

How do popular film companies uphold the image of minorities and women and do they have a responsibility to do so?

Popular and prominent film and media companies have shaped the world, whether it is the Superhero genre in the twenty-first century or the influence of Disney princesses for nearly one hundred years. From 'Snow White' in the 1930s, to 'Iron Man' in 2009, films and movies have influenced generations. But do these powerful companies hold up under scrutiny, and more importantly, as their target audience is so young, are these films setting a good example of gender and race stereotypes, minorities and the 'role' of women? This essay will look at only official, original Disney princesses, their remakes, 'Moana', 'Frozen' and all Marvel feature-length films up to Endgame.

Disney Princesses are some of the most influential figures on young girls across the globe, yet so many of the original films these princesses debuted in are completely inappropriate and culturally insensitive. The official list of Disney Princesses consists of Snow White, Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty (or Aurora) and make up the 'Classic Era' of princesses; the Little Mermaid (or Ariel), Belle, Jasmine, Pocahontas and Mulan make up the 'Renaissance Era' of princesses; last of all the 'Modern Era', consists of Tiana, Moana, Merida, Rapunzel, Anna and Elsa. All these characters inspire little girls across the world - but is that always a good thing? To see how Disney has evolved through nearly a century of its princesses, considering them in the context of their respective times of release and remake is essential.

The Classic Era, the first of the categories, is made up of the first three Disney princesses. Disney stayed mostly true to the original fairy tales for 'Snow White' and 'Cinderella', but changed 'Sleeping Beauty'. One of the first lines Snow White says, and the first line of the first song in the entire film, is Snow White singing, 'I'm wishing for the one I love to find me'. This presents a very unhealthy image: little girls need a Prince to be happy. Although the gender of Snow White's 'love' is not specified, due to the culture of the 1930s there can be no doubt that Snow White is referring to a man. Additionally, although appropriate to the views and beliefs of the 1930s, the original 'Snow White' presents an unhealthy image of youth being morally good and old being morally bad - inappropriate messaging for today's modern era, where Disney princesses are looked up to by little girls across the globe.

Cinderella is equally admired. However, the reason some people disagree with this movie is that they say Cinderella is too passive. An example of this is the website, Ladies of Disney, which writes, "Cinderella patiently puts up with the abuse from her family and never is seen to fight back in any way. Even when they assault her and rip apart the first dress she made for the ball, she does nothing but cry and wring her hands. It takes the magical intervention of a fairy godmother and some very fortuitous timing for her to meet the prince who decides to marry her (based on a dance and her beauty)."¹ Yet Cinderella, if her actions across the film are analysed, is mostly active, and she is caring, kind and optimistic. When the audience perceives Cinderella as passive they are, in fact, assuming that the traits of Cinderella, traditionally seen as feminine qualities, are 'weak' and to be more aggressive, louder or confrontational, traits traditionally seen as masculine, would be 'strong'. Why do women need to imitate 'masculine qualities', or conform to an idea of 'strength' at all? Women can be quiet and strong.

One of the biggest problems with the last film in the Classic Era, 'Sleeping Beauty', is that Sleeping Beauty is not in it, or is asleep, for most of it. Sleeping Beauty only has eighteen minutes of screen

time in the whole seventy-five minute film and only has eighteen lines; she does not say anything past the forty minute mark. This seems to imply that she is helpless or otherwise powerless, both literally and physically.

There is also issue with the fact that both Snow White and Sleeping Beauty are kissed while unconscious or in a dead-like state, and without consent. All of these princesses are extremely reactive, in the way that they don't do much, the plot mostly happens to them. In their more recent adaptations, these problems are 'solved'. In the 2012 film 'Mirror Mirror', Snow White learns to fight and takes down a monster, but this ties back to Cinderella, and the problem of 'strength'. Why does Snow White have to learn to fight in order to be seen as strong? Review site 'Time Out' (2012) says that 'Even the wicked stepmother (Julia Roberts) in this visually stunning live action 'Snow White' is not so much evil incarnate as a Bitch with a capital B. A cougar.' The film appears to be trying to convince the audience that is more feminist than its original, but it cannot overcome its fear of being sexist – it tries so hard to avoid being offensive that the film in fact turns all its characters into the same dull, bland figure – there is little emotional investment in the characters because there is nothing to invest in. The audience knows who the characters are simply because of names and the fact that they have heard the story before, not because of personality. There is no sense of plot, adventure or tension. As 'Time Out' puts it, 'Like conkers, scaring children seems to have fallen foul of 'elf 'n' safety touchy-feely-ness.'² The token feminism works against the film. As well, in this remake, technically Snow White kisses the Prince against his will. However, the remake does solve a lot of other problems, including removing the song mentioned earlier, and getting to know the prince instead of meeting once and then he kisses her (or she kisses him, as it turns out).

In the remake of 'Cinderella' ('Cinderella' – 2015), Cinderella again meets the Prince beforehand and the audience spend some time with Cinderella's mother before she dies. In the Sleeping Beauty remake (Maleficent – 2014), things are altogether different. The film actually follows the villain, 'Maleficent' and the twist is that the kiss of true love does not come from the Prince, but instead from the villain, as the princess and Maleficent develop more of a mother-daughter relationship.

The next Disney Princess Era is the Renaissance Era. Interestingly, Jasmine, from 'Aladdin' is the first non-white princess and every princess before Jasmine except Belle has had blue eyes, with both Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty having blond hair. In fact, in the original songs and script of Aladdin, there were a few offensive lines and there is the fact that Jasmine is still portrayed as a possession whose only purpose is to be married off. As Yara Alawi writes for 'Affinity Magazine', "The part which worries me the most is the song Arabian Nights. There's a lyric which states 'where they cut off your ear if they don't like your face it's barbaric but hey it's home' Barbaric? Home? Disney is just obviously implying that Middle Eastern homes are barbaric."³ (2017).

The Little Mermaid's adaptations from the Hans Christian Anderson tale were few and most of the 'Little Mermaid' is fine. However, if the film is looked at closely, a man has power over Ariel at all times, and the song 'Poor Unfortunate Souls' tells women that men want silent women/partners. Also, in the film, the male characters speak more than the female characters, and this is a film with a female protagonist and villain.

In the next film, 'Beauty and the Beast', there have also been some decisions that have not aged well. Disney has changed the story in quite a few ways: in the film, an enchantress puts the beast under a spell for not offering her shelter on a stormy night while she was disguised as an old woman. The story glosses over the fact that at this point in time, the Beast would have been eleven. His parents are not mentioned, but what parents would allow their only son to invite a stranger into their home? The

logic is not there. Belle's 'love' for the Beast could be argued to be Stockholm syndrome, a mental disorder where a person in captivity usually develops attachment to or dependency on their captors.

But here lies the fine line between logical, critical suggestions and over-rationalisation. Fairy tales cannot be faulted for simply for being a fairy tale. They are not meant to be rationalised and grounded in complete truth, they must be examined with the knowledge that not everything will make sense or have a meaning or be a hidden metaphor. However, when a large and influential company adapts an old story, it should adapt it so the story is no longer offensive, but still keep the plot and characters, unless one of these is particularly offensive. Diversity should not come at the cost of storytelling. Most of the lack of diversity and the abundance of offensive stereotyping are due to world views and culture at the time the story was produced.

'Pocahontas' is the worst film in this list, and one of the few based on truth. Pocahontas really was a Native American who really met a man called John Smith. The twist is that in the film, Pocahontas is portrayed as a young adult falling in love with a man who is twenty eight. In real life, Pocahontas was ten, and involved with a settlement that probably went on to kill thousands of Native Americans. She was kidnapped, held hostage, taken to England before being impregnated and dying upon the return trip to her homeland. It is the most culturally inappropriate story Disney has to offer, including the 1998 film 'Mulan' which is less progressive than the third century ballad it was based upon.

'The Ballad of Mulan' is a third century text and Disney decided that the changes they should make were: her family does not support her going into the army; to get to the army Mulan runs away in the middle of the night, and they gave Mulan a love interest. Altogether, this means that the original third century ballad of Mulan is more progressive than the 1998 film. This is especially disappointing, as the film deals with serious issues such as warfare and gender roles (in the film, Mulan has to disguise as a man in order to join the army). Most of these films either haven't been remade as live-action yet (Mulan, Ariel and Pocahontas) or are much more appropriate for the modern age.

The last and most recent age of Disney princesses is the Modern Era, which is going to include Moana, Anna and Elsa who are not part of the official Disney Princess list. It took seventy-one years, from the release of 'Snow White' to the release of 'the Princess and the Frog', for an African American princess to take to the big screen. This film is actually very different to the original story and the previous Disney films. It portrays a poor, career-driven woman called Tiana, who is not at all interested in finding her 'Prince Charming'. The only similarity between the Disney film and the original Brothers Grimm tale is that the frog, or frogs in the Disney film, is transformed back to human-form by a kiss. Disney has managed to adapt a fairy tale, modernise it and ensure that it is not racially offensive. This proves the point that diversity does not come at the cost of storytelling. Some people, however, have a problem with the fact that the first black princess spends most of the film as a frog and that her prince is not black, and the only other main characters that are black men are Tiana's dead father and the villain. One person of this opinion is Dana Matthews - writing for 'Odyssey', she says, "It's just such a shame that we didn't get to enjoy much of the beautiful black queen on the screen. Within the first 20 minutes of the film, both Naveen and Tiana are turned into frogs, and spend the bulk of the movie that way... learning a little more about the origins of the Princess name (Naveen is an Indian name, meaning 'new'), and languages the Prince speaks (French, English, and Italian), that [Naveen's kingdom] probably has Eurasian roots. Couple this with the representation of the Prince at Disney theme parks, and you see that our first black Princess did not have black prince. While the interracial relationship is a perspective that speaks to many, the only group that has less representation than the black women in these types of films, is the black men. The only other black men you see in the film are Tiana's deceased father and Dr. Facilier. Though the Shadow Man makes

for a great villain, I think African American men have been vilified by the media quite enough.”⁴ (2017). Add this to the recent #BlackLivesMatter protests, and it is easy to see why people were upset. However, Bobbi Misick writing for ‘Essence’ says, “There were still complaints over Princess Tiana’s love interest: The frog prince is not Black. Truth be told, throughout much of the movie he and his fair lady are frogs. He has a Middle Eastern name, Naveen, is voiced by a Brazilian actor, Bruno Campos, and comes from a made up place, Maldonia. Critics have cried, ‘What’s wrong with a Black prince?’, while others rebut, ‘What’s wrong with portraying multi-racial love?’ ”⁵(2009).

Another princess in this category is Rapunzel and, as with most Disney films, all the bad guys are all unattractive or older, and all the good guys are all young and pretty, which gives children the unhealthy idea that they need to be pretty to be happy. It’s not the best idea, but the pattern is in almost every Disney film, so at this point, unfortunately, it is not noticed as much. This is simply not acceptable. Children have enough to deal with, with social media giving them the image of the ‘perfect’, fake body; they do not need it from Disney as well. There is no progress regarding the villain here, either. The first four Disney villains were all elderly, unmarried spinsters, and Mother Gothel, Tangled’s villain, is also an unmarried spinster whose motivation is to be young and beautiful.

The next film, ‘Brave’ (2006), is set in Medieval Scotland, and, unlike most Disney films before it, ‘Brave’ is an original story written by its director Brenda Chapman, who was inspired by her relationship with her own daughter. The reason this film is so different to all other princesses before it is because it was not produced by just Walt Disney Studios - it was mainly produced by Pixar, who Disney had bought. Merida, the protagonist of ‘Brave’, was soon added to the official Disney Princess list. Despite this, the film still had critics, some of which had good points. Erik Wecks, writing for ‘Wired’ says, “You don't have to look any farther than this trailer to see that men in the film are portrayed as incompetent, uncouth, and ill-mannered, with no more care in the world than their own personal glory or the glory of their clan. I don't have a problem with any given man being portrayed in this light. That is just good characterization. Some men can and do behave in this manner. My problem is that these characteristics are applied to almost every man in the film. In this way, they become characteristics of the male gender, rather than traits of some individual men.”⁶ (2012). No gender should be portrayed as positive at the expense of the other. Why do films have to punch down on one gender or group of people in order to raise another?

Disney’s tale of ‘Frozen’ is very different to the original story it was based upon, which was ‘The Snow Queen’ by Hans Christian Anderson; in fact, the only similarity to the original is that there is a character who is a woman who has ice powers. This film’s main point is that an act of true love doesn’t have to be a kiss and does not have to be romantic. Yet, why do audiences have those assumptions? Because they were beaten over the head with it by Disney! The concept of true love’s kiss would not be as widely spread in popular culture without Disney. In this progressive film, the villain turns out to be the ‘Prince Charming’, and the act of true love turns out to be sisterly love. The heroine also saves herself, and although there is a love interest, it is not the focus for the film or the reason for the adventure.

The last film in this Disney category is ‘Moana’, a film based in ancient Polynesia and centred on a character called Moana. The story is inspired by parts of ancient Polynesian mythology. Despite this the story is original, as is its main character. There is a point to be made in the fact that Maui, a renowned hero in Polynesian myth, was turned into a self-centred American. Although some things do fall short in this film, ‘Moana’, ‘Frozen’, ‘the Princess and the Frog’, ‘Tangled’ and ‘Merida’ are proof that Disney is trying, and when comparing those films to the Classic Era of Disney, it is clear that there is no denying how far Disney has come.

The other influential company, which is also one of the largest film companies of this generation, is Marvel. This company, it is worth noting, is owned by Disney, so maybe there is not much difference between the two. Starting with 'Iron Man' in 2008 and ending with 'Avengers: Endgame' in 2019, how does this company treat the female superheroes and prominent characters, and how do their appearances and standalone films stack up against those of their male co-workers? Their first female comic book superhero was a character called Ms. Marvel, who eventually turned into Captain Marvel. There is a thirty-eight year difference between the printing of Marvel's first superhero, and the printing of Marvel's first female superhero. As well as this, the costumes female superheroes wore were... scant at best. In many earlier editions, Scarlet Witch, a Marvel superhero, wore basically a bikini with a cape and helmet, while Black Widow sported a tight-fitting, leather all-in-one. Compare that with the men's standard suits of armour and comfortable outfits, there is a clear difference. This essay will not include Wonder Woman or X-men costumes, though some of these are much worse. All in all, before Marvel made its debut onto the big screen, female superheroes had had a rough time.

The first main chapter in Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) history can be divided into three phases. In Phase One there is a pattern. There are four main male characters, including the protagonist, and then there is the girlfriend or love interest of the main character. This pattern follows through in 'Iron Man': the main female character is Pepper Potts, the main character, Tony Stark's, assistant and love interest. There's also Rhodey, Tony's best friend, Obadiah Stain (the villain), and Phil Coulson, a very main side character along with the protagonist, Tony Stark. Pepper Potts does work out who the villain is before anyone else and assists Tony Stark in the final fight, and she is one of the main four characters. However, the character of Tony Stark is a notorious playboy and in the film a female reporter challenges him on the ethics of his weapons-building company. Tony Stark first asks one of his bodyguards if the reporter, a character called Christine Everheart, is cute. When told she is 'ok', Tony Stark turns around and answers her questions, flirting with her the whole time. The scene ends and cuts to Tony Stark and the reporter kissing. The female reporter is objectified. This scene takes a serious character, one who is challenging the protagonist's morals, and then downgrades her by making her nothing more than a one night stand.

In 'The Incredible Hulk', one of the plot points of the film is that the protagonist, Bruce Banner, wants to visit his girlfriend, Bettie Ross. However this character is very one dimensional, as all she does is apparently serve as plot convenience and as Banner's girlfriend. That is the whole character. The other three main male characters are Abomination (the villain), General Ross (another villain) and Iron Man – Tony Stark himself, who also appears at the end. The same pattern can be found in both films that come next. Starting with 'Thor', there are again four main male characters: Thor (the protagonist), Loki (Thor's adopted brother), Odin (Thor and Loki's father) and Erik Selvig, a scientist down on Earth who is investigating Thor's magic hammer. The main female character is Jane Foster, a scientist who is also working on Thor's hammer. Jane does not have much to do with driving the plot forward, and as in many films, Jane and Thor have nothing in common in terms of interests or likes. They are both single and attractive. That is it. And they fall 'madly' in love in just a couple of days; because that is the basis of all strong, healthy relationships! The problem with most films, not just Marvel and Disney, is the fact that the romantic interests tend to serve only as the romantic interest. There is not much else they bring to the story, and sometimes this can make the character seem illogical or one dimensional, especially if their personality doesn't fit with their love interest's - or if things they do go completely against a character's established personality.

The next film, 'Captain America: First Avenger' also follows the same formula. Four main male characters: the protagonist - Steve Rogers/Captain America, a weapons-inventor and genius - Howard Stark, James 'Bucky' Barnes (Steve Rogers' best friend) and Johann Schmidt/Red Skull - the villain.

The one main female character is Peggy Carter, Steve Rogers' love interest and an English secret agent; she is one of the people responsible for deciding to give Steve Rogers the super-soldier serum. However, all of the films mentioned above are not that offensive in terms of language or content and even though there are little-to-no main female characters, there isn't much sexism.

In contrast, 'Iron Man 2' does not hold up so well. A great thing is that there is an additional main female character: Natalia Rushman, who is revealed to be Natasha Romanoff (alias Black Widow) - a SHIELD agent. The problem is that for most of the film Black Widow is portrayed as a great secretary and fighter, yet not much else. Once the reveal is made however, Black Widow disappears for a part of the film, before returning and changing into a very tight, leather catsuit that has a low neck line. This suit would definitely never stretch as much as Black Widow does when she is fighting.

The pattern through all of Phase One does actually break with the last two films, 'Iron Man 2', as discussed above, and 'Marvel's Avengers', which features all the main characters from the above films, as well as Black Widow and Clint Barton (alias Hawkeye, Black Widow's partner who also works for SHIELD). There are two main female characters, in both these film. The two main female characters in 'Marvel's Avengers' are Maria Hill, deputy head of secret organization SHIELD, and Black Widow. One of the most offensive lines uttered in this film is 'mewling quim' spoken by the villain, Loki, and this goes along with a speech where this villain threatens Black Widow with rape and torture. Appallingly, the director, Joss Whedon, has joked that his greatest achievement was getting the line ['mewling quim'] into the Avengers. On the other hand, the line is meant to show the characters of both Loki and Black Widow. Loki, the villain who is called evil multiple times, is sexist, and Black Widow turns the tables when she reveals she has just been interrogating him, using his opinion of women to lure him into giving Black Widow the key to Loki's plan.

In Phase Two, however, there is more difference. Marvel had laid the groundwork and was on its way to becoming a headline name. In Phase Two, there are some films that are less offensive and others are... more so. In 'Age of Ultron' and 'Captain America: Winter Soldier', Black Widow makes comments throughout both films about dating and being a housewife. This matters because even in the most dramatic circumstances in 'Captain America: Civil War', Black Widow will turn to Captain America and make a comment about a random girl and try and persuade him to ask this random girl on a date. In 'Age of Ultron', she picks up Cap's shield and comments:

"I'm always picking up after you boys." Why does the only woman in the Avengers team until 'Age of Ultron', have to continually comment on the dating? However, as the films went on, Black Widows' neckline on her leather suit did get higher. The last film in the Iron Man trilogy, 'Iron Man 3' was one of the worst critically received films in the MCU. It originally had a female villain, but that was changed. It does have Pepper Potts, the love interest, ending up saving the day. However in terms of its impact on the MCS, this film barely exists and its events completely ignored. So... it may as well have not existed. The second Thor film is actually 'Thor: the Dark World'. This film also had little impact on the wider story arc of the MCU; however, it is one of the less sexist films in this universe. 'Ant-Man' and 'Guardians of the Galaxy' are not very sexist, although in 'Ant-Man', the only main woman is the love interest, Hope Pym; in 'Guardians of the Galaxy', there are two main female characters, so a big step up - there is Gamora, the love interest of protagonist Peter Quill, and Nebula, Gamora's sister.

The last chapter in the MCU, Phase Three, is where the solo superhero films really matter. This is because these superheroes will be the main characters of many future films, so the more diverse and multicultural the heroes are, the better the future films are. In 'Doctor Strange', the protagonist has a

car accident and loses his entire lifestyle, which is embodied in his love interest, Christine Palmer, who is light and funny. But like his lifestyle, she leaves him. This does show a good message of healthy relationships - and when a relationship is unhealthy, how to maturely leave it. In 'Spiderman Homecoming', a huge plot twist is that the love interest is the villain's daughter. A problem is that one of the lines spoken by a significant side-character is a line that normalizes porn, for which numerous studies have shown the negative and addictive impact. This is bad, as porn sexualizes women and men in a horrible way, and when five and six year-olds are watching 'Spiderman Homecoming', it can be really harmful.

'Black Panther' is actually one of the first films with a black superhero protagonist. In many films like 'Captain America', 'Captain Marvel', 'Iron Man', and 'Thor' films, there is often a white main protagonist with a black sidekick, which is definitely not progressive. 'Black Panther' is one of the most progressive films ever screened, and with the highest rating of all Marvel films on Rotten Tomatoes, it is clearly a well-made film that shows the diversity of the modern world. The last solo film is also Marvel's first female-led superhero film: 'Captain Marvel'. It only took Marvel eleven years to put a female lead in a film. There are plenty of female characters, and it does not seem to be trying too hard to be a feminist film. Diversity and feminism are, and should not have to be, issues, but it should not feel like a moment, scene or film was made just for the purpose of 'girl power' as that, in itself, is a self-defeating and patronising message.

In 'Thor Ragnarok', the sidekick, Valkyrie, is not a love interest. The main villain, Hela, is a well-developed female villain, not seeking revenge or love. In 'Ant-Man and the Wasp', Ant-Man's love interest becomes a superhero. There is not much to say about this film, as it was neither offensive, nor the golden standard. It was average, and sometimes, that is a good thing, especially compared to earlier Marvel films, such as 'Iron Man'. In 'Captain America: Civil War', it was working with characters already established, so the film itself cannot be faulted for being very male themed. The blame for that lies with earlier films. It should be considered that when Black Panther was introduced, it showed that Marvel is trying to become more diverse. With 'Guardians of the Galaxy: Vol 2', Marvel's audience saw the introduction of yet another female character, Mantis, who is extremely powerful is told by one of the first people she has ever met (a male character) that she is ugly. Repeatedly. The character of Mantis has literally never known anyone apart from one other person her whole life, and when she does meet others, one of them who she tries to befriend, calls her ugly repeatedly. What kind of impression is this to leave on children? This character looks different, therefore she is called ugly. This should not be happening anymore. The character of Mantis is one of four main female characters, two of which are villains, and she is put down throughout the entire film. As well as this, in Marvel 'Avengers: Infinity War' and 'Avengers: Endgame', there is a moment where at least three female superheroes come together to defend or defeat a villain. This screams 'girl power', which as mentioned before can be very patronising and contradictory; both these moments are trying too hard, and being too aware of themselves. This is clearly Marvel trying to be less offensive, but unfortunately it has the opposite effect.

In conclusion, these films are getting better over time, yet with such a young audience, these companies need to understand the responsibility that they have: the media, films and TV greatly influence children and how they view the world. It is acceptable to let children watch the classic films such as 'Snow White' or 'Cinderella', but ensure children know how they should treat minorities, men and women and that sometimes these films aren't always right. Fortunately, Marvel and Disney are taking steps to represent diversity and be more open when regarding race, gender and sexuality. There are no main relationships that are LGBTQ+, and maybe there will be, with time. It is unrealistic expect companies to be perfect, but Disney and Marvel are perfecting and correcting their mistakes.

To finish, yes, popular film companies do have a responsibility to uphold the image of minorities and women and they are beginning to do so. But the critics and the audience must be aware of when representation/portrayals are not acceptable and should take issue with the producers of these films. In the end, the audience has the real power.

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