



# The Research on the Development Process and Influence of Female Images in Disney Films

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**Abstract.** At the beginning of the last century, American animation was still developing and trying. However, the emergence and development of Disney animation created a prosperous age of American animation, greatly promoted the development process of animation history, and tried a lot of technical and ideological innovation. In the early stage, it made a great contribution to the animation film, and in the later stage, which has also generated considerable repercussions in the field of emancipation of women's minds and change the public's prejudice and perception of women. Disney's films not only brought a feast to the audio-visual experience of ordinary audiences, but also had a certain impact on the society with the development of its female characters and the highlighting of female consciousness. By studying the development process and impact of female images in Disney films, in the process of analysing the character setting and plot development of different classic masterpieces, people can understand the changes in female characters over time and the development of female consciousness in society. This paper takes the development of different female characters in Disney films as the starting point and takes the image and spiritual connotation of female characters in different films as the research object to explore its development process and influence. Through the research results, the character image design in animated films is closely related to the background, style and trend of thought of The Times that the creators live in. It's found that the turning point of the female image in Disney films can be divided into four stages, namely "initial-traditional gentle image, transformation-pursuit of multiple aesthetics, innovation-accompanied by social influence, liberation-unique charm of women".

**Keywords:** Disney films · Female images · Development process · Influence · Social · Feminism

## 1 Introduction

Nowadays, with the gradual opening of the social system, there are more and more elements and different voices in the society, and the launch of the Disney movie, which is now familiar to everyone, is a further proof of the improvement of women's social status. By 2022, 14 animated princesses have been created. Its film and television box office and IP revenue has never disappointed Disney. During the nearly century-long creative process, the Disney Company experienced the Second World War in the 20th

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century, the recovery of capitalism after the war, the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. And the economic crisis period, also experienced the 21st century economic globalization wave, more importantly, caught up with the three waves of feminism at the same time. Under the influence of three waves of feminism and the complex and changing background of *The Times*. The princesses in the main series of animated films have undergone three major transformations [1]. As a series of female films, they can describe the evolution process of feminist ideology in more detail, and it is more convincing and easier to understand to study the transformation of feminist ideology with them as the entry point [2].

This paper will analyse the birth and development of Disney film series, its transtemporal transformation and pioneering attempts from several aspects. It will review the development history of Disney over several decades from some distinctive perspectives and relate it with the shaping of women, to reflect the social changes and their influences. The full text is divided into 4 chapters, according to the turning points of the female characters in Disney films and explore the characteristics of different development periods and female characters, hoping to provide some contributions to scholars in this field in the future.

From the first animated feature film “Snow White” release of Disney princess role increasingly as time goes on, the same type of Cinderella and sleeping beauty, and gradually occupied the main position in the Disney animated characters, and become a kind of cultural phenomenon, it also promotes the academic study of female characters in the Disney animation. But with the awakening of female self-consciousness, most female characters in Disney animation have begun to change. For example, the Little Mermaid and Belle, princesses have changed their weak and submissive image before. At the same time, the simple and flat Disney princesses have gradually evolved into vivid, authentic, independent women who pursue individuality and diversity. To the recent, Disney has been completely subverting the traditional image of the princess, began to bold attempt various villains as well as not so lovable, has the obvious flaw of female image, the image design of the heroine is no longer being limited by the traditional concept of Disney princess. Some of them has obvious contemporary feminine qualities. Also, love is no longer the only theme. Therefore, the study of the princess image in Disney animated films can undoubtedly get inspiration from the design thinking and expression style of the female animated image. The development of feminism is inseparable from the construction of female culture, and by linking the construction of new female culture with the Disney Princess series of animated female characters, we can explore the influence of Disney animation on the construction of new female culture, to improve the development of feminism [3].

## **2 Initial-The Male Perspective Gaze: Traditional Gentle Image**

Snow White, the first Disney film to become famous, was born in 1937, when the U.S. stock market was emerging from an unprecedented crisis in the capitalist world, and in a period of post-World War II fatigue and burnout. People’s anxiety and depression need to be relieved, so the birth of “Snow White” is undoubtedly a good time to help, its first release in the United States has been a very dazzling achievement and response.

From this point of view alone, it is indeed an outstanding film in the context of its time, and it also made a great contribution to the American entertainment industry and film and television industry. From the story and concept of the film itself, Snow White is a “perfect woman” fully in line with the psychological desire and pursuit of men at that time. This concept is imperceptibly ingrained and influences the social impression and definition of women. As Allen Ginsberg said, “All fairy tales are adult fairy tales in essence, and what fairy tales include is not the psychological needs of children, but the psychological metaphor of adult society.” Therefore, in movies, the establishment of characters needs to meet the psychological needs of adults for this type of characters, especially in the social environment at that time [4]. She is gentle, virtuous, naive, and lively, in the face of the stepmother’s malice and vicious murder of the heart is defenceless, can only wait for the dwarf and the prince’s rescue. To anyone, she looked like an innocent fawn, with no desire to fight and none of the hallmarks of a modern independent woman. In both Snow White and her later analogy Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty Aurora, female images are mostly constructed by male ideology, or beautify or vilify, thus forming a unique gender consumption culture. The images of princesses in Disney movies reflect, to a certain extent, the personality requirements of men for women in the society. In the character requirements to reduce the independence of self-personality and increase the proportion of love [5]. So as the result, the main focus of these works is on love, male heroism, and satisfying women’s expectations and aspirations for a rich and handsome Prince Charming. The full love story of the princess and prince was one of Disney’s early publicity stunts. As Disney princesses, all of them are loved by millions. Coddled by a father, loved by his subjects, and even the heart of a prince. The prince in Snow White can kiss Snow when he first meets her in a crystal coffin, the prince in Cinderella can fall in love with Sandy when he first meets her at a dance, and the prince in Sleeping Beauty can even kiss Aurora when he has never met her. Such “love at first sight” is romantic, but it also makes people think. The fact that “princesses” can win everything effortlessly means that the ability of women themselves is not important, as long as they have the external identity of princess and meet the expectation of the princess image, which is undoubtedly the denial of women’s personal struggle, and also a misleading way of women’s discourse [6]. In fact, the mirror that the queen faces in the fairy tale is a very typical metaphor, with a strong patriarchal colour, it shows the relationship between women and the mirror, it seems to imply that the expectation of men is like this mirror reflecting their hearts, always watching them, giving them a coercive label, that is “the pursuit of beauty to please men” and “women strive to change in order to gain men’s affection, respect and identity”. In this fairy tale, as a woman of the highest social status, the queen definitely wants her appearance to match it, but when she learns that she is threatened, her confidence is destroyed, and she becomes a villain completely. There are individual differences in gender identity, and it often depends on physiological factors and social factors to determine individual behaviour and role identification. Both physiological and social factors guide and restrict the development of males and females, and social factors also play an important role in the growth of different individuals. Gender identity has been defined in various ways based on different theories [7]. This not only embodies in that era, the concept of “beauty” from the context of the society at that time, the value of women is still the result of a patriarchal society

in which men affirm it, but also reflect the context of patriarchal culture female to male attachment. Put them in the opposite of the tender women, this is the kind of female rivalry that a patriarchal society wants. It also shows that the world still holds a great prejudice and aversion towards women with power and ability. In several of the films at the same era, the villains were invariably competent women, so it seems that Disney was not at all what it is today.

### **3 Transformation-Highlighting Female Independence: Pursuing Diverse Aesthetics**

It was Ariel in *Daughter of the Sea* that Disney really started promoting independent and thoughtful princesses. At that time, the United States entered the 1980s, under the influence of the feminist movement, the influence of women in the society became more and more powerful. Therefore, the classic female characters in Disney films were also constantly changing according to the trend of *The Times* to a considerable extent, and the independent female consciousness was gradually prominent.

Ariel is no longer a princess who just runs away or waits passively, but becomes brave and independent, and pursues happiness by her own efforts. She is a pioneer figure of feminism in Disney films, which lays the foundation for the style and development track of later. Belle in the later Disney blockbuster *Beauty and the Beast*, which is also a classic princess, is also a woman with advanced thinking, hard work and love of reading, and some standards of modern society for women in the new age begin to appear on her. The main focus of this film is on the shaping of the heroine's personal image. Although male characters still account for a substantial proportion, they play a role in echoing the character characteristics of the heroine. In some parts, they can serve as a foil for the heroine and make her image more full and real. There were actually two other versions of this story very early in history, but since the timeline spans too long and has nothing to do with the theme Disney, I won't go into detail here. Disney's version, which from the start places beauty on a near-equal footing with the beast, doesn't focus as much on Belle's growing independence or the power dynamics between the hero and heroine as those two versions do. Instead, it makes a new plea for a new generation of women not to be defined by their looks. This chapter of the princess in the story first try to set the male role into a villain, because Belle is a famous beauty in the town, the heroine's suitor just regards her beauty, but could not understand and support her personality and hobbies, and those are common defects of the traditional patriarchy, thus tying resistance and reluctant also reflects the gradual awakening of feminine consciousness at that time, Start on the path of pursuing themselves and saying no. Her rejection of Gaston means her abandonment of the superficial view of love based on appearance, which objectively constitutes a rebellion against the patriarchal perspective of marriage and love. Belle's rescue of the beast can even be seen as a redefinition of the traditional social roles of men and women [8]. Disney's creation of Belle, who refused to be a doll, was also a crucial break, setting the stage for increasingly courageous female characters in the decades that followed. In the story later, the beast doesn't like all the prince before, in a patriarchal position of dominator and dominant, but display a thirst for warmth and love, respect the wishes of Belle's image, so Belle from the beginning of some resistance

to the later slowly in response to his expectation, and let the beast don't care about his appearance, Ask the beast in the dark to "come out into the light!" To see his face and lead it to truly feel loved. Ariel's self-transformation shows a process from the outside in, but Belle makes men change from the inside out. The subtext is that men's nirvana needs the guidance of women, [8] and the middle interests are not contrary, but mutual benefit. This can reflect that with the development of The Times, people's expectations, and visions for the status of the sexes in love have been changing, and the expectation of the society for women is no longer perfect but has its own personality characteristics and independent rights.

#### **4 Innovation-Giving a Diverse Image: With Social Impact**

Disney Company, who has a huge influence on the public, also creates characters that reflect the characteristics of the current era through animated films, and implicitly reflects the society's thinking on the current situation of female production. With the change of times, more and more women begin to explore the awareness and development self-consciousness. From the traditional view, women are attached to men, and there is a view that "men take charge of the outside and women take charge of the inside". The role of women is always gentle and considerate, and the social role of women is mainly hidden behind the light of male. The female characters in the influential Disney films are also evolving, which indicates the greater influence of feminism in the social environment. Animation film on shaping the role of women, the female characters in the new century and the early female characters, image promotion and the innovation of feminist thought has a new orientation for the design of traditional female characters and a new guidance for the personality of female characters in the future animated films at the same time [7]. As more Disney princesses were introduced, they became more and more creative, and began to appear as characters that no one had ever seen before, even completing the metamorphosis from "princess" to "female warrior." This symbolized the promotion of feminist thought and innovation across the times, which was an unprecedented precedent, and greatly reflected that the public in modern society had a higher acceptance of women's pursuit of self-individuality and emotional belonging. In the Disney animated films of this period, the female characters broke the single perfect image in the original animated characters, increased the complexity of the characters' personalities, and made the characters' personality characteristics richer and fuller. Such as Moana is a naturally unruly character who follows through on her decisions and can even seem a bit reckless at times. The existence of such a group of imperfect female characters makes the audience feel that Disney movies have finally returned to humanity, looking directly at their vulnerability, helplessness, and confusion [9].

This chapter will mainly focus on the analysis of the magical fairy tale Frozen to explore why Disney movies have such a profound influence not only on women but also on the whole society and the reasons for its enduring popularity. Before that, briefly introduce Jasmine and Mulan, who can also be divided into "innovative" princesses. Their common feature is that they got rid of the conventional title and identity of princess and abandoned the bright appearance and crown. The princess images of this period are rich and diverse, which gives a new definition to "Disney princess". Their appearance symbolizes the further enhancement of female consciousness, the continuous improvement

of social status, and each of them is more personalized and real than before, with their own defects and deficiencies, rather than blindly formatted “perfect princess”. It also marks the beginning of a time when more power is in the hands of women in Disney films. However, having a beautiful love and marriage is still regarded as the destination of princesses, indicating that princesses at this time have not fully completed their transformation and get rid of their attachment to men. They still need male recognition and proof to create value and achieve the so-called “happy ending”.

But *Frozen* is certainly an innovative stroke of genius, and its success has been documented. It was Disney’s first animated film to focus not on erotic love and marriage between a man and a woman, but on family relationships and kinship and self-liberation. Moreover, it is worth noting that the male image in the film is no longer the classic Prince Charming and positive hero image, but gradually becomes more and more negative. *Frozen* has achieved an unprecedented breakthrough and innovation: the prince is the biggest villain in the whole story. Core theme of the story is the heroine sisters together to resolve misunderstanding and overcome the difficulties and obstacles, the best part of the film is sister Elsa left the noise of the city, and in all over the sky snow to unleash their personality and ability, this is her self-expression and secular shackles thoroughly get rid of, but also means that under the discard all aura and identity, A completely blank and transparent display of femininity. Throwing gloves, taking off capes, throwing tiaras – that’s who she is, and who Disney wants all women to shout out to the world. Recall all the princess in the Disney decades development history series and movies, most of them are silent support or seems to be able to rely on the presence of the father, but the father and daughter of love in this film are very pale, in addition to the Elsa a pair of gloves to let her not to show, doesn’t seem to be particularly careful to help and to develop, and then died early. The message that can be know is that the deliberate weakening of father-daughter affection and the withdrawal of fathers means that the disappearance of patriarchy has played a crucial role in women’s self-development and awakening [8]. Since then, Disney has really made it keep pace with *The Times*. Throughout the image evolution of all the princess in the movie, from always passive wait for help to active pursuit their own happiness, to pursuit of personality self. From clinging to love, heart and home to have a nation’s sense of honour, as you can see them every time for leading and echo the trend of *The Times*. And know the growth, will not easily be eliminated [4].

## **5 Emancipation-Rejection of a Single Role: The Unique Charm of Women**

It is not difficult to find that in the modern Disney animated films, more and more themes highlight the mainstream social values of independence and freedom, which gradually affects the public aesthetic and the public’s acceptance of media information. The public has also given some thought to the value and status of women in society. The improvement of the status of women also gradually shows that men recognize the value of women and that the two sexes grow together and coexist in a balanced way is very important to not only some people, but the whole society. Even though it still exists, but it is also an important step toward identity [7]. At present, to improve the status of

women is to release the social pressure on men, and it is also necessary to balance the relationship between men and women and promote identity [4].

So, Disney's recent focus on villains, as well as attempts to free men from prejudice and discrimination against competent women, is also a search for identity and an effort toward the situation described above. After the Disney princess series of films is completely out of the conventional princess story, Disney is no longer blindly to create a positive good character, but gradually began to different types of female image is created by secular vision restrictions on women's liberation, all this story is no longer a single one-sided, they are trying to remove the absolute antagonism between good and bad characters to show that the world is not black or white.

Characters who have succeeded is the villain in "sleeping curse" Phillip, her feeling and the reasons for the formation of character completely show in front of the audience, and then to the red queen Alice in wonderland, explain the reason why she is so loathed her sister's, and let go the painful memories of the past behind success, reconciliation with her sister. The success of the latest live-action movie *The black and white witch Cruella* undoubtedly herald the market acceptance of the higher and the audience's preferences will change over time. Disney based on her past experiences, showed how to make a complete character. Her tragic life, her paranoid and crazy, even it's not the standard of normal audience, but the courage and female wisdom are also worth learning. The entire series in 70s of 20th century, London is a liberal, free and open society, punk agitation swept by the whole era full of rebellion, cool and fashionable breath. But it is also a symbol of the new things to replace old things, old ideas have been eliminated, with some buried the meaning of a new Disney World in the past. Women are no longer stuck in a fixed image frame, and those who are ambitious and pursue their own career are more worthy of praise.

Through the above analysis, we can know that Disney has created female images from a richer Angle and a new direction than before. It is no longer a black and white fairy tale when creating villains but begins to pay attention to the careful excavation of female personal perspectives and enrich and rationalize the villains. Today's adult women face multiple pressures such as employment, childbearing and marriage, which makes the only beautiful fairy tale a rare "utopia". It is this kind of demand that also prompts Disney to continuously breakthrough in female-themed films to meet the needs of more audiences. In recent years, Disney's female images have been enriched not only in type, but also in character creation with more insight and depth. In the face of the development of *The Times* and the continuous improvement of people's aesthetic level, the flat character image has been unable to get the support of the audience. From the dimension of time to explore the inner changes of the character, so as to create a real people who has flesh and blood can have a long-term impact on the subsequent development of the society. The fundamental significance of Disney's constantly changing female image is that it shows the improvement of the status of women. And the advancement of women has profound implications for our generation and the next [10].

## 6 Conclusion

The construction and development of female images in Disney films has a certain degree of influence on the public. Through research, this paper finds that the turning point of the

female image in Disney films can be divided into four stages, namely “initial - traditional gentle image, transformation - pursuit of multiple aesthetics, innovation - accompanied by social influence, liberation - unique charm of women The meaning of film is like the meaning of life, and the meaning of life lies in life itself. Film is not only a work of art, but also a carrier of culture. Through the analysis of several different stages of the Disney Princess films, it also revealed their profound responses to the social situation in the past century. The female characters in them have always been in sync with the times, showing the group images of women in different times. From the transformation of Disney princesses, it can be seen from the traditional single gentle image to the courageous self-expression, which reflects that today’s women, under the influence of society and female consciousness, constantly break through themselves, pursue multiple aesthetics and individual spiritual independence awareness and behaviour, and through this initiative continue to influence social development, so that more and more girls can live out their unique charm. This paper has certain limitations and lacks qualitative research. It is hoped that later scholars can use more in-depth interviews to explore the influence of different female characters in Disney films on the public.

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