

# The De-Animating of an Ideology: The Mockery and Celebration of the Disney Ideology as Experienced Through Cognitive Dissonance in Disney's *Enchanted*

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The bright, other-worldly features that characterize popular animated films have been enchanting and swaying audiences for nearly a century through the largely undetected persuasion of powerful ideological messaging. Dynamic color palettes, unique voices, anthropomorphized creatures, sanitized violence, and exaggerated human forms create an entertaining alternate world in which societal norms and laws of science are fluid. These animated worlds do not seem real, so viewers are able to set aside their beliefs and expectations of reality and enjoy whatever the captivating animation has to offer.

Animation is a fantastic form of artistic expression and entertainment, but it can also be deceptive. The danger of animation lies in the potential for viewers to be less critical of what they are consuming as the animated style acts as a camouflage, distracting viewers from underlying messages. This risk is heightened by the fact that the average audience member views a movie simply as a form of entertainment and escape (Sun and Scharrer). The escapism of film is exponentially increased by animation due to the increased separation from reality. While the viewer's intention may be to turn off their brain or escape reality for a couple of hours, this does not mean that the production companies have that same goal in mind. This means that viewers are exposed to a variety of agenda-laden messages that influence their beliefs, purchases, behaviors, and relationships without their necessarily realizing it.

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*Popular Culture Studies Journal*

Volume 12, Issue 1

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This phenomenon becomes much more concerning when one considers how this ignorant consumption and subliminal influence is being executed upon impressionable youth. Adults are lulled into a false sense of security by the same bright, entertaining voices, colors, and music that keep the children so entranced. There is an inaccurate assumption that because something is developed for children it must be okay for them to consume without the oversight of an adult (Muller-Hartmann; Giroux; Giroux and Pollock). As this topic relates to Disney, Giroux justly claims that Disney films have gone under the radar because they have been classified as “politics of innocence” (28), resulting in little consideration for the potential negative effects on young consumers (Hefner et al.). Giroux further explains this issue of unconcern, stating “under the rubric of fun, entertainment, and escape, massive public spheres are being produced which appear to be too ‘innocent’ to be worthy of political analysis” (28).

The combination of adults' perspectives of youth-centric content, the embrace of escapism through film, and the naivety of young viewers results in the potential for children to unknowingly consume all sorts of things. It is the culmination of these factors that allows for much of Disney's content to be consumed without question or hesitation. More specifically, the vibrant colors, sweet-looking animals, beautiful princesses, catchy tunes, and PG-guaranteed happy endings have made Disney Princess films the go-to, worry-free entertainment choice for children (Sun and Scharrer).

### The Power of Disney's Animation

Disney Princess films have always played an active role in the influence of society, as the fairytale genre was intended to pass on warnings and cultural values. As a result, these films have affected how audience members view themselves, their relationships, their societal roles, and the world, hence the abundance of discussions of the negative effects on viewers' perceptions of race (Potgieter and Potgieter; Buescher and Ono), body image (Coyne et al.; Hayes and Tantleff-Dunn), and romantic love (Tanner; Garlen and Sandlin; Hefner et al.). Several generations have grown up watching Disney films, but considerable effects can be seen in the younger generations due to the introduction of the second and third-wave princesses, the increase of social and digital media, and the

creation of the Disney Princess franchise (est. 2001) with all its associated merchandise. The children of today are consuming media at a high rate, which means that during their most formative years, they are learning who they are and how the world works primarily through their screens. This places an extraordinary amount of power into Disney's hands, as the company is one of the top producers of children's television shows and movies. This shaping of young minds is something that Walt Disney himself was keenly aware of, stating "I think of a child's mind as a blank book. During the first years of his life, much will be written on the pages. The quality of that writing will affect his life profoundly" (Walt Disney, as cited by Giroux and Pollock 17).

Giroux and Pollock go on to label Disney as a "teaching machine" that "exerts influence over consumers but also wages an aggressive campaign to peddle its political and cultural influence" (18, xiv). This machine is spitting out a proliferation of ideologically loaded media that train viewers from the youngest of ages to be mindless devotees who eagerly buy into the idealized world that Disney proffers. In addition to the issue of these media teaching youth romanticized versions of life and love, children do not know enough about real life to know how to separate fantasy from reality. This leads young viewers to act like the characters they see and to believe in "once upon a time" and "happily ever after." As children age, this can negatively affect how they handle romantic relationships in a variety of ways, since True Love is not as easy to find in real life as it is in the movies, and the resemblances are few (Berlant; Whelan).

Furthermore, when it comes to Disney, one of the most powerful factors in the company's success is the nostalgia that is constantly evoked in older viewers (Sun and Scharrer). Adult fans associate Disney's iconography and music with the joys of their youth and the development of their identities. This deep connection leads adults to eagerly introduce children to the Disney catalog without additional thought or critique, making it that much easier for any amount or type of messaging to be speedily consumed and embodied. This process can create a circle of indoctrination wherein viewers are conditioned to love the Disney ideology and related content without concern for criticism or underlying messages (Muller-Hartmann; Sun and Scharrer). This powerful cycle of influence is cloaked in the brilliant, eye-catching animation style, catchy songs, and polished ideology of Disney's most iconic films.

### *An Enchanted Overview*

A live-action-2D animation hybrid, *Enchanted* is a fantasy musical romantic comedy that follows the story of Giselle, a stereotypical fairytale princess, as she is separated from her True Love and tricked into leaving her animated home of Andalasia for real-life New York City. As she awaits rescue by Prince Edward, Giselle is taken in by NYC lawyer Robert, who attempts to reconcile Giselle's fairytale personality with his no-nonsense view of the world. While Giselle adjusts to reality, Prince Edward travels to the modern dimension to find her. Through a series of magical mishaps and musical numbers, Prince Edward searches for Giselle as she adapts to the real world and wins over the people of New York, including Robert.

*Enchanted* stands out from other fairytale movies because a great deal of effort was put into incorporating as many different elements of other iconic Disney films as possible without becoming kitschy, including the inspiration for characters and plot devices, cameos of beloved characters, and the design of the musical numbers. The film was praised upon release for using classic Disney tropes in a comedic and self-deprecating fashion, and for finding a way to bring animated character types into the real world. This latter aspect is what makes the film unique from all other Disney princess movies – making a mockery of Disney fairytale stereotypes by pulling them out of a fantasy land and placing them in reality. *Enchanted* was immediately a fan favorite and is considered one of the best modern movie musicals. The impact of the film was great enough to garner a passionate fan following for over fifteen years, resulting in the release of a much-anticipated sequel, *Disenchanted*, in November 2022.

### The Classic Disney Ideology

The classic Disney ideology was established by the company's founder, Walt Disney, whose interests and beliefs guided the production of the early films (May). Disney's personal beliefs were slowly developed into an unshakeable ideology as his films "establish[ed] as norm a gendered rhetoric to which all of the subsequent [...] films have been obliged to respond in one way or another"

(Potgieter and Potgieter 50). In part because of the era in which they were produced, many of the early films follow a rags-to-riches pattern reminiscent of the American Dream that is focused on the characters' virtue (Potgieter and Potgieter; Wood; Garlen and Sandlin). This ideology is best illustrated through the classic Disney princess films, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty*, which were developed by Walt Disney during his lifetime, and were therefore heavily influenced by him. The prince and princess characters in these films embody the values and qualities that Walt Disney, and society at that time, believed to be the most desirable. Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora are all mistreated and demoted in some way, yet they remain happy and content with their lot in life as patient, forgiving young women who are pleased to serve others. In these stories, the characters are granted love, happiness, and status after they have proven themselves through characteristics such as hard work, kindness, selflessness, and perseverance (Potgieter and Potgieter).

Another key aspect of the Disney ideology is the goal of making dreams come true. Through overt and subliminal messaging, love and romance are established as the characters' predominant dream and the goal that viewers should pursue. For the princesses, their only true dream is to be loved, presenting love as something that "provides life's magical meaning, requires suffering and transformation, and is inevitable" (Potgieter and Potgieter; Garlen and Sandlin 958). Love is considered something that is destined, and that, if true, will hold firm against all odds. Furthermore, the romance between the prince and princess characters is always presented as a life-changing, life-saving event that makes the characters complete. By ending the princesses' stories with a happily ever after that always grants them their wish through marriage to a prince, these films impress on the viewer the message that they are worthy of love and status if their actions and characteristics mirror those of the Disney princess (Potgieter and Potgieter). These themes ultimately convey to the viewer that they too should search for their perfect match so that, by their rising status through marriage or the discovery of a noble birthright, all of life's problems will be solved and they will find happiness (Caldwell). Over the years, aspects of this ideology have evolved in response to changing societal norms, but the tenets of the classic ideology remain paramount to this day.

### Classic Disney Ideology in *Enchanted*

In *Enchanted*, Giselle and Prince Edward act as the stereotypical princess-in-waiting and prince charming characters, illustrating the ideological values established by the early princess films. Giselle, while never officially a princess, embodies the classic Disney princess from the Walt Disney-managed era, as a combination of Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora. Giselle perfectly fits the criteria of a traditional princess, possessing all the desired qualities that were valued when the first three princesses were created. Giselle has a very idealized, fantastical view of love, and, typical of a classic princess, she is helpless in dangerous and unknown situations, requiring rescuing by both Prince Edward and Robert within the first twenty minutes of the film. Meanwhile, Prince Edward is predictably romantic and heroic, as he fearlessly races through NYC and conquers a variety of obstacles to save his beloved.

Of course, Disney's ideology is present through more than just the characters' personality traits. The comments made by Giselle and Prince Edward throughout the film are focused on true love's kiss, but this concept relies upon the belief in the existence of true love. They, like their Disney brethren, believe that there is someone in existence who is destined specifically for them who they will magically find, marry, and thereby achieve happily ever after. Giselle wholly believes that her person is out there somewhere and that they will someday be united, referring to him as "My one true love, my prince, my dream come true" (*Enchanted*, 00:01:55). She sings about her dream of experiencing true love's kiss and how she hopes that the kiss will be delivered by a prince. Luckily for Giselle, minutes later Prince Edward rescues her and exclaims "We shall be married in the morning!" (00:07:04). This indicates that the full extent of the fairytale dream is to be married to one's True Love, who is preferably someone of status. In the fantasy world of Andalasia, this is the dream, the great motivator, the way the world works.

Their deep-seated belief in True Love is what carries Giselle and Prince Edward through their trials in reality. They find comfort and strength in what they believe to be a universal truth: True Love will always save the day and result in a happy ending. The phrase "happily ever after" is not just about the hope (and inherent promise) of spending forever with one's True Love but is also about the

assurance that by the end of the story, love will conquer all and the heroes will be perpetually happy. Giselle carries the fantastical expectations of the fairytale world into reality, so she has complete faith that Edward is on his way to rescue her and that he will be successful.

## Cognitive Dissonance

Cognitive dissonance is a theory that explains the discomfort people experience when trying to reconcile conflicting information or values (Festinger 1957). When someone is presented with information that contradicts a particular belief, they experience dissonance as the two views clash. According to the theory's founder, the motivation behind cognitive dissonance is that humans desire and rely upon internal consistency, which is threatened when presented with contradictory information (Festinger 1962). To resolve or lessen the uncomfortable feeling, an individual must find ways to explain away the new information, find new points of support for the original belief, or rationalize the presence of both pieces of information (Festinger).

In the setting of *Enchanted*, cognitive dissonance arises when a character that the viewer enjoys and relates to, such as Giselle, does something or is presented in a way that conflicts with the viewer's beliefs. In the case of Giselle, because she represents all the other Disney princesses, the dissonance calls into question Giselle's actions as well as all of the associated princesses and their actions. For viewers who strongly relate to these characters, grew up watching them, or want to be like them, this dissonance can be incredibly disorienting. Through these instances, the viewer is forced to consider whether they still support certain characters, behaviors, and belief systems, as well as the implications of what they choose to support.

Typically, this mental distress is not recognized, but it is still a serious internal problem that must be dealt with in some way. The viewer may try to explain away this dissonance by reasoning that "it's just a movie, don't take it seriously" or "this was written a long time ago, so, of course, it's not PC" (Muller-Hartmann; Sun and Scharrer). The cognitive dissonance that is so strongly established throughout *Enchanted* is also very effectively cleared up through the story's resolution, making it the perfect film to study when uncovering the ideological messages

behind Disney's animation. In addition to the hybrid style of *Enchanted* making it easier for viewers to compare the beliefs within animation and reality, this is also efficient because of the prolific use of Disney archetypes and gags. When Giselle, Prince Edward, the forest creatures, the musical numbers, the rescue sequences, or any other fairytale plot devices are used, their critique can easily be applied to other stories that employ those elements. Therefore, the analysis of *Enchanted* is a gateway critique of all the other Disney princesses and their films.

Animation can be used to dampen the effects of cognitive dissonance, but in *Enchanted* viewers are not given this opportunity. By stripping away the animation, the contradictory frameworks of Disney and the audience members are revealed. The recontextualization of the Disney ideology through the lens of reality provides viewers with some distance from the mechanisms of the fantasy world, granting them perspective with which they can begin to consider how what they have been casually consuming and promoting may or may not align with what they actually believe.

### The Giselle Conundrum

As a fairytale princess character, Giselle's appearance and behaviors are predictably princess-esque. One of the first things she does in NYC is handcraft outfits with ribbons and silhouettes that more closely resemble a costume or adult-sized children's clothing. In Andalasia, Giselle's style ranges somewhere between commonplace and trendsetting, yet in reality her outfits are received differently. She certainly catches the attention of many, but the stares are out of confusion or mockery, rather than appreciation or envy. Of course, this reception is caused by more than Giselle's otherworldly attire. What really attracts attention is how strangely Giselle moves and speaks compared to the women of reality. While no longer in her 2D fairytale world, Giselle's gestures, facial expressions, and vocal inflection remain in the over-the-top style of an animated princess. She sighs with her entire body, twirls about the room, and speaks in the style of someone play-acting as a princess. Many of her motions seem choreographed as she moves in a gentle and expressive way, making large gestures with her arms and holding her fingers just so. While readily accepted and celebrated when



animated, these behaviors are received differently when the person performing them looks like a real woman rather than an animated figure.

Giselle's qualities are exactly the same in the animated world and in reality, yet they have a very different effect on the audience. When animated, Giselle has the appearance and personality of a classic, well-known character that is never second-guessed. Once in reality, Giselle begins to feel more like a regular woman who is acting as a stereotypical princess, rather than the genuine article. Within this new context, the viewer is presented with questions: Do the fairytale princess qualities make sense in real life? Are these qualities actually attractive? If I were to see a woman looking or behaving like Giselle, what would I think?

This line of questioning aligns with a broader phenomenon that occurs when watching film or television, as audience members have a subconscious need to identify with the characters, especially the protagonist (Zeglin). Mulvey explains that the viewer "demands identification of the ego with the object on the screen through the spectator's fascination with and recognition of his like" (46). Meaning, to truly enjoy or connect with the content that is consumed, audiences need to see something within the main character(s) that they relate to. This is the relationship that Disney has been profiting from for decades, as the studio leaders realized early on that the more effective their animation is at communicating emotion, personality, and motivation, the more the characters and film resonate with the viewer (Wood). Despite her otherworldly beauty and charm, the Disney Princess is intended for audiences to aspire to and feel a sort of kinship with because they share the burden of being misunderstood, mistreated, or brushed aside (Whelan; Potgieter and Potgieter).

Furthermore, Gershon posits that animated characters are designed as "conventionalized markers" without much ascribed detail or backstory so that viewers can "project an affective connection and various social complexities onto the character," and effectively become a co-creator (2). This statement rings especially true for the Disney princesses whose identities are influenced by the creation of the other characters in the franchise and continuously developed by viewers' relationships with the franchise (Potgieter and Potgieter). Due to this intertextual entanglement, Giselle is a character who is defined by much more than the story presented on the screen. As an ideological representative, Giselle's character is established by the viewer's knowledge of and experiences with the

other Disney princesses as well as the fairytale genre, so the more of this intertextual knowledge a viewer has the more they will enjoy *Enchanted*. Most importantly, because Giselle is a representative of the Disney princesses, the viewer's perceptions of Giselle have an amplifying impact on how they view the franchise moving forward. The deep connection that viewers have developed with the Disney Princess figures causes significant cognitive dissonance when Giselle enters reality because the character that the viewer has established in their mind is subverted by the changing world around her.

The audience's perception of Giselle can be further contextualized through Hall's reception theory which uses a viewer's interpretation of a given work to categorize them into the dominant, oppositional, or negotiated audience. Generally speaking, dominant audience members accept the work, oppositional members reject the work, and the negotiated audience both accepts and rejects it (Hall). Those who watch *Enchanted* naturally fall into one of these categories based on a variety of factors, primarily their relationship with Disney and the Disney Princess franchise and their perceptions of the film's genre and general production. When it comes to Disney princesses, the issues that tend to place viewers in the categories of oppositional or negotiated audience are related to race, gender studies, and body representation. Since viewer-character alignment is closely linked to an audience's enjoyment of a film, their perception of a story's protagonist plays an exceptional role in determining which reception category they become party to. Due to the intertextual nature of *Enchanted*, especially in Giselle's case, the application of reception theory bears significance to the larger context of the film and the characters in the franchise. In fact, the characters' responses to Giselle within the film are, first, representative of the multifaceted opinions of the viewers, and second, reflective of public sentiment surrounding the Disney princesses as a whole. While all three audiences are portrayed in *Enchanted*, the group that is most salient to this analysis is the negotiated audience.

Many Disney Princess viewers fall into the negotiated audience, including this very analysis, and even *Enchanted* is part of this audience, as evidenced by its self-deprecation (Pratiwi and Primasita). Negotiated audience members are often fans, but they also have concerns and opposing views about what they are consuming. Those in this category tend to experience the greatest cognitive

dissonance as they struggle to reconcile their joy and criticism. With Giselle, there is entertainment and even admiration found in her exuberance, kindness, and faith but objections to her thoughts on True Love and her dependence on Edward and Robert. Many characters in *Enchanted* fall into this reception category as they want to see the world as Giselle does but their desires are hampered by their knowledge of reality. While many of these conflicting sentiments are impossible to reconcile, those in the negotiated audience are committed to the juggling act because of the joy that the characters and stories bring them.

This complex relationship between the viewer and the characters is part of what makes *Enchanted* so interesting because the viewer-character peace is continually challenged. Giselle in her real-world form complicates this long-established relationship as older viewers are given a character who begins to appear more helpless and silly, rather than humble and romantically tragic. Parents are presented with questions like: Is this really the sort of character that they want their children to be mimicking? Is this the sort of character that they have spent their lives idolizing? As this viewer-character phenomenon relates to cognitive dissonance, Zeglin explains: "consonance [peace] can only be achieved if the viewer is willing to accept the character as an iteration of his own self" (52). For the fans of Giselle, this means that to find peace with themselves, with Giselle, and with *Enchanted* as a whole, they must come to relate to Giselle as she appears in reality. Unfortunately for the viewer, this is not an easy accomplishment, as Giselle creates much more discomfort before she generates peace.

### Happy Working Song

Some form of a work or cleaning scene is a staple in Disney Princess films, and *Enchanted* is no exception. "Happy Working Song" stands out for a variety of reasons, particularly the catchy tune and allusions to iconic Disney Princess cleaning songs. Viewers who have seen other films in the franchise will find this scene in *Enchanted* to feel incredibly familiar. Most notable are the resemblances between "Happy Working Song" and *Snow White's* "Whistle While You Work." Once again, *Enchanted* provides the viewer with an opportunity to look at staples of the genre in a different light once the animation has been stripped away. In the

typical Disney Princess films, house chores are generally presented – through the songs, animation, and attitudes of the characters – as fun, fulfilling, entrancing, and easily achievable tasks, but when placed in the realistic context of *Enchanted*, these activities become upsetting.

In *Snow White*, the princess is assisted by cute forest creatures who eagerly take on the household chores. This scene is fun and pleasing to watch despite the animals' unsanitary cleaning methods, such as deer licking plates and using their tails to dust the furniture. Similarly, in *Enchanted*, Giselle calls upon the animals of NYC to help her clean Robert's apartment in a scene that is equal parts funny and absolutely disgusting. While the cleanup and assistance from the animals in *Snow White* and *Cinderella* are charming and oddly effective, the animals Giselle summons are rodents and bugs from around the city that end up making things cleaner only in the loosest of terms. In contrast to her cheery attitude and dancing, Giselle sings of cleaning up toilets and mildew as the animals eat through the grime on the bathtub and dishes.

This positive attitude becomes much stranger and more impressive in this scene because the viewer can see the realism of the filth that Giselle is combating. In *Cinderella*, the soon-to-be princess sings a beautiful song while gracefully scrubbing the floor. This scene evolves into a dream-like sequence, and, despite the exhausting task, the viewer does not pay much attention to the work being done because of the beautiful music and visually pleasing animation. With *Enchanted*, this disassociation is not possible for the viewer because the cleaning process is in no way visually pleasing. The reality and grossness of the situation make Giselle's excitement seem inappropriate, even though this perky attitude is barely an afterthought when watching *Cinderella* and *Snow White*. With the animation and cute, anthropomorphic animals out of the way, "Happy Working Song" reveals the underlying horror of the iconic cleaning scenes.

Viewers experience stronger dissonance in this scene because it is so reminiscent of the well-loved songs the early princesses sing, but is set in reality, and is therefore horrifying, as the viewer imagines a horde of rats crawling into their kitchen and using their tails to clean their microwave. Potgieter and Potgieter sum up the overall effect of this scene well, stating "Giselle's 'Happy Working Song' is offset against the realities of decidedly unpleasant domestic tasks and the vermin that come to assist her in it – she still dressed in her voluminous wedding

dress since the previous day – so that its relentless cheerfulness takes on an element of the ridiculous” (66). It is at this point in the film, when placed in the context of reality, that the fairytale approach to the world begins to look truly foolish.

### Prince Edward: Romantic Language and Heroism

As the stereotypical fairytale prince, Edward seems as if he should be a capable and dependable character, yet, in reality, he behaves more ignorant and childlike than heroic. When Edward arrives in NYC, he leaps onto a bus and stabs his sword through the roof, nearly striking a woman seated inside but believing that he has saved the passengers from a beast. Giselle’s chipmunk friend tries to mime directions to the prince, but he frequently misinterprets the message as something ridiculous and unwittingly passes by Giselle several times. Many more such mishaps occur, and Edward's tenacity is commendable – endearing him to the audience – but the prince is also frustrating to watch because he has no sense of how the world works and makes few attempts to learn, unlike Giselle. Beyond how he responds to obstacles encountered in reality, Prince Edward also creates dissonance for the viewer through his romantic vocabulary. The prince is first introduced in Andalasia as he captures a troll and expresses discontent with his conquest because his heart “longs to be joined in song” (*Enchanted*, 00:04:40). Once he hears Giselle singing from afar, he exclaims “Oh! I must find the maiden that belongs to that sweet voice,” before riding off to rescue her (00:04:57). His expressive vocabulary is appropriate and attractive in the fairytale world of Andalasia, but Edward carries this language into reality, frequently referring to Giselle as his “heart’s duet,” “heart’s true desire,” and “one coquette.” He also introduces her to Robert and Nancy as “the love of my life, my heart’s true desire” which Nancy finds surprisingly romantic and charming (01:19:42).

As a character from a fairytale world, especially a prince, Edward’s vocabulary and behavior are not surprising, and rather are expected, as a quantitative analysis of twelve Disney Princess films revealed that the male characters are almost always the characters that pursue the romantic relationship (Hefner et al.). The same study found that in the films of the classic Disney era, three-fourths of romantic statements are idealized and that these statements present romantic partners and love as perfect, powerful, or destined (Hefner et

al.). Unfortunately for Prince Edward, his perfect love – and his need to declare it to anyone who will listen – does not translate well into reality. When used in other princess films, declarations of love are viewed as endearing, exciting, and perhaps even desirable by the viewer, but when proclaimed in reality, Edward’s words tend to have a more unsettling effect. Suddenly “my heart’s true desire” feels cheesy and awkward (*Enchanted*, 01:19:44). While the prince’s behavior may initially be amusing, his declarations quickly begin to feel surface-level and uncomfortable to watch, ultimately subverting a cornerstone stereotype.

The cognitive dissonance the viewer experiences from watching Prince Edward is greater than feeling a little uncomfortable because his presence in reality threatens a deeply entrenched archetype. This archetype has many labels – hero, male-rescuer, princely image, redeemer – but these figures are all centered around the same qualities, behaviors, and purposes or dreams (Rodríguez). The prince characters in the Disney Princess films, and the greater fairytale genre, are designed to be heroic, passionate, and to prevail against all odds. This archetype has been established for centuries as the perfect man, just as the princess figure has been idealized. Audiences have been taught to trust the prince and his decisions implicitly and to find comfort in his dashing good looks, physical prowess, and fearlessness. Even by fairytale standards, Disney’s princes are especially perfect, as they are youthful, valiant heroes of good breeding who demonstrate unyielding faithfulness to their princesses, as well as a general brightness of spirit and commitment to family and society (Rodríguez).

Prince Edward exhibits all these characteristics, yet the prince figure is received differently in the new context. Essentially, Prince Edward’s perfection becomes an insurmountable flaw because he is now in a world where quintessential heroes are not viewed as such. Drawing from McCorkle’s story “Sleeping Beauty, Revised,” Rodríguez aptly explains that the male-rescuer archetype is not nearly as appealing in reality as it is in fairytales, stating, “[The protagonist] discovered the insubstantiality of [the prince] ... [and] feels utterly repelled by it ... [because] he is but a trivial image torn out of an illustrated fairy-tale book ... she is not blinded by the outwardly appearance of the traditional male rescuer, but is ... getting a glimpse into the vacuity of this kind of redeemer whose existence can only be materialized on a piece of paper (63). Now that the “insubstantial” Edward is flesh and blood instead of a 2D animated figure, he becomes peer-like to the viewer due to the similarities of form, which emphasizes how different his character is from the standards of reality.

Unfortunately for the prince, archetypes are rooted in myths – the power and meaning of which lie in humans’ ability to recognize themselves within the characters (Dürrenmatt; Novak). Like Giselle, Prince Edward is supposed to be a character that viewers can see parts of themselves in, but when he behaves in such an over-the-top and clueless manner, the audience becomes uninterested, and even embarrassed, at the thought of being similar to the prince. The prince’s power over the viewer is threatened by this new lack of appeal, but his archetype loses all significance in reality because the rules, threats, and objectives of the world are so different. In a contemporary society of rationalism, individualism, and bureaucracy there is no time for believing in fantastical heroes (Novak; Steiner). There are no beasts to slay or maidens to catch, and there is no kingdom to run. Prince Edward has no credibility, commands no respect, and is viewed as a joke or a crazy, dangerous person. His heroic contributions are decidedly ineffective and laughable. In sum, the prince is no longer an awe-inspiring hero, but an odd, pitiable figure of amusement and frustration – certainly not the sort of hero that the viewer expects will rescue Giselle when the time comes, or the hero who will live happily ever after with her. As a result, viewers are left with ever-increasing dissonance with the prince archetype and its promises as the foundational figure is repeatedly made a mockery of.

### The Cruel Reality of Fairytale Love

Cruel optimism, as coined by Berlant, is the phenomenon of attachment to the potential of something that is “*impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic*” (24, emphasis in original). These attachments are considered cruel because they are deeper than a casual interest or preoccupation; the cruelty lies in how the fantasy is intertwined with identity so that the object of attachment is linked to “the subject’s sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world” (Berlant 24). Disney’s brand of love has already been placed within the context of Berlant’s cruel optimism as something that holds girls and women under the spell of a perfect, destined, magical love that leaves them vulnerable to the agenda of the patriarchy (Garlen and Sandlin). Disney’s cruel spell – described by Garlen and Sandlin as something that “not only fostered a profound and pervasive love of Disney but also an equally profound love for love itself” (967) – has become integrated into audiences’ identities and collective

“social memories” through “bounded sets of symbolizations (texts, images, songs, monuments, and rituals) and associated emotions” (Simon et al. 3).

In *Enchanted*, the cruel optimism of Disney’s romantic rhetoric operates as a force that keeps viewers invested in a fairytale mindset of fantastical romantic standards, despite knowing that True Love does not exist in reality and, more importantly, seeing that fairytale love and romantic figures are not as appealing as advertised. Outside of the animated world, the true nature of Disney love that is tucked away within the animated princess films becomes inescapable. This new lens forces Giselle and the viewer to confront the realities of fairytale love as Giselle is introduced to the painful reality that exists outside of her animated world. As Giselle and the audience are forced to face their insensible fairytale notions, cognitive dissonance takes over, resulting in dissatisfaction with what, by all fairytale standards, should be happily ever after.

While Prince Edward’s behavior generates dissatisfaction within the viewer because he does not live up to his heroic reputation, the prince simultaneously becomes unappealing to Giselle because he is *too* stereotypically princely. When Prince Edward rescues her at their first meeting in Andalasia, Giselle is starry-eyed and instantly in love. She carries her devotion into reality, but it wanes as she grows closer to Robert, despite his pessimism and marked distaste for virtually everything that she holds dear. The emotional disconnect between Giselle and Prince Edward is uncomfortably palpable once they are finally reunited. Back in Andalasia, the pair sang a duet about being the other’s long-awaited True Love and when Edward locates Giselle in NYC he sings his half of the duet once more, but Giselle does not reply and only looks at him in confusion. At this moment it becomes painfully clear that the “perfect” prince charming character is not actually the epitome of male partners. Rather, he is simply a fun and intriguing, yet fleeting, concept – not the type of man that a typical modern woman wants to emotionally invest in or incorporate into her life.

The implications of this distinction between Prince Edward and Robert come to a head at a themed ball near the end of the film. A romantic, life-changing ball is a quintessential fairytale device, and in many ways, this holds true in *Enchanted*. The film brings the animated fairytale staple of a dreamy dance with one’s True Love – complete with sweeping music, flawless footwork, and beautiful attire – to life, making it feel very real and attainable for the viewer. As audience members live vicariously through their dance, the ball becomes more than a fantasy, and magic is re-instilled into the idea of a real-life ball. Where



*Enchanted* begins to deviate from the typical fairytale ball is during Giselle and Robert's intimate dance (in which the rest of the world literally disappears) when Edward cuts in to take Giselle back to Andalasia, ruining the perfection of the moment. The remaining magic of the evening is completely destroyed when Giselle looks back and sees Robert finishing the dance with Nancy and kissing her. At this point, the sanctity of the classic fairytale ball is compromised, as Giselle says goodbye to the man that she loves, sees that he loves someone else, and her faith in fairytale love is finally broken. It is at this moment that Giselle experiences the devastating effect of love and finally understands the cynical, self-protective romantic tendencies of the people in reality.

Giselle's distress is acutely felt by the viewer, since they were just as swept up in the magic of the evening, making the conclusion of this scene even harder to watch. The figurative ambush of this scene gives the viewer emotional whiplash and breeds a bitter sentiment because the magic of the fairytale ball is sacrosanct. In *Sleeping Beauty* and *Cinderella*, the dances are special moments in which the heroines' mundane and taxing lives briefly fade away so that the characters and the audience can have a blissful moment of refuge, but in *Enchanted*, this refuge is disrupted by none other than the prince himself! This is a shock to the system that, combined with the agony of seeing her True Love with someone else, proves to be more than Giselle can bear – driving her to accept a poisoned apple so that she can escape her miserable reality.

## Resolution

The resolution of cognitive dissonance within *Enchanted* is representative of a larger movement in the world of Disney and fairytales. This resolution begins right after Giselle is poisoned as Prince Edward finally proves himself to be a true hero. Once he is informed of the evil queen's plot he springs into action and confronts her before rushing to Giselle's side to administer true love's kiss. When kissing Giselle does nothing to revive her, he quickly realizes that he must not be her True Love and encourages Robert to kiss her instead. By doing so, the prince honorably saves Giselle from death and unites her with her True Love. Of course, the successful administration of true love's kiss confirms True Love as something magical that can exist in reality, which allows the viewer to hold out hope for finding their own happily ever after.

If the emotional relief from these events is not enough, all remaining dissonance caused by Giselle is resolved as she stands up against the evil queen-turned-dragon and rescues Robert from her clutches. Giselle's time in reality tempered her otherworldly nature by exposing her to new ideas and darker emotions, resulting in newfound self-sufficiency and bravery. While this aspect of her development has been observable, the final confrontation is the first evidence of Giselle's evolution from helpless maiden to bold hero. By Disney's habits, it is feasible that a different writer could have made Giselle the type of hero with immediate acumen and magic for support, which is part of why Giselle's impromptu, unskilled efforts are striking. In fact, Pratiwi and Primasita's analysis of *Mulan* (2020) through the lens of Hall's reception theory indicates that Disney audiences prefer conflict resolution and female character empowerment to be based on earned skills, character development, independence, and bravery rather than reliance on magic or immediate aptitude. Audiences do not want infinitely skilled heroes because those characters are less relatable, making their achievements less fulfilling. Instead, viewers are eager for characters with average skills, intelligence, and resources who can overcome great odds because they symbolize the potential for anyone to be a hero (Pratiwi and Primasita). As Giselle clammers along a skyscraper in the pouring rain – determined to slay a dragon with a sword she has never wielded – she proves that being a hero has nothing to do with skill or magic and everything to do with the heart. Finally, the viewer is watching a heroine they can truly admire.

This resolution of the plot acts as a resolution of the cognitive dissonance that plagued the viewer throughout the entire film. What makes this conclusion so satisfying and significant is that it demonstrates the potential coexistence of reality and fairytales, which justifies the viewers' love of the Disney ideology. Sure, reality exposes Disney's fantasy-inducing rhetoric, but this context also creates an opportunity for the fairytale concepts to be reinforced, in conjunction with the values of the modern world. Initially, the mockery of the fairytale mentality is subconsciously interpreted as a threat, but what is actually happening is more complex. What is perceived as an attack is, in a roundabout way, a means of bolstering what is under scrutiny. This process of subversion and dissonance is not an effort to demonize the Disney ideology. Rather the aim is to strip away the animated lens so the ideological framework can be assessed in its most relatable form. In the case of *Enchanted*, this process undoubtedly strengthens the viewer's original belief in Disney's ideology while also confirming the need for some

modern adjustments. As a result, cognitive dissonance is finally resolved, and the viewer is able to confidently support the classic Disney ideology without compromising their modern sensibilities.

While cognitive dissonance is unsettling, it can create a truly revelatory experience for viewers, making it something that future films will be wise not to shy away from. For proof of the market for such multi-faceted, subconsciously challenging content, one need look no further than *Enchanted*. With its fun, self-deprecating style, *Enchanted* is a uniquely enjoyable film. Its bold mockery has established a special place in the hearts of Disney Princess fans and a key position in Disney's evolution into the modern era. Furthermore, through its clever use of subversion and dissonance, *Enchanted* has illustrated that there is not necessarily something wrong with happily consuming a dated or personally incongruous ideology when the viewer is also given the opportunity to consider how their beliefs align or conflict with what they are watching. These experiences enable viewers to hold firm to their personal values while enjoying stories that contradict those values. This balance that *Enchanted* strikes is what needs to become commonplace in storytelling, especially for Disney and other companies that are producing content rooted in dated or "traditional" belief systems, such as fairytales, for modern audiences.

While an argument has been made to assert the potentially deceptive nature of animation, the medium also has the ability to be an invaluable tool. When it comes to developing animated content, the power of the medium lies in its heightened capacity for nuanced messaging and analysis of challenging frameworks. The artificial context creates a separation from reality, which allows animated content to employ elements of both the real and invented worlds (e.g., objects, cultural issues, social structures), resulting in more complex and thought-provoking viewing experiences. Animation is the perfect setting for scrutinizing typically overlooked rhetoric, adapting familiar frameworks, and encountering new ideological interpretations because the animated format softens the dissonance, making it bearable. For the Disney Princess franchise, the contemporary era was galvanized through *Enchanted's* implementation of the subversion-dissonance-evolution process. This franchise-wide ideological exploration began in *Enchanted* by simply removing the animated style, with the residual fairytale tone and artifacts of the animated world working to ease the viewer through the dissonance. Disney's flawless execution of such an earnest parody established *Enchanted* in the Disney Princess zeitgeist and reaffirmed the

need for fairytales within the modern era of storytelling. Future productions that can similarly utilize animation to criticize and celebrate their ideological roots are likely to find themselves in a comparable position of popularity, power, and cultural significance.

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