

(Post)feminist paradoxes

The sensibilities of gender representation in Disney's Frozen

Rudloff, Maja

Published in:
Outskirts (Online)

Publication date:
2016

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (APA):
Rudloff, M. (2016). (Post)feminist paradoxes: The sensibilities of gender representation in Disney's Frozen. *Outskirts (Online)*, 35, 1-20.
http://www.outskirts.arts.uwa.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/2950902/Outskirts-Rudloff.pdf

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain.
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact rucforsk@kb.dk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

(Post)feminist paradoxes: the sensibilities of gender representation in Disney's *Frozen*

Maja Rudloff

Disney's 2013 animated movie *Frozen* has been hugely popular with critics due to its perceived promotion of feminist ideals. In this article, I investigate this claim of the feminist ideals portrayed in *Frozen*, from the perspective of visual and cultural representation, situating my analysis within the context of feminist and postfeminist media studies. Focusing on the signs and cultural codes used to create meanings associated with the movie's main female and male characters, the article is structured around four themes: signs of gender difference, heteronormative romance and female agency, empowerment and sexualisation, and disparities in male/female representations and role models. Emphasising the conflicts and interactions between feminist and postfeminist messages, the analyses reveal that on the surface *Frozen* promotes a narrative of feminist ideals of equality, empowerment and female agency, but conflates them with postfeminist ideals of appearance, self-discipline and strongly gender stereotyped depictions with regard to how the characters look and act. Far from being 'truly feminist', it is concluded that despite popular sentiment to the contrary, Disney still has a long way to go towards promoting egalitarian and diverse representations of gender.

Introduction

It doesn't matter whether it comes by cable, telephone lines, computer or satellite. Everyone's going to have to deal with Disney. (Disney Chief Executive Officer Michael Eisner, cited in Wasco 2001, 222)

Pictures, photographs, films, etc. are addressed to us as their viewers and work upon us by means of winning our identification with those versions of masculinity and femininity which are represented to us. It is a process of constantly binding us into a particular—but always unstable—regime of sexual difference. (Pollock 1988, 35)

Corresponding author:

Maja Rudloff, Roskilde University
Email: mrudloff@ruc.dk

Fulfilling the prophecy of former Walt Disney Company CEO Michael Eisner (1984–2005), Disney products have become an influential, if not unavoidable part of most western children's lives. *Frozen*, the most recent addition to Disney's hugely popular and profitable line of princess feature films, is one of its biggest successes. Ranked as the highest-grossing animated film to date, *Frozen* has won several prizes and been heralded for its beautiful animation, audio-visual effects and catchy song lyrics (IMDb 2016). The movie and its characters are among the most beloved in Disney princess movies but are also, from the perspective of gender, the least criticised.

When Disney relaunched its princess features with such movies as *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) and *Aladdin* (1992)—and thus returned to its trademark visualisations of European fairy tales in feature-length animations, such as *Snow White* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950) and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959)—the company initially claimed that, in these new features, it sought to break away from age-old stereotypes of passive, submissive female characters and to reflect more modern, contemporary, agentic and realistic role models for young viewers (Culhane 1992, 10; Thomas 1997, 182). However, these 'updated' movies have received significant criticism for their archetypal, conservative, patriarchal, sexist and even racist representations of gender and ethnicity, featuring love-hungry princesses with no real control over their destinies (Bell, Haas and Sells 1995; Cummins 1995; England, Descartes and Collier-Meek 2011; Stover 2013; Towbin et al. 2004; Trites 1991).

Frozen, in contrast, seems to have avoided such harsh criticism. The film tells the story of the young Princess Anna, whose engagement to Prince Hans sets off a series of events that leads her on a quest with the ice-carver Kristoff to find her estranged sister, Queen Elsa, who has inadvertently used her supernatural powers to trap the kingdom of Arendelle in an eternal winter (Solomon 2013). The movie has received mostly positive reviews from audiences and popular critics for its display of powerful, agentic female characters and its privileging of sisterhood over a romantic male–female love narrative. Lauded for its breaking away from stereotypical gender portrayals and storyline, *Frozen* has been labelled the "first feminist fairy-tale" and "the most progressive Disney movie ever" (Luttrell 2014). Arguing for the movie's potential to set new role models for young girls, one critic proclaimed that "Elsa is not like other Disney princesses. ... Instead she is the female equivalent of a superhero like Batman or Spider-Man" (Merrick 2015), while another critic declared that, "Because *Frozen* differentiates itself from past princess

films and slams the door on the concepts of 'perfect princess,' superficial romance, needing a prince, and the morally perfect hero, we are able to rethink female role models within popular culture" (Feder 2014).

In this article, I investigate (and challenge) this promise of change. I analyse the feminist potential of *Frozen* and its main characters from the perspective of visual and cultural representation, situating my analysis within the body of feminist and postfeminist media studies. Media representations of men and women have long been recognised to be a primary element in the construction of dominant social and cultural conceptions of femininity and masculinity (Berger 1972; Beynon 2002; Hall 1997; Hirdman 2004; Pollock 1988). As the introductory quotation from British art historian Griselda Pollock suggests, visual media produce norms, ideas and expectations about what constitutes (or *should* constitute) 'female' and 'male' and how the two should be understood in relation to each other. Treating images and movies as symbolic sign systems of representation, Pollock (1988, 31) argues that "film has to be understood as a signifying practice, i.e. an organization of elements which produce meanings, construct images of the world, and strive to fix certain meanings, to effect particular ideological representations of the world". In this view, representation is understood as a process through which meaning is constructed, rather than a mere reflection or representation of a reality which exists outside the media. Ultimately, "We give things meaning by how we *represent* them—the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images of them we produce, the emotions we associate with them, the ways we classify and conceptualize them, the values we place on them" (Hall 1997, 3).

Since the 1960s, feminists have analysed representations of gender in the film and television industry and argued that they produce and reproduce patterns of oppression and inequality. What have made representations of gender different in the late 20th and early 21st centuries has been that "feminist discourses are expressed within the media rather than simply being external, independent, critical voices" (Gill 2007, 268). As British media scholar Rosalind Gill (2007, 2009) contends, contemporary mass-media representations of women rarely are straightforwardly sexist in the sense of objectification documented by, for example, media scholars of the male gaze, such as Laura Mulvey (1975) and John Berger (1972). This shift has been viewed as indicating that feminism has been "taken into account" (McRobbie 2004) and somehow become a thing of the past; however, the media have not necessarily become feminist or unproblematically adopted feminist perspectives (Gill 2007). Instead,

contemporary audio-visual media can be “profoundly contradictory in the way they mix up oppressive and emancipatory messages of sex and gender” (Gill 2007, 36). What the *postfeminist* media culture then offers is a (seemingly) new set of visual imagery which invokes and/or restates (often conventional, heteronormative and racialized, white, upper-middle class) ideas of femininity and masculinity in new, pernicious ways.

In the influential book *Gender and the media*, Gill (2007) delineates a range of persistent and recurring themes which have come to characterise what she and other feminist media scholars (McRobbie 2004; Richardson and Wearing 2014) have identified as shared traits of contemporary postfeminist media discourses: the conflation of feminist and antifeminist ideas; the achievement of gender equality (and thus the obviation of the need for a sustained feminist critique); natural sexual differences between genders; femininity (often sexualised) as a bodily property; sexual subjectification (as opposed to objectification) of the young, white, female body; an emphasis on self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline (exemplified by the makeover trope); and a neoliberalist focus on individualism, choice and empowerment (Gill 2007, 255; McRobbie 2004; Richardson and Wearing 2014). As postfeminism itself has been understood and defined in such contradictory terms as entirely hostile to or an extension of the achievements of second-wave feminism, Gill (2007, 254) does not propose a breach with conventional feminist media theory or methodology but, rather, advocates an analytical strategy which “emphasizes the contradictory nature of postfeminist discourses and the entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist themes within them.”

Following this line of thought to address a range of questions raised by postfeminism within film and media scholarship, I argue that *Frozen* functions as a site for both the maintenance and the disruption of gender ideology, although primarily the former, despite popular views to the contrary. Whereas popular debate on *Frozen* has been extensive, less has been written in scholarly formats. *Frozen* was recently analysed as a postfeminist cultural production in the light of its popular reception and discourse via online media and social networks (Macaluso 2016), while a 2014 study examined the gender roles presented in its marketing material (Wilde 2014). In the present study, I focus on the gendered messages produced in and by the visual and textual aspects of the movie itself.

In animation, the process of ‘gender coding’ is closely connected with how the characters are drawn, dressed, look and behave—that is, their visual characteristics. Disney characters are fabricated through a range of

processes and discourses, and princess movies, in particular, are developed from a combination of backgrounds, filters, computer animations and new and reused drawings inspired by other images and life models (Hahn 1996; Thomas 1997). Representations then cannot be viewed simply as innocent reflections of reality but is an active process of selection and presentation which creates meaning (Hall 1997). As feminist theorist Teresa de Lauretis (1987, 5) argues, "The construction of gender is both the product and the process of its representation." Therefore, the focus of my inquiry is not solely on *what* the film shows but also on *how* it produces and constructs the meanings of gender.

This study is aimed at examining the gender ideology—and the seemingly contradictory gendered messages—that this highly popular Disney feature presents to its young viewers and their families. To emphasise the conflicts and interactions between feminist and postfeminist messages, I pay particular attention to the signs and cultural codes used to create meaning, to the differences in the portrayals and behaviours of the female characters and their male counterparts and to male and female characters' functions in the interplay between text and image. Inspired by the idea of a postfeminist 'sensitivity', I examine both the continuities and the changes in *Frozen's* representations of gender with reference to previous Disney princess features. Following a textual analytical approach, this paper is structured around four themes: signs of gender difference, heteronormative romance and female agency, empowerment and sexualisation and disparities in male/female representations and role models. In the first three sections, I focus mainly on the visual representations of and relations between the movie's four main characters, Anna, Elsa, Kristoff and Hans, while in the fourth section, I take a broader perspective on gender misrepresentation and the lack of gender diversity.

Gendered signs of difference in *Frozen*

Recent decades have seen a re-emergence of the focus on the body as a signifier for certain meanings about gender, not the least gender differences (Hirdman 2004). As Gill (2007, 265) notes, "A key feature of the postfeminist sensitivity has been the resurgence of ideas of natural sexual difference [between genders] across all media." The young white female body, in particular, has been the focus of this mass media attention (Gill 2007, 2009; Hirdman 2004; McRobbie 2004).

As the female body has been a locus for interpretation in feminist and postfeminist writings—its mediated representations seen as either backlash against feminism or as agentic, self-determined forms of expressions—the bodies and appearances of animated princesses have been the centre of attention in some of the most critical writings on Disney. Arguing that Disney presents harmful body ideals for young girls, several studies have stressed the unrealistic looks, extreme thinness and sensual features of the princesses (Bell, Haas and Sells 1995; Wiersma 1999; Trites 1991), and while some studies (Do Rozario 2004; England, Descartes and Collier-Meek 2011) have noted an (albeit inconsistent) improvement in the behavioural traits of the newer princess characters from the 1990s and 2000s in that they “often involve women who differ from their earlier counterparts in ingenuity, activity, and independence” (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz 2003, 722) the same studies, along with a significant number of others (Stover 2013; Towbin et al. 2004), have also unanimously concluded that these slight changes in personality over time have not affected the princesses’ feminine appearance and “physical attractiveness” (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz 2003, 722).

The portrayal of body stereotypes and gender difference in *Frozen* indicates no attempt to counter this criticism of earlier movies. Like all other white Disney princesses, Elsa and Anna wear long dresses and adorn themselves with jewellery, while the male characters wear suits and pants. The sisters’ tight dresses reveal unusually petite, slender frames, tiny waists, round, firm bosoms and slim wrists, legs and arms. In particular, the princesses’ doe eyes are exceptionally big, even larger than those of earlier Disney heroines. They resemble the childlike, female characters of Japanese manga (many of whom are highly erotised). Anna and Elsa’s exact ages are never revealed as they shift from childhood to adolescence, but their bodily and facial features indicate youth.

A comparison of the physical appearance of the female and male protagonists shows how Disney enlarge features which traditionally connote femininity versus masculinity, thereby constituting these gendered looks as inherently different. Although Hans and Kristoff also have highly idealised appearances, Elsa and Anna’s faces more strongly emphasise signs conventionally associated with femininity: their lips are painted red, their eyes are greatly exaggerated, and they have long hair and eyelashes. Conversely, both Hans and Kristoff’s lips have a colour close to that of their skin, their eyes are significantly smaller than Anna and Elsa’s, and they have no eyelashes at all. The differences in Disney’s animation of male and female characters have gained some attention.

Lino DiSalvo, *Frozen's* head of animation, was quoted (and heavily criticised for) saying in an interview that:

Historically speaking, female characters are really, really difficult [to animate], 'cause they have to go through these range of emotions... You have to keep them pretty, and they're very sensitive... So having a film with two hero female characters was really tough, and having them both in the [same] scene and look very different if they're echoing the same expression; that Elsa looking angry looks different from Anna being angry (DiSalvo cited in Lee 2013).

Disney later released a statement claiming that DiSalvo's comments were taken out of context, but the view of gender they express is consistent with England, Descartes and Collier-Meek's (2011, 560) findings that Disney princesses generally display a larger variety of emotions than their prince counterparts. Moreover, this statement reflects a general cultural stereotype that women are more emotional than men (Beynon 2002, 56; Davis 1997). If the media's construction and representation of femininity and masculinity can be seen as a process of *naturalisation*, or an "essentializing of 'difference' through stereotyping" (Hall 1997, 8), *Frozen* demonstrates that animation's potential for exaggeration enables an even higher degree of idealisation, gender differentiation and portrayal of archetypes than other media types.

Pollock (1988, 33) has argued that "sexual divisions are the result of the construction of 'sexual difference' as a socially significant axis of meaning." Along this axis, the female body has often served as a metaphor for beauty, emotion and unruliness in contrast to the masculine body of power, strength and rationality (Davis 1997, 5). Anna's and Elsa's appearance not only indicates the bodily ideals and expectations that the film sets for women but also indirectly constructs a particular conception of masculinity. The male protagonists, Prince Hans and Kristoff, enact very specific male stereotypes. When Anna realises her inability to pursue Elsa in the harsh, snow-covered wilderness by herself (her highly impractical 19th-century-style gown and high-heeled boots do not help), she seeks help from Kristoff, a strong, young workingman who carves and sells blocks of ice for a living. While Hans "fulfills the trope of the dashing prince" (Macaluso 2016, 81), Kristoff is "a wonderful example of what a masculine, 21st century man looks like" (Luttrell 2014). He possesses a "male body [which] is connotative of power and strength, celebrated as a manly spectacle in opposition to womanly gentleness and beauty" (Beynon 2002, 65). Both of Anna's suitors are almost a head taller and

significantly more muscular than she. Muscularity indicates physical strength women usually do not possess and is, in film and media researcher Richard Dyer's (1982, 66ff) words, a "sign of power" often used to intimidate and dominate both women and other men. At their first meeting, Kristoff towers over Anna and brusquely asks her to "back up," and he continues to be rude and condescending, belittling her and suggesting she has made bad life choices. When they are attacked by wolves, he tells her not fall off the sleigh or get eaten, and he refuses her offer to help as he "doesn't trust her." After losing his sleigh, he agrees to continue to help her only because she offers to buy him a new sleigh, and he is convinced that she will die otherwise—despite her acts of bravery: She sets out after Elsa in a snowstorm and she saves Kristoff twice, first by setting a blanket on fire and throwing him a hatchet to escape the wolves and later from the snow monster sent after them by Elsa. However, Anna's male companion does not recognise these masculine-connoted displays of assertiveness, courage and autonomy, and ultimately, the characters revert to the classic roles of damsel in distress and male saviour. Although it is Anna's heroic act of sacrifice and love that eventually saves them all, she first seeks Kristoff to rescue her, and he, on the back of his reindeer friend, defies an icy blizzard to take on the archetypal role of a (male) hero.

Whereas Kristoff shows that "a male body is praised in terms of what [it] can do," Anna demonstrates that "the female body has always been judged in terms of how it looks" (Richardson and Wearing 2014, 85). In *Frozen*, both Anna and Elsa undergo significant bodily transformations in their quests to womanhood, while Hans and Kristoff stay the same. Postfeminist discourse frequently links determination, achievement and success to beauty, looks and self-care (Gill 2007, 2009; McRobbie 2004). Anna's character gives an example of this mechanism at work. Her body is a signifier of the status and the progress of her emotional life and a measure of her ability to control it. On Elsa's coronation day, Anna sleeps, even snores as a servant calls from outside her room to wake her. She sits up, with drool and strands of clearly messy hair sticking to her cheek. She says awkward things and lacks bodily self-control; she breaks objects and accidentally slaps Hans in the face while recounting a story. She stuffs chocolate in her mouth while singing about how she cannot decide whether she feels elated or gassy that the gates will be opened for her sister's upcoming coronation. While these initial displays of 'unruliness' render her significantly more 'human' and less the embodiment of the demure, picture-perfect, hyper-feminine Disney princess, this feminist promise (or threat) to disrupt the long-established mould of 'proper'

princess behaviour is soon contradicted as Anna “internalize[s] a notion central to postfeminist discourse: the illusion of the power of being looked at” (Stover 2013, 7). Anna imagines how she will look in the eyes of a potential suitor she might meet at her sister’s coronation ball. Posing while draping herself in a curtain, she sings:

Tonight imagine me, gown and all, fetchingly draped against the wall, the picture of sophisticated grace. ... I suddenly see him standing there: a beautiful stranger tall and fair. ... Then we laugh and talk all evening. ... Nothing like the life I’ve lead so far. For the first time in forever, there’ll be magic, there’ll be fun. For the first time in forever, I could be noticed by someone.

Later, seeking Kristoff’s approval, she poses for him and asks him how she looks. Both Hans and Kristoff are unconcerned with how they look, whereas Anna envisages how she will appear to the men in her life. *Frozen* does not portray Anna, an active, desiring subject, as an object characterised by her desirability and physicality, such as Snow White, Cinderella and Belle (Wilde 2014, 144). Instead, Anna internalises the self-monitoring gaze which several authors have argued has become so prevalent in contemporary media representations of femininity (Gill 2007; Richardson and Wearing 2014). Anna’s achievement of bodily control and discipline becomes a sign of her romantic interests; the adjustments made to her outward appearance parallel the remodelling of her internal life. Her initial displays of inappropriate behaviour, her quirky outbursts and her other spirited character traits conventionally coded as unfeminine do not continue and are not integrated into her personality as she matures and seeks to be found desirable by the opposite sex. Rather, they vanish as the movie progresses, and she grows fond of Kristoff.

The heteronormative love trajectory and female agency

The strongly gendered messages in *Frozen*’s visual and bodily coding of the female and male characters reinforce the traditional gender conformity displayed in other aspects of the characters’ lives. A content analysis of gender behavioural characteristics and climactic outcomes in nine Disney princess movies from *Snow White* (1937) to *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) found that all these films culminated with the princess winning the love of her prince, a “portrayal of romance [which] provides a strongly gendered message” (England, Descartes and Collier-Meek 2011, 565). The conventions of romance in western-style fairy tales, such as those which serve as models for Disney’s princess movies, have been

heavily criticised for dividing men and women into a binary sex-gender system: "it encourages young viewers to believe that true happiness for women exists only in the arms of a prince and that their most important quest is finding that prince" (Cummins 1995, 22). *Frozen* sends the same message. Although the original *Snow Queen* was never a romantic love story but, as are most of Hans Christian Andersen's tales, a story that offers valuable moral lessons about humanity and benevolence, *Frozen* rewrites, visualises and, for the younger generation, ultimately "canonises" (Zipes 1995) the story to follow the same traditional script as its princess movie predecessors. Reviewers have praised *Frozen* for taking up the theme of love between sisters (Rustad 2014, 154; Luttrell 2014), but though Anna's unconditional and unselfish love for her sister eventually saves Arendelle, it is the conventional heterosexual love narrative which drives the movie forward.

What Anna wishes for becomes quite clear on Elsa's coronation day. When the castle gates are opened to the outside world for the first time since the sisters were young girls, Anna gazes at the ships approaching the shores of Arendelle. As she excitedly bursts into song, one might expect her to announce her desire to travel and explore the world—but no. Instead, she sings about her eagerness to meet "the one," to "find romance" and to have "a chance to find true love". After having only seen the inside of the castle walls since early childhood, Anna dreams of the opportunity to meet Prince Charming and settle into matrimony. The heteronormative love scenario for which she hopes is visually and very graphically underscored in the castle's gallery of paintings displaying heterosexual couples. Anna physically positions herself in the place of the female characters in these paintings and clearly bases her expectations of how the world works on these stationary simulacra of reality.

This scene, which gives a glimpse into Anna's hopes and wishes and can be read as her anticipations for her own future, also stresses how deeply the structure of the romance plot penetrates the movie. Prince Hans turns out to not be Anna's true love after all, but he is quickly replaced by Kristoff as the movie passes her from the arms of one man to another. Her quest to save Arendelle is more a personal quest to find the right man than a journey on which she learns that forming other types of human relationships (e.g. friendships) is equally important in life. This is evident when Anna convinces herself that, to save her life, she must return to receive "true love's kiss" from Hans, even though, as Rustad (2014) observes, one might have expected her to realise during her adventures that what she has with Hans is not true love. For the first time, she has

had the opportunity to form emotional connections with other persons than her parents and sister (Rustad 2014, 165). Critics have praised Anna's displays of bravery and agency, but her quest to find Elsa is not part of her plan or her own desires. Despite having been locked up in a castle for most of her life she expresses no wish to travel and explore the world. Instead, she dreams about finding "the one" and, within hours of meeting Prince Hans, plans to marry him. These desires reinforce conventional gendered notions of heteronormativity and their embedded understandings of femininity and masculinity: While Anna embodies the classical stereotype of an emotional, love-hungry, romance-seeking princess, Hans represents the archetype of male strategic thinking, ambition, cunning and aspiration to power. His plan all along was to gain power to seize a throne and rule a country of his own. He was never emotionally invested in romance for romance's sake. Anna's childlike naiveté and lack of knowledge about life outside the castle walls made her an easy target.

Anna and Hans' musical, 'fall-in-love-at-first-sight' scene seems so clichéd that it can be argued that Disney manages to offer an ironic, self-referential critique of its earlier princess love stories (irony and self-mockery are prevalent in postfeminist media), but the subsequent events do not sustain this critique. Although Kristoff belittles Anna for getting engaged to Prince Hans shortly after first meeting him, the same can be said of their relationship after only a brief acquaintance. During the quest to save Arendelle from Elsa's ice spell, Kristoff takes Anna to his "love expert friends", a pack of trolls who perform an almost five-minute-long matchmaking song which culminates in a staged marriage scene between Anna and Kristoff. Although they don't get married, as the scene is cut off by Anna getting weaker, and she realises that saving Arendelle depends on her receiving a "true love's kiss" from Hans, it demonstrates the film's reinforcement of conventional sensibilities of gender, love and desire.

Both Angela McRobbie (2004) and Gill (2007) have advanced the argument that postfeminist consumer culture has reinvented these traditional heterosexual codes of romance, highlighting the coexistence of contradictory cultural discourses which promote the concepts of individualism, choice and empowerment but, at the same time, require women to adhere to strict—and restrictive—cultural norms. In this context, Anna, a liberated, agentic, empowered young woman, freely and actively *chooses* a love relationship for herself. Society's dogmatic rules do not force her to marry (as they do *Aladdin's* Princess Jasmine, whose country's laws declare that she must marry by the time she turns 16

years old). To the contrary, Anna's wish to marry Prince Hans is the catalyst that sets off the rage of her sister, the queen, and causes her to cover Arendelle in snow. We, in other words, are led to understand that Anna chooses the love trajectory from her own free desire. This narrative aligns with the "modernized, neoliberal version of femininity" which holds that "it is absolutely imperative that one's sexual and dating practices (however traditional, old-fashioned or inegalitarian they may be ...) be presented as freely chosen" (Gill 2007, 261). McRobbie (2004, 255f) describes this paradox as a "double entanglement" that permits "the co-existence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life ... with processes of liberalization in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations." This discourse of choice and self-determination presents the old and the traditional as new so that women may "choose" what is deemed to be natural.

Instead of presenting a true alternative to the standard depiction of romance, *Frozen* sends the message that women should aspire to a conventional lifestyle that result from falling in love with Mr. Right. The signs of postfeminist autonomy in Anna's ability to choose a man for herself are merely what Stover (2013, 4) has termed a rhetorical shift "from any prince to the right prince" instead of real progress or change. Still operating within a profoundly heteronormative framework, *Frozen*, with its emphasis on a male-female love relationship, is deeply imbued with the romance plot and the gender binary that such a plot encourages.

Royal makeover: From oppressed queen to sexy starlet

The transformation scene in which Elsa discovers her true self as the snow queen is perhaps the movie's most significant statement of (post)femininity. Several authors explain that a makeover paradigm has become the epitome of postfeminist media productions (Gill 2007, 263; McRobbie 2004; Richardson and Wearing 2014). Central to this paradigm is "its obsessional preoccupation with the body. ... [The] possession of a 'sexy body'... presented as women's key (if not sole) source of identity" (Gill 2007, 255). In this paradigm, the subject, most often female, is reminded to self-police, manage and develop her disobedient body so that her outer appearance aligns with her newfound inner sense of liberation, power and control. As Gill (2007, 255) contends, "The body is presented simultaneously as women's source of power *and* as always already unruly and requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodelling."

This paradigm can be seen at work in Elsa's transformation from bad to good. Early in the movie, we learn that Elsa is dangerous and that her out-of-control supernatural powers are so potentially catastrophic that she needs to be locked up and hidden from the outside world. Indeed, Elsa's brief rule before she retires to her ice castle produces the movie's most horrifying, chaotic scenes (and idyllic calm and benevolence reign again only once her power—her body—is under control). In these opening scenes, Elsa is "repressed, stoic and distant. Her tight, dark clothes (a black corset buttoned to her neck) mirror her personality" (Macaluso 2016, 76). Her flight to the North Mountain sets off not only a psychological process of inner liberation but also the transformation of her outer appearance.

Indeed, throughout the movie, Elsa's sense of control and self-esteem is expressed by how she looks. As she sings in celebration of not having to "conceal" herself anymore and exclaims, "Let it go, let it go! Can't hold it back any more," her embrace of her own powers is visually represented by a dramatic makeover of dress, makeup and hair. Elsa literally lets down her long, loose voluptuous hair, a "suggestive sign of allowed disorder, conventionally a sign of female sexuality" (Pollock 1988, 133), and she physically transforms herself into what can best be described as an exotic dancer or pin-up model. Wearing heavy purple makeup, stiletto heels and a low-cut, skin-tight, sequined dress with a high, leg-exposing slit, she walks sensually, hips swaying, posing and alluringly gazing directly at the audience, and—to the tune of her own liberation song—finally finds her own 'natural' self. Elsa's visual transformation, which springs from her stated wish to "be who she is" (and hence not oppressed by societal expectations), conflates the feminist call for liberation and empowerment with the postfeminist notion of the right to look good.

Postfeminist theoretical debates have centred on the paradox of the increasing sexualisation of (especially young, white) women alongside the apparent self-empowerment of young females in popular culture (Hirdman 2004; McRobbie 2004, 255f). Gill (2009) observes that, "on the one hand, then, we are confronted by a popular culture increasingly saturated by representations of women's bodies as objects, and on the other, a mantra-like repetition and celebration of 'women's success' and 'Girl Power.'" Elsa is truly such a young female: she is utterly attractive and takes matters into her own hands as she decides to "let it go." Her transformation and the ambiguous messages it sends constitute what Gill (2007) has called a true postfeminist moment: whereas earlier eras would contrive her sexualised demeanour as "to-be-looked-at-ness" for an

external and internalized “male gaze” (Berger 1972; Mulvey 1975), it is here clearly framed as what she does for herself, for her own pleasure. Elsa’s transformation comes from a place inside her. Her objectification is done by herself to herself. She *chooses* to be the sexy, tall, blond, full-figured starlet that she is as she finally lets her inner self come out. However, as Gill (2007, 111) argues:

The fact that the model speaks a language of empowerment in no way detracts from the impact of this shift. ... Subjectification, it might be argued, is just how we do objectification today. ... Women are still located in their bodies, indeed as bodies, albeit voraciously heterosexually desiring ones, as in conventional pornography.

Macaluso’s (2016) analysis of the popular reception and debate on *Frozen* strongly criticises this confusion of feminist ideals with postfeminist notions of appearance and sexiness that Elsa illustrates. Popular discourse identifies in Elsa a role model because she breaks free from societal constraints and follows her own life path, but the extremely conventional connotations that cling to her newfound visual appearance makes it difficult to agree with the critic who proclaimed that “Little girls dressing up like Elsa from *Frozen* are the future of feminism” (Merrick 2015).

Gender disparities in Arendelle

Frozen’s emphasis on romance, which it accomplishes by altering the basic plot and main characters of the original *Snow Queen* story, results in dramatic changes not only to the storyline but also to the film’s overall representation of gender. In Andersen’s story, all the central characters are women, and most of them are wise, caring and nurturing as they help the little girl Gerda on her quest to find and save her childhood friend Kay. Indeed, Andersen’s story is almost devoid of males, except for the evil hobgoblin, who is the true villain of the tale, and the little boy Kay, whose heart freezes when a grain of the demon’s magic mirror hits his eyes. In Disney’s heavily revised version of the *Snow Queen*, all the central characters surrounding Anna and Elsa are male—from their father, Prince Hans and Kristoff to the reindeer Sven, the snowman Olaf, the mountain store vendor (Oaken), the love trolls and the castle advisors. Disney’s Arendelle is a land inhabited and ruled predominantly by old, white men, while women are reduced to two adolescent princesses, a young, nearly mute queen (when holding Anna who has been struck in the head by Elsa’s magic, the queen’s only statement is “She is ice cold!”, after which the king does all the acting and talking), a female love-

obsessed troll and a few non-speaking castle servants and villagers. The only two female characters with more than two speaking lines, Elsa and Anna, resemble more a rare species than representatives of half the population of Arendelle. Although Elsa is formally the heir to the throne and is crowned as queen, power lies in the hands of the all-male, older advisors throughout most of the movie. Even among the hundreds of love trolls, only a few seem to be female—and the only female troll who speaks is preoccupied with romance.

Although *Frozen* arguably passes the Bechdel (1986) test (two women talk to each other about something other than a man), that measurement does not seem to accurately evaluate the movie's display of diversity in gendered role models. Since the 1960s, a critique of feminist media studies has been the lack of balance in who the movie industry and mainstream popular culture represents and how they are represented in terms of gender, race, age, social and occupational status (Richardson and Wearing 2014; Tuchman 1978). Contrary to what might be expected—and contrary to the postfeminist sentiment that feminism is no longer needed as equality has been reached (McRobbie 2004, 255)—female mis- and underrepresentation in the media have not improved in recent decades. Detailed reports on the roles of women in the film and television industries show that, between 2002 and 2011, lead female protagonists declined by 5%, leaving women with only 11% of lead roles in the 100 highest-grossing United States films in 2011 (Lauzen 2008, 2012, cited in Richardson and Wearing 2014, 20). These statistics are consistent with the findings of Smith et al. (2012, 2014) that only 28.3% of the speaking characters in family films are female and that female actresses are generally younger and less likely to be shown in leadership roles than men.

Disney movies are no exception to this tendency. They have been criticised consistently for their omission or marginalisation of certain social groups and lack of variety in gender roles (Bell, Haas and Sells 1995; Hoerrner 1996; Towbin et al. 2004; Wiersma 1999). When Disney adapted *The Little Mermaid*, another of Andersen's tales, to fit the screen, film scholar Roberta Trites (1991, 152) argued that "Disney invariably erases positive figures of women from its feature-length fairy tales; women are either reduced to the status of servants (e.g., the servant who is the only human woman in *The Little Mermaid*) or else they are elevated to an unattainable position above humanity by their possession of magical powers (e.g., Cinderella's fairy-godmother)." A content analysis by Hoerrner (1996) comparing gender representation and sex-typed

character behaviours in 34 full-length animated Disney features revealed that 77 characters (57%) were male, 28 characters (21%) were female, and 29 characters of non-discernible gender (22%) were placed in the category of other species.

In *Frozen*, the number of female characters depicted is even lower and the difference in gender representation is striking. Analysing the movie's promotional materials, Wilde (2014, 146) found that the movie's poster and trailer pay little attention to so-called power-queen Elsa and, instead, feature the male protagonists Kristoff and Hans and their relationship with Anna. This emphasis contradicts Disney's assertion that Elsa is the "complete antagonist" of the story (Solomon 2013, 14) and, reinforces the ideology of male dominance in both cinema and society (Wilde 2014).

This point returns to the initial argument of this article: representations in mainstream media not only reflect the inequalities and lack of balance in society but also define what groups and individuals may do and be in life. As a world-leading media producer, Disney is responsible for many of the images, including those of gender, projected daily into the world. Disney products, which have strong associations with childhood and innocence, play central roles in the lives of many western children, and its animated features are among their most favoured media genre (Towbin et al. 2004, 20; Wasco 2001, 183ff). Therefore, it is highly pertinent to scrutinise the messages Disney projects. When the range of gender images popular culture makes available are increasingly non-diverse and one-dimensional depictions of what femininity and masculinity can mean, it limits the range of possibilities of identification for girls and boys drastically. On the surface, *Frozen* might feature two active, agentic princesses, but they stand as the only female models of identification in a land almost devoid of women. In its representation of gender *Frozen* promotes what Zipes (1995, 40) has labelled the "eternal return of the same."

Conclusion

While the widespread popular celebration of the perceived feminist qualities of *Frozen* marks an important shift in thinking and talking about Disney's princess movies (Macaluso 2016), it also contributes to a mainstream perception of Disney's cultural status as a provider of innocent, wholesome family entertainment (Bell, Haas and Sells 1995; Wasco 2001; Zipes 1995). In this article, I have discussed and challenged the extent to which *Frozen* can be interpreted as (post)feminist. Visual and representational analyses reveal several paradoxes in how *Frozen*

represents gender. On the surface the film promotes a narrative of feminist ideals of equality, empowerment and female agency but reduce them to postfeminist ideals of looks, self-discipline and strongly gendered notions in how the characters look and act. The movie arrays masculinity and femininity along an axis of difference which determines not only the highly idealised and stereotypical appearances of the male and female characters but also their aspirations and concerns in life. Although agentic, determined and heroic, Anna is also presented as naïve, impressionable and emotional—and concerned with how she appears as she expresses her desire to find Mr. Right. In Elsa, the feminist ideals of empowerment, self-realisation and liberation are confused with her outward appearance and sexualisation, which equates her inner sense of self with a femininity that is located in her body. The character construction of both Anna and Elsa exemplifies one of the strongest features of postfeminism: a contradictory articulation of progressive and regressive elements of gendered identities and identifications. The sisters are initially presented as persons with real problems, desires and ability for self-assertion. Elsa exhibits rebellion when she leaves Arendelle to embrace her true self, and Anna displays courage when she sets out after her sister. These traits, however, receive no special reward at the close of the film. We do not learn if the sisters' quests and experiences have brought them any new aspirations or hopes for the future. Instead, we find them in much the same position as their princess predecessors: back in their castle and, in Anna's case, by the side of her 'prince'. Although *Frozen* might seem more 'feminist' than previous princess movies at first glance, I argue that Disney still has a long way to go to promote egalitarian and diverse representations of all genders.

Bibliography

- Baker-Sperry, Lori and Liz Grauerholz. 2003. "The Pervasiveness and Persistence of the Feminine Beauty Ideal in Children's Fairy Tales." *Gender and Society* 17(5): 711-726.
- Bechdel, Allison. 1986. *Dykes to Watch Out For*. New York: Firebrand Books.
- Bell, Elizabeth, Lynda Haas and Laura Sells (eds.). 1995. *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender and Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Berger, John. 1972. *Ways of Seeing*. London: BBC and Penguin.

- Beynon, John. 2002. *Masculinities and Culture*. Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Culhane, John. 1992. *Disney's Aladdin – The Making of an Animated Film*. New York: Hyperion.
- Cummins, June. 1995. "Romancing the Plot: The Real Beast of Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 20(1): 22-28.
- Davis, Kathy. 1997. "Embody-ing Theory. Beyond Modernist and Postmodernist Readings of the Body." In *Embodies Practices. Feminist Perspectives on the Body*, edited by Kathy Davis, 1-23. London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- De Lauretis, Teresa. 1987. "The Technology of Gender." In *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction*, edited by Teresa de Lauretis, 1-30. Bloomington: Indiana University.
- Do Rozario, Rebecca-Anne C. 2004. "The Princess and the Magic Kingdom: Beyond Nostalgia, the Function of the Disney Princess." *Women's Studies in Communication* 27(1): 34-59.
- Dyer, Richard. 1982. "Don't Look Now—the Male Pin-Up." *Screen* 23(3-4): 61-73.
- England, Dawn E., Lara Descartes and Melissa A. Collier-Meek. 2011. "Gender Role Portrayal and the Disney Princesses." *Sex Roles* 64: 555-567.
- Feder, Shira. 2014. "Slamming the Door: An Analysis of Elsa (Frozen)." *The Feminist Wire*, October 16. Accessed October 19, 2016. <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/slamming-door-analysis-elsa-frozen/>.
- Gill, Rosalind. 2009. "From Sexual Objectification to Sexual Subjectification: The Resexualization of Women's Bodies in the Media." *MRzine*, May 23. Accessed August 1, 2016. <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2009/gill230509.html>.
- Gill, Rosalind. 2007. *Gender and the Media*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Hahn, Don. 1996. *Animation Magic: A Behind-the-Scenes Look at How an Animated Film Is Made*. New York: Disney Press.
- Hall, Stuart. 1997. "Introduction." In *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, edited by Stuart Hall, 1-11. London, UK: Sage Publications.
- Hirdman, Anja. 2004. "Mirrored Masculinity?" *NIKK Magasin* 3: 8-11. Norway: Nordic Institute for Gender Research.
- Hoerrner, Keisha L. 1996. "Gender Roles in Disney Films: Analyzing Behaviors from Snow White to Simba." *Women's Studies in Communication* 19(2): 213-228.

- IMDb 2016. "Frozen Awards." Accessed November 5, 2016.
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2294629/awards>.
- Lee, Michael. 2013. "50 Things You May Not Know About Disney's 'Frozen'." *Movieviral*, October 7. Accessed August 10, 2016.
<http://www.movieviral.com/2013/10/07/50-things-you-may-not-know-about-disneys-frozen/>.
- Luttrell, Gina. 2014. "7 Moments That Made 'Frozen' the Most Progressive Disney Movie Ever." *Arts.Mic*, January 20. Accessed August 10, 2016.
<https://mic.com/articles/79455/7-moments-that-made-frozen-the-most-progressive-disney-movie-ever#.fyWjffs0B>.
- Macaluso, Michael. 2016. "The Postfeminist Princess: Public Discourse and Disney's Curricular Guide to Feminism." In *Disney, Culture, and Curriculum*, edited by Jennifer A. Sandlin and Julie C. Garlen, 73-86. New York: Routledge.
- McRobbie, Angela. 2004. "Post-feminism and Popular Culture." *Feminist Media Studies* 4(3): 255-264.
- Merrick, Jane. 2015. "Little Girls Dressing Up Like Elsa from Frozen Are the Future of Feminism." *Independent*. February 3. Accessed October 13, 2016. <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/little-girls-dressing-up-like-elsa-from-frozen-are-the-future-of-feminism-10021540.html>.
- Mulvey, Laura. 1975. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16(3): 6-18.
- Pollock, Griselda. 1988. *Vision and Difference. Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Richardson, Niall and Sadie Wearing. 2014. *Gender in the Media*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rustad, Robert. 2014. *True Love's Kiss*. New York: New Element Publishing.
- Smith, Stacy L., Marc Choueiti and Katherine Pieper. 2014. "Gender Bias Without Borders. An Investigation of Female Characters in Popular Films Across 11 Countries." Report published by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender and Media. Accessed August 1, 2016.
<http://seejane.org/wp-content/uploads/gender-bias-without-borders-executive-summary.pdf>.
- Smith, Stacy L., Marc Choueiti, Ashley Prescott and Katherine Pieper. 2012. "Gender Roles and Occupations—A Look at Character Attributes and Job-related Aspirations in Film and Television." Report published by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender and Media. Accessed August 1, 2016. <http://seejane.org/wp-content/uploads/key-findings-gender-roles-2013.pdf>.

- Solomon, Charles. 2013. *The Art of Frozen*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.
- Stover, Cassandra. 2013. "Damsels and Heroines: The Conundrum of the Postfeminist Disney Princess." *LUX* 2(1): Article 29.
- Thomas, Bob. 1997. *Disney's Art of Animation: From Mickey Mouse to Hercules*. New York: Hyperion.
- Towbin, Mia Adessa, Shelley A. Haddock, Toni Schindler Zimmerman, Lori K. Lund and Litsa Renee Tanner. 2004. "Images of Gender, Race, Age, and Sexual Orientation in Disney Feature-Length Animated Films." *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy* 15(4): 19-44.
- Trites, Roberta. 1991. "Disney's Sub/Version of Andersen's The Little Mermaid." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 18(4): 145-152.
- Tuchman, Gaye. 1978. *Making News*. New York: The Free Press.
- Wasco, Janet. 2001. *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy*. Cambridge, England: Polity.
- Wiersma, Beth. 1999. "The Not So Wonderful World of Disney: An Exploratory Content Analysis of Gender Themes in Disney Full Length Animated Feature Films." *Great Plains Sociologist* 11(2): 44-70.
- Wilde, Sarah. 2014. "Advertising in Repackaging the Disney Princess: A Post-feminist Reading of Modern Day Fairy Tales." *Journal of Promotional Communications* 2(1): 132-153.
- Zipes, Jack. 1995. "Breaking the Disney Spell." In *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender and Culture*, edited by Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas and Laura Sells, 21-42. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Author biography

Maja Rudloff holds a PhD in Media Studies and an MA in Art History. She currently works at the Department of Communication and Arts at Roskilde University, Denmark, where she teaches and researches. She has a particular interest in visual, discursive and political dimensions of gender representation in the media.

Email: mrudloff@ruc.dk