishment*

Another way to make a message more credible and acceptable is by creating a system of “reward and punishment”, and one can argue that, especially among children, this can be very effective. Usually, Disney does this with the definite establishment of what it is to be a princess and what it is to be a villain and depending on how one acts, one receives a reward or a punishment, respectively. The princess, the good character, is always the one to look up to, since it is the character that is praised and, in the end, deserves to be happy. However, in *Raya and the Last Dragon*, as the villain trope is subverted, the system of reward and punishment is no longer associated with acting as the heroine versus acting as the villain. The emphasis of the system is put into the much on the nose message of trust. If the trust is mutual, there is a reward. If it is one-sided, or

non-existent, there is a punishment. Hence the film is telling children they should trust each other, and if sometimes they feel betrayed, they should try to understand the other person's motives first, instead of immediately punishing that person and classifying them as bad. That being said, while there is a system of "reward and punishment", it cannot be said to be related to the way Raya as the heroine should act, and therefore how women should act. Every character from the film is encouraged to trust. Hence, as the whole structure of the film tries to convey, this is a world where women and men are equal and can be and act as their truest selves without the constraints of gendered stereotypes.

#### *6.6.6. Monopoly of the communication source*

As to having the "monopoly of the communication source", Disney ends up having it as the film was only available on Disney's own streaming platform and selected theatres, which helps the company control the sending of its message. It is also interesting to recall what was earlier mentioned about Disney having nearly a monopoly on film entertainment, allowing it even more control.

#### *6.6.7. Visual symbols of power*

Now onto the "visual symbols of power" and then the "language usage" and the messages they convey. These two aspects allow a look at the story, the world-building, the characters, their relationships, and dialogue in-depth to understand how the ideas of a woman and femininity are depicted.

Even though the film uses its visuals to illustrate that what separates the different lands is more a question of landscape and the colours of the clothes that people wear, the visuals also allow an understanding of the power structure of Kumandra. For instance, Heart has well-maintained and grand buildings, surrounded by greenery and water, and its people have luxurious clothing, which the other lands associate with the prosperity they have thanks to the dragon gem. However, the way the ideas of a woman and femininity are represented in the film goes beyond the apparent class struggle. As the main female characters present on screen are Raya, Namaari, Sisu, and Chief Virana, those will be the ones that will receive the attention of this visual analysis. For starters,

all characters, not just the female ones, are able-bodied and great warriors. These can be confirmed by the way they walk and move, and the swords and weapons they all held and fight with. All choreographies are carefully designed to illustrate that both Raya and Namaari are worthy opponents to one another, which can be seen clearly in the fighting scenes that happen in Spine and Fang. As far as princess characters go, Raya shows on screen the way a woman can fight with intelligence, but also grace as she is very meticulous and knowledgeable. One of the best examples of this is the initial sequence when Raya first appears as a child, moving fast, cautiously investigating the environment, waging weapons professionally and escaping traps resourcefully, traits that stick with her throughout the film. During the whole film, both Raya and Namaari run, fight, crawl and fall, and are not afraid of getting dirt on their clothes, which is not stereotypical of a princess. Furthermore, there is no point in the film where these characters are seen dancing, another stereotype associated with the princess characters. The only female character that dances is Sisu, and only in her dragon form.

Regarding their appearance, all the female characters appear of average height and while their bodies are not the usual princess type with a tiny waist, they are still very much according to the status quo of what is pleasant, they are thin and elegant. While Raya, as the main character, keeps the tradition of having beautiful dark long hair, both Namaari and her mother, Chief Virana, do not. Aligned with this, Raya's face is more stereotypically feminine looking and Namaari's and Chief Virana's are stereotypically masculine.

As their appearances are not complete without their clothing, it is necessary to analyse the choices made in this department. Both Raya and Namaari, as young children, despise wearing formal wear, and the party where they first meet is the only time one sees the female characters wearing anything close to a dress or stereotypically feminine attire ("only a monster would choose to wear this outfit on the regular", Raya says (00:13:18)). Chief Virana is the only female character that wears a dress throughout the film. Raya and Namaari spend the entire film wearing a top and pants, and Raya sometimes uses a cape and a hat. While these are choices that make practical sense as they are travelling and engaging in fights throughout the film, they also showcase different ways a woman can dress, and most importantly, a princess, without taking

away their femininity. The way the clothes fit their bodies without giving their body shape too much emphasis avoids sexualising the female body, as previous films did. Additionally, even though Namaari's physical appearance and the way she dresses are not deemed stereotypically feminine, she also uses a wide range of accessories from earrings to bracelets to a belt, showcasing a more complex and realistic idea of a woman that does not conform to all the stereotypes, and does to some. Whilst Raya provides the exact opposite image with a feminine physical appearance yet no accessories to showcase it.

Still on the visuals, but not on the character's appearance, Namaari and Chief Virana are both from a land that is associated with having lots of cats. Looking at the symbolism the stereotypes of women with short hair and with cats can have for the Western lesbian community, one could argue that Disney might be trying to communicate something else, even if, in no part of the film, one sees any character develop any romantic interest. As these two characters are also partially seen throughout the film as potential villains, it is also interesting to look back at the previous female villains of princess films, to find that all but one (Mother Gothel from *Tangled*), has short hair. While this reading could be deemed as overarching, other studies have shed light on how Disney relies on villains with stereotypically LGBT+ appearances, so *Raya and the Last Dragon* does not escape a trope that most likely should have stayed in the past. Moreover, it is relevant to note that in the past, Disney has put the focus of female villains solely on older women, on top of either depriving the princess character of her family or only providing her with a father. In *Raya and the Last Dragon*, Namaari exists as the first young female villain and her mother as the traditional older female villain. Yet, as discussed, they are not the typical villains. However, Raya's family maintains the patriarchal trope of her only having her dad to look up to, without a mention to her mother, giving all the credit for her upbringing to her father (throughout the film, Raya is motivated by her father's dream of unifying Kumandra), while Namaari that was raised by only her mother appears as the antagonist. In the end, this reading of the film ends up being very heteronormative, yet it needs to be done to criticise the patriarchal expectations Disney has been tracing since previous films.

As one looks at the age of the antagonists, one cannot help but also notice that Raya fits perfectly well among her princess companions from the franchise, as she is also noticeably young. Of course, it makes sense that the character is young, so it is more attractive for children to watch and connect with, yet as previous studies have shed light on, it generates ageism, which is an issue women have to tendentially struggle more with, due to patriarchal stereotypes that emphasise that a woman's beauty and purpose are associated with being young. A slight change to provide the spectator with an older female character that is undoubtedly good could help in this regard seeing it was not hard to make Raya's father an undoubtedly good man. For instance, Sisu, the dragon, for a portion of the film, takes a human form, yet even then they could not give her the appearance of an older woman, and this is supposed to be a dragon that has existed for centuries. Being Sisu a character that is both juvenile and wise, it would be a positive representation of older women.

An additional remark to the visuality comes with the dragon mythology the story embeds. Despite having different personality traits and wanting to resolve the conflict in their own ways, all the characters, regardless of gender, pay their respect to the dragons by visually making a symbol of respect with their hands. In the end, they share a belief and are respectful of that belief.

As one deviates from the visual onto the language, it is also worth noting that the voice pitch of the female characters is not as high and stereotypically feminine as in most previous films. While this breaks down the stereotype that women have high pitched voices, it also aids the stereotype that only non-stereotypically feminine characters have a low to average pitch.

#### *6.6.8. Language usage*

In terms of language, Raya, Namaari and Sisu, are all addressed as she or her throughout the film, highlighting their identification as women. It is also interesting to note that before the dragon Sisu took a human form during the film, she was already being addressed as a she, so her gender was always clear to everyone. While this could be a great opportunity to introduce a non-binary character, it led also to a female character that is a funny (e.g., Raya describes Talon as "a hotspot for pickpockets and

con artists” to what Sisu replies “Lucky for me. Empty pockets!” (00:43:30)) and powerful companion, which usually in princess films tends to be taken over by male companions.

While Sisu speaks to both Raya and Namaari with tenderness and wittiness, the way Raya and Namaari address each other is quite different. Their relationship starts at the meal organised by Chief Benja, when they are young and bond over the fact that they are both “dragon nerds” (00:12:46). They have the meal together and through their conversations, Namaari says they are both “warrior women” that “despise uncomfortable formal wear” (00:13:49). From this trusting conversation, Raya shows Namaari the dragon gem and Namaari says “thank you, dep la. You’ve been very helpful” (00:15:28) and strikes her from the back to the ground. She adds that in a different world maybe they could have been friends, but in this one, she has to do what’s right for Fang. “Dep la” appears as a term for “friend” yet is used sarcastically. Later, when they meet again, as Raya is explaining to Sisu that the gem pieces are being held by “a bunch of no good binturis” (00:33:15), using the word “binturi” to signify traitor and enemy, Namaari appears from the shadows and says that binturi is not a nice way to describe an old friend. When contextualising Sisu regarding the identity of Namaari, Raya describes her as “a backstabbing binturi that broke the world” (00:35:20). Raya attributes the fault for the state of the world to Namaari’s existence and the only fault Raya plays is trusting Namaari. In Spine, Raya tells her companions that she knows “how to push Namaari’s buttons” (00:58:35), and she meets Namaari calling her “princess undercut” (00:59:28). As Namaari orders her army to go against Raya, Raya provokes Namaari “I knew you couldn’t handle rolling solo. You’re nothing without your band” (00:59:39) and as she receives the provocation, she tells the army to stand down. Even though during their encounters they are hostile, sarcastic and provocative towards each other, when Namaari talks to her mother about Raya, she warns her mother to not underestimate Raya, showing that she recognises Raya as a worthy opponent. In their last battle, as the Druun invades Fang and Raya’s friends need her, Tong says “Raya is blinded by her own rage” (01:19:52). While Namaari starts their last conflict with “let’s finish this, binturi” (01:19:12), in the middle of it she says, “I never meant for any of this to happen” (01:21:23). Raya screams that Namaari is a liar, and Namaari cries saying that Sisu trusted Namaari and if Raya had done the same,

Sisu would have not died (“do whatever you want. But you’re as much to blame for Sisu’s death as I am” (01:21:40)). By the end, when Tong and Boun do not trust Namaari to give her the gem pieces, Raya says “then let me take the first step” (01:24:36), gives Namaari her piece and is turned into stone. When the Druun is destroyed, and everyone is coming to life, Raya looks at Namaari surprised and they are both slightly emotional, with Namaari crying as she sees Sisu back.

Both of them speak as leaders to their people, even if differently. As the princess protagonist, Raya displays stereotypically positive characteristics when talking to her friends by being polite and appreciative, as she thanks them for their help, elevates their good actions (e.g., “that was awesome!” Raya tells Tuk Tuk (00:04:39); “good work, Captain Boun” Raya tells Boun (00:57:56)), compliments them (e.g., when Raya tells Boun that he is a smart kid), does not force them into doing things and politely says please when she wants to convince the team. Raya speaks and laughs with her teammates as equals and listens to their experiences and perspectives, being the best example when they all have a different plan of how to obtain Fang’s gem piece. At times, Raya is altruistic to save the rest of her friends (e.g., in Spine, Raya tells them to run while she would face Namaari), at other times, she tries to act as a “lone rider” and asks them to just stay put so she can do her plan as she imagined (e.g., both in Talon and Spine, Raya asks them to stay in the boat) – Sisu is deviant and never listens – and, finally, in their last challenge in Fang, the plan involves everyone. While Raya used to be funny when interacting with her father in the past, in the present she delivers a more serious talk and throughout the film, Sisu confronts Raya about her trust issues (“You really got some trust issues” (00:38:46)) and it is an ongoing debate with different moments working in favour of each Raya and Sisu’s perspectives.

Nonetheless, Namaari also deals with her own army during her journey. Once a male warrior refers to Raya as “Benja’s daughter” (00:29:06) and he says she is good as dead, suggesting their search should end. Namaari asserts her power not by talking but by putting him on the ground and asking if anyone else wants to question their mission. There is a clear difference between Namaari and Raya, as Namaari is leading an actual army and giving orders, and sometimes recurring to violence, while Raya is guiding a group of random people who manage to come together and is treating them as equals.



As to how the power structure operates, both males and females are called chief and warriors, being the most striking example Chief Benja, Raya's father, and Chief Virana, Namaari's mother. It is also important to note how Chief Beja addresses her daughter Raya and how Chief Virana addresses her daughter Namaari. Chief Benja is caring when talking with Raya, always respecting her and giving her space to develop her skills. When they are training, Raya is very witty as she acknowledges that it is Chief Benja's duty to stop her, yet he will not manage. Chief Benja rapidly replies "don't mistake spirit for skill, young one" (00:05:48). Even then, Raya remains confident in her skills and ends up winning that fight, and funnily tells her father to not beat himself too much as he gave his best. Chief Benja congratulates Raya ("you did good dewdrop" (00:07:03)) and says "Raya, Princess of Heart, my daughter you are now a Guardian of the Dragon Gem" (00:07:32). After this Raya equates her and his father as "the two baddest blades" (00:08:32). As they prepare to receive the other lands, Raya is ready to fight with them, and Chief Benja tries to teach her that the way to solve the conflict is through sharing a meal with them and he explains that they are only enemies because they believe Heart guarding the gem brings them prosperity. Raya immediately says it doesn't and Chief Benja replies: "they assume it does, just like we assume things about them" (00:10:10). Raya and her father do not share many scenes, yet their relationship seems to be healthy, and they are very fond of each other. When Chief Benja is weak and soon to be petrified, he gives Raya a gem piece and he says he trusts she will not give up on unifying the people. He says "I love you, my dewdrop" (00:19:27) and pushes her over the bridge into the river while he is turned into stone. Raya refers to Chief Benja as "ba", which appears as a caring word for "father", and she goes through the film remembering his dream of unifying Kumandra. When Raya reunites with her father in the end, she calls him "ba", he calls her "dewdrop", they run towards each other and hug while crying (01:33:08)

The relationship Namaari has with her mother Chief Virana might appear to be colder when compared to the previous as when Namaari and her army lose track of Raya at first, Namaari says that instead of following them to Talon, she wants to go back to Fang to speak with Chief Virana, meaning her mother. However, when Namaari is back with her mother, she calls her "mother" and Virana says "my little morning mist, it's good to see you home" (00:51:56), showing affection. As Namaari explains Raya's

plans and asks for access to the royal army to stop Raya, Chief Virana reminds her that all that they have accomplished was made by smart decisions, not emotional ones, defining emotion as a bad thing. As they discuss the subject, Virana tells Namaari “you’re truly growing into the leader I raised you to be” (00:53:00) and asks for the general to prepare the royal army to be under “my daughter’s command” (00:53:05). However, in the end, as Namaari is marvelled by the sight of Sisu, her vision of saving the world clashes with Chief Virana’s as to Virana it is important for Fang to be one land that saves everyone. Therefore, Virana casts Namaari aside (e.g., Namaari asks “what are you going to do” and Virana replies “that’s no longer your concern, my love” (01:12:32))

Still related to the power structures and class struggle, besides the visuals of abundance that are present in Heart, while they are eating at the feast, Raya asks Namaari if she prefers rice or stew, and she says she has not had rice in a while because there is none in Fang.

Another relevant point regarding language usage is in the way the characters convey their goals because while it may seem that Namaari and Chief Virana are only worried about saving their people while Raya wants to save the whole Kumandra, that version would not be completely true. Raya wants to save all the lands and bring them together as part of her father’s dream, but multiple times she refers that she wants to bring her father back. For instance, when Raya and Sisu discover that reassembling the pieces together would send the Druun away, Raya says that it would bring her “ba” back, to what Sisu adds “and bring all of Kumandra back” (00:28:22). Additionally, towards the end, as Raya is growing more sceptical of people, she reinstates that she no longer cares about unifying Kumandra and that the only thing important to her is bringing her father back. In a way, Raya, as the heroine, also has her own motivations besides being altruist and wanting to save everyone. And even when wanting to save everyone she is doing so to honour her father’s wishes (e.g., in the end, Sisu says to Chief Benja “Chief Benja, your daughter did you proud” (01:33:42)), as throughout the film it is always really hard for her to trust or understand the ways of the other lands.

As this is a very female-centric story, most interactions are among female characters. Although there are some male characters such as Boun and Tong. Boun is a young boy

that lost his family to the Druun, he knows how to cook, is funny and does not get offended when Raya does not trust him in the beginning. Tong is a giant that looks and talks in a stereotypically masculine way (e.g., “I was born and bred to do only one thing. To invoke fear and to crush the skulls of my enemies!” (00:57:04)). At first, he appears brute, but he is also lonely and missing his village, as he was the only survivor of Spine. Even if Boun and Tong’s presence is not abundant, as male characters they prove to be emotionally available (e.g., as Raya says that it would be nice to share a meal with her father again, Boun replies “I know what you mean”, as he misses his sister. Tong wants to see his village full again, and he looks at the toddler and says, “and you will be reunited with your family Noi”. Raya is shocked as she did not know her name. Tong points that it is written on her collar “Have none of you never checked? And they think of me as the ruffian” (01:14:50)). The male character that stands out the most is Raya’s father, Chief Benja, as he speaks calmly and thoughtfully, always showing kindness. While he guided Raya into being the woman she is and in choosing the right path and could be said to be a patriarchal trope, when compared to the way Sisu acts and talks, they have the same role for Raya (e.g., at a moment when Sisu is sad and she says, “being people is hard”, Raya reiterates that “the world is broken, and you cannot trust anyone”. Sisu replies that “maybe the world is broken because you cannot trust anyone”. In this moment Raya says “you sound just like my ba” (00:53:53); later on, when Sisu insists that Raya should trust Namaari to unify Kumandra, Raya says “you remind me of him [her father]” to what Sisu answers funnily “Oh yeah? Strong? Good-looking with impeccable hair?”, and Raya says “hopeful” (01:10:21); and in the end, to convince everyone to merge the gem pieces Raya says “it’s not about her [Sisu’s] magic. It’s about trust. That’s why it worked [in the first time, with Sisu and her dragon brothers and sisters]. That’s why we can do it too. By doing the one thing Sisu wanted us to do. What my ba wanted us to do. To finally trust each other and fix this” (01:24:06)), and Sisu is present throughout most of the film while Chief Benja is not.

#### 6.6.9. *Music as propaganda*

Most princess films produced by Disney include “music as propaganda” which immediately facilitates the audience to take on a new symbolic identity by singing the songs repeatedly. However, in *Raya and the Last Dragon*, just like in *Brave* (Andrews

& Chapman, 2012), there are no songs. While this is not an immediate deal-breaker, it can also explain why certain princesses are more popular than others since songs help to establish an immediate connection with the characters and film.

#### *6.6.10. Arousal of emotions*

Lastly for the (11) “arousal of emotions”, *Raya and the Last Dragon* definitely tries to do it by developing a story around family and loss. So, while for a child it might be incredibly sad to see Sisu die on screen, for an adult it might be emotional to see Tong returning to his village full of people, Noi finding her mother, Boun reuniting with his family and Raya reuniting with her father in the end. Additionally, with the trust trope, the film also evokes empathy when learning the stories of Boun, Noi and Tong, as they have lost either their family or their home, which also makes the audience connect more with these characters. Besides these sensible emotions, in the fighting scenes, with the sound and visuals, the film definitely invites the audience to be excited and curious.

## 7. Discussion

This chapter summarises the most relevant findings of the analysis and discusses them, firstly, against previous research, and secondly, regarding their implications, looking at the “audience reaction to various techniques” and at “effects and evaluation”, the eighth and tenth aspects presented by Jowett and O’Donnell’s (2015) propaganda analysis model.

### 7.1. Discussion of the key findings

*Raya and the Last Dragon* presents two princesses, Raya and Namaari, whose bodies are both desexualised and able to fight. The film addresses them as complex characters pointing to their socio-economic backgrounds as a shaping factor in their different personalities. As a protagonist, Raya is curious, resourceful and confident in her skills. Moreover, there is Sisu, the dragon, and Chief Virana, the mother of Namaari, who play relevant roles, making for a film filled with powerful women that drive the plot. Women are the ones that speak for almost the entirety of the film, and they rarely talk about men, except when Raya remembers her father. The focus on women and the relationships and dialogues between women is a great step, especially when compared to Aurora only having eighteen lines in her film, *The Sleeping Beauty*. Additionally, as opposed to the usual male companion, Sisu as the silly female sidekick shows that women can be funny and, as far as a dragon goes, still have a stereotypically feminine appearance. The sidekick companions ultimately help the protagonist on her journey and in making decisions. In this regard, *Raya and the Last Dragon* took a step forward seeing that even the more recent films *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013) and *Moana* (Clements & Musker, 2016) had Olaf and Maui, respectively, as male companions.

With a world where woman and man are seen as equal, the film puts women in prestigious positions without constantly having to prove to society they are worthy of them. While this is the main ideology that transpires in the film, some tropes and stereotypes that are present in previous films continue to be here, even if subverted. As the actual context of the filmmakers is not one where all feminist goals have been achieved, it makes sense that their flawed ideological beliefs still inspire gendered stereotypes based on patriarchy, that then appear in the film.

While *Raya and the Last Dragon* still plots woman against woman (as seen in *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Tangled*), it subverts the enemy trope in a way that focuses on the importance of female friendship and trust. As the film also takes romantic interest out of the picture, one wonders, if instead of plotting a woman against a woman, had it been a man against Raya, would the lack of romance would be the same. Seeing that the trope of enemies becoming lovers is widely used in storytelling and the way Raya and Namaari address each other provocatively could be interpreted as flirting, it is difficult not to wonder. Additionally, with Namaari's queer appearance, *Raya and the Last Dragon* could be seen as yet another instance of queer coding and queer baiting (as seen in *Frozen*), a way of appearing gay-friendly without risking losing a heteronormative audience and international profit – if someone identifies queer tropes that is fine, but if someone does not it is also okay as nothing is explicit. As Raya and Namaari's relationship is the ultimate key to saving the world, this was definitely a missed opportunity for queerness, yet a chance at female friendship.

Talking about missed chances, one might note that there is no mention of romantic love or marriage leading to children to put their care into family and friends, similar to *Moana*. While Elsa from *Frozen* and Merida from *Brave* do not have a romantic interest, Merida's personality surrounds rebelling against the marriage institution and Elsa shares a film with her sister, Anna, and her relationships. However, the role of men in *Raya and the Last Dragon* is still, to some degree, problematic as it upholds the trope of a princess not having a mother, and, Raya, whom children aspire to be when they grow up, comes from her father's education. Not only did the film keep this trope, but it also emphasised it multiple times as Raya's motivation to go on her journey was to bring her father back and, in the process, make his dream of unifying Kumandra come true (similar to Tiana in *The Princess and the Frog* as she pursues her father's dream to own a restaurant). As previously stated, although Sisu was Raya's female companion and guide throughout the film, she was compared to Raya's father on multiple occasions. Princesses have been completely deprived of their mothers in *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, *The Little Mermaid*, *The Beauty and The Beast*, *Aladdin*, and *Pocahontas* (but not of their fathers in the last four films mentioned). In *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Mulan*, *Tangled*, *The Princess and The Frog* and *Moana* mothers do not have a relevant

role. Finally, in *Frozen* the mother was killed alongside the father. This trope perpetuates the idea of a patriarchal lineage instead of a matriarchal one. It attributes princesses' heroic characteristics to their fathers, and it does not value the relationship between mother and daughter. *Raya and the Last Dragon* could have easily made the change as it was not hard to give Namaari, as the antagonist, a mother with an important role, Chief Virana. In this regard, it has also to be noted that it was still not *Raya and the Last Dragon* that introduced children to a positive depiction of older women, which is definitely a point of improvement for the next films.

In terms of physical appearance, the film only presents able-bodied female characters who are all thin and elegant, and with clear skin. As mentioned, the clothes are appropriate for the activities they engage in and fit them in a way that does not sexualise their body through the male gaze (see Mulvey cited in e.g., Sassatelli, 2011), which is seen as an improvement in comparison to previous films (see e.g., Liu & Yang, 2021). Adding to this, Raya is never afraid of getting dirt on her clothes while exploring which might inspire young girls to do the same – a deciding factor as seen by Coyne et al. (2016).

As earlier explored, the film presents different ways a woman can look, from Sisu, a very stereotypically feminine dragon to Namaari, with less stereotypically feminine facial and hair traits and more stereotypically feminine accessories. However, as children mostly aspire to be like the princess protagonist, Raya will set the tone with her stereotypically feminine long hair and stereotypically feminine face, and youthful appearance.

As being overly emotional is a stereotype associated with what it means to be a woman, it has to be addressed that Raya, the protagonist, is usually guided by rage and revenge caused by her mistrust, and throughout the film she learns to shift those emotions into empathy after learning the stories of her companions who lost their home and family to the Druun. While Raya gets sad, she is never seen crying, except when she is reunited with her father in the end, crying from happiness. The only time emotions are mentioned in *Raya and the Last Dragon* is when Chief Virana classifies having emotions as being weak. However, throughout the film this view is contradicted, as her daughter, Namaari displays emotion and cries several times, without it taking any of her

strength away from her. It is also worth noting that Namaari is the female character that cries the most, a trait stereotypically feminine, and she is the one who least fits the feminine gender stereotype. Hence, the film provides different representations when it comes to being emotional. Even if the Raya herself is more closed off due to the betrayal, Namaari proves to her mother that emotions do not have to make a person weaker. Therefore, subverting the stereotypical trope of emotions being something that women go through that makes them less than men.

While the ideology presented of a world that values people equally regardless of their gender, does not escape all the problematic tropes, it provides young girls with the story of a girl who is powerful because she is a warrior who happens to be a girl. While Mulan had to dress as a man to fight and to prove and empower herself, Raya is just existing as expected of her. Additionally, Chief Virana wearing a dress, as stereotypically associated with femininity, does not influence her authority, showing that women in power do not need to invalidate their femininity.

## ***7.2. Implication of the key findings***

It is not easy to determine if the purpose of the propaganda was fulfilled or not, as the purpose of the film is not explicitly known. Firstly, regarding profit, the film seemed to do well in the conditions it was released. Secondly, it was praised by the critics, yet generated controversial debate among the Southeast Asian community. While this debate was among adults, it should not be discarded, as they can try, for instance, to organise a boycott, impacting the way the film is received and impacting future productions. Thirdly, as for how it might impact the way children behave, talk, or think, falls out of the scope of this thesis. From the Literature Review one can assume that it would impact, yet a specific study carved for this case would be necessary to assess. Only by conducting a separate study, could one assess if the way the Southeast Asian community is represented is being taken as a fact by those watching; or if the way Raya comes to represent women influences the way children act upon gender roles.

As part of the evaluation process, one needs to look at the techniques used and at the possibilities of choosing different ones. One aspect that can be referred to in this regard is the fact that *Raya and the Last Dragon* does not incorporate songs as the previous



films do (*Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013) being the most successful example) which might make it more forgettable, as these songs tend to live on and spread quickly.

Finally, to evaluate if the outcome would have been the same if there was no propaganda is also difficult to determine. However, if *Raya and the Last Dragon* is followed by Disney Princess films that share similarities with it, the effects they might provoke on children would probably only have happened thanks to this film, as this has been a trend throughout the franchise.

## 8. Conclusion

“What is propaganda if not the effect to alter the picture to which men respond to substitute one social pattern for another?” (Lippmann, 1922, p.26)

As oversimplistic empowerment narratives of silent women or women who lose their voice to a man are conflictual with nowadays’ reality and are no longer relatable, comes the need to adjust and update the propagandistic messages to be in accordance with the current cultural stereotypes embedded in society – integration propaganda. The changes The Walt Disney Company does within its Disney Princess franchise come from a focus on profit and therefore, trying to appeal to the largest audience possible.

In *Raya and the Last Dragon*, women have their arcs and missions to accomplish, and they are not related to the fact that they are women. As Kumandra is a world that recognizes women as men as equal, the characters happen to be female, which is part of their identity but not their defining trait, encouraging young girls to identify with this, not setting limits to their performance based on their gender.

However, while gender might not seem to play a role, gendered stereotypes are still present due to the flawed ideological beliefs of the filmmakers – sociological propaganda. The alternative Disney has found to representing women as stereotypically damsels in distress, seems to be representing them as stereotypically masculine. Raya fights and can manage things by herself, she does not dance nor cry, she despises dresses and, ultimately, as her father wanted, she is the saviour of Kumandra. Therefore, the message the film implies that for a woman to save the world she has to comply to stereotypically masculine actions and traits. Of course, in Kumandra, this way of behaving seems to be the only possibility – meaning, everyone behaves this way, regardless of their gender – so it is not like when Mulan changed her stereotypically feminine clothes and actions to be like a man and save China.

From a very Western perspective on gender and representation, *Raya and the Last Dragon* is a good addition to the franchise, giving it a chance to be promoted as equal to the other Disney Princess films and gain media attention. Disney still has many steps to take forward, especially when it comes to cultural and racial representation, as clearly

mixing eleven countries and their culture and traditions is not the best way to introduce an audience to underrepresented cultures. It is a step forward, nonetheless, as the visual appearance of the characters still resonates with the community they represent. Moreover, as Disney has a significant impact on Western media, it could open more opportunities in this regard. While one can applaud the step taken, one can also keep asking for better of a company with money and resources. Disney as a cultural superpower should be held accountable for the representations they depict, as the stereotypes present can influence how children behave and think, regarding gender roles, and intersectionality.

### ***8.1. Limitations of the thesis***

As flawed ideological beliefs have been mentioned throughout the thesis, the researcher cannot escape their own flawed ideological beliefs. The main limitation of this thesis has to do with it relying on a qualitative analysis based on interpretivism, being the researcher conditioned by their own subjectivity, positionality, and privilege. While this has been addressed throughout the thesis, by keeping a narrow Western perspective, it needs to be reminded in the end. Personal biases cannot be entirely avoided, and neither can the historical, political, and social lenses of today through which the content is being analysed. Both art and research are contextual in time and history, in the moments of making it and receiving it, being interpreted in the light of the social and cultural codes given at a certain moment in time.

An additional limitation of the thesis is associated with the propaganda analysis model used. As mentioned, this was not a model conceived to apply to filmmaking hence some difficulties were found as most aspects of the model require investigation that goes beyond the viewing of the film, except for the “special techniques to maximise effect”. The benefit of using this model stands as it is the most straightforward and simple propaganda analysis model to apply.

### ***8.2. Contributions for future research***

This Master’s thesis brings interdisciplinary forward by combining propaganda studies with film studies and gender studies. As mentioned, most studies on the effects of

media, do not coin said media as propaganda, which has made it hard for propaganda analysis to establish itself as a field of analysis. Hopefully, this thesis might aid in that regard.

By applying propaganda studies and recognising the impact the films that children watch can have on their education, it leaves space for much research in the field. For instance, as the times evolve, so children's media consumption habits do. With the increasing amount of time children spend watching YouTube videos it could also be fruitful to investigate what kind of gendered messages and stereotypes are present in the most-watched videos.

Additionally, by choosing *Raya and the Last Dragon* as its case study, this thesis also updates the field of literature dedicated to analysing the gendered stereotypes present in the films of the Disney Princess franchise, in terms of the constructions of what it means to be a woman and of femininity. To this extent, complementary studies can be done, focused on the construction of what it means to be a man and of masculinity or comparing Western stereotypes with Southeast Asian stereotypes.

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