

An Aesthetic Approach to Evil

Un acercamiento estético a la maldad⁴⁰

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Resumen

Explorando el rol de la bruja en las historias animadas de Disney se pretende establecer semejanzas con las mujeres objeto de persecución en la caza de brujas de los siglos XVII y XVIII. Se procura también el acercamiento a un modelo que no evoluciona a pesar del tiempo y que conlleva al estancamiento del rol de la bruja como una figura que atenta únicamente contra el valor de la reproducción.

Palabras clave: · Bruja, Disney, Fantasía, Felicidad, Matrimonio, Celibato, Procreación, Reproducción, Mujeres

Abstract

Starting from the exploration of the role of the witch in Disney's animated stories, this essay intends to establish similarities between witches from fairy tales and the pretext responsible for women who were victims during the witch-hunt between that took place from the 15th till the 18th century. This approach to a model that doesn't evolve in spite of time is also intended to prove how the figure of the witch still attempts against valuable goods such as family or reproduction, specially when talking of a white heterogeneous couple.

Keywords: Witch, Disney, Fantasy, Happiness, Marriage, Celibacy, Procreation, Reproduction, Women

⁴⁰ Isabel escribió este artículo en inglés, como parte de su máster en investigación de cine y audiovisuales contemporáneos en la Universidad Pompeu Fabra en Cataluña. Y con la finalidad de compartirlo en la red del repositorio de Universidades en un idioma más universal, como es el inglés.

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Maleficent, Ursula, Mother Gothel and the Evil Queen not only belong to a group of old citizen ladies, they don't need a man, and not just because they are self-sufficient in financial terms, but for the mainly reason that they don't plan to have babies or a family.

A complaint letter to Disney for my unresolved trauma:

I was asked to write an essay about how a cinematographic motive was aesthetically developed from my date of birth until now. Taking into account I was born in the late 80's plus the fact of being almost 30 years old, instead of feeling personally attacked (which to be honest I did at the beginning) I tried to take this as an opportunity to evaluate and find the reasons for being so afraid of my birthday being so close.

The first clue that came to my mind when thinking about the fear that women experience when becoming older, was the idea of "how" they become older, and I mean this in social, financial and family terms. Maybe, this anxiety doesn't rely so much in the fact of the age or the imaginary and incomplete "places-to-go-to-before-I-turn-30" list; but in the things you are supposed to do or have achieved when you become older. To identify the characteristics one is afraid of embody while becoming older, I thought it was essential to find the source of those fears, but most importantly, who or what is responsible for all the things we might consider good or bad when growing up.

So, this essay, which serves the purpose of confronting my worries and the fears of many other young women (yes, because we are indeed young), is also a complaint letter to Disney. Not only because I grew up surrounded by the Disney fantasy world franchise and its completely absurd enthusiasm for fake happiness, but because "fantasy is the expression of our unconscious, and it is these films in particular the ones that most readily reflect areas we repress or suppress" (Hayward, 2000, pág. 108). The author of Cinema Studies (2001), Susan Hayward, points out that, fantasy movies, play a metonymical role in our lives as the voice of the dominant ideology and social myths, so why not establish an evolution time line of characters that alienate the world of thousands of children (and adults) to become their role models. We all know Disney hasn't played fair when it comes to race or gender, but the evolution in these kind of topics has had a bloom. However, there are some characters with more than 70 years of time difference that haven't evolved just a bit in term of aesthetics not only in their appearance, but specially in the way they interfere during the plot.

So, what about the covenant?

It wasn't difficult at all to find the type of character that I would be if I were to play a role in a Disney movie: I would definitely be a witch. This is not just because my favorite color to wear is black, or because I would very much like to be part of the selected Maleficent's staff, or because I would be thrilled to look as elegant as the Evil Queen does in front of her magic mirror. The real reasons I would be a witch in every Disney movie are mostly that: I'm reaching my 30's without a partner, I don't need a man for financial support (or at least that's what I think), I wouldn't even think about cleaning or washing something that isn't mine, I'm totally against arranged marriages and abortion being illegal in my beloved South America and in every part of the world. However, the mainly reason I would burn at the stake would be that I enjoy my sexuality being absolutely conscious of it and of the fact that I have no intentions of being part of any life miracle. It is purely for my pleasure

and enjoyment. Not for the purpose of procreating.

According to Haskell's book *From Reverence to Rape* (1974), cinema reflects the ideological and social construction of women who are either to be admired or hated. Analyzing the elements all the Disney witches have in common, is indeed a starting point, then, being on the antagonistic side of the story, automatically turn them into undesirable and reviled women. But it is important to dig deeper. It's important to analyze the primary significance the witch plays in the structure of the narrative; to have an idea of the effect this role establishes in society.

Lacan says fantasy isn't, but "the conscious articulation of desire, through either images or stories- it is, then, the *mise-en-scène* of desire" (Hayward, 2000, pág. 130), which would work as a mirror of society, a point which Molly Haskell (1974) has made emphasis on her book *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*. Haskell digs a little deeper here, as for her the question relies not in what the characteristics for a certain social construction are, but to find out how and why are they part of a common ideological universe.

It's a pity how, despite being such a fierce mother, Lady Tremaine couldn't make this list. I feel sorry for super fashion Cruella de Vil too, who would for sure run a fashion blog or at least be an instagramer these days if she wasn't fictional. Truth is both Lady Tremaine and Cruella are excellent villains, as are Izma and the Red Queen; they are not witches, though.

Witches are commonly pictured as women who mix potions or conjure spells to manipulate the forces of nature, or the human body in their own favor, whether the somatic structure is theirs or not. That's why the main characters of this essay will be the Evil Queen in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Morey, Hand, & Cotrell, 1937), Maleficent in *Sleeping Beauty* (Geronimi, Larson, & Reitherman, 1959), Ursula in *The Little Mermaid* (Clements & Musker, 1989) and Mother Gothel in *Tangled* (Greno & Howard, 2010).

Having a releasing date gap of almost twenty years (even 30 in one case), Disney had over 70 years to develop the image of the witch in terms of characteristics and role in the narrative structure, so let's jump into these evil women's lives. Although I'm not being surprised at all by the fact that although their roles differ quite a bit in terms of time from one another, these witches are always, in every single one of these four stories, the reason a white princess can't get married.

The thin line between menopause and fertility

Always covered in black or purple long dresses, even a strapless dress in Ursula's case, these witches always appear to be more than 30 and even 40 years old. The famous line when dating someone a little older: "Age is just a number" doesn't apply in these cases, then none of them is keen on dating or finding the one. Our witches aren't wishing for a prince, a king or a future husband. This is the first clue and characteristic these women share in common: they don't aim for their significant other, they wish for power, acceptance, supremacy, youth and beauty; and on top of it all, the empowerment they wish for is just for themselves, yes, no altruism intended.

The Evil Queen wants to be the fairest of them all and doesn't want her beauty to be doubted, she rules a whole kingdom and doesn't even have a partner.

Snow white's father, the king isn't to be seen, he isn't even there to protect his daughter, nor is he to fulfill his duty with his wife, the queen. Dead or alive, far away, it doesn't matter, the Evil Queen, followed everywhere by her raven, rules the kingdom, has the power to make the princess mop the floors and cares just to protect the beauty and power that she has fairly (or not) gained.

Maleficent, on the other hand, gets really upset by not being considered important enough for being invited to a social event. She wishes to be recognized in society, to be treated as an equal and to be addressed to with respect, even if that respect is meant to be caused by fear. She lives alone on top of a deserted mountain wishing only for her course to work by punishing the ones who didn't recognize her importance before.

Ursula wants to rule the seven seas and craves for Triton's power. She lives alone in a cave, with two eels, and just as the other two witches, she has no children.

Mother Gothel doesn't have a partner either. Despite caring about youth and beauty the entire movie, the only thing she wants is the power of the flower that keeps her alive and young. Same flower that was taken from mother nature to fulfill the needs of healing a pregnant woman.

Three of them have a pet, two of them wish for beauty, the entire coven doesn't have any children. All of them aspire to occupy a powerful position and none of them seek to have a partner. Here's where the witch begins to show herself, to show her true colors, then it wouldn't be fair to talk about a witch representation without referencing one of the most powerful moves the world has seen that killed women and homosexuals in the past, the "Great-witch-hunt" of the 15th 16th 17th and 18th centuries. Federici (2009) points out that the cause of women being haunted or persecuted for the crime of being a witch, was that the process capitalism tried to promote "required the transformation of the body into a work-machine, and the subjugation of women to the reproduction of the work- force. Most of all, it required the destruction of the power of women which, in Europe as in America, was achieved through the extermination of the witches." (Federici, 2009, pág. 63).

Maleficent, Ursula, Mother Gothel and the Evil Queen not only belong to a group of old citizen ladies, they don't need a man, and not just because they are self-sufficient in financial terms, but for the mainly reason that they don't plan to have babies or a family. This peculiar characteristic represented a great threat to the basis of capitalism itself as Fedrici (2009) describes when writing about the causes women were beginning to be punished when turning against the state, to which procreation was more than important, and therefore the reason to enslave women to this task and establish "severe penalties (...) in the legal codes of Europe to punish women guilty of reproductive crimes" (Federici, 2009, pág. 87).

At the end of the 16th century, coming from a population decline and a strong economic crisis, "a new concept of human beings also took hold, picturing them as just raw materials, workers and breeders for the state" (Federici, 2009, pág. 88). Witches, denying

themselves to have children committed the worst crime conceived, so “laws were passed that put a premium on marriage and penalized celibacy” (Federici, 2009, pág. 88). The main initiative that the state took to restore the desired population ratio was the launching of a true war against women clearly aimed at breaking the control they had exercised over their bodies and reproduction. (...) primarily through the witch hunt that literally demonized any form of birth-control and non-procreative sexuality (...) all the European governments began to impose the severest penalties against contraception, abortion and infanticide” (Federici, 2009, pág. 89)

Brooms? No thanks, not even for flying

Born from a hatred to single mature women without children, caused only by economic reasons and power struggles, Maleficent, Ursula, Mother Gothel and the Evil Queen, are perceived as guilty of being witches for committing the crimes of not having a family. They also don't display any kind of domestic duty, which was also wrong and condemned in the witch-hunt, as the state wanted to delegate this kind of work, as a vocation for women, increasing the dependence relationship they had with men.

(...) The economic importance of the reproduction of labor-power carried out in the home, and its function in the accumulation of capital became invisible, being mystified as a natural vocation and labelled “women's labor” (...) These historic changes – that peaked in the 19th century with the creation of the full-time housewife- redefined women's position in society and in relationship to men (Federici, 2009, pág. 75).

Home duties in times of witches were established as non-paid work women had to do for their families. “If a woman sewed some clothes it was “domestic-work” or “housekeeping”, even if the clothes were not for the family (...) Such was the devaluation of women's labor that city governments told the guilds to overlook the production that women did in their homes (...)” (Federici, 2009, pág. 92).

It's not surprising that while our 4 witches embody everything that was wrong among the principles which capitalism established as values, princesses, on the other hand, seemed as happy as a clam when doing household chores. Snow White sings in the company of their fellow animals when sweeping the floors of the castle and when cleaning the seven dwarfs' cottage. The fact that the seven dwarfs accepted her in their house because she knew how to cook, is literally said in the movie. Aurora grows up in a cottage in the middle of the woods, and for a birthday present her fairy godmothers mop the floors for her, as a way of giving her something of value, a clean house. What else can Rapunzel do all day long, but cleaning her tower? She even sings a song about how she does it everyday and how annoyed she gets every time she finishes it and doesn't have anything else to do. Luckily for Ariel she lives under the sea, because if not, the idea of her dusting or washing dishes, wouldn't be surprising at all.

Tearing happy homes apart

Pointing out the fact that princesses worked hard on household matters, was just to prove how they embody what capitalism has tried to impose as a value by making these activities seem normal and usual in a good happy woman's life; while Ursula, Maleficent, Mother Gothel and the Evil Queen never used a broom, not even for flying.

Then again, talking about virtues and having in mind that happiness and marriage are two of the most desired values (or at least a certain dark force has tried to make us believe so), the fact that witches turn against princesses at the very age of sixteen in the cases of: Ariel and Ursula, Snow White and the Evil Queen, Maleficent and Aurora or at eighteen in the case of Mother Gothel and Rapunzel; isn't strange.

Narratively, the four witches tear families apart, separating princesses from their parents and homes when they are little. The Evil Queen sends Snow White deep in the woods, and far from her home, the castle. Maleficent curses Aurora so the three fairy godmothers have to take the little baby to a cottage in the woods, far away from the king and the queen. Ursula gives a pair of legs and lungs to Ariel so she can live like a human, far away from her father, her sisters and her castle.

Mother Gothel, steals literally Rapunzel away from her family so she can live forever young thanks to the magical powers on the little princess' hair.

Tearing homes apart attempts directly against the value of family, consider by Ahmed on her book as a "happy object, as being what good feelings are directed towards, as well as providing a share horizon of experience" (Ahmed, 2010, pág. 21).

It's not strange that family is still perceived as a good through which happiness is achieved, then in times of witch-hunt, family meant to be "the counterpart of the market, the instrument for the privatization of social relations and, above all, for the propagation of capitalist discipline and patriarchal rule (...) also as the most important institution for the appropriation and concealment of women's labor" (Federici, 2009, pág. 97).

In the narration, from this moment on, the four witches are perceived as evil as they separate a happy family from being together. Then, capitalism was (when the term witch was created) and apparently still is giving family "a new importance as the key institution providing for the transmission of property and the reproduction of the workforce" (Federici, 2009, pág. 88).

Love's a charade

Maleficent, Ursula, Mother Gothel and the Evil Queen not only attempt to the union of families, they surely represent the biggest obstacle between the princesses and their beloved princes, and plus with a lot of good sense of humor they even make fun of the concept of love and family with a little sarcasm and a smile on her faces.

Though none of them wishes for a partner, they are always on the way of the happy couple. The very age at which the princesses get in trouble facing

the witches' powers, announces their big entry into reproductive age (and humanity has to be grateful to Disney, in Rapunzel's case, for having raised two years the expectations for princesses having a husband and a bundle of joy). How convenient for the stories is it that at this very same age princesses meet their lovers (three princes in the first cases and a thief in the last one, wow Disney great progress on that one).

As soon as the Evil Queen transforms her beautiful body into the one of an old, sinister witch to trick Snow White into eating the apple (any references to the Bible are merely coincidences ¿or not?), she minimizes love when thinking the true love's kiss won't work on the princess. When Maleficent has prince Philipp chained in a cell, she enjoys herself laughing about how "love resists everything, even a hundred years". Ursula laughs about Ariel thinking without a voice she can convince the prince to be with her and sings a spectacular song about men just carrying for the looks. Even Mother Gothel tells Rapunzel that her beloved thief Eugene has been with her just for her hair. Once again, Disney designed even the dialogues of these women, to fit into the evil side which rejects marriage and love and even allows itself to make fun about family.

Over my dead body

The soma of these witches is another aspect to be analyzed. The four of them have the ability to transform themselves. Whether an ancient lady, a dragon, a young beautiful lady or a young version of herself, they surely have power over the body, sometimes even the body of others. Again, this idea of having the power to manipulate the body coincides perfectly with the abilities women were punished for in times of witch-hunt. These powers were different though. They were related to sexual pleasures, abortions and medicines. Crimes a woman committed against society, then even medicine was just for men to be developed. As Ehrenreich and English say in their book, witches were charged with different crimes, among others:

Ante todo, se las acusaba de todos los crímenes sexuales concebibles en contra de los hombres. Lisa y llanamente, sobre ellas pesaba la "acusación" de poseer una sexualidad femenina. En segundo lugar, se las acusaba de estar organizadas. La tercera acusación, finalmente, era que tenían poderes mágicos sobre la salud, que podían provocar el mal, pero también que tenían la capacidad de curar. A menudo se las acusaba específicamente de poseer conocimientos médicos y ginecológicos (Ehrenreich & English, 2006, pág. 11)

Jaffar is sent away by the genie. Hades is sent back to the underworld. The Red Queen still lives in Alice's nightmare. Lady Tremaine gets to live with her two daughters in a huge house after Cinderella leaves.

But such a soft end is just for them, not for the four witches. Their crime is too heavy as to be forgiven. I'm not saying they are the only villains in the Disney universe who die, but for sure, death is a price all witches have to pay. It's again important that they all die, when her witchcraft is at their highest, when their bodies have changed, when her full magic over the somas is liberated (no references to the clit intended).

Oh-my-witch! What haven't we done to you?

In a Disney world where princesses get to evolve into being free and empowered, like Merida, Moana or Elsa (even if it's just because they are still young and will change their point of view about marriage and kids later), where even the prince figure evolves and changes for a burglar or a hard working man like Christophe or Eugene (even if they continue to rescue women in trouble); witches appear to have a corset which doesn't allow them to evolve in their roles or have any other goal but to ruin a couple's life by being selfish and having a misused uterus on a mature age.

Having in mind that human groups can be defined as ecological environments where representations of ideas grow or decrease (Lévy, 1999), there are many social forms, institutions and techniques that give form to these environments in ways where certain messages have more spreadability than others. For this spreadability, systems of communication, registration and reproduction of information are vital. Cinema, and in this particular case, Disney calls upon structures of our own unconscious, creating stories and images that emerge from our own unconscious desires and fears. Witches are always on the loser side of the story and will always represent fears, because, let's face it, "Hollywood cinema's great subject is (...) more precisely the family. When this dream is threatened, the "threat" must be removed" (Hayward, 2000, pág. 109).

The idea of family is both produced and consumed retracing its origins through happy marriage. "Marriage would be defined as "the best of all possible worlds" as it maximizes happiness" (Ahmed, 2010). The figure of the witch was created to punish women for not following the expectations capitalism had forged to increase population.

Women's "wombs became public territory, controlled by men and the state, and procreation was directly paced as the service of capitalist accumulation" (Federici, 2009, pág. 89)

The figure of the witch in Disney's fantasy world, with all her characteristics and narrative roles, still opposes directly to marriage and more important, to the concept of family. It has been already 73 years from the creation of the first Disney witch to the last one and barely anything has changed regarding this figure. The Evil Queen and Mother Gothel, apart from dressing differently and have a more active role in the story in terms of dialogue, are still designed as single and childless women who attempt to destroy the happiness of a happy royal couple as soon as the princess comes to a reproductive age. Either Disney is lacking some imagination when coming to witches roles, or maybe society is not being so far apart from the capitalist induced concept of reaching for happiness only by having a family, where women have to accept her "virtues, obligations and vocations" to be mothers and housemaids.

(...) in the age of the computer, the conquest of the female body is still a precondition for the accumulation of labor and wealth, as demonstrated by the institutional investment in the development of new reproductive technologies that, more than ever, reduce women to wombs. (Federici, 2009).

The characteristics of witches haven't barely changed, they are still single though being mature; they still don't have children, though being young and beautiful; and power is just for themselves, not to achieve any reproductive goals. They stand as a figure which opposes marriage and love, they are self-sufficient. By achieving all this, they represent an alternate way of living, the counterpart of the ideal capitalism tries to establish, and therefore, they are a threat. As this menace can't be removed, it immediately translates into the evil side of the story, the loser side, the one you don't want to become because it directly attempts against the economically designed path to happiness.

Mother Gothel, Ursula, Maleficent and the Evil Queen are characters of movies which have a 20-year release date gap between each other, but their differences are barely noticeable and still establish the witch pattern capitalism spread centuries ago. It's sad to see how despite the feminism being more popular everyday, there are practically no changes in how massive culture defines the role of the witch, most importantly if it's meant to be seen by kids.

So, besides writing a complaint letter regarding the non-evolution of the witches' role; I wanted to ask for a membership. If being a witch means having fancy clothes, a pet, wishing for being forever young and beautiful, expecting to attend an amazing party and be it's dancing queen, ruling the seven seas; but specially and most importantly, not having children, being independent, not needing a man besides to fight for your goals, and try to keep young kids for falling in love too soon, or giving them the option of legal abortions, I have just a question to ask: ¿where do I sign? I really want to join the club! Thirties, here I come!

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