

WHY IS DISNEY SO POPULAR?

The animated feature films from a childist perspective

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by *Margareta Rönnberg*

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Sources (= previous articles by Marge Rönnberg):

2. **Disney's menagerie:** An abridged version was published in *Tusen och en film* 4/1990, pp. 37-41
3. **Finding one's way out and back home again:** An earlier version was published in *Filmhäftet* 3-4/1980, pp. 7-50
4. **Who's afraid of big bad Disney...?:** Partially published in *Barnfilm* 2/1985, pp. 8-13
5. **Beauties, stepmums and godmothers:** A very short excerpt was published in *Film & TV* 4/1992, pp. 20-22
6. **Choosing one's path in life:** About a quarter was published in my book *TV är bra för barn*, Stockholm: Ekerlids Förlag 1997
7. **Knowing one's place or taking a leading position?:** A short version was published in *Zoom* 4/1998
9. **Weak young man's path to maturity in Notre Dame:** Partially published in *Zoom* 4/1996, pp. 4-6
10. **Hercules redefines heroism:** About a quarter was published in *Zoom* 4 /1997, p. 22
13. **Those outside want to enter and those inside want to exit:** An abridged version was published in *Filmhäftet* 3/1996, pp. 49-53
14. **Is Alice in the land of children or the land of adults?:** previously (partially) published in two parts: in *Barnfilm* 4/1982 (pp. 18-20) and in a completely different form in my book *Skitkul. Om s. k. skräpkultur*, Uppsala: Filmförlaget 1989

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1. Why is Disney so (un)popular?

There is probably nothing in this country that evokes such completely contrary reactions from children and responsible, well-educated parents, respectively, as “Disney” does. Well – possibly sweets – and, sure enough, several Disney films have been criticised for being sickly-sweet syrup and fluffy candy floss ... The reasons for this are the subject of this book.

“Good children’s culture” is, according to adults, that which promotes – and preferably hastens – the growth of children and their future, their rising and their maturity (except in the sexual sphere). In other words it is assumed to be that which leads, as quickly as possible, to children leaving their childhood and becoming adults. However, children themselves live more in the present and want to understand the world surrounding them, other people and themselves as they are at the present. Nor are they oriented towards the future with regard to their cultural preferences, as adults are *concerning children’s culture*.

Accordingly, adults have a vertical cultural evaluation which rewards the development and rising of both the fictitious characters and the reading or viewing children towards the status of adults. Children, on the other hand, possess a more horizontal and stabilising cultural evaluation, focusing on the present and on their friends.

Children are occupied with clouds of menace and causes for rejoicing here and now, and not in ten to twenty years. Disney’s film sagas deal precisely with thoughts and trials during childhood, and not with conceivable problems much later in the cycle of life. Their “monsters” and “bridal couples” are not projections of some *future* dangers or wishes, but symbolic penetrations of children’s *immediate* experience of big threats, as well as the need of the small and the vulnerable for protection, a spirit of community and close friendship in the present.

Why so popular?

Children appreciate Disney for many reasons (some of which are of course applicable to animated films in general), but mainly for the following reasons:

- The animated feature films are for many associated with their very first experience of the cinema, with everything that it involved – the excitement of the darkness, ushers with torches, other elated children, the smell of popcorn, sweets, etc.
- The animated medium’s comprehensibility and clear markers of unreality. The audiovisual medium does not demand any ability to read, and resembles “reality” more than any other medium, at the same time as the animation (more than a direct filming of everyday

life) can elucidate both what is like reality and the fictitious nature of the film. The latter is important when the film becomes far too horrible.

- The emotional impact of the films. Not only have both the positive and the negative feelings of the children in the audience found their expression, but different key scenes have also given rise to a collective crying ritual (as well as collectively shared moments of laughter), including other children and the parental generation.

- The humorous minor characters and the physically expressed comedy, for example when Sebastian the crab, who is the court composer in *The Little Mermaid*, is rattling with all his legs when he is compelled to inform Triton, the king of the sea, of bad news. Preschool children understand and appreciate precisely the facial expressions and patterns of movement of the characters at a much earlier age than they understand and appreciate verbal humour. In former times there were special comical tales parallel with the fairy tales, but with the advent of Disney's animated feature films these have been skilfully incorporated into the tales of wonder and adventure, since the format, unlike that of the short films, could not just be filled up with comedy. Rather often the minor characters constitute the greatest pleasure derived by the very youngest children from the films, and even mitigate the scenes that are far too terrifying.

- Children of all countries experience Disney's characters as belonging to their own country, and indeed as being almost local. The characters speak the children's own language, and even if they look slightly "Indian" or Chinese, the children do not conceive of them as strange or "foreign". Moreover, in the cities of the Western World, varying ethnic origins are commonplace nowadays.

- The well-chosen voices of the characters of the animated films. For their understanding of the qualities of the characters children rely to a high degree on the characteristics of the voice, which Disney has always selected with the utmost care.

- The film music, which is most often exceptionally good, with at least one unforgettable melody in each film. Moreover, during the '90s the film music became more "rhythmical" and no longer mainly consists of "melodious" tunes resembling songs from musicals. Children have never preferred light opera music to songs with a more trendy beat, and nowadays the film makers pay greater attention to their preferences. (Unfortunately the present author does not possess enough specialist knowledge to treat the film music in greater detail.)

- Disney's obviously intuitive insight into child psychology and the entertaining way in which the experiences of children and the problems connected with their development are dealt with. For example, the *search for an identity* and the desire for belonging and *group*

solidarity, the *desire for separation* (the will to set out on a voyage of discovery, stand on one's own two feet, make one's own decisions) coupled with *separation anxiety*, as well as the traditional *fears* of children. The company is expert at taking the prevailing fears of children and transforming them into reassuring and hopeful messages.

Just like everybody else, children have their own experiences, wishes, dreams, goals and clouds of menace, which also determine their interest in different media content. The threats include being abandoned, alone, vulnerable, under attack, and even on the point of annihilation. The wishes include having greater power over one's own life, being big and strong, charming and popular. Being able to set out into the big, exciting world, and in spite of this being protected. Being appreciated as good, beautiful and successful. Everything circles around becoming someone unique, while still being part of the spirit of community.

All the types of story appearing in Disney's films are pervaded precisely by themes such as "managing by oneself", finding one's self", "being accepted for what one is", "becoming somebody", and "growing up" – especially developing from a girl to a woman, becoming independent (of one's parents at any rate) and approaching the opposite sex. It is true that the boys seem to be somewhat less interested than the girls in growing up, since men do not seem to have any real power, but the identity problems are central, nevertheless.

Both sexes want to orient themselves towards both individual roles and group solidarity. The children compare themselves with the characters in the films, whom they experience themselves as being both inferior and superior to. If one has large, protruding ears, one can recognise oneself in *Dumbo*, and if one is a twin, one can see oneself mirrored in the naughty Siamese cats in *Lady and the Tramp*. The films also praise the advantages of fundamental trust, self-esteem and independence, as well as one's own power of initiative and solidarity.

- One compares not only oneself, but also one's nearest and dearest with the characters in the films. The male and female villains in particular are of assistance by articulating disapproval or criticism of certain sides of one's parents, for example. Precisely due to their stylised and almost grotesquely exaggerated traits, the scoundrels are useful in providing a harmless expression of feelings aroused by the recognition of family members.

- Motherly love is lavished on the children in the films, and the fathers also love their children dearly, being affectionate, considerate, self-sacrificing and even "motherly". The worst thing of all that can happen to parents is quite clearly (to judge by Disney films) that the children should be kidnapped. The children seem to occupy a central position in the adults' lives and, indeed, mean *everything* to their parents. What child does not want to hear that? In most of the films different characters converge and become the "dream parent",

while the “catastrophically bad parent” is eliminated – or rather eliminates himself or herself. Could it be any better?

- Children are described as competent and defeat or outshine incompetent and authoritarian adults, who are always brought down to earth by precocious children. The mice are always able to stand up to the cats and the elephants, which is of course appreciated by an audience of children. Or, at any rate, the small, sly characters are able to put the big characters in their place. Almost all of the films are permeated with anti-authoritarian, self-fortifying and democratic messages.

- The stories are characterised by optimism, cheerfulness and happy endings. Here a kind heart, helpfulness and friendliness are valued. The films are about friendship and solidarity when removing authoritarian and ruthless tyrants or self-centred, child-hating types who have a fixation on money. In almost all the Disney films the villains are defeated by collective action taken in solidarity by several animals (and people).

Children, however, interpret happy endings in a completely different way than adults, for whom *Dumbo*, for example, ends with material rewards and the status of a star, while children value the fact that Dumbo is now able to be together with his mother once again... In all the films the audience is assured that good will win in the end. Children below the age of nine detest open endings and want to know how things turn out: that the evil are punished, the good rewarded and that security is re-established. The happy endings are claimed, however, by the critics to be unrealistic, “false” endings, but why would one go to the cinema at all if one merely wanted to see a duplication of reality?

- The magic and the potential for transformation in the elegant, glittering and star-sprinkled dresses of the heroines and the equally powerful, enchanted and flashing weapons of the heroes. The small and weak have from time immemorial been in need of magic.

- For primary school children the films represent a kind of maturity rite, in the sense that they are the first films that the children are allowed to see at a cinema without being escorted by a parent.

Why so unpopular?

The reasons why many adults find the films unsuitable for children, or even harmful, are just as many. For example:

-The dominance of Disney is considered to be dangerous in itself and to lead to uniformity, and “monopolising” and “colonisation” are often discussed in the media. However, in this context no one mentions the qualities that explain and justify this dominance. The critics believe that the successes can be dismissed merely as a result of “enormous advertising

campaigns”. This is definitely a question of taking the easy way out. Mostly one speaks merely of the commercial aspects, the financial successes, merchandising and PR.

It is implied that sly and greedy gentlemen are cheating poor and innocent small children out of their savings, by resorting to different “tricks” to arrange the premiere of one animated film per year (and during the past decade release a couple of videos of Disney classics per year). In actual fact this constitutes less than a quarter of the selection of animated (feature) films for children available. Likewise, one most often forgets the Disney Company’s difficult years and financial struggle for survival. Most of the early animated feature films from the ‘40s and ‘50s were losing transactions for a long time (e.g. *Pinocchio*, *Bambi*, *Fantasia* and *Alice in Wonderland*).

- The merchandising surrounding the films is experienced as placing unnecessary pressure on parents. However, we must realise that preschool children in particular process their impressions in the physical and external form of play – not through silent inner reflection. Consequently, dolls, figures or soft animals that resemble the characters in the films stimulate children’s thoughts much better than, for example, a book based on the characters would do. Moreover, we must be able to assess the qualities of the films in themselves, irrespective of how many toys they have given rise to and how much advertisement has promoted them. (Cf. Rönnerberg 1998).

- “Disneyfication” – i.e. that the company through omission, “falsification” and mystification removes everything that, in adult circles, could conceivably cause controversy (class conflicts and racial tension, politics, sex and violence). In other words that Disney “purifies” the world from everything problematic. However, fairy tales in book form for children have always been tame, diluted versions of adult stories, adapted to suit children.

Consequently, one must certainly ask oneself whether these doctored phenomena should just be ascribed to the Disney studio, or whether this purification is typical of 19th and 20th century children’s culture in general. In that case why do we not demand likewise that picture books, the curriculum for the junior level of the compulsory school (or even the activities of day nurseries) should contain detailed studies of the Holocaust, the Vietnam War or sex education? Who goes to the cinema or sits down to watch TV documentaries, with their small children, to study the atrocities and mass killings that took place during the colonisation of the U.S.A., in Auschwitz or in Bosnia?

- The spreading of the “American dream of success”: life is not as simple as Disney has depicted it. But who is basically of the opinion that pessimism is a more suitable attitude than optimism and belief in the future when preparing children for life? Tragic endings have never been a traditional feature of fairy tales, but have belonged to more adult myths.

Although, in actual fact, many of the films (e.g. *The Lion King*, *Snow White* and *Bambi*) are to a great extent tragedies, even if they have happy endings.

The remarkable thing about the criticism of Disney is, however, that it comes from two diametrically opposite directions at the same time: the films are considered to possess too little and too much of most things. Certain people see a dishonest avoidance of violence and its consequences, while others discover, on the contrary, far too much violence in the films, which, nevertheless, are always considerably less violent than the folk tales on which they are based. Some people speak of a prudish attitude to sex or maintain that sexuality is kept a complete secret. Disney is said, for example, to have a puritanical wish to conceal the biological facts of reproduction from children. This is claimed in spite of the fact that both the least anthropomorphized animals in the animal fable (*Bambi* and *Simba*) and the animals that resemble people most in the pet biography (*Lady and Tramp*, *Pongo and Perdita*, and the cats in *Aristocats*) are all seen growing up and having children. It is true, of course, that we are not able to witness how the actual conception takes place.

Other people speak instead of too much sex: children ought to be able to remain ignorant of sex and keep their innocence, in their opinion. Another opinion is that it is only the female characters who are sexified. Female bodies are accentuated in a completely different way compared with those of the flat paper men, which, however, is not to be regarded as positive, because women's bodies are now regarded as merely being objectified and exposed to men's eyes for their delight. (Whenever Disney really shows muscular male bodies, for example *Hercules*' body, this is regarded as equally reprehensible – but remarkably enough not intended for the eyes of *women*..) Accordingly, the *Catch 22* of the Disney film is that female bodies and sexuality are to be shown, by all means, but not so that boys and men can see them. However, a ban on the male sex visiting the cinema is probably not imminent.

Disney's films are therefore criticised either for not dealing with sex, birth, violence and death, or for containing far too much of these elements (and in a "falsified" manner). These criticisms are in agreement with James Agee's statement that Disney's hallmark is "sexless sexiness" (cited in Schickel 1969:233). Others have discovered "violence-free violence", or interpreted premarital relations into a film and therefore experienced *Lady*, the cocker spaniel, for example, as an innocent "slut" (Nadel 1995). It is probably with one of these reasons in mind that people characterise the (American!) Disney films as being far too "Americanized". Or perhaps it is the following features of the films:

- The gender role stereotypes, particularly concerning the female characters. It is said that pretty, passive and patiently suffering heroines have to be rescued by courageous men. Moreover, motherhood is idealised and motherly love is glorified, which is apparently not

good either. *Or else* the mothers are far too negatively depicted (“witches”), which is also to be condemned.

This is possibly applicable to the early films which are based on old folk tales (*Snow White*, *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*), but after these films the picture is much more complex and equal with regard to the assignment of both positive and negative qualities. However, the typification is needed, since it helps children on the whole to *catch sight of* gender roles. One also forgets that children’s experiences differ from those of adults when one argues against Disney in the following terms:

- Too harmless, sugary and cute, as well as too idyllic and sentimental: insipid products in comparison with the strong fluctuations between different emotions and wonderful frights provided by the films of the critics’ own childhood... Disney’s films suffer from the fact that they have managed to become “classics”, i.e. they appeal to several generations. As a result the new films following the classics of necessity always appear tame to the adult in comparison with the increasingly colourful memories of his or her own childhood.

Alternative reasons for criticism:

- Far too much emotional violence, terror, suffering, pain and menace.

- Far too incomprehensible to small children. *Or:-*

- Far too simple, childish and predictable stories. It is said that the audience of children is “infantalised”. The critics either underestimate or overestimate, in contrast to the Disney group, the capacity of children. One explanation for this contradictory polarisation into excessive simplicity or difficulty is that the films appeal to such a wide range of ages and that they have something to offer the great majority of people. However, they can therefore also in certain respects be experienced as both too difficult and far too simple, depending on the age of the recipient.

- Racism: for example, it has been alleged that the cool, musical black crows in *Dumbo* are portrayed in a racist manner (although they are in fact the ones who urge the elephant boy to fly, give him magical power and confidence in his own ability). Indeed, *Dumbo* himself has been interpreted as a bullied black boy or mulatto, as if Mrs Jumbo had committed a faux pas in “crossbreeding” with an African father (African elephants have big ears in contrast to Indian elephants) (Reising 1996:302-6). And *Mulan* is described as a “banana”: yellow on the outside and white on the inside, while *Aladdin* is said to exploit the Islamic view of women as an anti-Islamic and anti-Arabic argument (Addison 1993:6-8).

Of course, no child would even conceive the idea... Most (non-Islamic) children under the age of ten do not even know what Islam is and believe that the film takes place in a fictitious country at a fictitious time “a long time ago”. To the children *Mulan* is fantastically brave

and of the same “race” as they themselves are, and the crows in *Dumbo* are the coolest characters in the whole film. Moreover, the theme of *Dumbo* is that one’s appearance does not make any difference, and the film is *against* prejudice. Disney’s films are on the whole anti-racist.

Adult-centred criticism

The problem with most of the criticism of Disney is, as is evident from the above, that the analyses are *far too adult-centred and profound*. Moreover, *they do not attempt to comprehend the films on the basis of children’s points of departure and horizon of understanding*. One is dumbfounded when one realises the extent of the “false consciousness” that the films are alleged to give rise to. The feminist over-interpretations in particular are not infrequently absolutely comical. [Note 1] But the attempts to interpret the noses of the lying boy of pine as Freudian and phallic symbols, or to interpret Christian allegory (*Pinocchio*), political allusions (e.g. Jafar in *Aladdin* as Saddam Hussein) or “contempt for democracy” (*The Lion King*) into the films also exceed the social and political awareness of children by far.

Another problem, however, is that the critics most often do not discuss a specific film, but, on the basis of a general feeling of familiarity, group all the films together into a single diffuse mishmash of cultural imperialism. [Note 2] Even researchers, who are expected to study their research objects closely, can generalise as wildly as Jack Zipes (1997:92-94). Zipes asserts, for example, that the storyline (of *all* the animated Disney films from *Snow White* to *The Lion King*) has been that *the disenfranchised or oppressed heroine must be rescued by a daring prince*, which should supposedly convey the message that male individuals are better and stronger.

However, this is not even applicable to all the films with pining teenage girls in the principal parts. On the contrary, it is of course Belle the beauty who rescues the prince from continuing to be the Beast (even if it is true that this monster first frightened the wolves away from Beauty). Moreover, it is the little mermaid Ariel who rescues Prince Eric from death by drowning, even if he later impales Ursula the sea witch with his boat and thereby also rescues himself.

In the films that follow those on Zipes’ list, Pocahontas, Megara and Mulàn are able to save the lives of John Smith, Hercules and Captain Shang, respectively. The only courageous young man who really *rescues* an oppressed heroine is the dream prince of *Sleeping Beauty* (who sticks his sword into the dragon/the evil fairy). It is true that princes raise both Snow White and Sleeping Beauty from “the dead” with their kisses, but can this be described as an act of great bravery at all, considering how pretty the princesses are? The

rescue actions of the kissing princes are of course extremely random and not even intentional. Nor does the prince in *Sleeping Beauty* seem to dare kiss his Aurora on her lips, since the sixteen-year-old is much more sexually attractive – and therefore more threatening – than the asexual thirteen-year-old, Snow White. Is not Belle’s rescue of the terrifying Beast much more courageous? Moreover, the female kisses of fairies are a good deal more common than the male kisses of princes awakening princesses.

Besides, Pinocchio saves the life of his old father, and the Blue Fairy in her turn rescues Pinocchio from death. The genie in the bottle is constantly rescuing Aladdin, and Bianca is rescued by Bernard, who afterwards, however, must be rescued by the female golden eagle from the Australian Crocodile Falls, etc. In other words, both sexes rescue each other all the time. “Rescues” are quite simply a permanent ingredient of fairy tales, and they can be performed in slightly different ways by the different sexes in different genres, but in the end they can be most often attributed to middle-aged or elderly ladies.

Considering the fact that both Snow White’s Evil Queen and Maleficent, the evil fairy in *Sleeping Beauty*, lay down conditions for their curses, perhaps it is actually these evil mother substitutes who rescue their “daughters”. Why, actually, should the Evil Queen make it *possible* at all to break the enchanted apple’s power to keep the girl asleep with “love’s first kiss”? And likewise, could *Sleeping Beauty* be awakened by “true love’s kiss” without the consent of Maleficent? Moreover, why do *Sleeping Beauty*’s good fairies give the completely crucial enchanted sword to the *prince*? None of Disney’s films are, as we will see, as easily interpreted as they may at first appear.

However, Zipes asserts (1997:93) that “[h]eterosexual happiness and marriage are always the ultimate goals of the story” and the latter is quite rightly applicable to four out of thirty-one films (“heterosexual happiness”, on the other hand, is doubtless the ultimate aim of 95% of both the audience and the characters of the films). Moreover, Zipes claims that Disney’s films reinforce *the nostalgia for eternal youth*, but, on the contrary, it is the happy childhood that is portrayed in a rosy light. Both the small boys of the animal fables and the intermediate generation of the pet biographies certainly grow up, but most of them are seen ending up as parents who adore their children. For the young teenage girls of the wonder tale, youth actually seems to be a torment that they do not at all desire to perpetuate.

And, quite contrary to what Zipes maintains (that *good always takes the form of a male hero*), the characters who are the kindest and best of all are constantly pensioners (and most often female pensioners), which represents an outlook that should reinforce the yearning for eternal old age. Moreover, almost all of Disney’s teenage girls also represent the very symbol of goodness.

In addition, according to Zipes the films *always* have a *narrative conclusion*, i.e. never have an open ending, which children are in fact extremely content with. But do we really know how the film ends for Mowgli or Jasmine and Aladdin, for Pocahontas or Quasimodo? (It is true that Pocahontas and Quasimodo were created after *The Lion King*, but they appeared before the publication of Zipes' book.) We know equally little about what the future will look like for Mulàn and Captain Shang.

A closer and more careful look at the animated feature films will show a much more complex and multifaceted pattern than conventional criticism gives one to understand.

The purpose of cultural subsets

Neither the avoidance of violence and sex nor excessive violence and sex, however, are considered by the adult generation to promote the maturity of the child. Nor are harmlessness and idylls, sentimentality and nostalgia experienced as being of assistance in developing children. (None of these four labels, however, characterise *children's* reactions to the surrounding world, but are feelings experienced by adults and then projected.) Excessive horror and menace are, of course, both paralysing and growth-inhibiting.

Both the incomprehensible and the all too predictable are believed to merely favour marking time. The critics seem to be of the opinion that children's culture ought to be some kind of school which is to transport kids from childhood to adulthood in a flash. Why they should actually advocate this is incomprehensible, since in the same breath they regard childhood as such a kingdom of happiness that we ought to "let children be children" as long as possible. At the same time as children are to "develop" as quickly as possible...

Concerning the demand for "character development" (the criticism that good remains good and evil remains evil, and that the two never change in the films), it is difficult to understand how a reversal could be considered more realistic. How often does it happen in so-called reality that evil people suddenly become decent, or that good people behave nastily? Of course, we call them evil and good respectively precisely *because* they are *constantly* characterised by such actions.

However, the fact is that the good Disney characters always grow through their new experiences and insights, and that those who are already evil in actual fact become *even more* evil in the course of the film. In other words they "develop"... Moreover, preschool children cannot at the outset distinguish nuances, and they themselves divide their surroundings up into good or evil. However, they slowly learn to grade things finely, precisely by observing characters in films who are wrestling both with contrasting characters and with contrary tendencies within themselves.

The criticism of the fact that in the films “good is beautiful and ugliness represents evil and offensiveness” also reveals an ignorance of the concrete way in which children think and react. Preschool children are frightened precisely by ghastly appearances and, quite simply, cannot for the life of them understand how a beautiful exterior could conceal an evil interior.

Accordingly, the main reason why many parents regard Disney’s films as unsuitable, or only just acceptable, is an adult inability to view things from the perspective of children instead of from their own perspective. For that reason many adults single out *Pinocchio* as the best Disney film, which hardly any children do. *Pinocchio* is of course about letting oneself be tamed, learning to please parents, and following orders, and it is a middle-class fairy tale warning about the importance of education, diligence and hard work, sobriety and self-sacrifice.

The more child-oriented and playful films, such as *The Little Mermaid*, *Aladdin* and *Hercules*, are, on the other hand, considered to be far too “superficial”, “sugary”, “noisy”, “violent” and simplified – candy culture quite simply, rather than a diet rich in energy and fibre. One does not realise that children by birth and by force of habit are precisely sweet and noisy, immature and uncomplicated – “lack depth” – and that their cultural products therefore ought to be based on exaggeration, recognition and simplification if they are at all to be comprehensible.

For adults themselves do not choose their own cultural products with a view to being improved, developed or led away from their present identity as quickly as possible. Why should children be any different? We all want to recognise ourselves, to have our experiences rendered comprehensible, defined, and consolidated, before they can be broadened. We want to compare ourselves with people of our own age and those older than us, and we seek to imitate them – or dissociate ourselves from them.

The purpose of children’s culture, like that of other cultural subsets (e.g. youth culture, women’s culture and men’s culture) is to comment on and elucidate the lives and experiences of its users up to the present – and in this way to prepare them for coming tasks. The aim of a cultural subset is to reinforce and protect the identity of the members of the group in question, and not to lead them away from it as quickly as possible toward something supposedly higher and “universal”, which is the aim of the culture in schools and of “quality culture”. Here, as we shall see, Disney is undeniably of assistance, in letting children be precisely children...

(1999)

Notes

1. See for example Bettelheim (1976), Dorfman & Mattelart (1975), Addison (1993), Burton-Carvajal (1994), *From Mouse to Mermaid* (1995), Zipes (1995, 1997), Muhr (1996), Giroux (1996) and Salus (1997). Giroux is of the opinion, for example, that Disney's films teach specific roles, values and ideals, and in this respect have appropriated the position that has been traditionally held by the family, the school and the church. The authority and power of these animated films are evidently based on the fact that they "prioritize the pleasures of the image over the intellectual demands of critical inquiry" (Giroux 1996:91).

As if the latter analytical approach should really apply to four- to nine-year-olds' relations with their parents, teachers and Sunday-school teachers, for example, which are supposedly "free" from ideology and a conservative conception of the world! Furthermore, Giroux maintains, "For children, the messages offered in Disney's animated films suggest that social problems such as the history of racism, the genocide of Native Americans, the prevalence of sexism, and crisis of democracy are simply willed through the laws of nature" (a a:107). Do the films really make this assertion? If that is the case, do *preschool children* also pick this message up?

In his retirement Bruno Bettelheim (1976) had evidently completely lost contact with the thoughts and anxieties of early childhood, and he interpreted folk tales (and especially Disney's versions, e.g. *Snow White*) in a way that is much more suitable for teenage literature than for children's culture.

Bell et al's anthology (1995) in particular is a remarkable reading experience for those who have thought that Disney's films are primarily supposed to represent *children's culture*. In the index "Women"/"Feminine"/"Mothers" take up twelve times as many page references as the entry "Child/ren".. In spite of the fact that the editors inform us that their own university students protested and were of the opinion that the authors had interpreted far too much ("feminism") into the films, this does not seem to have given the researchers any food for thought whatsoever. Of course, the actual reception from millions of children does not interest them in the least, and their distance to the children's audience is total. Intoxicated with theories, the only desire of the researchers is to demonstrate their own profundity and "penetrative analyses", and the easiest way to accomplish this is, of course, to attack children's films, which of necessity are simplified or "adapted". Notwithstanding, Elisabeth Bell's own contribution ("Somatexts at the Disney Shop. Constructing the Pentimentos of Women's Animated Bodies", pp. 107-124) represents a very rewarding exception. However, Salus (1997) seems to believe that *Aladdin* is a textbook on jurisprudence...

Jack Zipes (1995, 1997), for his part, attacks the versions that Disney made for small children of supposedly "original" adult tales for being formula-like and stereotyped. This expert on fairy tales seems to be completely oblivious to the fact that research on fairy tales has revealed that they contain a very small number of stereotypes and types of motif. Zipes recommends instead sophisticated and questioning film parodies of "classic" versions of fairy tales, *before* preschool children have even acquainted themselves with the *originals*...

Among those who have completely neglected to mention the fact that Disney mainly produces children's films, one also finds Burton-Carvajal (1994), who mostly finds colonialism, male chauvinism and over-explicit sexualisation in *The Three Caballeros*, and Hansen (1993), not to mention Theodor Adorno (Adorno & Horkheimer 1997) and Eleanor Byrne & Martin McQuillan (1999). Adorno's idea seems to be that the animated film's rebellion against authority narcotized the (adult) German population and gave them illusory satisfaction, but the animation's sadistic performance of violence, barbarism, orgiastic love of destruction and collective laughter, on the other hand, infected the subjects ruled by Nazism. One can, however, question whether Nazism was characterised by *laughter* in reality.

So Adorno considers (Adorno & Horkheimer 1997:138), for example, that cartoons "hammer into every brain the old lesson that continuous friction, the breakig down of all

individual resistance, is the condition of life in this society. Donald Duck in the cartoons and the unfortunate in real life get their thrashing so that the audience can learn to take their own punishment”, overcoming ”fear by capitulating to the forces which are to be feared. It is the echo of power as something inescapable. Fun is a medicinal bath” (ibid:140)! Was it only German Jews who went to the cinema? Adorno forgets, for example, to mention the fact that even Hitler was a Disney fan. Moreover, contrary to what Adorno thinks, to the children’s audience Disney films are not about adults versus technology – and probably not even to the adult audience of the ‘40s either. For children it is a question of escaping the authoritarian exercise of power, at least in fiction. Or of being able to take their revenge, in their imagination, on all the authoritarian characters whom they have experienced themselves (and who unfortunately do not content themselves with being fictive) and like Donald Duck’s nephews outshine Donald. But perhaps it is also a question of transferring certain rebellious ideas to the reality of everyday life...

In Byrne & McQuillan’s book about the Disney films between 1989 and 1998, Jacques Derida occurs 100 times – and “the collapse of the Berlin wall” 10 times – more often than the word “children”.. Here Ariel (1999:23-25) is regarded as the embodiment of both consumption fetishism and shoe fetishism...

A wonderful exception, however, is Susan Z. Swan’s article (1999) on *Beauty and the Beast*, which was published after this book was printed, however, and which I chose not to work into the second edition, but instead warmly recommend in its entirety.

2. However, I am not going to discuss here why Disney is unpopular in greater detail than this. Besides, this has already been done by so many other people before me that the matter should be settled by now.

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2. Disney's menagerie

Why animals in human roles?

Anthropomorphism

= A metaphorical transfer to animals (or things) of features and characteristics (e.g. a conscience, morality and cunning) that are considered to originate from human experience. The animals (or for example Herbie the Volkswagen Beetle) are made human, or in other words "act the part of" humans, are most often able to speak, sometimes even wear clothes, and are used instead of humans. The animal characters form a parallel world that on the whole reflects the social relations and the class, gender and family roles of human society. However, the animals are rather often slightly better and kinder than their human models – a kind of more positive role model for a more democratic, equal or at least more harmonious society.

Even as adults most of us probably have a more vivid and more detailed memory of a certain animal scene from some animated Disney film than any character from a "normal" film.

Who will ever forget Bambi when he gets all of his (eight?) legs entangled on the ice? Who does not remember the charming little calf elephant Dumbo's expressive facial expressions and eyes filled with tears? Likewise the treacherously fawning snake Kaa in *The Jungle Book*? Or the boy donkeys in *Pinocchio* and the principal character's conscience, Jiminy Cricket? Or Pluto stuck in the gooey flypaper? Or...? Indeed, one could compile an almost endless list.

Why actually have these scenes engraved themselves on our memories like this? Some people would perhaps explain this by saying that they were some of the very earliest impressions in our young brains, which were as yet almost empty. Or that we have had our recollections refreshed by continual repeats. It is probably not quite as simple as that. In my opinion it is more a question of the characters being precisely people in the stylised and over-explicit guise of animals.

For thousands of years stories have been told about anthropomorphized animals. They have taken the form of myths or fables (by Aesop and La Fontaine, among others), African trickster tales or stories about sly characters such as the 13th century fox, Reynard, oral folk tales (such as those taken down and doctored à la Grimm brothers), so-called ethological art tales written by Rudyard Kipling, for example (which "explain" how the elephant obtained his trunk, the camel his hump, etc.), or allegories such as Dahlin's "The Story of the Horse", where the horse is meant to represent Sweden.

Certainly, many of these stories have been aimed more at adults than children, even if they at a later stage have been adapted and placed on a "more childish" level. For more than

200 years mice and cats have been the most commonly occurring animals in children's literature. Nowadays dogs figure more often, and today we undeniably think of a children's audience in connection with speaking animals. But why do animals exert such a strong influence on children? And why do we adults like to associate children with animals so much?

Modern ideas of the child arose at the same time as the modern view of pets as a special kind of animal. Both conceptions were invented in the 18th century, which is also the time when stuffed animals became toys for children. Children could be raised in the same way as one could domesticate, train or break in animals. Therefore, pet-like characters also came to represent children in tales and games (Plumb 1982). However, do children also see the similarities between the vulnerability of animals and their own vulnerability, the short step from training animals to bringing up children?

Bearers of signs

Animals are quite simply excellent tools to think with. Small children *personify* almost everything, but as they grow older this animated way of thinking is restricted to *living* beings. Children are drawn to real, living animals, on account of their smallness and similarity to themselves with regard to defencelessness, powerlessness and dependence, among other things. Moreover, the interest is most often mutual and dogs and cats, at any rate, usually like children in their turn. Tales about animals appeal to preschool children in particular, because of their habit of attributing their own way of thinking and feeling to other people, as well as to plants and animals. Stories about animals made human follow – rather than lead – the child's thoughts and imagination.

Animals help children to recognise feelings, characteristics and other abstract features in people and to assign names to them. They become a kind of easily observable bearer of signs and their actions, through their clarity, become images that create meaning. *Animated* animals in particular can, through their over-explicitness concerning facial expressions, gesticulation and body language, be interpreted in a completely different way than both people and authentic animals.

Children under the age of four are not interested in make-believe animals unless there are some pictures of them. For they cannot by themselves create a conception of something that they have never seen, in spite of illusions cherished by adults concerning children's well-developed imaginative capacity. Not even supposedly imaginative children can concoct a pink elephant if they have neither previously seen (pictures of) an elephant nor know what "pink" is. This is something that films, cartoons and picture books can show them. Stylised

drawings in picture books have also proven to be more comprehensible to the very young than the exact same objects photographed.

The precise purpose of animals in fables, folk tales, cartoons and animated films is to embody and cultivate certain *human* characteristics: the lions of children's culture are powerful, its wolves and snakes are cruel and unreliable, respectively. Their purpose is therefore to take *one* human characteristic and cultivate and exaggerate it, so that the characteristic will become clearer. The animals are not *animals* – they exist *instead of* abstractions, instead of *humans*.

How many games are there in which children do not test “being” animals? All the numerous games ranging from those for the smallest children, such as “Bunny Hop” and “Duck Walk”, to those for older children, such as “Leapfrog” and “Hares and Hounds”. And how many nursery rhymes are there that are not about animals: “Ba Ba Black Sheep”, “Hickory Hickory Dock” or “Hey Diddle Diddle”? Consider too all the proverbial phrases referring to animals, for example “as stubborn as a mule”, “as strong as a bull”, “as busy as a bee”, all of which probably have their origins in the fables, which in their turn are without doubt based on observations from real life.

Imagining oneself in the shape of an animal is the child's first form of self-understanding and her first possibility of comprehending other people in a deeper sense. Consequently, it is not primarily a question of understanding or learning about *animals*, but of creating order and attaching words to aspects of the child herself and of other people. Thought, of course, is to a high degree a question of categorising, defining and making distinctions – of seeing similarities and differences. Moreover, animals are obviously even more vulnerable and defenceless than children themselves, which also arouses the sympathies and recognition of the youngest.

Accordingly, animals play a very important role in the process of maturity and the thought process of the child. In the very first, symbiotic stage of childhood, the dominant task of the child seems to be to differentiate the self from the non-self, on a purely physical level. In this context the child appreciates, for example, big cuddly toys coming into direct physical contact with her skin. Such forms of interplay concern directly the child's efforts to identify the borderline where her own body ends and the surrounding world begins.

Before long the child is also able to start to look at the external appearance of the animals, make comparisons and create groups and categories, for example large-small, fast-slow, shaggy-hairless and dangerous-harmless. In their play children are then able to create the animals and thus perceive with the whole of their body what a certain “animalness” feels like. It is also easier for children to observe characteristics and actions in animals than in

people, since it is easier to separate certain characteristic features from the more limited behavioural repertoire of the animals. The animal *is* what it *does* in this doctored children's culture. Not like the people around the children, who behave like lions one minute and like cows the next.

Chandra Mukerji (1997) maintains that, with the help of the animals in children's culture, children also learn what it means to be a *child*. The "culture consumer" can observe and test, or imagine, many different children's roles, elucidated by everything from pets to predators – or even monsters. For it is not just a question of children *being born* and then growing and learning how to behave to be called an adult. Children must also *learn how to become a child*, or together with the people around them create a suitable child identity for themselves.

Mukerji points out that children may be naturally young, but are not *children* by nature. So-called "wild children", who have grown up in nature or in a basement without human community, are never regarded as "natural children", but as "unnatural" (sometimes even "animal-like" or "animals"), precisely because they have not grown up within a culture. And this is not merely due to the fact that they lack a verbal language. This shows that what we mean by a "natural childhood" is a socio-cultural construct that is learned and artificial.

Becoming a "natural child" instead of an animal is something that one has to work to achieve, with the assistance of other people. This includes finding, in one's local environment or in media, *cultural* models for "natural, childlike actions", which children can then use as a guide or an aid for interpretation when forming their own identity and their own actions.

Different characters isolate and highlight different aspects of conceptions of what the "child" "is". Mukerji fetches her examples from the menagerie of the Muppets (Kermit the frog, Animal, Miss Piggy, Gonzo, etc.), but could just as easily have used Disney animals such as Simba the Lion King/cub, Dumbo or Donald Duck's nephews. The animals embody different culturally sanctioned ways of defining the "child". Those children who faithfully follow the animals of children's culture acquaint themselves with different options for navigating through childhood.

"Animals" and animals

There is of course a gradual, sliding scale of anthropomorphism in these animal tales. On the one hand we have animals that speak and are like the common run of people. On the other hand (and this applies to the last hundred years only) realistic or even naturalistic portrayals: animals that are actually animals. Between these poles the variation is great. Dumbo, for

example, is “more of a human child” than Tod the fox and his doggy friend Copper, and children realise this almost “instinctively” – i.e. through cultural learning.

However, only *certain* animals are selected as representatives of humans, most often *pets*.. Consequently dogs figure most often nowadays (the larger dogs rather often as a kind of parental substitute for lonely children), closely followed by cats. The dogs are mostly males and the cats most often females. If both sexes occur, the male is as a rule big, short-haired and of mixed breed, the female most often a small (sometimes blue-eyed!), long-haired pedigree dog or cat, respectively. The animals of mixed breed are, however (in spite of their being uncivilised, dirty and clumsy), ingenious and worthy of their good pedigree catches, since they have deserved them through their courage, strength and protection.

The pets are bad at hunting and procuring food by themselves (which is intended to emphasise their non-animalness), and are therefore dependent on people for their food. Dogs most often accompany boys/men, while cats are associated with girls/women. Cats (such as the Siamese cats in *Lady and the Tramp* and Lucifer in *Cinderella*) are sometimes also associated with unreliable women in our culture and are regarded as less faithful and loyal than dogs. However, men can also be accompanied by cats, and Ratigan the sewer rat in *Basil the Great Mouse Detective* has a female cat as his executioner.

Utility animals, agricultural animals or cattle (used for food and as work animals) are more seldom, or at least *to a lesser extent*, anthropomorphized. They are most often genderless, are without a name and lack the power of speech, and do not converse with humans at any rate, but possibly with pets. It is not considered suitable to make the animals that one intends to eat too human, to avoid risking any suggestion of cannibalism, and, of course, this encourages emotional distancing.

Wild animals are completely the opposite of pets and agricultural animals in that wild animals are not controlled by humans in the same way, but more clearly represent nature than animals that have been tamed and shut in. Wild animals can in turn be divided up into the friendly (roe deer, rabbits, birds) and the hostile (snakes, wolves, bears). Dangerous wild animals are more seldom given a human voice, unless they are among the principal characters of the film. After all, the main purpose of wild animals is still to represent nature, as an antithesis of the more humane, domesticated or non-predatory “animals”, which here represent culture.

Freudian ideas

An exception to the above-mentioned classification is mice, however, which are most often not pets, utility animals or particularly wild. An unusually large number of good Disney characters are charming, kind small mice, confronted either with cats or with large rats (or both, as in *Basil the Great Mouse Detective*). The reason, of course, is their smallness and vulnerability, their similarity to children in relation to adult “rats” or “cats”. However, a mouse can also, like Timothy in *Dumbo*, frighten and even overturn big elephants. Naturally, this feels promising...

But *all* rats are not people, for example the rat that threatens the baby in *Lady and the Tramp*, which cannot speak, does not wear clothes, is not comical and does not appear to be anthropomorphized as far as the style of drawing is concerned in other respects. Ratigan the sewer rat, on the other hand, who challenges Basil the mouse and his friend Dr Dawson, represents a human quite clearly. All three of them can speak (Basil even talks to Toby the dog, who, on the other hand, cannot answer), they wear clothes, but more importantly their whole lifestyle and driving forces unambiguously indicate that they are caricatures. Here a clear distinction is also made between rats and mice. Ratigan does not want to be called a “rat”, but wants to be called a “mouse” instead, even though he is three to four times larger than a mouse. Here it is good to be small...

The most famous mouse in the world is, of course, Mickey Mouse. When Pluto was introduced in the Mickey Mouse films, one started to make a distinction between animal characters who were animals and those who represented humans. Goofy and Pluto are, of course, both “dogs”, but Goofy is a dog made completely human (i.e. in actual fact a somewhat stupid human), while Pluto remains a dog, who is often smart. Goofy speaks, while Pluto barks. It is true that Pluto is not any ordinary dog, but, for example, has a conscience that few humans have. This is also intended as a comment on humankind...

Most of the aggressive or stupid Disney characters who are sufficiently anthropomorphized are meant to represent disguised *adults*. As Freud pointed out, a long time before cartoons and animated films entered the nursery, in children’s dreams parents are often portrayed in the disguise of big animals, while children’s brothers and sisters are represented by small animals. Accordingly, with the help of this distancing effect, the child can process aggressions and anxiety more easily, with the help of small animals who defeat or vex big animals (e.g. the nephews or Chip ‘n Dale versus Donald Duck), than through a more direct – but more threatening – portrayal of small children versus grown-up parents.

Research has also shown that children between four and six years of age think that punchlines aimed at parents are more funny than the exact same jokes made at a *child’s* expense (a finding that is scarcely surprising). Stories that come too close to reality, in the

form of stories about tensions and conflicts within the family, can, however, frighten children. Mickey Mouse had little success when he spoke with a man's voice. It was not until he was given his falsetto voice that he was liked by everyone. Previously he had perhaps borne too close a resemblance to an authoritative father?

The fact that Disney's characters lack genitals has aroused a great deal of criticism, as well as the fact that sexuality, in spite of the characters' "animalness", plays such a subordinate role in their family history (e.g. the fact that none of the small characters is the child of adult characters, but either a nephew or niece). It is said that Disney harbours a puritanical desire to conceal the biological facts of reproduction from children.

Such criticism disregards the fact that the comics and films are meant to be *children's culture* and fulfil one of their most important purposes as disguised rebellion or concealed aggression precisely against representatives of parents. For here the relationships of authority are distorted, in that adults do not have the same right of procreation or right of primogeniture to control children, if they are not depicted as their biological parents. The children's desire to rebel thus becomes both more defensible and less frightening. When the animal children here play with excessively austere animal adults, it is neither a question of their own parents nor even a question of adults, but rather it all becomes a rebellious game involving the Adult World. Nor is this rebellion undermined by the (ambivalent) emotions, the loyalty and the solidarity that is normally regarded as "natural" within the nuclear family.

The accusation undeniably also disregards the fact that the children viewing the films in fact already know that they themselves are sons and daughters whom their parents have given birth to. However, children's interest in the facts of life are as yet not as urgent as their need to feel a little more powerful.

Mickey Mouse's hypophysis

Mickey Mouse has, on account of his voice, movements and bodily expressions, been called both a eunuch and a hermaphrodite. It was said (as early as 1940) that he shows anatomical similarities to a person with special types of malfunction of the hypophysis, characteristic of certain types of people with a round body, feminine forms, thin arms and legs. Here one is adopting once again an adult perspective too rooted in reality. The fact that Mickey is obviously neuter in gender does not disturb children – quite the reverse. They at any rate regard Mickey as a child – of varying age – who resembles both boys and girls, which facilitates a broad reception.

However, Mickey has changed during the course of the years and has become more anthropomorphized, more harmless and more childish. At the beginning the mouse was actually too big in comparison with Donald Duck, Goofy and Pluto. Then the rodent was also much more animal-like than the Mickey of our day and lacked both shoes and gloves, for example. The kinder he has become, the more tolerably humanoid he has become to children. Donald Duck also had exaggerated features that were more animal-like (a longer bill, a more slender neck and a more stout body) in the earliest films, which, it is true, did not directly target the children's audience, but were intended as short films to be shown before the adult repertoire, which was, however, of the kind that appealed to all ages.

Nor was Mickey so well mannered and decent at the beginning and in fact had problems with the guardians of morality as early as 1931. Many parents, above all mothers, were indignant at this naughty little good-for-nothing. Mickey was given a spanking and from then on was not allowed to tease the other animals in the barn or make daring jokes. The fact that he had to change is in itself evidence that he was regarded as human. However, this was also a sign that the animated medium was increasingly coming to be perceived as being "meant for children".

For adults also entertain certain ideas of *children* being animal-like. Many animals in children's culture also embody for adults different culturally sanctioned ways of defining "the child". The so-called "playground movement" around the turn of the century (with such prominent figures as Stanley Hall) were even of the opinion that children in their development – through genetically impressed memories – recapitulate the development of the human race through different animal stages; and that this is manifested in their play and their interest in animals as film characters. In the climbing stage children were said to be like monkeys, hunting and trapping games bore witness to the period when humans were savages, after which children are eventually transformed into the roaming nomads of the games of adventure!

And since adults also associated children with animals and with the "natural" in the '30s, this association, according to Richard deCordova (1994), actually came to promote the acceptance of animated films as suitable for children, in spite of the fact that many people in the '20s and '30s considered the film medium to be unsuitable for children. Mickey Mouse almost became an emblem of an ideal (idealised) childhood.

As early as the '30s came the start not only of so-called merchandising, with all the Mickey Mouse goods and Mickey Mouse clubs, but also of children's participation in consumer culture and children's own consumer communities. Indeed puppets (e.g. Punch and marionettes) have for thousands of years been closely associated with the market and

saleable goods, with their natural appearance precisely at markets and Medieval festivals. In other words, they have *always* functioned as advertising, merchandising or support for other products. However, while merchandising with the help of characters from animated films is criticised tremendously nowadays, the greatest merchandiser of them all, Mickey Mouse, has never been condemned during all these decades, and nor is he even condemned today. What might be the reason for this?

DeCordova's answer focuses on two factors. It can be explained partly by the fact that toys were deemed to have such a positive effect on the development of the child during the first decades of the century; and partly by the fact that Mickey was an animal and that childhood at that time, which was still romantically influenced, was associated precisely with animals. Children were regarded, just like animals, as being natural, unspoilt, and in need of protection and special tending. Accordingly, one went in for animal toys, zoological gardens, and children's literature with animals playing the leading roles. Therefore, films about and with animals could also be more easily accepted as suitable for a young audience.

Consequently, the world of childhood was "animalised". Nature was used partly to show clearly the innocence of children and their healthy distance to the corrupting influences of social life; and partly to emphasise the primitiveness, vitality and vigour of children, as a contrast to the artificiality and rigidity of adults. Accordingly, children were compared both with animals (human-animal) and with adults (child-adult).

Incidentally, the opponents of the film and the rescuers of children were of the opinion as early as the '20s and '30s (just as Neil Postman was half a century later, concerning the TV medium) that the child-adult distinction was abolished by the film medium, but, by associating the audience of children with the animal characters on the screen, this distinction was reintroduced all of a sudden (because adults were regarded as neither particularly animal-like nor interested in Mickey Mouse merchandising). Disney's films could thus, with their animal characters, counteract this supposed unsuitability and become true children's films! Consequently, merchandising at that time functioned as an alibi both for film makers and parents with regard to getting the films themselves accepted as suitable for children (deCordova 1994: 211-213). Today, however, it is quite the opposite, since commercial goods are considered to "culturalize" the supposed "naturalness" of children and make them far too "adult". (Cf. Rönnerberg 1998.)

During the '30s, however, Mickey Mouse's appearance and style were influenced by Fred Astaire and Charlie Chaplin, as well as Douglas Fairbanks, although Mickey of course personified them in a younger mouse version. Mickey was now so big that he became a national symbol, but was for that reason forced at the same time to become increasingly

harmless, well-behaved and kind. Moreover, the possibility of creating self-glorifying comedy thereby decreased, as such comedy most often needs someone to laugh at. Mickey Mouse became increasingly uninteresting and Donald Duck, who was a good deal more aggressive, actually surpassed him in popularity as early as the end of the '30s, even if the exemplary mouse has remained Disney's number one symbol.

In the short cartoons it is often difficult to determine who is the assailant and who is the victim. Moreover, the "violence" and the "attacks" often surge back and forth, just as in traditional hunting games. There is a great deal of quarrelling and fighting, which on the conscious level can be experienced as monotonous, but which seems to appeal to our unconscious in quite a special way. After aggressive impulses have been given free rein, concern about this aggressiveness appears, however, leading to a desire – indeed a need – for punishment. This need is satisfied too, in so far as the aggressive character in these animated hunting games gets a taste of the same medicine himself. But seldom are punishments as mild and amusing, indeed pleasurable, as in the animated film – mostly meted out casually and without any consequences whatsoever.

Wonder tales

Those animal tales of Disney that the children's audience loves most, however, are the animated feature films, which for natural reasons have a tempo that is a good deal slower, as well as a decidedly more complex content and a much more restrained expression of aggression. They are most often modernised fables or fairy stories. Fables with animals in all the roles teach the youngest children what is right and wrong. Fairy tales or wonder tales are primarily about maturity and transformation, about emotional experiences and trials. Here animals are above all assisting or humorous minor characters. The tale circles around such development problems and feelings as are common among older children (as well as teenagers) in their relations with their parents, their brothers and sisters, and children of their own age. This concerns, for example, physical limitations (feeling like a mouse taking on an elephant), the fear of being abandoned or left alone, and childish wishes for power and fantasies about revenge, versus guilt and punishment.

Apart from helping children to understand abstract phenomena (such as conscience) and process their anxiety, threats and negative experiences, Disney's menagerie also serves a third purpose, namely a didactic and moralising purpose. Here it is mainly the animal fables that are used. Therefore, of all Disney's animals, it is naturally the animals in the fables, with their educative ambitions, that interest children least of all. There are exceptions,

however, such as *The Lion King*, but then here the film makers have also deviated from the pattern somewhat and, for example, supplied playfulness and a happy ending.

The fairy tale differs from the fable in that it always has a happy ending and always takes place in a remote and indeterminate environment in a bygone age and a far-away place. The fairy tale often uses animals to concretise *inner, individual* qualities and conflicts – rather than interpersonal ones. It is therefore better suited for a somewhat more teenage central character than for a younger principal character possessing a lower capacity for reflection on her self and consequently needing external warnings and orders. In the fairy tale it is the conflicting sides of the main character herself that are illustrated with the help of different animals. The advantage of the fairy tale is its unconscious processing. It can actually be harmful to explain its concealed meanings to children.

Fables and pet biographies

The *fable* is less complex than the fairy tale, and here good and evil are clearly separated and are represented by different animals. In the fable the lesson is clearly expressed, and here the offender is punished properly and in a manner that is scarcely pleasurable. The fable is about the demands and expectations of the surrounding world and social community. Here virtues and social conformity are to be taught, and not awareness of inner reactions or signs of inner conflict.

The fable uses animals to isolate and elucidate *social* values and experiences. It provides warnings about greed and envy, or preaches diligence, self-sacrifice and loyalty in the public world – themes that are less attractive to preschool children, however. Fortunately Disney's fables are relatively few in number. It is true that in the '30s and '40s a few short films were added, for example *The Grasshopper and the Ants* and *The Tortoise and the Hare* (both dating from ancient times). The grasshopper (or cricket) just amuses himself, while the ants toil away, and when winter comes the pleasure-seeker does not have any store of food, unlike the industrious worker. Or consider the tortoise, who represents trustworthiness and perseverance, while the hare on the other hand stands for arrogance and the inability to make optimal use of good qualifications. Indeed, we are all acquainted with this rather cheerless story...

Pinocchio and *The Fox and the Hound*, however, are the only animated feature films that can be said to be pronounced fables, but then they are also the films that are most frightening to children. In contrast to what many people think, this is not only due to these films' horrible, monstrous villains, but also to the underlying unpleasant moral, which even small children can divine, apart from the "animalisation" of the humans. *The Fox and the*

Hound would be almost unthinkable as a children's film, if one were to really imagine children in the principal parts.

The interplay between the individual and the social, between the mature and the immature, male and female – and the conflicts that arise then – are dealt with in the *pet biographies*.. Here both conflicts between generations and gender role conflicts are thematized using more clear expressions. In these films male dogs are associated with men and female dogs with women, and the animals most often contribute to their masters and mistresses becoming couples (as a part of the process of finding their own partner). The “lesson” here is often what responsible parenthood should look like. These films also describe the reversal of roles that seems to be common in middle age, when men suddenly become interested in relations and (grand)children, and women show a greater interest in independence, professional life and achievements.

Nature dramas

There is a fourth and final group of animal films, which we could call more realistic *nature dramas*. Disney's naturalistic dramatisations in the True-Life Adventures series has been criticised because here real animals from nature are directed, commented on and filmed as if they were people, for the purpose of creating excitement, danger and adventure. Certain animals are made heroes, while others are made villains and murderers. However, I believe that children also perceive these real animals as “good actors” in fictive roles, through an instinct of pure self-preservation, if for no other reason.

One can also attribute to both documentary and fictive animal films the task of evoking (and thereby processing) a primitive fear of the “animal phobia” type. This leads one's thoughts not only to Kaa in *The Jungle Book*, who by being so cute is said to have cured certain women who have seen the film of their dread of snakes, or Sir Hiss in *Robin Hood*, but also to spiders, mice and bats. In the animated films, even humans can make a contribution and shoulder the roles of animals or even monsters.

The evil characters of both sexes (e.g. the wicked fairy Maleficent in *Sleeping Beauty*, Ursula in *The Little Mermaid*, Jafar, the villain of *Aladdin*, and Frollo the judge in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*) are equipped with a very special code of fright: their faces and background fade into black, whereupon their eyes stand out like white slots or yellow, luminous, bloodshot, and almost hypnotising/hypnotised globes directed towards the victim – as well as towards us in the audience. Not only does this intensify the evil nature of the wicked, but it also evokes – by transforming their faces into wolves' or cats' eyes – an

ancient fear of wild animals, which at the same time is hereby alleviated in the long run (Bell 1995:115-117).

Some people have warned about the danger of children interpreting “wrong” (i.e. human) qualities into nature on the basis of Disney’s films. Do children not acquire a confused concept of reality due to animals which speak and react in a human way and which live an apparently everyday life? And is it not the case that human and culturally created phenomena that are undesired are made “natural” by being dressed in the garb of animals? Should the films and books not be more realistic and rational?

“Wise owls” and “sly foxes” or “slippery snakes” are most certainly associated with these human qualities on account of their appearance, rather than their actual behaviour. But surely we do not demand that the rather naughty robin redbreast of reality should actually live up to his kind image from children’s culture, or that the eagle, which in true life is sluggish and leisurely, should prove to be as bellicose as children’s culture wants to portray him? No, demands such as these are only made when certain animals are libelled in fiction.

It is undeniably the case that some animals are undeservedly portrayed in an unfavourable light in children’s culture. Predators are often described as the villains of the stories, since small children for obvious reasons have difficulty in seeing the hunt for (and devouring of) weaker animals as a natural part of the ecological balance. Children do not make any difference between animals and people. Realistic nature films easily become too difficult for preschool children to stomach, so that a fictionalisation can in fact make it easier for them. We would be reluctant to narrate the story beginning as follows, “Once upon a time there was a piggery crammed with small piglets. The voracious wolves walked around on two legs and were called humans, and they just loved sausage...”

But to be sure, predators are also needed, both in nature and in children’s culture. Pets only appeal to (and express) certain sides of us, namely the protected and tamed sides. It is true that real wolves can be tender, playful and faithful, according to the findings of research. However, we do not teach this to preschool children merely by removing the wolf-like characteristics from the wolf of children’s culture, which, of course, in actual fact represents the wolf-like features of *humans*.

Now, what conclusions are to be drawn from this? Animals represent a combination of all the possibilities of the child and all the dangers facing the child.. They are both wild and tame, both violent and cuddly. They demonstrate how to learn the rules of childhood, which can then be infringed; and how to succeed by being cute - as well as wild – in achieving what one wants. Children learn to see themselves both as playful mice and cute kittens, as well as the Wild Beast that they are also capable of being. Children can also see their own

“animalness” embodied outside of them and processed. Animals become living gauges and are able to represent such things as we relate to and things in relation to which we set limits (e.g. “wild” versus “tame”). They help children to train their thinking, and promote their self-conception and perception of relations. (See also Shepard 1978.)

The animals in the films make an excellent contribution to children’s understanding of the human and the inhuman. At the beginning the tales were oral, after which they were written down (gradually with certain illustrations). And now in the electronic age they have become oral once again, but above all visual. The decrease in adult control of the narrations and children’s more independent access to the stories have naturally also had an influence on the actual content.

In the fables it was the adult values that prevailed and were foisted on the very young. Originally the fairy tales were about a power struggle between the supernatural and the human, after which the theme was for a good while the struggle between the social classes and the sexes. Nowadays, when children, with their access to TV and video, no longer need any adult to directly communicate the stories or to accompany them to the cinema, Disney’s film saga more often concerns a struggle between the generations – a struggle of age from which children through their alter egos emerge rather often in triumph.

(1990)

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3. Finding one's way out and back home again

A development-psychological study of Disney's film sagas

Margareta Rönnberg with Olle Sjogren

The animated films circulating under the trademark of Walt Disney hold a central position in the children's culture of the 20th century. Here we shall sketch a model of analysis that can help us understand these works better, precisely as expressions of children's culture. [Note

1]

Of the Disney group's thirty-one completely animated feature films, we have found twenty-nine to be "film sagas" – entertaining stories for a broad family audience, with the horizon of experience of children as their common aim. Both *Fantasia* (1940) and *Alice in Wonderland* (1951) fall slightly outside the normal framework of children's and family films à la Disney. It was not until much later that these works, with their "higher" artistic aspirations, obtained a (partially different) response, for example in the drug culture. The question is whether they are even to be regarded as children's films in the same conventional sense as the others. [Note 2]

The film saga

In the very choice of a basic concept like the "film saga", a slight formation of theory is embedded. For we take as our point of departure the explanatory model that this type of film functions as an audiovisual equivalent of the "folk tale" and the "fairy tale", the reading matter that many parents have found especially suited to the needs of the rising generation. During the 19th century the Grimm brothers and others "translated" and rewrote the orally transmitted folk tales to create book versions with a literary guise. During the 20th century this narrative matter was processed additionally to shape it as moving pictures.

Accordingly, the old folk tales have been transformed in a long process of transmission branching across different media. Just as reading aloud in the light of the lamp in the middle-class nursery once replaced the collective story-telling session in the dimness of the cabin, the book of fairy tales has encountered competition in the form of animated series of pictures and electrified sound tapes in dark cinemas and afterwards on TV sofas. Indeed, in recent decades video cassettes have begun to supersede books in many bookcases – and

parents as viewing company have increasingly been replaced by children of the same age as the viewer.

However, more important than the contest between different media is the fact that the older fairy tale in book form and the more recent film saga serve the same basic purposes as stuff of the imagination for children when processing external experiences and handling inner processes. With the strong impact of psychologists like Bruno Bettelheim, many adults started to understand how the fairy tale (in book form) is used as a means of giving form to experiences and a guide through psychic conflicts during the process of growing up. However, the knowledge that Disney's film sagas also function in a similar way still seems to meet with indignant opposition within the adult cultural strata, where one likes to paint a picture of an aesthetic and moral abyss between good literature and evil products of the media.

We prefer to ask ourselves *why* Disney's film sagas have been and still are so attractive to millions of children. How could the adult story-tellers in the film factory have maintained such a sensitively tuned and enduring contact, if they had not brought their own important insights with them to the exchange of communication?

The developmental process as a type model

It is our intention to approach Disney's film sagas as a mass-mediated form of children's and family culture. We will above all attempt to analyse what importance the films acquire for their audience of minors. Even if such a point of departure may seem to be self-evident, it has been difficult to find reception-sociological, media-ethnographic or developmental-psychological outlooks in the comprehensive literature on Disney [Note 3] – even in the theoretically more ambitious studies, where critical analysis of ideology and psycho-analytical approaches have dominated. [Note 4] Nevertheless, it is necessary to seek to understand the inner processes that determine meaning in concrete functional contexts. Both social analysis and symbol interpretation are reduced to a ritual of blindman's buff, if one conceals all the emotional reactions within the family behind established power games and conceptual fetishes.

Why should the conflict models and the solutions that characterise the ideological structures in a work-oriented *adult culture* have the same relevance for children, who live in a completely different world of experience? Would it not be wiser to take *children's horizon of understanding and need for orientation* as our starting point and highlight the conflicts that dominate the everyday existence of the family and children's situation as newcomers to

society? The child's role in the family is also characterised by her special task: being small in a world of giants, but being expected to grow up in the near future.

Consequently, it is this perspective, the role of the film saga in the developmental process of the child, that constitutes the point of departure for our own model of analysis. We proceed on the assumption that the family not only constitutes a sanctuary that provides protection against all the strains of the surrounding world, but also forms a conflict unit of its own. Both the inner conflicts and the possibilities of finding solutions vary, of course, between different families with different conditions governing their lives. Nevertheless, it is meaningful to disregard important differences sometimes, in order to make the basic pattern itself clearer, i.e. sketch a *perspicuous type model* for general developmental processes.

In this way we can more easily analyse Disney's film sagas without losing our way in the forest of all the concrete details and nuances. We shall therefore attempt to uncover the fundamental pattern in the films and make these central functions apprehensible. The reader herself or himself must test whether our analysis can then be applied in the individual case, by comparison with her or his own experiences. **Note 5]**

Individuation and growing up

Among the basic experiences of the growing child, there is one that more than any others will characterise her lifeworld: the contradictory experience of being a "ward" who is completely dependent on adults and at the same time being expected before long to become an independent individual, with her own identity and the ability to stand on her own two feet. The constant oscillation between the security of dependence and the dreams of breaking out connected with liberation often arouses conflicting feelings. The vehement fluctuations between feelings of powerlessness and fantasies of all-vanquishing power can in particular be difficult to handle. It is not least as a projection background for processing such split experiences that children's culture acquires its great importance for the rising generation.

Disney's film sagas provide excellent examples of how the stuff of the imagination functions as a symbolic orientation framework for organising and channelling pent-up emotional reactions. They have helped many children (and adults) to create a simplified conception of the world from an inner chaos and to make the development of their own identity easier to take in and handle. On an imaginary fictional plane, the member of the audience experiences a number of transitional phases between childhood and adulthood and acquaints herself with different roles in the process of maturity.

The so-called individuation process starts when the baby is only a few months old and begins to perceive her own body as something separable from that of the mother (parent).

Many researchers are of the opinion that separation anxiety and concern about not having one's immediate biological needs satisfied is first processed as early as in peekaboo games: the mother or father disappears, but soon returns to the field of vision. Other more complicated forms appear when the child, with increasing independence, starts gradually to venture out all by herself, to encounter and discover a surrounding world as yet unknown. In addition to the dread of suddenly standing abandoned in a hostile external world, feelings of guilt also arise for the desire for separation, the *will* to leave the parents, who still constitute fundamental security. This concern can, however, be alleviated by suitable parental substitutes – real or imaginary – which may serve as companions and provisional assistants on the way out into the big wide world.

One aspect of the individuation process that by degrees becomes increasingly important is the search for one's identity. The gradual liberation from dependence on parents is all the time accompanied by more or less articulated answers to basic questions such as “Who am I?” and “What will I become?” In order to set oneself free from the definitions and expectations that are formed within the limited framework of the family, it becomes necessary to explore broader worlds. The encounter with alternative role models and reflections of her own self (in others' eyes) increases the child's possibilities of testing an expanded repertoire of roles and identities. In this way the young person can achieve an image of her self that is less dependent on the image dominated by her parents.

One can also speak of a spatial reflection of the different stages in this process of liberation. We have a development from doll's houses and tents made of blankets indoors, to little makeshift houses put up by the children themselves and public meeting-places such as cinemas, with friends and leaders further and further removed from the parental home. The progress of individuation through different worlds of the imagination and symbolic models can be illustrated by the step from playing House and increased contact with the media to daydream-like fantasising around future professional roles and marriage. That is to say towards that station which marks the confirmation of an independent adult identity: starting a home of one's own and forming a family. Thus the “baton” is passed on to the next generation so that it may commence to wrestle with its own process of individuation.

Gender-divided formation of families

Now, individuation and building an identity are not processes that take place in a social or cultural vacuum. In addition to dichotomies like “adult/child” and “home/surrounding world”, there is also, in a society with our type of work division, a division into different spheres of gender roles: “man/woman” and “boy/girl”. Even at the age of four, children are

subjected to expectations from the environment in which they grow up that are clearly differentiated according to the conceptions of value and the action orientations that are associated with the different genders to which they belong.

In the middle-class nuclear family the child's first question concerning her or his identity has traditionally been "Am I a boy or a girl?" At a very early stage most children (before they have even encountered Disney's feature films) grow into conventional systems of norms and internalise different role expectations as a "natural" part of their own personality. Therefore, boys and girls have in part to wrestle with different problems and frustrations while growing up to adulthood.

To boys, who have been promised a more independent professional role out in society, the father has appeared to be a smothering figure of authority, at the same time as they have often seen how *powerless* the father seems *at home*. With the orientation of the man's role towards the social external world and its demands for action, the socialisation process of the boy is usually characterised by active exploration, with a testing both of his courage and his own competence. It is in competition with a number of other male figures that the shadow of the father appears, in the form of inner voices of conscience to yield to or figures of authority to rebel against.

The woman's role has traditionally been oriented towards her future task as a wife and a mother in the home. Therefore many girls, during their individuation, have come to collide with the mother's conflicting attempts at definition and veto processes, as well as with *her power role within the family*. The isolation in the one and the same home has increased the tendencies towards mutual rivalry, particularly when "feminine" values like attractiveness and motherliness become increasingly problematic for the mother, at the same time as the daughter is rising in value after her sexual maturity.

In order to handle the hate reactions and feelings of guilt caused by the denial of a competing woman's identity, the classic solution for the teenage girl has been to withdraw mentally from the arena of conflict. During her "compulsory internment" in the home, she has to large extent had to seek support in the domains of fantasy. The "unfeminine" aggressions and ambivalence triggered by the mother's active blocking of her identity can only be projected onto evil mother figures (nasty vixens, potty schoolmistresses, witches and stepmothers). The young woman has to look more or less passively at reflections of her positive values as a woman during an extended period of moratorium, in the form of romantic dreams and fantasies about her idols, or in relations to animals or "grandmothers".

While little girls usually have both strong and realistic role models in their immediate neighbourhood, little boys in middle-class society have been compelled to seek clear,

powerful role models in fantasies and in different media. In the teens, however, a certain reversal usually takes place, so that the boys' models, at least on the surface, become more realistic and the girls' models are characterised more by fantasy. This pattern is also reflected clearly in the central characters in Disney's film sagas.

Three basic types

There is perhaps reason to point out once again that this basic pattern of children's individuation and social creation ought to be seen as an ideal-type construction for middle-class society. Even if many features still survive in half-forbidden layers of consciousness, the well-defined contours have started to become less clear during recent decades. The changes are due not least to the increased emergence of women in the labour market, an intense debate on gender roles and an ideological crisis for the "male" achievement cult.

That the gender roles in Disney's film sagas reflect both the traditional pattern and the new winds of the times is scarcely likely to cause surprise. Many of the films were made more than half a century ago and are most often based on even older models. Actually, it is not until *The Rescuers* (1977) that the debate of the '60s is given a clearer expression, leading to an increasingly accentuated "struggle for girls' rights" in the '90s. Why should one expect an avant-garde position of a media company with the family audience as its principal target group; or a drastic contravention of norms in films for children under ten years of age, who usually show a clear dependence on stable stereotypes?

Upon a closer analysis of recurrent patterns, we found that Disney's film sagas can be divided into three different basic types (the fable, wonder tale and pet biography), with the central characters' sex, age and developmental process as natural principles of division for each group of films. (Parentheses surrounding a film title signify that it belongs to the type in question to a lesser degree.) In order to make clear the "level of maturity" of the different basic types, we have chosen three genre concepts that go back to older spheres of motifs and narrative forms in children's literature. The film makers have developed an established tradition, often in direct connection with a literary model.

Animal fables

The oldest genre dates from ancient times and comprises didactic stories about animals made human, which have been considered most suitable for the very youngest. The moralising animal fable says, like all early upbringing, what the child ought to or must not do. It preaches values such as obedience, love of truth and diligence, but can also have a deterrent purpose. With its purpose of warning – not to say terrifying – the fable is usually

used in particular in connection with smaller children, who are not yet considered mature for independent thought. This genre includes:

Pinocchio 1940
Dumbo 1941
Bambi 1942
(The Sword in the Stone 1963)
The Jungle Book 1967
The Fox and the Hound 1981
Oliver and Company 1988
The Lion King 1994

The central character in Disney's animal fables is a boy who develops from a clumsy infant to a competent young man. The story unravels mainly from the age of seven to the age of eleven, when the hero's search for his identity is started by his unclear origin and diffuse gender role. The character is driven out from a secure but incomplete parental home into a threatening and insecure surrounding world, where he is confronted with a number of temptations and trials of strength. Searching for male role models and testing his own capacity culminate in a decisive trial of strength and the boy can then return home with a clearer identity.

The central characters of the animal fable have no magic rescuers to help them out of their conflict, since it is they themselves who need to grow in competence. On the other hand, they are surrounded by a number of helpers in the male world of action, where there is a greater choice of roles and role models – as well as greater uncertainty. The didactic feature of the classic fable has its equivalent in the Disney film fable in the boy's expected adaptation to dominant man's roles.

Wonder tales

The wonder tale (including the "fairy" tale) is a more entertaining form of narrative which can also be traced far back in the oral tradition. As entertaining fiction with fantastic elements, with its enchantments, magic solutions and happy endings, it has been used for a long time to support and encourage the rising generation during its liberation from parental authority. In this group we have placed:

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs 1937
Cinderella 1950
Sleeping Beauty 1959
The Little Mermaid 1989
Beauty and the Beast 1991

Aladdin 1992

Pocahontas 1995

The Hunchback of Notre Dame 1996

Hercules 1997

Mulan 1998

Tarzan 1999

The central character is as a rule a girl in her teens whose “true identity” is denied and smothered by an evil mother figure. This threat compels her out of the overheated sphere of conflict constituted by the home. The girl seeks protection in an isolated sanctuary where she can have her image of her feminine self reflected in the eyes of others and fantasise about romantic trysts with the dream prince. Having had her positive sides revealed and confirmed, she is eventually delivered by the prince from the threat against her true identity. In the continuation of the happy ending one catches a glimpse of the promise that the two might in the future become a couple and form their own home.

The teenage girl does not (like the little boy) need role models which she has to adopt an attitude to or imitate, since she has already acquired a positive view of the woman’s role. Nevertheless, she needs to be acknowledged and desired, seen as a young woman rather than as mother’s little girl, through being reflected in other people’s ways of behaving towards her. In this way she is also more capable of seeing herself both through the eyes of others and through her own eyes.

Accordingly, the central character of the wonder tale has her positive identity *confirmed by others* and the threats against her identity *eliminated by others*. The teenage girl therefore easily stands out as a passively suffering and romantically swooning heroine, but she is saved less because of her “feminine helplessness” than because she needs to have her values and her bonds to other people certified.

Nor has she, like the boy hero, had any older guide or friend of her own age with her on her excursion, but has travelled much more alone, which is another reason why she now needs another person by her side. The excursion of the teenage girl becomes, in contrast to that of the boy, a form of isolated exile. The “prince” literally becomes her only way out of the confinement of loneliness. On the other hand, the little boys have throughout their journey had helpers by their side, while the friendly assistance to the teenage girls is concentrated to one single, more emphasised symbolic occasion.

Since the wonder tale has space for magic powers that suspend the border between dream and reality, it is possible to satisfy all wishes. With the help of fantasy it is also possible to shift the traumatic conflict to a *disguised* antagonist – the mother transformed into a

stepmother or witch. Moreover, the wonder tale genre has for a long time provided a freer sphere of fantasy for creating characters symbolising feminine sexuality, and especially what is “unbecoming”..

While the fable likes to offer a physical struggle between men outdoors, the wonder tale prefers psychic and verbal conflicts between women (or within the woman herself) indoors: quarrels, envy and rows. While the young heroes have the opportunity to fight against - and destroy - beings that are totally unlike themselves (dragons, monsters, giants), the young heroines most often have to wrestle with negative mirror images (stepmothers, stepsisters) or with female rivals who are quite like themselves. And they have to learn to become reconciled with them.

Pet biographies

In contrast to the animal fable and the wonder tale, the pet biography is a relatively late genre. Like many other things in the entertainment literature of today, the genre has developed in close interplay with the growth of middle-class society, its “demystified” world conception and individual socialisation in the intimate sphere of the home.

In contrast to the pet biography that took shape during the 18th century and often had a tragic and cruel end, Disney’s offshoots are moulded as comedies of everyday life with elements of the thriller. Like their precursors, however, it is still a question of exciting chases, courage and cunning in a “lower” ideal society in the miniature format, where one prefers to stay out of the way of the big humans. The small pets, which are pushed out of the way, live like our children in their own world to a great extent – at the same time independent and securely dependent on us human beings. In this group we include:

(Peter Pan 1953)
Lady and the Tramp 1955
One Hundred and One Dalmatians 1961
Aristocats 1970
Robin Hood 1973
The Rescuers 1977
(The Black Cauldron 1985)
Basil, the Great Mouse Detective 1986
(Oliver and Company 1988)
The Rescuers Down Under 1990

The role of the central character in the pet biography is shared between couples of marriageable age from different social camps, but of the same race. At least one of them simultaneously functions as a “child” upwards and as a “parent” downwards. The home

appears as something positive but overprotected. It is external enemies that drive one (or both) of the characters to undertake adventures in the surrounding world. The excursion also involves encounters with some exciting bohemian character and the discovery of an alternative lifestyle.

The search for an adult partner also includes the necessity of guaranteeing one's own children or the children of others safety and security. Therefore, revolutionary changes of identity do not come into question, but given hierarchies of age and gender roles are assumed to be quite unproblematic. The class gap that is suggested behind the breach between different life styles is eventually bridged successfully as a gap between complementary standards. Both the security neurosis and the love of adventure can be balanced with a new synthesis that abolishes all extremes. With the master and mistress as good role models, both parties finally form their own family, "inside the master and mistress' house".

The pet biography is based on clear boundaries between animals and human beings, and it avoids erasing the "realism of everyday life" either with dreams or with magic. Instead conflicts are processed by means of a form of comedy that plays with our stereotyped conceptions of male and female and through disguising the internal contradictions of family life. It is "only animals" that are allowed to exemplify problems such as shut-in isolation and the wild life of the bachelor, rivalry between sisters and brothers, and parental dependence. With villains *from the outside* and several helpers, it is also easier for a children's audience to handle the threatening situation behind the exciting chases.

Family cycle with several perspectives

Our quick sketch of the three types of film can easily convey the impression that Disney's film sagas are aimed at different "target groups", according to their different genders and age groups. It would also be possible to infer the same strategy from the detailed film analysis that constitutes the frame of this study. For our presentation is organised as a fictive film biography, a collective life plan, where central characters of different gender are followed from the cradle to the cradle and, in the case of some minor characters, almost all the way to the grave.

These clearly defined stages of development are, however, a pedagogic construction on our part, not a description of the social life which the different film types have had (and still have) with different audiences. The decision to choose the chain of events of the family cycle as the overall narrative framework presents itself immediately in connection with the children's and family film. It is this cyclic process that is specific to the family unit itself, its

developmental phases and conflicts – not the biography of the individual family member or the social upheavals outside the home.

The basic conception of the films from a certain gender and age perspective does not mean that they should be less attractive or relevant to other members of the family. A boy is very likely to derive great pleasure from a wonder tale like *Cinderella*, as is a girl from an animal fable like “*The Jungle Book*” or “*The Lion King*” with a boy in the leading role. The actual complex of problems connected with individuation is, of course, common to children of both genders, and it feels secure, time and time again, to be able to experience the stages that precede or follow the developmental phase that one finds oneself in. Not only does one need to strengthen the positions already reached, but one also has to prepare oneself for the next challenge.

Moreover, the creation of identity concerns defining the borders between oneself and the opposite sex, i.e. seeing differences between oneself and others, as much as it concerns seeing similarities. Girls can shape their image of their self through the effect of contrast, when they observe boy characters in the films – and vice versa. However, the decisive gender differentiation begins when the individual’s independent consciousness of her role is strengthened in connection with puberty. Then one’s circle of friends will in a completely different way leave its imprint on one’s search for an identity, and the pressure increases to shape the value orientation connected with one’s own socialisation model. The boy or girl who at the age of 14-15 “makes the wrong choice” encounters great difficulties in having his or her role as a gendered being confirmed by the opposite sex – as well as by many of the same sex. During recent decades, however, the possibilities of variation have increased considerably, particularly in youth-oriented film genres outside the mainstream of the Disney group.

Now it is mainly in the lower teens that one feels prompted to leave, indeed to dissociate oneself from the film sagas of one’s childhood. To the boy who wants to fit into the gang, not only does *Sleeping Beauty* seem “silly”, but *Pinocchio* and *The Lion King* also seem “too childish”. The family-oriented teenage girls who do not completely break their ties to Disney’s film sagas have been greater in number, but their current idols still usually supersede the Cinderella characters, as psychologically more relevant to a processing of experiences that is more specific to their age. However, around the age of twenty, both girls and boys already show clear tendencies to wallow nostalgically in old Disney films and children’s programmes.

When the young people then form families, most of them usually renew their acquaintance with Disney’s film sagas. Now they do not go the cinema with their parents,

but with their children, which, of course, gives a completely new perspective to the film experience. However, the very developmental process in childhood also included taking an interest in the parental roles of the films, although at that time mostly as early points of orientation for the future path of one's life as an adult. As a parent one has one's own children present the whole time as living references in the cinema or on the TV sofa. Even if each individual selects from the films the levels of action and experience that are closest to her own position in the family cycle, the small children are at the same time aware that they live in a world dominated by big grown-ups, just as the grown-ups are constantly reminded of their responsibility for the small children.

Therefore, this is precisely what is characteristic of family films that function on several levels at the same time: different age perspectives for familiar simultaneous interpretation. By allowing several generations to *adopt different perspectives simultaneously* and take an active interest in different roles for different ages, the films fulfil an important purpose as an orientation aid. Processed afterwards in play or reflection, the films can stimulate a more flexible ability to "change perspective", put oneself in other people's shoes, or look both upwards and downwards.

However, when the need for liberation and the conflicts between the generations increase during early adolescence, the conditions for interplay through the media within the family's own framework most often cease.

The transformation of the family film

The discovery of the significance of fantasy as an elastic model of action, with several levels and roles for joint processing of the internal conflicts of the family, was not new to Disney. Even when the Grimm brothers in the 19th century were quite self-indulgently rewriting folk tales for publishing in book form, such a use was envisaged. (Their tales were not called "Kinder- und Hausmärchen" for no reason at all.) And few have been as aware as H.C. Andersson of the fact that one can create artistic tales that function on several levels simultaneously; for example fables about ugly ducklings and naked emperors, which in part help children to process concrete experiences and in part grow to form allegorical complexes of symbols for adult discussions on the cultural pages of newspapers.

With a certain generalisation one can distinguish a clear development during the sixty years or more in which the Disney group has been producing its film sagas. On the one hand we have been able to see more and more *equally divided leading roles*, centred around the everyday problems of the nuclear family (1955-1980), while on the other hand there have been an *increasing number of independent teenage girls* and *yearning and insecure young*

men in need of feminine assistance (especially 1989-1999). At the same time the *significance of magic and enchantments* as rescuers in distress has *decreased*, in favour of *more realistic solutions to conflicts* and *collectives characterised by solidarity*. Consequently, there has also been a decrease in the *supernatural evil of the villains* and *wrestling with authoritarian socialisation pressure from the parents' generation*.

Accordingly, Disney's film sagas have to a great extent reflected the general development during the years 1937-1999, with regard to dominant family patterns in western society.

ANIMAL FABLES

The central characters of the animal fables are all small boys. It is then of less importance that Pinocchio happens to be a puppet, Dumbo an elephant, Bambi a roe deer, Mowgli a "man-cub", Tod a fox, Copper a puppy, Oliver a kitten and Simba a lion cub. The important thing is what they have in common: that we are able to follow their development from a new-born little boy to a competent young man.

The birth

In five of the seven typical animal fables we receive mythically charged information about the "birth" of the baby boy. The calf elephant Dumbo comes, greatly delayed and with a stork that has lost his way, to the anxiously waiting Mrs Jumbo. Pinocchio the puppet is given a double birth. First he is carved from pine by the carpenter Gepetto, and then life is blown into him by the Blue Fairy. The human child Mowgli is found by the panther Bagheera, like Moses among the reeds lying in a basket in a battered boat at the river bank. Oliver the kitten is likewise an orphaned foundling. Little Tod the fox is orphaned in the introductory sequence, his mother having been shot by a hunter, but old Widow Tweed feeds him with a baby's bottle. His future friend, Copper, is kidnapped as a puppy of two months from his mother by the hunter Amos Slade. It is only the fawn Bambi and the lion cub Simba who have a "normal" birth and childhood in nature with their biological mothers.

There is no mistaking the pride and rapture of the parental characters. Gepetto calls his "son" a miracle, and Mrs Jumbo is no less delighted than Bambi's and Simba's mothers. That even an adoptive mother like Mother Wolf loves her man-cub dearly, *The Jungle Book* assures all adopted children – and all those who have some time *believed themselves to be* adopted. Indeed, tenderness and boasting about the progress of their offspring characterise

all the parents of small children in Disney's fables, in contrast to the parents of teenagers in the wonder tale.

That these parents of small children are desperately looking for their lost children strengthens the conviction that parents focus all their attention on their children. This is of course a dream that appeals to an audience of younger children. For their security and the development of their self, small children need positive self-appreciation and backing-up. Praise is a prerequisite for both trust and independence. None the less, these loving parents will later be the cause of unclear identities for the young boys.

The physical self

However, before then we have the opportunity to witness the very earliest years of the baby boy: the first stumbling steps, his training in basic skills, and his discovery of the surrounding world, with all its concrete mysteries. Since the child must grow somewhat before his identity can be the object of reflection and questioning, his physical self will in the beginning be the focus of attention. For the first thing that all children must learn to master is their own body, which also explains their early interest in grimaces, laughter at people tripping, and slapstick.

At first one's own body is perceived as an extension of the mother's in an original physical symbiosis – an important explanation for one's later separation anxiety. Closeness to the mother and her warmth, pre-verbal contact and security, is most clearly given form in *Bambi* and *Dumbo*. For it is only here that we have central mother characters of the same species, i.e. biologically related. (In *The Lion King* it is actually a question of an equally close physical and psychic contact between the father and his little son, Simba.) In *The Fox and the Hound* and *Oliver and Company* too, the great security of physical contact and wordless communication are emphasised.

Just like a kind of reminiscence of early primal situations and forgotten complexes of feelings, many scenes with small children in Disney's films convey an experience of déjà vu – or rather déjà senti (already felt). This concerns especially those non-verbal articulated feelings which are only expressed with the body and which one for that reason does not usually remember intellectually. The only time when Dumbo's mother has verbal contact with her son at all is when she sings the lullaby for and about "Baby Mine". What we perhaps remember best of all is the way in which the imprisoned elephant mother caresses her son with the help of her trunk, stuck out through the bars of the prison cage. Bambi and his mother also communicate mainly by means of bodily contact. Body language and gestures are the child's first language of his own and the films recall the physical security in

this direct communication and close contact. However, the physical symbiosis has a time-limit and is impossible in the long run, since the child must learn to stand on its own two feet.

The audience is able to see many funny episodes with stumbling children who are trying to take their very first fumbling steps. Pinocchio's way of moving about is at the same time both cute and comical. He flops down onto his behind and often falls down. Dumbo is continually stumbling on his overgrown ears. And Bambi is laughed at by Thumper the bunny when he tries to control all of his four legs but falls head first over a log. First the child discovers his body and then his will and ability. Physical control of one's own body and its limbs, the experience of being able to go and move wherever one wants, contributes to establishing a basic security.

Looking at other children who fail in the beginning provides a perspective on the inability that one has recently experienced oneself. Laughing at the clumsiness of others does not necessarily mean a feeling of superiority, but may merely mean relief that one has got over one's own experience of inferiority and insufficient control of one's body. We are also able to see the characters in the films overcoming apparently insurmountable physical obstacles, for example when the pup Lady or the mice Gus and Jaq in *Cinderella* succeed in climbing to the top of endless giant stairs, merely because they have the will.

Self-determination

Children's strong dependence on their parents (particularly on the mother) during their earliest years has received its classic symbol in *Dumbo*. The little calf elephant persists in hanging onto his mother – if not by her skirt, by her tail, which he continually grabs hold of with his trunk. However, the dependent roles of childhood have to be replaced soon, and the ties to parents gradually decrease. The next phase in the child's process of maturity will therefore be for him to make himself less emotionally dependent on his parents. Instead his interest is directed towards the outside world, in order to explore life outside the home.

Then a bridge between the parental home and the surrounding world is often provided by friends. Dumbo has in future to hold the tail of little Timothy Mouse, and Bambi turns to friends like Thumper the bunny and Flower the skunk, as Simba turns to Timon and Pumbaa. Tod and Copper are at the beginning each other's best friends, and Oliver the kitten has a whole gang of dogs as his protectors. Bambi's mother shows her son the dangerous field ("Out there we are unprotected"), but otherwise it is Thumper and Flower who almost completely provide Bambi with an introductory course on the surrounding world. They teach him all that he needs to know and understand, giving him elocution lessons and teaching him the names of different

things. But they also teach him diversions like sliding on his hooves on the ice. Simba's friends are also mostly interested in play and in taking life easy and with a light heart, "Hakuna matata!"

On other occasions the mothers' problems are depicted in a comic light, for example when the child wants to assert his own will (especially if his friends are nearby). When Thumper teases Bambi, his mother criticises him, "Don't you remember what your daddy said this morning? If you can't say anything good about other people, then you ought to keep quiet!" At first Thumper feels slightly ashamed, but then he saves his face by laughing off the lesson in morals with asides to his friends, a few witticisms and different tricks. And, since the little bunny only wants to eat flowers of clover, his mother reminds him that he must also eat the more wholesome leaves. Even here Thumper's grimaces and side-glances can help all children who love sweets to recognise themselves.

Tod's adoptive mother also devotes herself a great deal to his upbringing, as do Merlin, the teacher of the adopted child Wart, and Dodger, Oliver's temporary foster-father. Almost the only thing that Simba's mother is seen doing with her little son is washing (licking) him, to his obvious disapproval. We are also able to see other small animals in the forest being careless about their morning wash, for example the opossum in *Bambi*, who in all haste splashes himself with a dew-drop.

Good behaviour and personal hygiene, a balanced diet and sensible clothing are in Disney's animal fables the most common issues of controversy on the early battlefield of bringing up children. The defiant reactions of the small beings and their first awakening self-determination can here encourage the joy of recognition in the audience of children. This also contributes to the feeling of affinity that is so important in liberation from parental authority.

Separation

A certain measure of basic security is needed before the child is mature enough to enter the first "crisis". Having overcome the need for continual, close physical contact with the mother, learnt to control his own body and achieved a certain self-determination, the boy-child is now thrown out – more or less brutally – into a surrounding world where he is compelled to stand on his own two feet. Having established a feeling of basic security, the child continues by processing the problems in his continued development towards independence.

On the younger children at least, the sudden separation from the parent has a traumatic effect – so-called separation anxiety. After his mother has fallen victim to a hunter's bullet, Bambi runs terror-stricken around in the forest, searching for her (a ghastly sequence that was substantially cut in the version for Swedish cinemas). The fox cub Tod's mother is also

shot, and Dumbo's mother is taken away in a heart-rending manner. Mrs Jumbo is locked up in a cage as a "mad elephant" when she is no longer able to bear the bullying of Dumbo and all the taunts about her son's large ears. In Simba's case it is the father who is lost, but the traumatic loss is no less intense, completely in line with the feministic wish that men should have greater importance in the lives of young boys.

Emotionally charged scenes like these make many small children aware of the possibility that their own mother (or father) might die or be taken away from them. Fiction's more distanced technique of processing feelings gives them the opportunity, perhaps for the first time, of becoming familiar with the thought and preparing themselves for this traumatic experience.

In both *Pinocchio* and *The Jungle Book*, the complex of problems is approached in a somewhat different way, since the films jump over infancy with a compressed "leap in time", directly from the creation through carving and the discovery at the river, respectively. Consequently, the later separation becomes less problematic, more future-oriented than immediately physical and traumatic. When Mowgli is "turned out" of the jungle at the age of ten, it is not a question of a direct shock, even if he offers resistance and wants to remain as before. As early as the second day of his life, the curious Pinocchio ventures out in sheer folly on adventures of his own that lead him further and further away from his good father. In stead of the narrow path to school, he chooses a more attractive, but also more dangerous "path of pleasure".

Even if the necessary relations with friends have already been established, all the boy characters are forced by the separation out into a threatening and insecure surrounding world. Previously they have naturally been the children of their parents, but now they are beginning to feel uncertain. They are being compelled to ask themselves "Who am I?" In the continuation of the films we therefore have the opportunity to follow their searching and questioning, the self's striving and hunting for the right identity.

The search for an identity

Accordingly, the characteristic feature of the boy child of the animal fable has been an "unusual" birth and childhood, with an unclear origin and vague forms of being. An "unreal" origin is, of course, a common feature of all creation of myths (not least in children's culture), from Moses among the reeds and Jesus, to Superman and Donald Duck's nephews. The *vague identity* of the central character provides a narrative freedom to give form to conditions and relations that are not included in normal everyday life, but still exist there as a potential reality – as threats, dreams and future alternatives. Even for an audience

of children, such mythical and symbolic constructions will facilitate a form of camouflage or distancing which helps them to (dare to) enter the course of events and the lives of the characters, without needing to be reminded that it is really a question of themselves.

The *content* of the experiment in thought can give expression to children's own wishes and fears, while the actual *fictional form* ("unbelievable" origin) creates a protection against too personal a reading. Many children go about carrying a so-called "family romance" within them. In their imagination they toy around with the idea that their parents (or one of them) are not their "real" parents – whom they are still expecting to appear.

In several animal fables the question of "origin" is exceptionally difficult to explain. Here the secure parental character cannot possibly be the central character's real parent, since the two are not even of the same species. The question that arises is then "Who am I *really*?" Is the foundling Mowgli (the "man-cub") a wolf like his parents and brothers and sisters, or is he a human being, as he appears to be? Is Pinocchio a puppet made of wood? A *living* puppet? A donkey? Or a normal boy? Are there really flying elephants like our deviant Dumbo? Can little Bambi really be the Prince of the Forest, a future King of the Forest? For he only looks like an unusually fumbling fawn. It is hinted, to be sure, that the proud stag, who mostly stands out like a statuesque silhouette against the sky, is an ordinary biological father, but his absence from the mother's side contributes to emphasising the discrepancy between the idealised image of the father and the unrealistic role expectations on Bambi, with his fixation on his mother.

The audience never finds out which fathers Tod and Copper really have. (Nor does the audience, in Copper's case, see the mother.) However, since the cub and pup are taken care of by people, must they not believe that they are a "man-cub" or "man-pup"? At the same time, foxes are of course not supposed to grow up on a farm, but rather in the forest. Later on Tod is quite rightly called "farm boy" by the animals of the forest and does not seem to belong anywhere. Copper's identity problems revolve around the question of whether the "little runt" is really the makings of a good hunting dog. Therefore, he is given (apart from his master, Amos) a foster-father in the form of Chief, an aged hunting dog with a deteriorating sense of smell. The "fox boy's" and the "dog boy's" *common confusion concerning their identity* concerns the question of whether such animals can really be best friends in the long run.

In the case of Oliver the kitten, both the mother and father are absent and only his brothers and sisters appear in the introductory scene. They all receive adoptive parents, the one after the other – except for Oliver, who is evidently not good enough. The deviant therefore orientates himself towards his "natural enemies", the dogs. Therefore, is he a dog

or a cat? A well-bred kitten with an expensive collar, or a street urchin and a petty thief? Simba must also have difficulty in believing that he could be a future king. He is merely a miserable "little hairball" that is literally trying to walk in his father's footsteps, but is only filling a tenth of the imprints. And will little Wart ever be able to live up to the expectation that he will become King Arthur? Is he a bird, a fish or something in between (perhaps a squirrel)?

In order to find the answer in their search for their identity, the boy characters must set out on a journey or an excursion that also involves active exploration of the surrounding world. The message of these film fables is that it is not until one departs from home that one can grow, stand on one's own two feet and demonstrate what one is capable of. One must free oneself from one's old ties and be left to one's own resources if one is to "become someone". One cannot remain close to home, in mum's enclosed pasture, if one is to grow up to become a man. Mothers have far too great a tendency to inspire dependence. If the boy is to be able to mature, the parent that represents care and security, or in some other way stands closest to him, must die – since she or he is treating him all the time like a little boy.

During their expeditions the boys oscillate constantly between a higher and a lower degree of self-insight. In their fluctuations between a need for security and an urge to explore they tend, in spite of everything, to approach their right identity. In all the animal fables the emphasis concerning formation of character is on the boy child's intensive "training" at the age of 7-11. This so-called "age of latency" is usually characterised as a delay in growing up, but it is not on that account a period of rest. During these years the child is probably more active psychosocially than at any other time, completely occupied with building up a stable platform before the approach of puberty, when a number of new needs and problems concerning his identity emerge. To the question "Who am I?" is added the increasingly exacting attendant question "Who will I become?"

The ordeal by fire

In most societies boys have traditionally been permitted to have a much more active period of latency than girls. At this age they are allowed to start to explore the surroundings all by themselves and take risks, to learn how to set about new tasks and not to lose heart at the first adversity. They must test themselves, explore their own capacity and limitations.

One of the classic symbols of danger in the fable of warning has been fire. All the boy characters of the films have to learn what fire means: that one has to be careful with it and at the same time realise its "Promethean" value potential. All of the seven must literally go

through different baptisms of fire, all of which contribute to them finding their identity and qualifying as an adult.

Through sheer lack of wisdom, Pinocchio burns his finger on a candle-flame on the very first evening of his existence. Such imprudence could have been particularly fatal for a marionette made of wood, but he gradually learns to make proper use of fire for praiseworthy purposes. An example is when he saves his father from the belly of the whale, by making a fire in there and using smoke to escape (when Monstro starts to sneeze from the smoke).

Dumbo is extra anxious and nervous about the circus trick which involves him jumping through a burning ring, but he finally succeeds in overcoming his fear. Moreover, Bambi manages to escape with his life intact from the terrible forest fire that was caused by careless humans.

Tod the fox saves his fiancée Vixey and himself from the burrow, by running straight through the fire that the hunter has tried to smoke him out with. Likewise, Simba's final showdown with Scar takes place in a sea of fire that has started through a stroke of lightning. Here the fire is used first by Scar, who kicks embers up into Simba's eyes, but Simba then finally succeeds in pouncing on his uncle in a wild struggle, so that the fratricide falls down into a ravine and is in the end taken care of by the hyenas.

Mowgli is captured by Louie, the King of the Apes, who wants to become a human being with the help of the Red Flower (fire). For the ape believes that Mowgli can reveal its secret, but the man-cub does not even know how to make an ordinary fire, since he has so far only lived among animals. However, later Mowgli himself finds use for fire, when he succeeds in frightening Shere Khan the tiger and puts him to flight for good. Through this baptism of fire, he also confirms and demonstrates to himself his proper status as a human being.

The victory

Both Pinocchio and Mowgli set out into the world all by themselves to seek adventure. They attempt to stand on their own two feet but often fail. In the end they still get the opportunity to confirm their own capacity (and their future roles as adults) through different exploits. They accomplish this by confronting and conquering the monster that is threatening to smother them (Monstro and Shere Khan, respectively). Childhood friends Tod and Copper vanquish, through pooling their resources, both the terrifying bear and the even more dangerous predator, the human being, with all his firearms.

Since neither Dumbo nor Bambi go very far away from home on their excursion, their victories are of a rather different character. Bambi spends all of his time in the great forest, which offers sufficient space for exercises in independence and strength. Here he is able to rescue his fiancée Faline from the bloodhounds chasing her, as well as conquer his rival. However, it is mainly a question of more normal tests of strength, not involving great exploits against monsters in foreign terrain.

Dumbo stays at home at the circus, except for one single occasion. Together with Timothy he sets out into the country, having (without his knowledge) intoxicated himself with water laced with alcohol. It is of course precisely on this occasion that he learns to fly and thereby finds his own way to conquer all the scorners at the circus.

The fact that it is not only a question of an external victory, but also concerns an inner victory over one's self is emphasised most clearly in *Dumbo*. The taunts and laughs of the unsympathetic people around him have their extension inside Dumbo himself, in his inadequate insight concerning his true self. While the elephant with the big ears completely lacks belief in himself and his capacity, the little mouse Timothy is able to function as his potential self-confidence and plant ideas about a future career in his head. Even if a great deal of Timothy's advice and many of his proposals are completely unsuccessful in the beginning, Dumbo learns in any case that one must believe in oneself, particularly if no one around one does so. Even "misshapen beings", who are to all appearances imperfect, have their special talents which it is important to find and feel confidence in.

Accordingly, the tale about the elephant whose ears are too big deals with discovering oneself, with searching for self-knowledge. Since Dumbo appears to be involuntarily comical and his initial incompetence arouses laughter, we feel sorry for him as a victim of an unsympathetic environment. However, in the end he is rehabilitated as an acknowledged and famous circus performer, having had to try a number of humiliating roles, for example that of the clown. A unique talent has all the while lain concealed in the supposed imperfection of the deviant. Moreover, thanks to his successes, Dumbo can be reunited with his mother. In actual fact, his very success mainly appears as a means of freeing the mother and giving her a pleasant old age, with a circus carriage of her own on the tours of the world-famous son. Here the well-known cherished dream of the child is realised – namely that of being able to provide for his parents, who have been lamenting their poor finances.

In Simba's case too, it is to a great extent a question of increased self-insight, although his searching is more philosophical and moral. At the beginning he withdraws from the community (on account of his bad conscience) and flees into the jungle in the belief that he bears the responsibility for his father's death. However, he is finally compelled to deal with

the question “Who am I?” and return home to shoulder his responsibility – and fight against his uncle Scar.

“I’ve got no strings”

The fact that Pinocchio, Mowgli and Simba set off on excursions to much more remote areas in comparison with Bambi and Dumbo is partly due to their over-confidence in themselves. They insist all the time that they are already able to manage by themselves. If anything, their maturity is impeded by the kind of hubris that Jean Piaget called “cognitive conceit”, namely children’s illusory feeling of being able to handle any situation whatsoever. Having previously regarded their parents as omniscient and omnipotent, around the age of seven children often start to feel smarter than adults. Even up to the age of twelve children often feel superior to their parents.

The fact that Pinocchio and Mowgli do not at first realise their limitations also gives rise to punishments. They are confronted by several difficult tests and trials, which they fail, but they succeed after all in the conclusive final test: the rescue of Gepetto from the belly of Monstro the whale and the test of manhood against Shere Khan the tiger. Mowgli believes presumptuously that he can manage all by himself in the jungle and escapes from his minders, Bagheera the Panther and Baloo the Bear. When his confrontations with Kaa the snake and the monkeys are about to end up badly, Bagheera must come to his rescue.

Pinocchio the marionette imagines that he – literally – can stand on his own two feet. He sings “I’ve got no strings”, when he tests the role of the actor in Stromboli’s theatre. Pinocchio’s proclamations of emancipation, resulting from his overestimation of himself, only point, ironically enough, to a constantly increasing dependence, with captivity, slave labour and mental torture. With each new figure of authority whose claws he ends up in, the nightmarish control of the challenger is increased. These confrontations with stifling figures of authority also exert an influence on the development of Pinocchio’s character, of course, in the form of negative lessons that mark out boundaries instead of opening up new perspectives.

Simba also believes himself to be ready to cope all by himself at an early stage, after his father has declared that his son will one day be the new king. The lion cub starts to believe himself capable of deciding by himself, and dreams of being the “mane event”, of “playing a major part”. However, he learns a lesson from the excursion with his best friend Nala to the dangerous Elephant Graveyard, when his father has to rescue him from the hyenas. Simba now wishes to be as brave as his father, but his father points out that, on the contrary, he *was afraid* – afraid of losing his son.

“I wanna be like you”

Until the age of ten the child needs above all *concrete situations and roles* as a basis for his thought and his solutions to problems. In this connection the boy characters of the animal fables offer a great number of possibilities of cautiously experimenting by launching trial balloons and constructing models. Like the principal characters, the children in the cinema can dress themselves up in the identity of other characters and test different attitudes and roles that they come into contact with.

This learning based on models takes place through imitation, games of make-believe or experiments in thought. Not least through imitating “negative examples” are children able to realise who they are and who they are not, what one ought to do and what one must not do. By playing around with different roles and experimenting with different images of their identity, they finally reach a clearer understanding of their stronger and weaker sides, their possibilities and limitations.

The concrete orientation taken by this playful testing of different future roles (which are quite near in time) and models of action is of course dependent on the special starting position of the central character. It is natural for Pinocchio, who is revolting against his father, to orient himself towards those very things that have been taboo in a strictly middle-class upbringing. The forbidden alternatives that he tests include the “bohemian” career of acting. On Pleasure Island Pinocchio is not content with eating sweets, but makes a big effort to be a “real man” and smoke, drink and lead a dissolute life, like a real juvenile delinquent.

For Dumbo the experience of being scoffed at as an unsuccessful elephant is the primary issue. The role of the scorned circus clown can give expression to his humiliation as a comical giant baby and illustrate the nadir from which his wings of victory will one day lift him up. When Dumbo tries his first bout of drunkenness, his intention is not, however, to act the problem child, but rather he is completely unaware that the tub of water contains champagne.

Bambi is not a social animal made human to the same extent as Dumbo. Since he still lives out of doors in nature as an ordinary animal, the focus is on the organic life cycle. The plan of Bambi’s life is mainly biological: finding a female, mating and reproducing the species. Even as a little deer he can therefore (like Simba and his girlfriend Nala a long time afterwards) join with his friends in laughing at a ridiculous lecture on love’s expected forms of expression. However, they soon succumb themselves to the natural force that we call love.

In *The Jungle Book* several scenes are devoted to showing how Mowgli willingly tests different lifestyles from his closest surroundings. He tests the actions of a number of male role models – the bear, the ape, the elephant.. Indeed, he wants in fact to be like everyone he meets (e.g. vulture, wolf) and lets himself be carried away, without any inhibitions, by the song of the monkeys:

“I wanna be like you,
I wanna walk like you,
talk like you, too.
You’ll see it’s true!”

The voice of conscience

Testing male role models also includes the learning and development of morals. The long socialisation process – from the egocentric and relatively unsociable condition of the infant to all the demands and complications of social life – is often problematic. Having once been the centre of the world, the child must conform as an ego among many others. Social learning includes adopting moral norms, which takes place in encounters with other people, with parents and the school, with other adults and with friends.

This complex of problems is focused on especially in the more extrovert and socially oriented characters (Pinocchio, Mowgli and Simba), much more clearly than in the more animal-like Bambi, Dumbo and Tod & Copper. They have to acquire their own morals, a set of values, attitudes and norms. It is necessary both in the society that is called the jungle and in the jungle that is called society to develop values which block emotions and which mark out boundaries for what is possible and desirable.

Pinocchio is the character who is most clearly compelled to internalise other people’s views on what is right and wrong. He often has to learn tangibly not to always yield to his own desires and to develop an inner moral voice. Precisely because Pinocchio is a puppet who has suddenly become alive, it is emphasised that he was not from the beginning equipped with any conscience and has not internalised a so-called superego. He is therefore accompanied on his travels by an external figure of conscience, Jiminy Cricket, who is not, however, really competent for his task. Jiminy always gets behindhand, puts his foot in it, and oversleeps. Since the film depicts the voice of conscience as something external and often powerless, it can illustrate the fact that conscience is something that we must acquire *ourselves*. Conscience is of course merely, to speak in Freudian terms, our “phantom parents”, the external warnings and values that we must *make internal* ourselves.

The learning of norms has traditionally included such elements as refraining from lying or from letting oneself be enticed into engaging only in fun and pleasure. Instead one has to

direct one's energies towards what is useful, think about the future and develop a sense of responsibility for one's tasks. Pinocchio has to learn in the hard school of life that life does not only consist of entertainments and amusements, sweets and ice cream. Since he has ignored the ordinary school, he receives instead a graphic lesson according to the principle, "He who refuses to listen must learn by experience!" Pleasure Island, which appears as an enticing dream and where nothing is forbidden and everything free (Tobacco Lane, Rough House, the Pool Hall), turns out to be merely a dangerous trap.

The approach to upbringing in *The Lion King*, made in the '90s, is on the other hand much less authoritarian, completely in phase with the new ideals of the times. Simba's ideal father, Mufasa, seems to be schooled in the ideas of Rousseau and does not punish the disobedient Simba, who has defied his father's command not to visit the Elephant Graveyard. Simba's (and Nala's) fear can be punishment enough. However, the Lion King's moral lessons for his son are doubtless more effective, since the boy is forced to take responsibility for his own choices by himself.

The moral of *The Fox and the Hound* is perhaps even more edifying. Here it is actually the small animals (but especially the freer fox, Tod) who have to set a good example and teach the big humans some peaceful co-existence. The film is perhaps the least anthropomorphized (next to *Bambi*) of all of Disney's film sagas. The main characters neither wear clothes nor talk to humans. For it would have been far too horrifying if the central characters had been depicted in any shape bearing a greater resemblance to that of human beings. Nevertheless, this is probably the Disney film that frightens children most of all, even if the scene where Bambi's mother is killed has aroused most attention. Throughout the film Tod and Copper ask themselves what they really are to each other: best friends or mortal enemies from birth? Or is it in reality a question of species so like human beings as "hawks" and "doves"? Or is it a question of an animalisation that brings out the animal in humans?

If we were to translate the animal boys and their foster-parents into human concepts, we could think of putative "natural born enemies" such as Indians and white people, Israelis and Palestinians, Serbs and Muslims, or the U.S.A. and communism during the Cold War. [Note 6] In the constellation of neighbours consisting of the farming Widow Tweed versus Amos Slade the hunter, a peaceful woman's world (including Big Mama Owl and the caterpillar) is contrasted with a man's world with its fixation on violence (and in which the hunting dog Chief, the comical caterpillar-hunting birds and the terrifying bear are also included).

In terms of defence policy the women are of course depicted as "doves" and the men as "hawks". According to old Chief's lessons for his novice Copper, it is not sufficient for a

hunting dog to have a good sense of smell – he must “think dirty”. And the bear’s insight concerning this is described as almost instinctive. However, even if Copper learns how to hunt, he seems mainly to regard it all as a game, without realising the real consequences of hunting until he is confronted face to face with his childhood friend.

In the end Tod the fox and Copper the dog are able to adopt the role of the mediator and convey a pacifist message. Are they perhaps meant to represent United Nations delegates, just as the inhabitants of the nature reserve? Anyhow, it all ends in mutual agreement and solidarity, instead of confrontation. Indeed, it is even hinted that Widow Tweed and her neighbour Amos Slade start some kind of friendship.

Helpers

The boy children of the animal fables all have one or two male helpers, important minor characters who assist them by pointing out the best way to find their true self. Pinocchio has Jiminy Cricket, a figure of authority whose demanding role as a voice of conscience is diminished by comical incompetence. In *Dumbo* we have Timothy the Mouse, who also gradually becomes comical in his unrealistic over-confidence in himself and Dumbo. At the same time he undeniably contributes to spurring the hesitant elephant on with his excess of self-confidence.

In *Bambi* we have on the one hand an idealised but remote image of the father, the Great Prince of the Forest, and on the other hand a comical figure of authority (Friend Owl), who teaches the language of love, among other things. The assistive characters of *The Jungle Book* can also be divided up into a demanding role model (Bagheera the Panther) and a comical adult playmate (Baloo the Bear). Wart has his magician, Merlin, and Merlin’s comical owl, Archimedes. In *The Fox and the Hound* it is just for once two women, Big Mama Owl and Widow Tweed, who have to lead the boy animals in the right direction. Oliver the kitten has a gang of dogs of both sexes, as well as a little girl as his companions, advisers and helpers. Simba’s guide is, apart from his beloved father, the wise old baboon shaman, Rafiki, who maintains that one can either flee from the past or learn from it. Moreover, the bird Zazu acts as the lion cub’s humorous and somewhat incompetent minder.

This flexible mixture of comical and demanding role models makes the acquisition of norms more pleasurable and clearer. The qualities that are to be found in excess or short supply in any of the helpers appear as ridiculous or meddlesome. Bagheera is far too overprotective, while Baloo is far too irresponsible. With the jungle vagabond Baloo as his father, Mowgli’s identity as a playful child would never be threatened. However, nor would

he ever develop towards his future role as an adult, unless Bagheera acted as a complementary helper and role model.

When there is a more regular father figure, as in *Pinocchio*, *Bambi* and at the beginning of *The Lion King*, these characters keep away while the central character proceeds by trial and error between different role models. The technique of using substitute helpers provides a completely different possibility of testing and making clear, in a freer and more flexible way, where the limits set by the norms run.

Scorners

In this connection there is also another kind of helper, “the scorer”, whose purpose is to spur the central character on and implant a little resolution in him. They are often experienced as more negative when the boy is still small and weak, but prove later to act as a driving force in the boy’s search for his “true identity”. The “defect” Dumbo is scorned by the elephant ladies, by the clowns and by the circus audience (not least by the children). However, the “black” crows, who at first joined the choir of scorners with their cawing, later have to do a turnabout. Without changing the pitch of their voice, they are transformed into minor helpers in black plumage, who give Dumbo temporary self-confidence. The lead crow presents Dumbo with a “magic feather”, which is meant to help Dumbo to learn to fly. For he himself has experienced the same problem with his own children, who did not dare to take the leap out into the air either, in spite of the fact that they were already fully fledged.

In *Pinocchio* the Blue Fairy returns at the end, having almost abandoned all hope concerning the character and future of the boy of pine. Now she no longer appears as a critical tester, but as a helping white dove who leads Pinocchio to the place where Gepetto is shut in. In the final scene she has actually been transformed into a twinkling star.

Birds can be used as helpers, as well as scorners and accomplices of villains, and throughout the history of myths of course they have also been regarded as divine guides. In *The Jungle Book* we have a gang of vultures, who first tease and threaten Mowgli, but are later transformed into minor helpers. They are the ones that are able to tell Mowgli how he should defeat Shere Khan with the help of fire. Moreover, the old owl in *Bambi* is a bird that started out as a meddlesome master, but later turned out to be a far-sighted teacher of wisdom. And among the animals who in the beginning scornfully laughed at the fumbling Bambi, Thumper and Flower are to be found, who then become his best friends and parallels in courting. In *The Lion King* it is the hyenas who in fact spur Simba on to accomplish great feats. And Tod has the annoying birds Boomer and Dinky to tussle with, and does not

always know whether they are poking fun at him or not, which Oliver also wonders in the case of his dog thieves.

The experience of being scorned and teased emphasises the helplessness of the central character, but the scorn also involves a *challenge*. It gives a clearer target orientation for his actions, strengthens the incentive to seek rehabilitation and revenge by showing how capable he has become. Being teased and scorned, but nevertheless helped by the same character, also shows that one is accepted, even though one is clumsy and lacking in knowledge. It is the very ability to cope with playful digs from one's circle of friends that proves that one is persevering and can take both criticism and setbacks. The inner strength can confirm that one has learned how to handle the normative pressure and the system of values of the collective. Therefore, there are often shifting boundaries between helpers and hindrances, between approval, joking and playful digs.

Returning home?

During the tests of one's competence and the search for one's roles, it is a question of learning how to overcome one's weaker sides and ascertaining what constitutes one's undreamed-of potential. It turns out that the heaviest of all the animals can fly – if only the elephant can mobilise sufficient self-confidence and courage. A puppet made of pine can obtain human life – if only he develops his willingness to work and his conscience. A clumsy fawn and a cowardly lion cub turn out to possess the potential to become upright heads of families and leaders of hordes, just as a “man-cub” who lives among the animals of the jungle can realise that he belongs to the man village. An insecure little boy turns out to be the much longed-for King Arthur, by using his ingenuity instead of non-existing muscles. And when all is said and done, the kitten was not a dog committing petty crimes. “Natural born enemies” such as foxes and dogs can evidently also learn to live in agreement and harmony.

However, finding an opening leading to one's future identity also means that another door is closed – namely that leading back to childhood. In the case of Pinocchio and Mowgli in particular, who have turned out to be human beings, this knowledge entails the boys having to dissociate themselves from everything that is playful and childish in their previous identity. “Resembling an animal” is here the equivalent of remaining in one's childhood, unless one IS an animal, like Bambi or Tod and Copper. The dread that the animal side might prevail when indulging in excessively unwholesome child's play is illustrated very concretely in *Pinocchio*, where we can see how a donkey's tail and ears start to grow on the naughty marionette and his friends.

In order to gain admittance to adult male culture, Pinocchio and Mowgli must leave both the world of play and the world of animals. Bambi only needs to leave the former. After learning to fly during his little excursion, Dumbo has to remain with his mother. For he is still too young to depart from home, even if he too has to accomplish great feats, find his “true self” and be socially accepted. Dumbo solves the dilemma by turning his childish play and fantasy of omnipotence, being able to fly, into his profession – like so many more or less grown-up men.

In *Pinocchio* the true identity of the central character demands submission to the patriarchal work ethic, with its close connection to puritanical denial of instincts and hostility to play. Not least the final ideological conclusion can be said to be more on the side of the adults than on that of the children. When Pinocchio returns home, he has been compelled to humble himself and repress all of his spontaneous interests. Since a violent system of sanctions denies him the right to any relapse into irresponsible play, he is also deprived of the possibility of independent development. With its authoritarian ethics of submission, *Pinocchio* scarcely bears witness to any deeper insight into growing-up as a long development process where one is often compelled to take two steps forward and one step backwards.

The *Jungle Book*, which came into being 27 years later, reflects a completely different understanding of children’s need to repeatedly draw close and create distance in their relationship with their parents: at times seeking security and at times seeking separation. When Mowgli has shown that he can look after himself, he can very well remain in the jungle. However, at the sight of a girl on her way to fetch water, he decides in any case to follow her and take a look at the man village. While the original expulsion of the man-cub was forced from above by an authoritarian father figure, Shere Khan, this awakening (premature for a 10/11-year-old) has been able to develop through a process of maturity within Mowgli himself.

Bambi is from the same epoch as *Pinocchio*, but the roe deer’s development is less problematic than the puppet’s. Growing-up out of doors in nature is depicted as a more organic process, a physical growth with faster and less complicated sexual maturity. Bambi also manages to form a family himself, like Simba and several of the central characters in the pet biography. The other boys in the animal fable are still far too immature for the opposite sex, even if Tod the fox has made a good deal of progress, thanks to his more advanced girlfriend Vixey.

Simba is able to choose an adult role in a freer way than both Bambi and Pinocchio. He realises in the end that it is not only his “duty” to cease turning his back on the flock. It is

also his own desire to make his way to Pride Rock and deal with Scar. Accordingly he returns home to change things, make conditions more loving and humane. And even if the time has passed when life was free from care, the tasks in the lion kingdom do not consist of any boring chores, but mainly of expeditions and hunting. The crucial obligation here involves being a good leader for one's flock and fighting injustices – a moral fantasy that many boys devote themselves to daily in their play.

The Sword in the Stone, on the other hand, is a hybrid of different genres that has aroused bewilderment more than any other response in audiences. It is a question of a saga which started as a Medieval legend, but which has partly been altered to become quite a loose-jointed fable. The film is about a ten-year-old boy called Wart, who evidently is to be taught certain lessons by his father figure, Merlin the magician. He is therefore transformed by magic into a fish, squirrel or bird, in order thereby to gain an insight into how these species live and perceive the world. Instead of a prelude to the saga of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, with its fantastic epic poetry about heroic feats, we obtain here a comical disparagement of the magic tricks behind all enchantments. The message that this earth-bound saga-fable is apparently trying to say is that there is nothing remarkable about wonders.

The moral seems to be that ingenuity is more important than muscles and that innocence can conquer power-seeking experience. He who exerts himself too much to become king or hero never succeeds in doing so. One can only stumble across heroism and the office of King, so to speak. However, the ten-year-old King (W)Arthur seems, after passing the test, to feel extremely ill at ease, sitting there on his throne wearing a mantle and a crown that are far too big. The only thing that the audience can be glad about is the battle of magic between Merlin the magician and Madame Mim the witch – the power game between the Good Father and the Evil Mother.

WONDER TALES

There is a pronounced difference between the central characters of Disney's wonder tales and those of the animal fable. The former are *much older* and as a rule *of the female sex*. And neither their birth nor the first stumbling steps of their physical self, neither their separation anxiety nor earlier tests of their capacity receive more than a peripheral place. When the principal character steps into the centre of the picture, she is already a teenage girl who has passed childhood, but who has not yet reached the status of being fully grown.

Accordingly the heroine of the wonder tale finds herself in the borderland called the threshold age. On the horizon she can already catch a glimpse of the possibility of a *better future*, changes that result in her own independent adult role. Her childhood identity is questioned, nullified by sexual maturity and sexual awakening. And her intellect has developed sufficiently for her to be able to plan a future career *abstractly in her thoughts*, and not just *act according to the trial-and-error principle* like the younger boys (who are really reactors more than independent actors). As a teenager one is capable of operating on the basis of hypothetical conditions and of reflecting on future possibilities and potential relations. Therefore, one no longer needs to act out ones thoughts in a concrete (and seemingly more “active”) manner. One is also more capable of talking the perspective of others, instead of having to act their role. Moreover, fables have always delivered more unequivocal answers than wonder tales, which with their innuendos leave more to the recipient to interpret herself.

While the boy characters head out into the world to seek and test their true identity, the teenage girls devote themselves mainly, in the proximity of their home, to reflecting on and daydreaming about how the plan of their lives can be realised. Egocentricity is now replaced by more de-centred thought. The Self starts to wonder about the “Me”. The girl asks herself, “What do I look like through the eyes of *other people*, compared with the person who I consider myself to be?” From this new differentiation of personality, an inner *experience of identity* develops, as well as a more self-reflecting feeling of insecurity. One constantly asks oneself what one means to other people, not what “species” one belongs to, or whether one is big or small. The young woman considers herself to be grown up, beautiful and good, but must have this confirmed by other people. If the boy of the fable asks himself, “Who am I?” the girl rather tends to ask herself the mother’s question, “Who do you really think you are?”

One can also express this difference by saying that the wonder tale is permeated with “enchanted” reflection, while the animal fable is a genre of action, in which it is a question of convincing, persuading and restraining. The fable is of course meant to be lucid and is not meant to charm like the wonder tale. Consequently the fable is experienced as being both more “active” and realistic when hopes are frustrated and the central character suffers or is punished towards the end. The boy genre depicts someone who is still inadequate, while the girl genre depicts someone who is already adequate, but has not yet had her status confirmed.

The evil mother

The home of the central character is also the point of departure in the wonder tale, but here “home” does not signify a secure and kind embrace, but represents torment, danger or

menace. The central character experiences her loveless parental home as something negative, stifling or threatening.

The teenage girl's independence and identity as a (latent) adult are denied and blocked by an evil mother figure. This character is never the same as the biological mother. The parents are dead, unknown or irrelevant for the plot. Not least the absence of the "normal" mother is an important prerequisite for being able to visualise the girl's process of liberation and depict how she succeeds in setting herself free from dependence in the home and becoming an independent individual. The feeling of loneliness and abandonment can be alleviated by romantic swooning over future partners, or through support from good mother substitutes.

One can also say that the Evil Mother constitutes a necessary evil: the "witch" acts as the external projection figure that the girl needs. On the one hand she obtains a motivation for leaving home, and on the other hand a scapegoat for her own forbidden or ambivalent emotional reactions when she feels unjustly treated. For the mother who inhibits the daughter's sexual maturity and independence has been a classic problem of puberty in the middle-class nuclear family. The "housewife" perceives her monopoly position as "the woman" in the family as being threatened and has no other professional identity to fall back on. At the same time the girl already feels like a fully-grown woman.

Both Snow White and Cinderella seem to have lived together with their stepmothers for a longer period of time. There is nothing to indicate that they were treated especially badly before they started to become rivals of their mother figures. Snow White (13 years of age?) is sent out to be murdered in the forest when the Queen finds out that she herself is no longer the "fairest in the land". Cinderella (17 years of age?) is locked in when she has reached the age for attending balls and has become a rival of her stepmother's own daughters, who receive preferential treatment, and an indirect threat to the daughters' and their mother's social rising. Sleeping beauty is put under a sleeping spell at the age of 16, completely in accordance with the curse of the Evil Fairy, who has felt excluded from Sleeping Beauty's birthday party.

Accordingly, the teenage girls of the wonder tales have their adult identity dramatically denied and their freedom of movement drastically curtailed. And that happens at that point in life when the much younger heroes of the animal fables have already started to travel about and see the world and test new teenage roles.

"Mirror, mirror..."

To symbolically visualise the unresolved conflict between the teenage girl and the Evil Mother, the wonder tale uses the mirror metaphor, the classic form of expression for

depicting identity crises and traumatic conflicts between roles. In the castles and manors of the wonder tale there seems to have been only one mirror of beauty – the one to which the mother figure still considers herself to have the sole right. In *Snow White* this neurotic mirror monopoly has been given a frightening symbol that few forget: the magic speaking mirror. The Evil Queen has annually checked her position as the most beautiful woman of the kingdom with a special formula, and has so far always received the answer that she loves to hear:

“Mirror, mirror on the wall,
Who is the fairest of them all?
-You, Queen, are the fairest in the land...”

However, the situation changes with the years, and the crowned beauty queen suddenly receives another answer from the mirror:

“Famed is thy beauty, Majesty.
But hold, a lovely maid I see.
Rags cannot hide her gentle grace.
Alas she is more fair than thee....
...Hair black as ebony,
skin white as snow.”

On hearing this the Queen exclaims, “Snow White!” At the same time this only comes as a confirmation of her own misgivings. Of course, the mirror represents the thoughts of the one who is looking into it, the “self-reflection”, her own knowledge of the fact that she is ageing, while Snow White is only becoming more and more beautiful. Since the Queen has based her woman’s role on this identity, she must expel the rival face that has emerged in the mirror. First she tries to prevent the girl from discovering her “true” mirror image herself, and when this is no longer possible, she tries to remove the whole of her person.

It is appropriate to contrast this classic life-and-death rivalry with a “modern mum”. Ursula in *The Little Mermaid* is both ugly and fat, but still satisfied with her body. She can in fact change shape as much as she wants to, enter her rival’s body and almost marry Prince Eric. However, as the beautiful double of Ariel (Vanessa), Ursula cannot deceive the mirror: the mirror image shows the sea witch. And this is not an attractive picture that the “daughter” Ariel wants to extrapolate for her own future.

It is even hinted that Ursula is living in exile, banished from the castle of King Triton. She seems to have been the Queen of the Sea before she became a monster. The target of our octopus lady is obviously not so much Ariel as Triton and his power. She takes the matter in her own tentacles and eventually even succeeds in capturing his crown. As so often happens in stories about mother-daughter relationships, the sea witch functions both as a magic

mirror (evil rival) and as a helper (mum), for example when taking away the voice of the daughter. The hag must be eliminated if she does not have the sense to be dead already, like the mothers of Belle, Jasmine and Pocahontas.

Disney's animal fables also use the mirror metaphor as a symbol of the early search for an identity. Each of the boy characters can look at the reflection of his evasive identity at an important crossroads. They are thus confronted with possible future roles and conflicts. When little Bambi for the first time sees his own mirror image in a pool of water, he is able at the same time to discover the image of his future wife, Faline. But he is still so immature that he shyly looks away. For Dumbo the first reflection signifies a painful confirmation of his status as a deviant with overgrown ears. At the same time we see large tears running down his face.

While Bambi and Dumbo are still at the stage of the physical self, Pinocchio and Mowgli have already started to test role models that are slightly more adult when they are seen looking into the mirror and their own inner self. During his escapades as a "juvenile delinquent" in the Pool Hall, Pinocchio can discover, to his own and our horror, that the ears and tail of a donkey are growing on his body. Mowgli, who has just reached the stage of sexual maturity, suddenly finds other alternative actions for the future. From a branch across the river he happens to look down into the water and see the image of a young girl of the human race.

When the adult Simba, at the request of the baboon shaman, looks at his reflection in the surface of the water, not only does he see his own mirror image, but also an image of his father. Indeed, Rafiki the baboon maintains that it *is* his father: "You see? He lives in *you* now!" And quite rightly, Simba hears inside himself his father's voice and sees a blurred mirage in the sky that says that every person is always more than himself, namely also those who have gone before him.

However, the teenage girls never consider including the mother figure in the mirror image and only devote themselves to dreamy self-reflection and fantasies about their future husband. Since the Evil Mother dominates all the mirrors, the girls are obliged in the beginning to discover their own mirror image in a clear spring outside the home. Their anguish does not consist of any painful self-discovery – the fact that they are about to change physically or are ugly – but rather the fact that they are not allowed to look at the reflection of their own beautiful and kind faces. The dictatorial rival, who is preventing them from seeing the reflection of their beautiful faces and making their wonderful voices heard, is still treating them like children.

For Snow White, Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty, the home develops into a real castle of horror and torture-chamber. The Evil Queen denies jealously the beauty that has just burst into full blossom, and even wants to kill Snow White and then eat her heart. Cinderella's stepmother does everything to keep the beautiful girl's true identity secret, by keeping her engaged in dirty work and concealing her appearance from outsiders. Instead she seeks to show off her own daughters, who vainly look in the mirror at their ugly mugs. The Evil Fairy of the neighbouring castle, who has a fiendish power over the castle of Sleeping Beauty's parents, foretells a fatal sting from a poisoned dragonfly as early as when the girl is lying in her cradle.

During the last ten years, however, Disney's wonder tales have undergone certain changes. Heroines like Ariel the mermaid and Belle the beauty, the Arabian Jasmine and the Indian princess Pocahontas, Esmeralda the gypsy and Megara from Greek mythology luckily enough do not have mothers who are alive. It is true that Princess Ariel has a stepmother-like antagonist in the form the sea witch, who wants to "be of assistance" by making the girl even more beautiful with human bones. Our teenage princesses have, on the other hand, kind, admiring and proud fathers – or far too powerful and loving father substitutes. For these modern heroines have to wrestle with their future competence in the same way as principal male characters of the same age.

Indeed, in wonder tales of the '90s such as *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *Hercules*, the roles are reversed more than anything else, so that it is the "true" identity of young teenage boys that is denied. In *Aladdin* and *Hercules* the basic pattern of the wonder tale seems to be applicable to the representatives of both sexes, and in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* to a trio of both sexes, in fact. The main opponents of the young people have now also become fiendish sadistic types of the *male* sex, such as the Sultan's adviser Jafar, Frolo the judge and the King of Death, Hades, apart from the usual fatties with their comical incompetence.

However, young men are not expected to look at their own reflection in as self-absorbed a manner as Belle's unwanted suitor, Gaston. But they are allowed to see their reflection at the same time as their female friend is reflected. In *Pocahontas*, *she* is reflected in the water, when he is washing himself in the river. At the very beginning of *Snow White* both the heroine and the prince are reflected together in the same spring. The Beast's mirror even shows what the reflected person is thinking about and wishes to see, since it is here a question of learning to focus on others and not just look at one's own reflection in a self-absorbed manner.

Sanctuary of thought

It is threats of smothering and effacement that compel the central character of the wonder tale to leave her or his home for a more secluded place, where she or he (or they) gain access to other mirrors and images of the self. The earliest three teenage girls obtain temporary refuge in their own sanctuaries, at a safe distance from the Evil Mother. Snow White and Sleeping Beauty are forced out into miniature homes in the form of cottages in the forest. The darkness of the forest is usually the symbol of confusion and gloom, but here nature is experienced as both safer and more secure than home. Cinderella has – just like Quasimodo in Notre Dame – a protected sanctuary high up in the attic among mice and birds, where she herself can decide and act the housewife. In this protected isolation the teenagers are for the first time left to themselves and are able to act independently.

In order to manage the adult leap from the protected existence of childhood to the demands and expectations of the woman's role, the teenage girls usually enter a long period of fantasising, daydreaming and speculation about the future. In their sanctuary of thought the central characters of the wonder tale start to “wonder”, “search for” and “wish” – constantly recurring keywords in the songs in which they express the dream that someone/another person will appear. The romantic idealisation that characterises these dreams of love is a protection against the sexual forces that they have never been allowed to acquaint themselves with and learn to handle. In languishing fantasies they must continue to sublimate the sexual maturity that is brutally denied by the Evil Mother.

Nevertheless, now it is not sufficient for them to look at their own reflection, contemplate and confirm their own image of their self. For their self-conception it is also important that their own more positive role image should be confirmed by others.

Small animals

The beings that Disney's classic teenage girls mainly come to spend their time with in their sanctuaries are small animals and little people. For there is a need for a living interplay with stand-in small children, so that our heroines may demonstrate such motherly and domestic sides as confirm their own value as grown-up women. This does not just include the role of being beautiful, of course, but also appearing to be domestically competent and generally and truly kind-hearted. Otherwise why should the Evil Queen in *Snow White* want to eat precisely the girl's *heart*? In song and happiness the girls are able to convey many convincing proofs of well-developed talents for the mother's role, with a feeling for both care and responsibility.

Snow White comes to keep house in the forest cottage for the seven dwarfs, whom she establishes a “motherly” relationship with in spite of her considerably lower age. She teaches them necessary virtues, such as washing one’s hands before meals and tidying up after oneself – and at the same time is able to practise what have traditionally been the tasks of a mother. She starts to accept housework as a natural adult occupation, instead of regarding it as slave labour, as she did when living with the Evil Mother. This is a reflection of the teenager’s usual ambivalence to the obligation to work in the home: the desire as a child to be excused from “helping out”, but still to have the privileges of the adult.

Cinderella can reflect a flowering motherliness in her relationship with the small mice and birds in the attic, all of whom love their good-humoured and helpful mistress. Pocahontas has her racoon and her humming-bird, Esmeralda has Djali the goat, and Jasmine has both Rajah the tiger and her cage-birds, which she sets free when she herself feels most confined.

In addition to their role as objects of care and mirrors, the small animals act as confessors and confidants/confidantes. To these innocent small beings the central characters can reveal their innermost feelings, dreams and troubles. As impartial witnesses to the truth concerning both conflicts and processes of maturity, they can act the Greek choir and comment on the course of events. Therefore, the central character herself does not need to give expression to forbidden feelings such as aggression, displeasure or vanity. So the mice in *Cinderella* have to sing a lament in which they express their anger at how the poor girl must constantly toil and moil for her stepmother. And Sleeping Beauty can confide to the innocent small animals that she has grown tired of being treated like a child and never being able to go out and meet “strangers”.

Prince Charming

The teenage girls of the wonder tale start at an early stage to dream of their Prince Charming. The very first time we meet Snow White while she is toiling away at housework down at the well, a princely figure materialises as an answer to her musically expressed yearning, “Some day my prince will come...” However, the more dreamy than real nature of this imaginary relationship is emphasised by the fact that we can see her dancing with a bucket and broom instead of the phantom-like Prince Charming with whom she has shared her duet of love. Cinderella is also inspired to dance with an imaginary princely figure, while she confides to her small animals how wonderful it would be to be able to go to the big ball at the castle. Moreover, Sleeping Beauty gives expression to her yearning for a

better existence by allowing her chores at the forest well to be interrupted by a dance with her Prince Charming.

At these first “meetings” Prince Charming almost becomes an imaginary friend acting as a mirror that can confirm the teenage girls’ beauty and potential for love. At this stage love is nothing sexual or even real, but expresses the need for an intimate contact who can reflect one’s own image of one’s self. Indeed, infatuation is usually more a question of one’s self than the object of one’s feelings. The experience of being in love in the early teens is difficult to differentiate from the general search for an identity and the hunger for an alternative and more independent role outside the parental home. The “romance” is principally an attempt to reach a clearer understanding of one’s own diffuse adult identity. In *Snow White* both she and he attempt to come to a conclusion as to who they are, by listening to their own echo in the other’s voice.

Here we also have an important explanation as to why the central characters in Disney’s wonder tales are so vaguely drawn, compared with their opponents and the minor characters, or with their colleagues in the animal fable and pet biography. As an excuse one has often referred to the difficulty of animating people, although this problem seems to have been solved with excellent success in the case of the villains. The reason is rather that the teenage girls are not personalities with a distinctive image, to be interpreted or valued as if they had an individual existence. Rather they act as centres of experience for the audience, as substitute bearers of the viewer’s emotional conceptions and experiences. This anonymous lack of personality applies to an even higher degree to Prince Charming, who primarily constitutes a creation of the central character’s imagination. Consequently, the young couple are sketched as representatives of two complementary genders, rather than as two separate individuals.

Both Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty communicate their dreams about the prince to the animals, who have to help in providing the romantic swooning with somewhat clearer contours. The animals in the attic participate with their heart and soul in the work on Cinderella’s fine ball gown. In *Sleeping Beauty* we have a kind of comical playmate in the courting ritual: with hares leaping in the boots, an owl and small birds under the coat, and a squirrel in the hat, the animals dress up as the prince and dance with Sleeping Beauty. In *Snow White* it is the dwarfs of the forest who have to become involved in the fate of the heroine and as a substitute prince ask her for a preparatory dance. The effect is quite comical, since it is not exactly the smartest dwarf who plays the head.

Just as the small animals, with their spontaneous admiration and trust, confirm that the kind principal characters are budding mothers with a love of children, the princes’ courting

and love prove that they have the beauty and attractiveness of the mature woman. Consequently, they help the teenage girls to realise their “true” value – and that they are treated like children, although they have been grown up for a long time.

Apparent death

While the boy characters of the animal fables have to test their capacity through active actions (the ordeal by fire and the victory), the teenage girls of the wonder tale must undergo a more long drawn-out transitional rite. Here trials and tests of identity are presented in a more passive light, featuring both unmasking and somnambulism. For the girls it is not a question of displaying their competence in any “manly” tests of strength. It is instead a question of demonstrating their qualities as sexually mature women, in other words revealing a generous possession of “female” attributes such as attractiveness and motherliness.

While Snow White still remains in the dwarfs’ cottage, she is subjected to a test of her sexual maturity by the Evil Queen in the shape of a witch. When the teenager, like Eve in paradise, takes a bite of the shiny apple, she is poisoned and collapses, “apparently dead”. After her 16 years in the forest cottage, Sleeping Beauty makes her way home to the castle to celebrate her (first adult?) birthday. However, her true identity is revealed when she is inexorably drawn to the dragonfly in the turret – and collapses “dead” on the floor. It is true that, after her public success as the queen of the ball, Cinderella is only locked in as “apparently ugly”, until it is time for the prince’s own test to see if the shoe fits, but her existence must have been experienced as sheer “death”.

Accordingly, the curse is subject both to certain conditions and to a time limit – with a period of time falling within the interval of the teens. Consequently, the Evil Queen switches from having Snow White murdered to merely putting her rival under a sleeping spell, keeping her in a torpor that can be terminated by “the first kiss of love”. Sleeping Beauty can also be awakened by love’s first kiss.

At a later stage in the development of the wonder tale, we find the “little” mermaid, Ariel, who is given three days to pass her test of sexual maturity around her 16th birthday. According to the sea witch, “not just any kiss, but the kiss of true love” can save the princess. The aggressive Beast has ample time, until his 21st birthday – instead of being wed for the sake of his beauty. Hercules has a respite until his 18th birthday before he is to show the goodness of his heart. Moreover, Quasimodo, the bell-ringer of Notre Dame, wakes up from his “sleep” at the age of twenty.

This recurring element of apparent death, with tests of sexual maturity, goodness and attractiveness, works as a kind of somnambulistic transitional rite. The torpor-like state of

sleep and being locked in give the teenager a possibility of reducing the rapid fluctuations of the threshold age between premature development and regression. With their basic symbolic techniques, the films visualise the delay accepted today in assuming adult responsibility and taking adult decisions – the period of temporary respite that is usually called a psychosocial moratorium.

Therefore, the teenager's state of torpor, with isolation and apparent death, can protect against all the vehement oscillations in the threshold stage. But at the same time it is also necessary to point out the exit from the diffuse transitional zone and mark out clearly the borderline where the old (masked) identity changes into a new (revealed) identity: the adult gender role. As is the case in more traditional transitional rites, a symbolic sign is needed to mark the individual's awakening and rebirth into the next age period.

In the early wonder tales it is of course the prince (later also the princess) who is able to deliver the central character from the torpor-like sleep. The objects of the central characters' love have already seen through the Evil Mother's (or Father's) attempts at smothering: the ways of masking the girls' beauty, goodness and motherliness or the young men's dormant capacity and unselfishness. Through kisses, tests as to whether shoes fit, or other symbolic acts, they seal the awakening. The transitional stage has passed at last. It turns out that the teenage girl has been lying warm-blooded on her bed of rest or has the right foot, and the prince's love shows that she is both loved and loving in other people's eyes. It also turns out that the teenage boy has a kind heart under his bulging muscles or childish exterior, and the princess' love proves that the lad has grown up at last.

But why should *even modern* mothers and fathers want their daughters or sons to slumber a while and grow into fine girls or boys. Well, so that they might not throw themselves away in their first love affair. With its greater experience and broader view, the older generation considers itself to have a better perspective on the different stages of love. The strict limitations with which young women have traditionally been shackled can also be explained historically by the fact that parents have wanted to protect the value that the daughter's undefiled innocence has had on the marriage market. Consequently, the tradition of delaying the awakening with "sleep" would provide more time to find the "right man".

Godmothers

We have therefore seen how the teenage girls, in the form of play, swooning and the transitional rite, have had their future role as a mother and woman mirrored and confirmed – an identity that had already developed, but had for a long time been denied. But how will they be able to leave their protected but isolated sanctuaries? And deal with the threatening

reality out there, as well as the overwhelming superiority of the Evil Mother? For this apparently hopeless task the characters receive help from good (grand)mother figures, often dressed up as fairies.

Not only can these positive counter-forces with their magical resources come to the girls' rescue in confrontations with their opponents. Even previous to this they have been able to highlight the girls' potential for the surrounding world. Cinderella is assisted with beautiful clothes for the ball and an elegant means of transport. Sleeping Beauty is endowed even as a little girl with gifts such as beauty, song and music, and is then relieved of the dirty domestic tasks in the forest cottage. The gifts from the good mother figures are not only to be regarded as external presents, but as emphasising the *possibilities* that already exist within the girls: beauty, kindness, patience and unselfishness.

However, the positive counter-force of the good mother figures is no more omnipotent than the power of the evil mother figures. The magic range of the former is limited to the task of bringing the development possibilities of the central character to the fore and assisting the male rescuers. The magic power of the godmother in *Cinderella* stretches only to midnight, when the glass carriage becomes a pumpkin once again. And the good fairy Merryweather in *Sleeping Beauty* can only reduce the death-sentence of the Evil Fairy, just as Grandmother Willow can only give Pocahontas good advice.

Snow White is the only one of the three early teenage girls who does not have any kind and supportive mother figure by her side. Here the Evil Queen herself, temporarily transformed into a witch, has to provide the modification of the power of her curse. She must acknowledge that the effect of the poisoned apple can be terminated by the first kiss of love. This motif is a relic from the days of yore, when fairies could be *both good and evil* at the same time. In modern society, however, the character started to be split up into two separate figures, polarised into an evil witch versus a good fairy, who became smaller and smaller in size and was equipped with angelic wings.

The evil mother figure is as a rule an erotically tempting femme fatale type characterised by a chilly elegance, with the stepmother in *Cinderella* as the more ladylike exception. The godmother characters, on the other hand, are all asexual and slightly fat, as well as comically impractical, absent-minded and domestically incompetent. In other words, unlike the Evil Mother, they are not rivals for the title of "The Ideal Woman". The godmothers belong rather to the same good-natured, reassuringly harmless and comical category as comical aunts, old maids and grandmothers.

The godmother in *Cinderella* is so scatter-brained that she would have sent Cinderella to the ball in torn rags, unless the girl had submitted her mild protests. In *Sleeping Beauty* the

three good fairies, Flora, Fauna and Merryweather become extremely comical, with their constant quarrelling and squabbling. For sixteen years they have been trying to act like ordinary housewives, but due to the stress of preparing for Sleeping Beauty's birthday party, they cannot resist the temptation of resorting to the magic wand to take care of baking a cake, sewing a dress and cleaning. And when Sleeping Beauty is at last about to make an appearance as Princess Aurora in her beautiful dress and crown, two of them start to quarrel like constantly competing sisters. The red-dressed Flora wants the princess' dress to be red, while the blue-dressed Merryweather persists in using her magic to switch it back to blue.

Cinderella tales?

Another characteristic feature of the first three teenage girls is their royal descent, or at least the high social status of their parentage. Not even *Cinderella* itself is a "Cinderella tale" in the sense which the expression has come to acquire. She is not a poor Eliza type who is brushed clean, smartened up and civilised to be admitted to the highest circles of society. On the contrary, from the very beginning she is both a beautiful and a cultivated rich man's daughter, the heiress of her wealthy and noble father. It is therefore not a question of any advancement from a cabin to a castle, some kitchen maid who becomes a princess or some dancing girl who gets her count. Of the later wonder tale characters only Aladdin and possibly Belle are said to be "Cinderellas" who win social advancement.

On the contrary, it is the opposite development perspective that is the point of the wonder tale: a process in the direction of degradation, which gives an emotional processing of important experiences. It is *in spite of* the fact that Snow White, Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty (like Princesses Ariel, Jasmine and Pocahontas, the prince in the guise of the Beast, and the demigod Hercules) are from wealthy homes that they are made ugly, oppressed and degraded. They may then be dirty from ashes and dressed in rags, forced to scrub, carry water and toil like servants for a strange woman in their own home, or isolated from young people of their own age and generally unappreciated. Common to all of them is that they must work as hard as if they were grown up, at the same time as their self-determination is as non-existent as if they were children.

By analogy with Aristotle's so-called "height-of-fall" rule, which states that it is only the fall of the high-born that is capable of producing tragic cleansing, one could with regard to the wonder tale speak of a "low-start principle". Only those possessing the lowest status can become a princess or win the hand of a princess, if the ascent is to have its maximum emotional effect. However, as mentioned above, it is not representatives of low *social* strata,

but individuals of high status, masked as lower members of society, who are placed at the stove, under the water yoke or in a simple foster home.

The final “transformation” of the saga of tribulation – like Prince Charming’s “courageous feat of rescue” – is therefore only illusory, a symbolic act that clarifies facts that are denied. The teenage girls of the films are no domestic slaves who, through a miracle, are lifted up in society, in spite of all the ideologised clichés about “Cinderella tales”. Cinderella & Co, who in actual fact are princesses (and princes), ought rather to be compared to spoiled children upon whom one is starting to make tough demands, at the same time as they are being prevented from being the person who they really are. The emotional indignation of the viewer is due not least to the fact that the character, objectively seen, is worth a higher position than that unjustly assigned to her or him.

Their own kingdom?

For more than a century wonder tales of the Cinderella type have been mainly utilised as children’s culture. For that reason too it seems plausible to regard “Cinderellas” as a symbol of all teenagers who are denied the possibility of becoming the princess or prince of their own life, the ruler of their own identity within the family. The so-called Cinderella ethic, patient waiting and contented suffering (“my day will probably come, if only I have the patience”) then becomes the prototype for the persevering submissiveness of all incapacitated young people.

An illustrative fact is that this allegedly “female” suffering is nowadays also endured by many young men. The Beast, Aladdin, Quasimodo and Hercules have all suffered just as passively for a long time, in spite of the fact that they are young men. We make their acquaintance when their pseudo-life is at last about to take a new turn. They are in fact several years older than their female counterparts and have already suffered their moratorium. If one is compelled to swallow continuous disparagement and restrictions on one’s freedom, the miracles and happy endings of the wonder tale become primarily an expression of the incapacitated young person’s desire to be freed from parental control and submission to authority.

The prince and princess can then primarily function as a point on the horizon to flee to and can personify the promise of a better future and the hope of a helping hand. He can hold up a positive mirror to reflect the image of the teenage girl and lift his sword against the Evil Mother. She can motivate his stamina and endure “imprisonment” and excessive demands, or with a kiss lift him from childhood. In the extension of the wonder tale one can also catch a glimpse of the couple forming a family of their own – their own kingdom.

However, becoming a couple and reaching parenthood in the future only appear as an enticing dream of a distant utopia of freedom. Establishing a life together in a permanent relationship requires much more than liberation from the parental home. It is therefore logical that Disney's wonder tales lose their previous functional value when the teenage girl has reached the age when her relationship with her boyfriend supersedes her relationship with her mother as the problematic relationship of identity. Or when the teenage boy thinks that his girlfriend is making the same unreasonable demands as his father.

The distance to the marriage that appears as an enticing dream is also emphasised with the help of comical minor characters, who are able to puncture the excessively inflated balloons of romance. The mice Gus and Holger throwing confetti at Cinderella's wedding functions as a clever ironic detail, as do the two fairies engaged in their colour-spraying duel around Sleeping Beauty's engagement dress. And it is probably no official secret that most members of an audience leaving a showing of *Snow White* usually have the comical dwarfs etched in their memory – not the romantic loving couple.

The happiness of love that appears as an enticing dream at the end has mainly functioned as a provisional utopia, an auxiliary motor for propelling the actual plot forward. Indeed, it is not without significance that we have to leave the heroine here, before she herself has managed to take the place of her parent. The teenage girl's transformation from the suffering victim to the dominating witch would demand such a dramatic change of perspective that the very framework of this type of film would be shattered.

Falling to their death

A prerequisite for the happy ending of the wonder tale is therefore that the teenagers get rid of their smothering parents. However, to the evil characters this solution can hardly appear to be a "happy ending". In *Snow White* the Evil Queen, both literally and symbolically, has to fall down from a precipice. For the enraged dwarfs' hunt for the witch ends with a stroke of lightning, and the rock on which she is standing (to throw a large boulder) gives way. In *Sleeping Beauty* the Evil Fairy (in the form of a dragon) is destroyed by Prince Phillip, who wields the "shield of virtue" and "sword of truth", which he has received from the good fairies. Accordingly, the dominant parental characters, who do not realise that they must step aside for the next generation, must be dethroned and eliminated. However, their death is self-inflicted and nothing that the central characters need to soil their hands with. Evil has to destroy itself, without matricide or parricide.

In Disney's wonder tales there is also a more humane variation of the eternal family drama whose end is characterised more by reconciliation. One alternative is to let a troublesome parent, such as the stepmother in *Cinderella*, slip out of the story without being noticed, merely to be "forgotten". Another alternative is to laugh the problem off and portray the parents as comical and harmless. In *Sleeping Beauty* both Princess Aurora's father and Prince Phillip's father are depicted as childish and slightly confused minor characters. King Stefan and King Hubert are mutual rivals through vanity, drink merrily and ramble on the rest of the time. Belle's and Jasmine's beloved fathers are also slightly scattered-brained and helpless.

Consequently one can say that the parental characters of the wonder tale can be divided up into comical harmless types and fiendish threats. The more a film contains elements of the mythical horror tale, the greater is the emphasis on the fiendish nature of the attempts to obliterate the identity of the young people. The relentless conflict between the generations can only be resolved by eliminating the dominating parent. The terrible consequences of such an approach must of course be disguised. Accordingly, the fundamental traumatic conflict is shifted over to a *stepparent* and the experience of horror and suffering is moderated by comical minor characters. Neither torture of children nor antagonism to the older generation is a concept that rhymes particularly well with the word "Disney film".

Female awakening

During the past ten years the wonder tale has experienced an upswing that has involved several important changes. We have seen six films with suffering, yearning and insecure young men. These characters have also been endowed with a more pronounced interest in love for the opposite sex – in other words they have become less "passive" – and have not merely played the role of the object of princesses' swooning and a mirror of princesses' emotions. This change is also noticed in the wish songs where the main characters communicate their dreams and reflections. For the early princesses it was always a question of the yearning to "meet someone", called "The Prince" for the sake of clarity, who could *confirm* that they were who they were. For the young men of the wonder tale it is at the same time a question of *forming a clear idea of* who they are "in reality" and a question of a sexual awakening.

All that the misshapen Quasimodo desires is to be spared being shut up in the tower of the cathedral. He does not want to merely see the people far away down there, but wants to join them and be in their midst. The demigod Hercules (born on Mount Olympus) also feels different from all the other people down on earth and cannot join the other boys in pursuing

sports. His task is to find out where he belongs. Aladdin dreams at an early stage of what it would be like to live in the palace with servants and to be a prince without any problems. However, he is not a fortune-hunter, but falls in love with Jasmine *before* he knows that she is the sultan's daughter.

These young men are still more unsure of their identity and gender role than the more self-confident teenage girls. The young woman knows what she can manage and is ready for both unmasking and love. The boys get much more confused on account of their newly aroused feelings for the opposite sex, which is evident from their almost ridiculous facial expressions. When the Beast, Aladdin, Quasimodo and Hercules meet "her" for the first time, they blush bashfully and get tongue-tied. They have obviously not had sufficient practice in this sphere, as they have been busy preparing themselves for great physical exploits. In contrast to the earlier princes, the young men of today are unskilled in the rituals of courting. Like the boy animals in *Bambi*, *The Fox and the Hound* and *The Lion King*, they need to be taught by older figures of wisdom, such as owls. As always the girls are more sexually advanced than the young men of the same age or even those who are older.

Is it a relic from the much younger boy of the animal fable that none of these adolescent boys knows who he is as yet, or is it a question of a general male problem? Is the Beast a monster or a man? Is Aladdin a worthless penniless street rat or, as he himself believes, an uncut diamond? Is John Smith superior to the Indians, or an ignorant intruder? Is Quasimodo a monster or a man? Is Hercules a super-nobody or a super-hero – divine or human?

For the teenage girls it is no longer sufficient merely to meet Prince Charming. They want something more: to travel, find their own way and make their own decisions. Ariel knows that she is a mermaid, but she wishes to become a human being, since she is curious about life on dry land. The bookworm Belle is wise, tough and independent, but the people in the little town regard her as slightly crazy on account of her great interest in reading. Most of all she wants to depart and broaden her mind, but for the time being she is compelled to travel with the help of books. Jasmine is a princess, but wishes that she were an "ordinary" girl who could travel about and see the world. The pioneer Pocahontas succeeds in converting both the Indians and the coloniser John Smith, but sacrifices her own happiness in love for peace and reconciliation.

None of the girls is waiting for "someone", anyone who might turn up, any longer, but for the "right man". They do not need an awakening from a period of sleep with an extended period of waiting. Belle is very resolute when she rejects Gaston's proposals – she has read the book where

"... she meets Prince Charming
But she won't discover that it's him 'til Chapter three!"

Jasmine has put off a number of suitors. Pocahontas is expected to marry the warrior Kocoum, who has been chosen by her father, the Indian Chief, but she wishes to find her own way. Esmeralda seems to manage well all by herself, as does Megara, whose first fiancé was unfaithful to her. Esmeralda has to say no to two suitors, but can preliminarily choose a third. The newly created teenage girls are still uncertain as to which path to take, but are definitely more self-confident than their somewhat older boyfriends and much more experienced in the ways of the world and more critical in their evaluations than the early, dreamy princesses.

The heroes of the '90s have had to take over part of the suffering of Cinderella & Co. The spoiled Beast Prince has been enchanted by an ugly old beggar woman and is compelled to remain in the insecurity of his home, constantly reminded by a withering rose of how unloved he is. Disney's most pronounced "Cinderella tale" is *Aladdin*, which is about an orphaned petty thief whose good substitute father, conscience and helper are the comical genie in the bottle. Aladdin has to wrestle with the same major villain as Princess Jasmine, whose mother is dead and whose father is quite an impotent and comical sultan, in the hands of his manipulative counsellor, the major villain Jafar. This refined gentleman, who mostly resembles a woman adorned with jewellery, becomes Aladdin's rival for Jasmine.

Frollo the judge, the foster father of the bell-ringer of Notre Dame, is also a pointed-faced aristocrat with several rings on his thin fingers. As a single parent, Frollo has been compelled to shoulder the role of the "mother" of the "monster". Hercules' uncle, Hades, the lord of the kingdom of death, has cursed the little fellow in the same way as the Evil Fairy cursed Princess Aurora, so that our male "Sleeping Beauty" must be hidden away in his foster home for a whole 18 years. Hercules is unaware of his divine parents, Zeus and Hera, but does not really feel at home with his foster parents and suffers from his outsidersness and his "handicap" – an enormous strength coupled with a certain clumsiness.

Heroic deeds

However, the young men do not attempt to alleviate their feeling of loneliness and abandonment with romantic love, but start to seek adventure and riches, great exploits and contests. Nor do they need any sanctuary close to home, since the position of the father in the family is so weak that he does not need to feel threatened. The young men all have animals that can listen to their dreams and worries – a monkey, a goat and a few birds or, in the case of Quasimodo, statues of stone and wooden puppets. However, unlike the men in

the pet biography, they do not need to prove their “fatherliness” with the help of small animals, but are of course kind to both animals and children, nevertheless.

On the other hand, the position of the father figures in the *broader community* is threatened by our young men. Aladdin and Quasimodo endeavour to get rid of evil father figures, while Hercules and John Smith endeavour to save their good father figures. It is true that a few long for wealth (Aladdin, John Smith) and fame (Hercules), but both riches and heroism serve mostly as a pretext for the actual adventure. The young men have thus far been leading a pseudo-life in which they have not been able to participate or prove their courage. Like the boy characters in the animal fable they are now at long last able to test their capacity in different ordeals by fire and tests of their identity.

However, even if they have trained themselves for physical feats, it is in the sphere of the heart that they are able to show their true heroism. The Beast defeats both wolves and his rival, Gaston, but the decisive victory comes when he proves to be sufficiently unselfish to set free his beloved Belle and spare Gaston’s life. Aladdin succeeds in vanquishing Jafar and taking the treasure, and with the help of the magic lamp he is transformed into a rich prince, worthy of wedding Jasmine. However, he realises in the end that he must cease pretending to be something that he is not, and must restore the genie to liberty as his third and final wish. John Smith does not only succeed in saving the life of Pocahontas’ father, when Governor Ratcliffe tries to shoot the Indian chief. John has for a long time been seeking to persuade the white people not to wipe out the Indians, in order that he might, like Pocahontas, convince his people that they should choose the path of peace.

Quasimodo is an ace at climbing on the facades of Notre Dame and in this way he succeeds in rescuing Esmeralda and the captain of the guard Phoebus, from his foster father Frollo and the sea of fire. He performs his great heroic deed, however, when he voluntarily places the hand of his beloved Esmeralda in the hand of Phoebus, his rival. Hercules has for a long time been preparing himself for his great exploits, with his hero-trainer, Phil the satyr. He has for a long time been training hard and intensely, practising both fighting technique and how to withstand mental pressure – as well as how to rescue damsels in distress. However, Megara does not want to be rescued, but manages well on her own. Hercules soon has to tussle with his monsters, from the many-headed giant hydra and the Titans to Hades himself, and has to go “from zero to hero”.

Hercules father, Zeus, points out, however, that being a famous idol is not the same as being a real hero, and he encourages his son to listen to his heart. The same advice is given by Megara, who is mortally wounded when she rescues Hercules from a falling pillar. Hercules now beseeches Hades to allow him to change places with the dead Megara – and as

the immortal son of a god he can be reunited with his beloved. At last Hercules has qualified for Olympus, for, as his father Zeus puts it:

“For a true hero isn’t measured by the size of his strength, but by the strength of his heart.”

However, our super-hero chooses to remain where he is, together with his Megara.

Accordingly, the heroes and heroines of the later wonder tale accomplish their great exploits because *their goodness* embraces everyone. They do not only collect heroic points to obtain the person whom they desire, but because they wish other people well. Quasimodo and Phoebus are not only struggling for Esmeralda, but for the rights of *all* gypsies. Hercules is also fighting for his father Zeus and for all the inhabitants of Thebes and Olympus. Both Aladdin and Jasmine want to help the poor, small, hungry children, not just her father and the genie. Belle’s love also embraces the father and the enchanted servants of the castle. And Pocahontas defends everything that is alive.

From the teenage boys of the ‘90s one does not expect muscles as much as a heart and brains. And as far as the girls are concerned, it is not merely a question of showing “feminine” attributes such as beauty and motherliness, but of demonstrating independence, a passion for justice and fearlessness.

PET BIOGRAPHIES

Disney’s pet biographies are in many ways conceived as a combination of the two other film types. As we have seen, the gender role pattern was previously more pure, but in recent years one has started to emphasise the romantic and contemplative sides of the young men and make the teenage girls more and more independent and courageous. However, the boys are still expected preferably to accomplish physical feats of heroism all by themselves, while the girls are preferably expected to wait for them at home. (In this respect *Mulan* constitutes a welcome exception.) [Note 7]

In the pet biography the central male and female characters are able to meet in a cultural synthesis that both bridges social gaps and unites gender-dependent lifestyles. As (future) parents they must act together in the threatening world around them to reach a common goal. The young boy of the people and the teenage girl of noble descent now have to learn to live side by side, in spite of all their previous differences.

Shared identity

Just as the traditional training for an adult gender identity has been characterised by opposite socialisation models, Disney's small boys and teenage girls have had to undergo different development processes. The animal fable was oriented towards active actions and achievement-oriented thinking, while the wonder tale was oriented towards a more contemplative looking at reflections of the self. A cultivation of contradictory role expectations must of course create great problems, if both sexes one fine day want to form a family and live together under the same roof. What would happen, for example, if little Mowgli were to fall in love in a few years' time with the much more mature Pocahontas? They would undoubtedly have to make a real adjustment to already developed gender roles, if they were to suit each other at all.

The pet biography is to help the audience to reach a new balance between two opposite worlds: a *male sphere of adventure*, with friends, strength and courage, and a *female sphere of intimacy*, with romance and beauty, motherliness and objects of care. The boy has been socialised to be physically active and mobile, *extrovert*, while the girl has been socialised to be emotionally sensitive and to contemplate reflections of her self, *introverted*. The wonder tale hinted that the young woman was emotionally ready for motherhood, but both the boys of the animal fable and the young men of the wonder tale did not by a long way appear mature for fatherhood.

How then will these incompatible gender cultures ever be able to meet? Well, this will be possible through a representative of each camp realising that she or he needs the other. It is made clear at the very beginning of the films that the world is divided up into an extrovert sphere of adventure for men and an introverted sphere of intimacy for women. However, love gradually enters into the picture and this natural force is able to bridge all gaps.

In their purer form the different gender identities are of course both problematic and incomplete. Therefore, every individual also needs to supplement her or his own life with good parts from the other culture. By forming a couple two people can make each other complete, share an extended identity instead of being a one-sided half. The fact that this purely individual solution is complicated by the two cultures remaining as before is a problem of adjustment that Disney's film sagas take as lightly as the conflicts of everyday life.

However, this way of illustrating the complex of problems, which is polarising and reconciling at the same time, probably serves as an orientation aid, not least for children. It not only elucidates the contradictions that one experiences daily around one, but also paints an encouraging model of solution. The message is that it is possible to unite incompatible

interests and stop opposite tendencies within one's self. It is merely a question of melting together two halves of the self in mutual tolerance and love.

The master and mistress' house

In both the animal fables and the wonder tales the central character is always a young person with the parental home as the starting point for her or his search for an identity. The teenagers are able at the end to catch a glimpse of a future perspective in which they form a better family themselves. However, the parental generation has all the time been viewed from underneath, from the "worm's eye perspective" of the rising generation. The curtain manages to go down before the loving couple themselves come close to any parental role. It is true that in the least anthropomorphized animal fables we see roe deer, lions, and foxes getting offspring of their own at the end, but it is mostly a question of illustrating the cycles of nature. Moreover, we barely get the opportunity to see the newly born and never hear the crying of children...

The pet biographies highlight more clearly the fact that so-called "children's films" have for a long time meant "family films", seen together with parents. Here both the central characters are of marriageable age, and the female party devotes a large proportion of her time to finding a partner and father for her (present or future) children. The main conflict no longer takes place between the generations, but between different lifestyles associated with the life of a woman at home and the outdoor life of a man. The search for an identity connected with individuation now results in a collision between different gender roles and the problem of living together as partners and parents.

However, it is, of course, still not a question of a drama about family life or a comedy of marriage for mature people. Even if the child characters play a more peripheral role, the child-parent relationship is still built into the basic structure of the films. For the paradox is that the adult parental couples still function at the same time as *child characters*.. The characteristic feature of the pet biography is of course that our anthropomorphized animals almost always have a master and/or mistress in whose house they live, or else live in conditions resembling the house of a master or mistress. The characters can realise the classic dream of childhood of marrying and having one's own children – while still living at home.

With this secure house of the master and mistress providing a protective roof over their head, the children can both have their cake and eat it. The central characters can set out on excursions and adventures in an exciting but threatening sphere of adventure. At the same time they still always have their master and mistress' home as a secure sphere of intimacy to

seek protection in. This is also the place where they lay the foundations of a parallel home, most often a direct reflection of their master and mistress' happy relationship.

Disney's purest pet biographies follow the usual tradition of letting tame animals such as dogs and cats play the principal parts. In *Lady and the Tramp* and *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* it is a question of dogs that live in their master and mistress' house, or lead a freer life as collar-free mongrels. In *Aristocats* we are able to make the acquaintance of a fine cat lady with three kids of her own and a more bohemian stray cat, who in the end find one another. And in *Oliver and Company* there are both a well-mannered foundling cat with wild dogs as his foster family and, according to Georgette the pampered poodle herself, a perfect pedigree dog, who at the beginning calls the intruders riff-raff infested with lice. [Note 8]

It is true that in *Robin Hood* it is not a question of ordinary pets, but of two foxes: the outlawed hero and his future spouse of noble birth. However, Nottingham and Sherwood Forest still become the scene of a kind of master-pet relationship. Since the humble folk give their beloved King Richard their undivided love, his fatherly spirit comes to hover over his kingdom, even in his absence. For example, Robin Hood and Marian ponder over what the King's view would be on the lady marrying an outlaw. The young couple in *Peter Pan* are not any pets either, but an upper-middle-class girl entering puberty and the product of her imagination, inspired by fairy tales. However, Wendy, who likes to pretend to be the foster-mother of her younger brothers as well as the Lost Boys, always has the security of her parents to return to after her adventurous nocturnal excursions. However, her "future husband" turns out to be far too irresponsible and childish to qualify as a potential father. For Peter Pan personifies the boy who refuses to grow up, while Wendy (who chooses to do precisely that) needs real suitors.

The minor characters on the master and mistress' level are more or less faceless parental figures in the background – diffuse characters who hover high above reality. They appear to be easy-going and inefficient persons of authority, without any idea at all of the dangers that threaten those under their protection. Accordingly, it is a question of parental figures being experienced by pets from underneath, from a knee-high perspective. At the same time these pets are themselves also adult beings of parental age, although they have a completely different ability to act, sense of responsibility and sense of smell. The shift in perspective is reflected in the way of drawing the characters, with different degrees of stylization: the masters and mistresses appear as vaguely outlined, slightly absent-minded demigods.

Having one's own lodgings built as a miniature into a larger household is a device that makes it possible for children to live in two home worlds at the same time. For it is not

unusual for smaller children to fantasise about marrying the parent of the opposite sex, while realising that this is impossible and experimenting with an alternative and equally imaginary solution: namely that of marrying some friend, while still living at home with mummy and daddy after the marriage.

“Lady” characters

The central characters whose acquaintance we first make are the female ones. With the exception of Wendy in *Peter Pan*, who is much younger, they are all high-born “Lady” types with an “ultra-feminine” image and an over-protected home life. Their well-mannered devotion to their master and mistress seems as over-developed as their superior feeling for style. Their slightly prudish refinement manifests itself in their measured manner of licking their nose, shyly averting their glance, or coquettishly fluttering their big eyelashes.

In *Lady and the Tramp* the cocker spaniel pup comes as a much longed-for Christmas present to her newly-married mistress. Even if the family mostly appears to be middle-class, Lady can at an early stage learn how to conduct herself in a fine and well-bred manner. Soon she grows up and becomes a “real little lady”, who lives up to her reputation without hesitation – until she meets Tramp...

Perdita, the elegant Dalmatian bitch in *One Hundred and One Dalmatians*, who constantly takes great pains to be “dignified”, always glides forth at a very measured pace. She throws the playful Pongo a disdainful glance the first time they meet. For the male dog succeeds, with the intention of arranging a double date, in causing their master and mistress to fall into a pond.

There is no doubt that Lady and Perdita have a fine pedigree, but, concerning dignified upper-class taste and refinement, Duchess in *Aristocats* is superior. This silky cat – who is adored as a child by her mistress, who comes from the finest of families (Madame Adelaide Bonfamille) – can demonstrate her highly-cultured education by citing both Shakespeare and Beethoven. Her children will, of course, also receive a sound schooling in the fine arts. For being a so-called aristocat is something that puts one under an obligation, or to cite one of the songs in the film:

“Which pets' address is the finest in Paris?
Which pets possess the longest pedigree?
Which pets get to sleep on velvet mats?
Naturellement, the Aristocats!
They show aristocratic bearing when they're seen upon an airing
And aristocratic flair in what they do and what they say
Aristocats are never found in alleyways or hanging around
The garbage cans where common kitties play

Oh, no!”

The fine fox of noble birth in *Robin Hood*, Marian, is also a genuine lady with aristocratic ways of dressing and carrying herself. We easily take it for granted that a young maiden from a castle in a historical costume film should bear the stamp of the social environment of her times. But Lady, Perdita and Duchess are also obviously influenced by the distinguished heads of their houses, as feminine ideals worthy of imitation and looking up to. Indeed, Perdita even maintains that it is the dogs that choose their humans, and not the other way round.

However, these “Lady” characters have difficulty in living up to their aristocratic ideals concerning style when problems arise and dangers intrude on their lives. It may be a question of strange male animals, threatening kidnappers or mischievous brats, who cause them to lose their dignity slightly. When these ladies lose their composure in their over-protected sphere of intimacy, we realise that their isolation in their fine homes also has its negative consequences. One can quite simply be harmed by one’s environment on account of all the over-refined upbringing.

The fence

The young lady who seems to have suffered least on account of her childhood and adolescence is, significantly enough, Lady Marian, in spite of the fact that she lives in the well-known castle of the saga. She too dreams of her adventurous hero in Sherwood Forest, somewhere far away on the other side of the drawbridge. However, Marian never needs to be prudish and unbalanced, since she is safely integrated in a stable social hierarchy – the extended family of the feudal court.

Things turn out worst for the lady who is called “Lady”, quite simply, but who lives as an ordinary pet dog in the house of a middle-class family, shut off from the outside world by a simple but high garden fence. She is shut in and completely dependent on the care and attention of her master and mistress to have her self-esteem confirmed. When minor problems arise in this small doll’s house world, she easily loses her foothold and shows all the neurotic symptoms of the middle-class nuclear family.

Lady’s idyll is first shaken by the appearance of a little baby in the house. Her master and mistress are still kind to her, even if Lady is smacked on one occasion and is not allowed to sleep on their bed any longer. However they do not have the same amount of time for her as before and she feels abandoned and neglected. Lady’s difficulty in handling the shock of a rival little brother shows how easy it is to develop security neuroses in an isolated

environment that is based on rivalry for love. Tramp, who has more experience of life and the ways of the world, could prophesy, even before the delivery, that Lady would be turned out of the house and put into the kennel when the baby was born. "Just remember, a human heart has only so much room for love and affection. When a baby moves in, the dog moves out..."

In order to prove that she is not at all jealous of her "brother", Lady constantly devotes herself to the self-imposed task of looking after the baby. Even though Lady is grown up, she has difficulty, like Perdita and Duchess, in abandoning her excessively close relationship of dependence with her master and mistress. These "daughters living at home" justify their continued presence as an expression of love, care and responsibility for their master and mistress. Lady says that she must look after the baby and throughout the film has an unhealthy preoccupation with the question of who is to look after the child, particularly when her mistress is replaced for a couple of days by Aunt Sarah. Perdita for her part has to "walk" her mistress Anita. And when O'Malley is courting her, Duchess says that she can never leave Madame, "You see, my mistress will be so worried about us!"

Without the help of a more extrovert adventurer like Tramp, Lady would never have got out of her confinement. She is far too dependent and conscious of her duty to even dare to go outside the fence all by herself. The "female" security neurosis that previously manifested itself in rivalry between sisters also finds its continuation in Lady's jealousy of all the "liberated" she-cats who are drawn to the swinger Tramp. Moreover, Duchess becomes jealous at the very thought of the wild cat O'Malley's alleged speciality, "[helping] beautiful dame-- uh, damsels in distress".

The fairy Tinkerbell in *Peter Pan* becomes extremely jealous of Wendy in competition for the favour of Peter Pan, and the evil mermaids become so jealous that they are thinking of drowning Wendy!

The heroines' jealousy is most often related to their isolation and is not just depicted as a "female" characteristic. Perdita and Duchess are so preoccupied with their children that they seldom have either the time or the conscience to go outside the fence. Indeed, Lady, Perdita and Duchess do not dare to go any greater distance from the security of their master and mistress' home *before they are compelled to do so..* The economic dependence is symbolised by the fact that all three of them wear collars. Duchess has a splendid blue collar with jewels, while Perdita and Lady have a collar with a licence tag – the guarantee of security for a dog.

The fact that they also sometimes feel a longing for the exciting, collar-free existence on the other side of the fence becomes more and more evident, nevertheless. Lady becomes jealous when she hears one of Tramp's flames singing the praises of her hero:

“He's a tramp
he's a scoundrel
he's a rounder
he's a cad
he's a tramp
but I love him
yes, even I have got it pretty bad

You never can tell when he'll show up
he gives you plenty of trouble

I guess he's just a no-'count pup
but I wish that he were double
He's a tramp
he's a rover
and there's nothing more to say
If he's a tramp, he's a good one
and I wish that I could travel his way”

“Tramp” characters

The “Prince Charmings” who are to rescue the refined ladies of the pet biographies have very little in common with the romantic projection figures who used to save the princesses of the early wonder tales from the stranglehold of the evil mother. Their purpose is rather to provide a complement to the confined world inside the fence, to represent a freer and more extrovert lifestyle.

First to perform is the trendsetter Tramp, who delights in being “footloose and collar-free”, as he puts it himself. He manages very well without a licence and despises those who are attached to a lead, who have their security but lack freedom. Tramp is a shabby mongrel who sleeps here, there and everywhere and always has a good friend ready to give him a bone with a bit of meat on it: “a family for every day in the week”. As a hobo he has for a long time refused to believe in the adage of Jock the family dog, “[A] dog's best friend is his human.”

However, even if both the class gap and the difference in temperament between them are striking, Lady cannot help falling for this exciting and attractive cur.

Duchess also meets a modern Don Juan character from the opposite social camp. The king of the wild cats, O'Malley, is an audacious and unabashed swinger, who introduces himself and his wanderlust with the following song, which he has written himself:

“I'm king of the highway
Prince of the boulevard
Duke of the avant-garde
The world is my backyard
So if you're goin' my way
That's the road you wanna seek”

The interplay between Duchess the “aristocat” and O’Malley the wild cat is just bound to result in many comical cultural clashes. With her well-bred politeness Duchess gives him to understand that his song and flattery are “very poetic. But it is not quite Shakespeare”.

Nevertheless, O’Malley does not let himself be crushed by her measured snobbery, but asserts himself by pretending to be superior, using his jargon and answering casually, “Of course not. That's pure O'Malley, baby. Right off the cuff, yeah.”

However, gradually the king of the wild cats tries to adapt his language somewhat to that of Duchess, but she too is ready to learn and picks up more and more of his slang, an idiom tailor-made for O’Malley’s jazz-playing feline buddies. Even if the music does not have many similarities to her usual Beethoven, she finds their jazz session to be “stimulating”.. And in the end the whole of her aristocat family has been drawn into playing jazz, even if Duchess herself still prefers to play music on the harp...

The outlawed Robin Hood has neither a collar nor a “licence tag”. He refuses to pay unlawful tax to the usurper (Prince John) and his sheriff with his “posse”.. Robin lives free and unfettered in the great Sherwood Forest, together with his merry men, which include Friar Tuck and Little John. From the window of her castle in the confinement of her stronghold, the beautiful noblewoman Marian cannot but admire the reckless adventurer.

Peter Pan is also a footloose and fancy-free hero dressed in green hunting clothes and a cap resembling Robin Hood’s. Peter represents the exciting dream of an imaginary kingdom free from responsibility and beyond the regulated everyday life of affluent homes. It is to the “Never Land” of the saga that he takes Wendy and her brothers – not to any urban sub-culture – but here there are also threats and adventures.

The only male hero that is not collar-free is Pongo, Perdita’s Dalmatian husband. Even if he is not a pronounced bohemian type himself, he has a certain affinity to his master, the careless and absent-minded composer Roger Radcliffe. However, Pongo is worried about his careless master being unmarried, so he succeeds in finding two proper spouses, one for himself and one for his master.

The adventure

Pongo, who is the only male pet with a collar, is the only male animal that takes the initiative in establishing family ties. Even if the male animals like to call on their female

partners and court them, they want to remain collar-free as long as possible. They are far from being unaffected by the beauty and warmth of the “Lady” characters, but are scarcely prepared to abandon their free existence. The high fence frightens them.

When Tramp approaches Lady’s district for the first time, he speaks of “snob hill”: “I’ll bet they’ve got a lid on every trash can... And a fence around every tree! I wonder what the leash and collar set does for excitement...” On their first romantic evening out together, Lady and Tramp sit and look out over the town. The happy street-boy says enthusiastically, “Look, there’s a great big hunk of world down there with no fence around it, where two dogs can find adventure and excitement!”

However, Lady does not let herself be drawn into the tempting freedom from responsibility. She wonders who would look after the baby back home then. With a resigned expression on his face the gentleman accompanies his lady home...

Tramp contrasts the fence around the small houses and the confinement with the adventure in the big wide world. He himself represents an alternative lifestyle, with the joy of discovery, camaraderie and the occasional love affair. It is therefore a question of the way of life that one traditionally associates with the concept of a bachelor’s life: freedom from all family ties. To Tramp not only the fence, but also children would mean a loss of freedom. But at the same time we have seen, at the very beginning of the film, how he has been talking baby talk to three puppies in a shop window.

Tramp seems to be sexually experienced, to judge from the talk in the kennels about all his conquests. Lady, on the other hand, is still both innocent and a virgin. She does not understand her mistress’ pregnancy and complains to her two friends and protectors, Trusty and Jock, because no one has told her all about the birds and the bees. She sings out her curiosity about what a baby is – and her friends tell her that they walk on all fours and are very expensive.

Just as Lady is ambivalent to Tramp’s carefree lifestyle, Duchess is envious of the reckless side of the wild cat, even if she herself as a mother with three children finds it difficult to realise risk-taking dreams of freedom. Someone has to look after the children, of course... When O’Malley asks her to join him in discovering the world (“just we too”), he does not know of her kids. But here he is in fact presented with a possibility of combining the need for adventure of the man’s role with the collar of family life. He can engage in the great adventure of escorting the admiring children all over the world, since the foster children are big enough to come along on his excursions.

Gradually the young cat children’s enthusiasm for the tough style of the king of the highway comes to serve as a mirror of his manliness that is just as good as his wild cat

buddies. Indeed, among aristocrats the middle-aged O'Malley does not even need to exert himself to become an idol. And the old camaraderie is passed on to the two cat boys, who become his new playmates, just as fond of adventure, although much younger. When they are playing "train", they are nearly run over by a real train. Nevertheless, this is not a return to the irresponsible paternal role à la Baloo from the animal fable, as O'Malley is able to act the hero and even save the little sister Marie, when she falls down from a lorry or almost drowns.

Robin Hood has also an admiring filial figure who helps lead the adventurer into lines of thought that are more conciliatory towards matrimony. Skippy the little rabbit is a little Robin Hood Junior, who, in respect of his dress, weapons and competitions, attempts to live up to his idol's highly placed role model. Our comical challenger can represent the playmates, fond of adventure, who are expected to replace the "merry men" in the free outdoor life of the forest.

The only one to prove completely unwilling to compromise his masculine adventurer role is Peter Pan. He is not even prepared to continue to play within the framework of the family, together with future sons, since he himself is still a boy. The wonderland of the saga still seems to lie before him – if one can talk of a movement forward in a kingdom where time stands still...

The kidnapping

With its clear contrasts the pet biography sets an isolated and overprotected domestic sphere against an attractive but dangerous sphere of adventure outside the fence. How then will these two completely different worlds be able to meet? How will the introverted "Lady" character and the extrovert "Tramp" character begin to complement each other, instead of pulling in different directions?

The film makers succeed partially in evading this stumbling block by introducing external forces, which *compel* them to co-operate to accomplish a common task. Consequently, the borderlines between the two worlds come to be erased. For what happens is that their own kids or the kids of others are kidnapped, so that they must acquaint themselves with the other world and its foreign value orientation. She dares to set out on adventures, and he learns to take responsibility for small kids.

Like the young people in the classic children's detective stories, one must take the matter in one's own hands, since the parental figures on the master and mistress' level have proved to be completely naive or powerless to act. Therefore, the kidnapping will provide the lady with the necessary shove out onto the dangerous ground of adventure, and the collar-free

bachelor can devote himself to the search for adventure in the name of family ties. Neither the excursion out into the big wide world nor the exciting hunt is now depicted as some manifestation of an immature love of adventure, but as a necessary assumption of responsibility triggered by immature villainous characters.

The kids are kidnapped by aristocrats and opportunists, who are usually just as mad about money as they are self-absorbed. In *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* we get the opportunity to meet the rich and ruthless Cruella de Vil, who wants to kill 99 innocent small Dalmatian puppies to adorn herself with their furs. In *Aristocats* Edgar the servant attempts to lay his hands on the mistress' huge inheritance by getting rid of Duchess and her kids. In *Oliver and Company* the original kidnapper is miserably poor and lower class, but Fagin, who is fond of children, repents when he realises that the owner is a child. Consequently, the kidnapped kitten, with the little girl who owns it, must be kidnapped from the kidnapper by a rich loan shark with both a limousine and torpedoes.

The greedy usurper, Prince John, and his sheriff, who keep the humble folk in their stranglehold of taxation, even take the little sum of money that Skippy received on his birthday. Here the only reason why Robin's friends are "kidnapped" is that the conceited Prince wants to get hold of Robin himself, who is expected to try to free them from the prison. Captain Hook the pirate in *Peter Pan* is also a former aristocrat who from greed and desire for vengeance embarks on kidnapping. The threat in *Lady and the Tramp* consists partly of a large rat that attacks the baby in the house and overturns the cradle, and partly of the dog catchers who "kidnap" collar-free dogs to have them put to sleep, unless someone fetches them by paying a "ransom". Accordingly, the homeless are led away to be executed, although their only crime is not having considerate parental figures in the form a master or mistress to pay for them.

Therefore, the dramatic conflict comes to rage between representatives of fundamental values, such as fondness of children and family unity, and all the ruthless neurotics who, as it turns out, hate children and animals. The villains are grown-up people who only think of themselves, their own riches or beauty, and who cannot be bothered with small pets or children.

As so often happens in Disney films, this social criticism from underneath is combined with a private dream of money in the upward direction. When the pet biography ends, several central characters have enriched themselves. In *One Hundred and One Dalmatians*, the master, Radcliffe the songwriter, suddenly becomes rich after his satirical song about Cruella de Vil has met with success. Although the money is of course used for a farm in the country for all the 101 dogs. The aristocats become inheritors of Madame Bonfamille's

fortune, and there is money over for a home for alley cats. After Robin Hood has recaptured the money bags that Prince John has used as a “comfort blanket”, he shares them with the people of Nottingham. And Oliver and Company at least see to it that their master is free from debts. Accordingly, as in so many old sagas, it is precisely those who strive least to obtain money who are rewarded precisely with money...

Consequently, the kidnapers do not only play an important role as involuntary matchmakers and a means of uniting families. Their greed also comes to trigger moral correction mechanisms, which redistribute wealth to people who share it with good communities. One could in fact accuse the Disney group of an element of “socialist” Robin Hood mentality. Like the mothers of the wonder tale, who are at the same time both evil and helping, and the combination of helper and scorner in the fable, the villains in the pet biography represent both a menace and a means of assistance.

Boundary characters

After the external threat from the kidnapers has strengthened the unity of both parties, there is also a greater understanding of the fact that they need each other. It turns out that the chasm between different lifestyles can be bridged through mutual adaptation and complementary identities. The two worlds can meet when the extremes have been moderated, and the new balance is to the advantage of all involved.

Consequently, the roll of marker of outer boundaries is taken over by comical minor characters. Representatives of the irresponsibility of the world of adventure and victims of the confinement of the domestic sphere are set against each other as pure types. While those who are far too faithful and excessively tied to their home are depicted as slightly pathetic, those who are far too free are presented in a slightly tragicomic light.

Lady’s closest friend and neighbour, the old bloodhound Faithful, with his good relationship with his master and the fence, has lost his sense of smell for want of training and appears as a slightly pathetic character confined to the house. A couple of the old mongrels that Tramp has knocked around with end up in the dog catcher’s cage, and while waiting to be put to sleep sing “Home Sweet Home”, with an ironic nostalgia. Here it seems to be too late to try to change or to atone for previous lifestyles, in accordance with the old adage, “You can’t teach old dogs new tricks.”

In *Aristocats* Duchess’ tendencies towards the prudishness of an old maid are completely overshadowed by the twin geese Amelia and Abigail. The two old maids are shocked when they realise that O’Malley is not Duchess’ husband and the father of her children. They start shouting about scandal, rakes and womanizers. O’Malley too is surpassed in respect of

“male” dissipation and boozing. Waldo the goose is an old drunk (marinated alive in wine) who is close to ending his days being served as “country goose à la provençale”. And while the children in *Peter Pan* only pretend to be pirates, Indians and mermaids, their “childish” fantasy is surpassed by all of the adults, who have really got stuck in these stereotyped roles and are not just pretending.

The city dogs in *Oliver and Company* have their free communal home in the house of Fagin the poor rag-and-bone merchant, who shares dog biscuits with them and reads his small ones bedtime stories. The little, tough chihuahua of the gang, the petty thief Tito, becomes enamoured of Georgette, a prize poodle belonging to a girl called Jenny. Georgette is a stuck-up and faded beauty who believes that the canine burglars are seeking to rape her, who once won the “Best in Show” prize. When Oliver’s reserve dad, Dodger, calms her down by saying, “You’re not the one I want,” the prize-winning dog wonders vainly, “Why not?” Eventually Tito the mongrel also finds his sexually alluring star lady to be far too forward. There is a virtue in moderation, even when it is a question of the brand of external beauty called sexiness.

Through these caricatures in the form of pathetic minor characters, one is able to demonstrate both extremes as ridiculous exaggerations. Thus both male and female gender roles are elucidated, at the same time as the contrast between Lady’s and Tramp’s lifestyles appears less glaring. The actual learning of fundamental value norms is reinforced, without the main characters having to concentrate too much on old boundaries.

Music as a mediator

Love, of course, is able to serve as a uniting force, with excitement being added though external threats. Thanks to love, the “Tramp” character can mature to assume responsibility for the rising generation in a less happy-go-lucky way, and the “Lady” character can take the risks that living together in a relationship demands, if she is to avoid withering away behind the fence. During the hunt for the kidnappers the tramp acquires the beginnings of a paternal role, and the lady has a taste of excitement in some risky undertakings.

While love facilitates the merging of different gender roles, the power of music can help to bridge cultural chasms and remove class barriers. Significantly enough, it is always the “primitive” musical rhythms that possess the compelling power, while the classical music of the aristocracy does not have enough intrinsic life to be able to stimulate others.

In *Lady and the Tramp* it is above all a romantic serenade, sung by a jovial Italian chef in a backyard, which opens the floodgates of love. “Bella Notte” can then remain as a musical leitmotiv for the loving couple. It is the jazz of the wild cats, not the Beethoven of the

aristocrats, which bridges class differences in *Aristocats*. In *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* the song compositions and the advertising jingles on TV have a contagious mediating effect. In *Peter Pan* we hear the pirates' work songs and Wendy's lullaby, in *Oliver and Company* somewhat groovier tunes, including rapping about guys who are streetwise. Moreover, in *Robin Hood* the popular instrument of the period, the lute, serves as an enthralling mediator, when Marian sings out how "love goes on and on..."

The renewal of the family

At the beginning of the pet biography the nuclear family is both incomplete and threatened, but the "shortcoming" that the kidnapping dramatizes is suspended by the hunt for the villains. However, it is not by brute force, but with cunning combined with loyal assistance from all the small and weaker individuals, that the central characters of marriageable age succeed in defeating the unmarried villainous characters and rescuing the children. After the threats have strengthened their unity, the pets can return to a better home and form their own enlarged nuclear family. The children have been guaranteed continued safety and security, at the same time as the adventure has renewed family life behind the fence.

The "Tramp" character has at last become a fatherly dog wearing a collar and realises the value of domestic care and home life. Even earlier O'Malley had developed a lump in his throat during Duchess' lyrical speech about her mistress: "It must be wonderful to know a person like that – one who really loves you!"

The inveterate bachelor seems in his heart of hearts to almost want to be tied "for his own good". And with the kids as an alibi he can legitimize his need to be playful again.

In the "Lady" character it is even clearer how the adult identity of the parent is confirmed through the kids. Here the adjustment concerns above all becoming less stuck-up and more like ordinary people. Thus the aristocratic lady avoids exerting herself too much to live up to ideals concerning style that are tiresome in the long run. She becomes more tolerant and broader-minded, receptive to things that are somewhat different. Moreover, if the couple move into her aristocratic environment, the whole household of her mistress will be drawn into a democratization process, with greater joy of living, lively kids and more popular music.

Through the heroic achievement of his rescue, Tramp proves that he deserves to be taken in by the finer family of Lady's master and mistress and to have a licence bought for him – the key to freedom for any dog who happens to be locked up by the dog catcher. The master and mistress obtain, into the bargain, two loyal watchdogs for their own child, who also obtains new playmates in the form of their puppies. The good balance in the marital

compromise of the central characters is also reflected in their offspring: three of the pups are pedigree cocker spaniels like Lady, while the most mischievous male pup is a mongrel like his dad, Tramp.

Duchess obtains an exciting stepfather for her children at last. Previously her boys obviously lacked male role models. Now they have a real tiger at home, who, however, can also dress himself up in a starched collar and a bow-tie. Pongo and Perdita also return to a better and enlarged home. Their new house in the country will in future not only accommodate their master and mistress and their fifteen pups. Here there is also space for all the homeless Dalmatian pups that Cruella has bought (all in all 101 of them).

When Wendy in *Peter Pan* returns home with her small brothers, whom she has looked after responsibly, her parents have managed to become more understanding. Her father, who was previously so sceptical, now admits that he in fact remembers Peter Pan and the pirate ship from a long time ago, when he himself was a child. And he no longer insists on Wendy growing up immediately. She may now stay in the nursery for a while longer, if she wishes.

Previously Robin Hood believed that an outlaw could not mean anything to a beautiful woman of noble descent, but Marian begins to love him precisely because he is so courageous and impulsive. Indeed, she is so infected by his style and rampaging that she, a placid noblewoman, begins to fight with the guards to set Robin free. After long and boring days in the castle, spent playing badminton with an anaemic hen-in-waiting, she can now experience the adventure and spirit of community out in Sherwood Forest. And her “course commoner” is pardoned by King Richard, who blesses the couple before they set off on their honeymoon with the “Newly married” sign on the carriage.

“The best years”

In all the cases except for *Peter Pan*, it is therefore a question of a couple who have recently fallen in love or have just married and who form a family – “the best years”.. It is a question of families with small children and young and active parents, and the children are relatively unproblematic preschool children. The family is at its zenith, without any greater conflicts between the generations. We do not meet any troublesome teenagers with their own dreams of breaking out and ideas of liberation, merely small kids who are as yet only cute and mischievous. The parents’ only problem seems to be that the kids are far too fond of eating and watching TV.

The fresh happiness of love is not only due to the fact that they have not yet been tested and hardened by many years of everyday life together. The couple also have the advantage of living in the best of worlds, with the right mixture of dependence and independence,

security and adventure. For they are able to remain as small kids in their master and mistress' home at the same time as they themselves settle down as an adult couple in a parallel home of their own. Moreover, if the parents want to go out and enjoy themselves, they do not even have to worry about the problem of a babysitter.

Of course, this “vertically” expanded nuclear family also has a more negative dark side, which the films more or less neglect to illuminate. The film makers seem now to have forgotten the fence and have erected a protective wall of warmth against large parts of the world outside. All the forbidding aspects of the outside world remain unchanged in the end, since the “solution” stops at a purely individual dream of happiness. However, for the smaller children in the cinema the family and the home serve as a necessary point of reference – both as a base of security for excursions into a strange world surrounding them and as a utopia for the hope of an adult life of their own. They have nothing at all against this “home defence”.

Therefore ideological criticism of Disney's idealised pictures of middle-class nuclear families risks becoming an incantation recited by adults for themselves, which in the name of children batters down standard radical doors. “Bohemian” lifestyles have of course their given place as a protest and an alternative in a rigid adult world. But it would be rather irresponsible to exalt this way of life and make it an ideal norm for juveniles in need of security who as yet lack real possibilities of choosing or even influencing their own life environment by themselves.

Dead funny

There is also a more unmerciful consequence of the centring on the family “in its best years”, which is only hinted at in the conciliatory shroud of a humour based on character's disabilities. As in Disney's other film sagas, none of the central characters in the pet biographies is older than 30-35 years (if one translates cat and dog years into human proportions). Children can easily live the part of the adult parent with small children, but why would they pretend in their play to be a single 50-year-old when children's culture is dominated by grandparents who are either alert and wise or dying 70-year-olds? Their counterparts in the real world are most often much younger, gainfully employed people who are both pressed for time and mentally absent.

In Disney's animal fables elderly people are only to be found as male teachers of wisdom who have a great deal to teach inexperienced boy characters. The good helpers of the wonder tales are rather often semi-comical grandmother figures who support the teenage girls in their liberation from the mother figures. It is mainly in the pet biography that elderly

people are portrayed as pathetically ridiculous. Of course, the adult couple needs a few characters above them who are even older in order not to appear ancient themselves. And if one were to depict these old folks as wise, the main couple would risk losing most of their adult authority.

The comical minor characters of the films have to choose between two extremes. They can persist in their steadfast loyalty and stay at home with their master and mistress, or remain free adventurers, although they have begun to appear too old for that. In both cases they come to acquire the image of a kind of relic that is either handicapped or has suffered an occupational injury. The ailments of old age are transformed into humour based on the characters' disabilities, with great scope for defect sensory organs.

In *Lady and the Tramp*, the kind old bloodhound, Trusty, has lost his sense of smell and even suffers from a chronically poor memory. *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* allows us to laugh at Colonel the sheepdog, who has served in the navy for a long time, but who is now so deaf that he cannot pick up important SOS signals. The telegraph operator has to attempt a number of misinterpretations, the one more crazy than the other. Moreover, Prince John's old counsellor, the sly snake Sir Hiss, is rendered harmless by his comical lisping.

The old first mate on Captain Hook's pirate ship, the fat and bald Mr Smee, has embarked on the career of pirate by mistake, due to his poor eyesight: he happened to go onboard the wrong ship. His short-sightedness makes him unusually clumsy and nervous, and he both stammers and shakes with fear in front of Captain Hook. The captain himself is also handicapped, in that one of his hands was eaten up by a crocodile, which is still seeking to consume the rest of his body. The otherwise so cocky pirate captain trembles as soon as he hears or sees a crocodile, and it is hinted that he is heading for a well-deserved death. In the final shots we are able to see him disappearing, swimming towards the horizon, hunted by his ravenous mortal enemy.

Since the old people in the pet biography are most often comically harmless, there is no greater need of a precipice where they have to meet their death, as there is for the Evil Mother in the wonder tale. Moreover, the central characters will probably continue to live in the home of their master and mistress in the autumn of their life. The comedy suffices to elucidate the ideal norm, namely that is not particularly attractive to be too old in the best of worlds. Characters who go astray far too close to the verge of death seldom belong to the entertaining family film. For who would look after the children then, if the parental figures also had to think far too much about the older generation?

New currents

With its ideological orientation towards the broad family audience, Disney's film saga has been deeply rooted in the contradictions of the nuclear family. In the pet biographies all the traumatic conflicts between the generations are toned down, in favour of a common reconciliation between the excessive protection of the sphere of intimacy and the lack of responsibility of the sphere of adventure. Neither the "male" pressure of achievement in the animal fables nor the "female" antagonism between the roles in the early wonder tale is included any longer in the central field of conflict. In spite of the fact that the pet biography contains elements of the thriller and adventurous excursions, the genre therefore risks becoming a love comedy that is far too idyllic and free from conflicts to serve as stuff of the imagination when processing the problems of everyday life.

Not even Disney's stable world of saga has failed to be influenced by the critical discussions about the crisis of the family and narrow gender roles that grew more intense at the end of the '60s. It turned out that the conflicts were not limited to certain extreme groups, but were also to be found as tensions within the primary audience of the family genre. In order to catch the new currents, the film makers had to break the idyllic framework for the pet biography.

The increased uncertainty of the Disney group could be noticed as early as in *Robin Hood* (1973). How would it be possible, in the reverberations of youthful revolt, to paint a trustful relationship to the establishment and its masters and mistresses? It was easier to look for cover behind historical costumes in a distant age of chivalry, in which Richard the Lionheart, the father of the nation, remains absent right up to the end, so that the criticism of authority can be focused on a malevolent usurper.

It is not until *The Rescuers* (1977) that the cold currents from contemporary reality force their way into a Disney film in earnest. Here the small pets no longer live in some idyllic small town in the U.S.A. or in some romantic quarter in Paris, but have to make their way on high escalators and through threatening traffic. In the film's expressionistically stylised and overdimensioned big-city culture (modelled on contemporary Manhattan), there are no master and mistress to act as human guardian spirits. Indeed, the small mice start to appear as modern big-city dwellers who have lost the secure god of their fathers, even if they are dependent on the people above their own basement level both for inspiration and methods of organisation.

Our main characters never become firmly rooted at any permanent home address, only in their place of work in the basement of the UN skyscraper. Here mice delegates from the four corners of the earth meet, having travelled there in the diplomatic briefcases of their human counterparts. The international rescue organisation, the Rescue Aid Society, does not seem

to have any greater power over the major conflicts of the surrounding world, but must limit itself to the task of acting as a rescue corps for individual small victims.

Our attention is focused on two apparently homeless mice who, on different levels, work for the Rescue Aid Society. As in the earlier pet biographies, the principal part is shared between a man and a woman. The “Lady” character is, as earlier, a woman of noble descent: a Hungarian noblewoman with a fur-trimmed coat and an image of elegance. The “Tramp” character is a man of the people, wearing a cap and dungarees. However, in this case it is no longer the male character who represents an extrovert sphere of adventure, while the lady represents an introverted sphere of intimacy. No, indeed, the rolls are reversed rather.

Bernard is a timid and suppressed janitor, an indoor mouse who stands with cap in hand, admitting the international guests. Bianca, on the other hand, comes as an experienced agent from the big wide world outside. *She* is the adventure-loving one who brings the timorous and clumsy Bernard along with her on exciting chases and perilous assignments. Bianca would never even think of letting herself be obstructed by any “fences”, and she has to help Bernard, who is far from bohemian, to get out of the bottle in which he has been trapped during the meeting. Bianca, who attracts admiration, succeeds, at any rate, in getting the small, chubby caretaker to come along with her on the rescue mission.

In the course of their adventures, Bernard turns out to be less jittery and superstitious than he seemed to be at the beginning. He rises to the challenge thanks to his down-to-earth and practical disposition. And the highly educated but often foolhardy Bianca overestimates her own capacity and competence more than once. In a slightly comical tone, the ill-matched pair of agents can demonstrate the new form of complementary coexistence, in which both parties can show their strengths and weaknesses by turns. Behind the professional roles we can still discern the external contours of a male “Tramp” character and a female “Lady” type, but at the end of the film they are not prepared to form a family of their own. They content themselves with arranging other people’s family happiness and preparing themselves for the next adventurous assignment together.

In the world of Disney – and in children’s culture on the whole – an actively acting career woman who brings a jittery and fumbling male mouse along with her out in the world represented a radical break in the trend. This transformation constituted a direct answer to the intense discussions of the ‘70s on gender roles, when the Disney group was criticised for its passively suffering heroines, among other things. The third main character, Penny, whom Bernard and Bianca are assigned to rescue, also diverges from previous basic patterns.

With regard to her image and basic purpose in the film, little Penny belongs primarily to the unhappy teenage girls of the wonder tale. She is a foundling of preschool age who

suffers from a lack of love and ends up being subjected to the infernal terror of an evil mother, the greedy pawnbroker Madame Medusa, and her vacillating partner, Snoops. The scenes out in the swamps, where Penny, after being kidnapped, is kept imprisoned on a river steamboat, have pronounced elements of the Gothic horror film à la *Snow White*. The girl is guarded by the crocodiles Brutus and Nero, the witch's "darlings". She has to risk her life in slave labour, lowered down in a mine shaft to take out the largest diamond in the world (the Devil's Eye) for the vain Medusa, who at the same time is trying to *force* the child to like her.

Even at the orphanage we have had to sob with Penny, this wrongfully suffering girl whom unsympathetic adults do not appreciate as the pretty and charming girl she is in reality ("masked identity"). With Rufus the cat and Teddy the teddy bear as her mirrors and confessors, she has also been able to entrust us with her innermost dreams and anguish. However, the much younger Penny is no teenage girl waiting for her Prince Charming. She must herself actively assist in her rescue, and the new identity appearing as an enticing dream at the end is the role of the daughter of a couple of good adoptive parents, who like both children and animals.

Therefore, the Medusa character primarily becomes a child-hating kidnapper à la pet biography, even if she at the same time functions as a projection figure of the "evil mother" type. In a scene that is very popular among children at the cinema, Penny is able to parody the false lady, imitating her swaying gait and affected facial expressions. Like some Captain Hook, Medusa is also punished by her own crocodiles, which turn against her to create a more comical ending than the precipice of the wonder tale or the cut of a sword.

Threatened family enclave

Consequently, *The Rescuers* represents a kind of hybrid genre, with basic patterns from both the wonder tale and the pet biography. The pets here have lost their secure masters and mistresses to return home to and previous gender-role models are dissolved. The teenage girl has become younger but, nevertheless, more active. Prince Charming has been superseded by a good adoptive family. The clearly defined borders between pure gender identities are being erased, and the secure "fence" around the domestic idyll has to fall in favour of skyscrapers and traffic.

Indeed the whole model with a "vertically" enlarged nuclear family as the dominating ideal has been dissolved. It is rather the work place, the mice's United Nations, which partially replaces the family. It is only the foundling who, in her vulnerability, nourishes a dream of security and love within a traditional (adoptive) family. The loving couple on the

mouse level do not have any such longing for a home, but prefer to proceed by trial and error, testing all the new and old gender roles. They do not hesitate to switch between strong and weak positions in their interplay in the threatening but also exciting world surrounding them.

Like the conflicts between the generations, living together in a relationship now also seems to have become far too problematic to be treated within the framework of the nuclear family. Bernard and Bianca, who have more than reached a marriageable age and are the oldest central characters in an animated film of Disney, do not seem to be in any hurry to form a family, or even find a place of their own where they can live together.

Nor are they married thirteen years later, in the sequel *The Rescuers Down Under*, but now Bernard finally gets around to proposing and receives an affirmative reply. However, according to Bianca, work has first priority, the wedding must come later. (Bernard suggests, "How does...how does next ah... April sound to you?", but Bianca's thoughts are on work only). In Australia it is a seven-year-old boy who comes under the protection of the mice agents. His name is Cody and he is kidnapped by a greedy man, McLeach the poacher, who is hunting for the "rarest bird in the world": a female golden eagle brooding on her eggs. Cody's single mother is searching frantically for her son, who is believed to have become another victim of the crocodiles, while Cody's father has quite simply disappeared.

However, it is another man, Wilbur the albatross, who has to "mind the children" and in fact reluctantly "bring them to the world" by brooding on the eagle's three eggs, while the female eagle is prevented from doing so herself. Bernard is still quite cowardly and afraid of flying, however. When he at last succeeds in rescuing Bianca, he himself has to be rescued by the female eagle.

Men as childminders

A film that falls between all three basic types is *The Black Cauldron* (1985), a rather unsuccessful mishmash based on a juvenile fantasy novel. The film mostly resembles a pet biography, even if the principal characters here are not animals. The hero is a clumsy young man halfway between the eleven-year-old of the animal fable and the nineteen-year-old of the wonder tale. Like the grown-up men of the pet biography, the boy is assigned the task of "minding the baby" – a small, clairvoyant pig called Hen Wen.

Taran does not develop from a clumsy infant to a competent young man, but remains quite a gawky apprentice of Dallben the magician. He is uncertain concerning both his social identity and his diffuse gender role: as to whether he is a pig-keeper or the stuff that heroes are made of. In a mirror of water Taran sees himself as a warrior in shining armour with a

sword and shield. He daydreams about honour and fame on the battlefield, and fantasises about meeting the Horned King one day in a life-and-death struggle – not about meeting “her”.. And he pretends in play to fight against the Horned King, although he only gets to feel the horns of the billygoat.

Taran is driven from his secure but incomplete parental home, together with his dog-like friend Gurgi, out into the Forbidden Forest, in order to hide Hen Wen from the Horned King. He is confronted with a number of different trials of strength, receives magic aids from imaginative helpers and meets Princess Eilonwy. The beautiful princess seems to be slightly in love with the pig-keeper, but Taran only wants to speak of friendship. Like the ill-matched couple in the pet biography, together they attempt, with the help of fairies and kind witches, imaginary animals and a bohemian old troubadour, to prevent the pig from being kidnapped, in the course of exciting chases.

The final kiss between the pig-keeper and the princess is not really a kiss, but unintentional contact on their part, arranged by the little, shaggy Gurgi, who brings their mouths together. Not all that many male deeds of valour have been performed, but rather all the characters have helped each other and taken turns to rescue each other. The real hero is in actual fact Gurgi, who through his self-sacrificing jump down into the cauldron rescues the world from the Horned King.

The dissolution of male heroic roles acquires a homosexual subtext in *Basil the Great Mouse Detective* (1986). This film is about two odd male mice who live together in the basement under their “master” (Sherlock Holmes). Basil the mouse is portrayed as quite a conceited intellectual snob, an easily hurt father figure obsessed with his work and just ready to be brought down to earth. The fat Doctor Dawson is a timid and fearful type who only lets himself be dragged along by the master detective. “Papa” Basil is not particularly fond of children (“doesn’t have the time”), since he himself mostly resembles a precocious and self-centred child. He seems to be almost disgusted when little Olivia hugs him, but “Mammy” Dawson persuades him to take on the distressing case involving her “kidnapped” father. Consequently, here it is a question of a *parent* who is abducted and a child who is forced to search for her father, a toy-maker.

In *Oliver and Company* (1988) we also have a (human) child who has to function as a parent and try to procure the ransom for her kidnapped kitten, Oliver. Seven-year-old Jenny is the rich but neglected daughter of a busy couple – constantly travelling to conferences in Europe. When Jenny herself is kidnapped, she has to be rescued by substitute parents in the form of the manservant and a gang of male doggy friends. However, Oliver, who has been

given a fine collar by his child mistress, with his new address engraved on it, does not want to be rescued from his new adoptive home.

Longing home to what?

The good parental home therefore remains as a distant future utopia for the children's individuation and growing independence through increased contact with the surrounding world, and friends are as necessary as they were previously. However, over the years it has become more and more unclear what those who have left home will *find their way back home to*, once they have found their way out.

The search for an identity also tends to become more and more diffuse and complicated, less traumatic than full of questions. Can dad be as good a mum as mum? Can children become their parents' parents? Can adults be as immature as children? What does it mean to be a lady or a tramp? Are any of the parties really equal to the responsibility involved in bringing up kids of their own?

The increasing pressure on the nuclear family, both from the inside and the outside, has made it much more difficult to create characters out of the central experiences of today. The demand of entertainment for dramatisation with clear conflicts and contrasts presupposes a fairly uniform orientation of actions, a comprehensive system of values that is confirmed by the common experience of the family. When the conflicts become ambiguous, to say the least, for the different members of the family, the need for clear assistance in orienting ourselves and for simple solutions will collide with our increased understanding of ourselves.

Resource for knowledge

Disney has never attempted to compete with the expanding sector of family guidance counsellors, therapists and child psychiatrists, and the film makers have never sought to analyse individual symptoms of illness or sketch strategies for solutions. The film saga has formed a part of the creation of myths in society, which contents itself with presenting material for stories for the purely emotional processing of experience reaped, without infringing dominant systems of values. It is up to ourselves, as members of the audience and parents, to articulate this source of experience as knowledge that has received greater consideration.

One could also say that the boys of the animal fables are the only characters who have had to undergo a longer process of maturity. Of course, it is also during the first ten years of

their lives that individuals develop most of all. The maturing children of developmental psychology who are on their way to “higher and higher” stages have always been experienced as being “boys” and the progress has been assessed in *masculine* terms: towards greater and greater independence instead of dependence, from concrete to abstract thinking.

It was not until the last few decades that Disney’s film sagas started to depart from this pattern and introduced dependent men and independent women. In order to grow up to become a young man, the boys of the animal fable had to serve as apprentices with different male masters (or clumsy oafs), while the teenage girls of the wonder tales had to get other people to realise that they already *were* adults. And for the almost “over-mature” characters of the pet biography, it became increasingly important to reach a mutual integration and participate in a greater spirit of community.

As a member of the audience we have the freedom of dealing with our film experiences ourselves afterwards, of subjecting them to critical reflection and of comparing them with our own experience. The films are lying there waiting for us as a poorly utilised resource for knowledge – either to be thrown away or re-used in a meaningful way. There are no magic powers compelling us to dismiss everything with gross simplifications that further simplify the complex simplifications of Disney.

(1980 + 1998)

Notes

1. This chapter is based on a long essay that was first published in the journal *Filmhäftet* (No 29-30, 1980) and was re-published in the anthology *Play It Again, Sam*, Uppsala 1984. The original study was in 1998 both revised and updated with later film sagas from the Disney group. However, there was not enough time to include an examination of Mulàn (1998) in the revised version.
2. See also Chapt. 13 in the present book.

3. A great number of popularly oriented works of reference on the Disney phenomenon have been published. Most of the monographs have a biographical orientation, such as Richard Schickel's *The Disney Version* (New York 1968) and Bob Thomas' *Walt Disney – an American Original* (New York 1976). For further data and facts on the films it would be appropriate to consult Leonard Maltin's *The Disney Films* (New York 1973) and Dave Smith's *Disney A to Z: the Official Encyclopedia* (New York 1996).
4. A great deal of critical-analytical light has in the past few decades been shed on Donald Duck in particular, including the miniature world that goes under the name of the Donald Duck Universe. For a long time the Danish co-operative work *Tegneserier – en ekspansionshistorie* (Kongerslev 1974) was unsurpassed. In addition there is *How to Read Donald Duck* by Ariel Dorfman & Armand Mattelart (New York 1975) and the refreshingly parodic *Ankismen: en djupvetenskaplig studie i Kalle Anka och hans värld* by the Norwegian Jon Gisle (Stockholm 1976). (See also the bibliography of Chapter 1: "Why is Disney so (un)popular?")
5. When creating our own model of analysis, we aimed at a synthesis of the experience and tools already gathered within two different research traditions. On the one hand we sought, using very free revisions and complementary additions, to develop further the methodical arsenal of concepts that had been created by the Soviet Russian ethnologist Vladimir Propp and his successors. Here we connect to a number of anthropologically inspired attempts to systematically uncover deep-going basic patterns in comprehensive material of the nature of fairy tales and myths. On the other hand we wanted to correct and concretise these often very generally sketched conceptual models and research programmes, by connecting the structuralistically oriented analysis of the film sagas more directly to the current functional contexts of children's culture. Here we connect rather to symbolic interactionism and to a line of research oriented towards developmental psychology, in our endeavour to anchor the material of expression in the experiences that determine the conditions of children's lives.
6. As Gérard Hernandes has suggested in "Rox et Rouky. Faucons et colombes", in *Image et Son* no. 373, June 1982, pp. 118-122.
7. *Mulàn* came far too late to be included in this study. However, see Chapter 7.
8. *Oliver and Company* has already been classified as an animal fable on the basis of a focusing on the titular hero. However, if we focus our attention on the whole gang of dogs, the film does in fact fit into this group too.

4. Who's afraid of big bad Disney...?

On preschool terror and film censorship

Many adults remember with dread the blood-curdling films of their childhood: when Bambi's mother is killed by the hunter's bullet; when Snow White's stepmother (?), the Evil Queen, orders the hunter to kill the girl and bring back her heart (which the Queen then intends to eat up!) in a box; when the hunter raises the dagger; when Snow White dashes in flight through the maliciously staring forest; when the beautiful Evil Queen is transformed into a repulsive witch and then appears to kill Snow White with a poisoned apple.

Or perhaps we remember instead how the wicked Stromboli threatens to turn Pinocchio into firewood? Or when the fiercely snorting giant whale, Monstro, pursues and devours the boy? Or possibly when the prince in *Sleeping Beauty* sticks the sword into the Evil Fairy, who has been transformed into a monstrous dragon?

Being killed oneself – and by one's own mother into the bargain – being devoured, poisoned by her food and then “dying”... That one's own mother should die... Imagining oneself as being capable of killing, or wishing to see one's mother dead... Horrible thoughts! But these are precisely the thoughts that Disney brings up to the surface in an incisive and thereby relieving way in his frightening entertainment.

Consequently, many parents condemn Disney for “his” cruelty and sadism, after which they bring their children along with them to a Disney matinee any way, confidently relying on Bruno Bettelheim...

Is Disney a sadist who is only seeking to frighten the life out of small innocent children? In my opinion that is not the case. The only acceptable reason for frightening children at the cinema or in front of the TV is, of course, to be able to calm them down afterwards. In other words, so that the children may be better equipped to master their own diffuse fears, thanks to the film's elucidative, concrete processing of their fears, its hopefulness and happy ending. This is precisely what these animated films do, in addition to teaching children *what* they must be on their guard against in life.

Fear – a feeling that we learn

Preschool children can be afraid of anything, even their own shadow. Not to mention their own fear! This fact can easily become unbearable and paralysing, specially if one does not yet possess enough verbal and analytical ability to handle one's anxiety. Therefore, small children do not primarily need words or explanations to master their fears, but rather pictures: symbols that make their fears more concrete and fewer, limited to a small number of threatening figures and symbols of terror that are culturally shared – in other words have been acquired through instruction.

Of course, fear is also a feeling that is learnt to a high degree; i.e. children have from time immemorial been instructed in *what* they should be afraid of and be on their guard against. The almost perverse predilection that parents have shown for narrating or reading cruel fairy tales for their children (tales about terrible parents who maim, murder and eat up their children) undeniably merits close examination.

However, nowadays it is no longer considered quite suitable for parents to frighten their children themselves. Therefore, they leave this to other people, whom they can then criticise.

Harmless terror

In spite of the fact that the anti-fairy-tale wave of the '60s and '70s turned a long time ago and the children of today are fed almost entirely on a diet of fairy tales, it is above all a question of more modern and more innocent variations (about *kind* dragons and ketchup vampires, or about ghosts who themselves are afraid of ghosts), in addition to a few watered-down "Hansel and Gretel" stories, whose plots no longer resemble the kidnapping, slave labour, murder and cremation of the "original", but lead one's thoughts more to pastel-coloured sweetshops. Leaving only Disney, of course...

Disney's animated feature films are today the most widely used and earliest encountered vehicles of this preschool terror, these culturally defined clouds of menace and frightening figures: aids for processing terror that make "inner" threats "external" and turn children's "own" threatening figures into commonly shared figures. For in our world of culture there are certainly a great number of ancient symbols of terror and uneasiness which are not innate but have been acquired by learning.

Indeed, one may wonder how else the children of the present day could become participants in the cultural heritage of fright, if not through different media. The school definitely does not take its responsibility in this connection. As usual those who are "deprived of junk culture" have to rely on children's own oral culture, which passes on second-hand ghost and horror stories, as well as second-hand résumés of films (so-called visual lore or media lore).

Universal fears

It is true that there are, according to the anthropologists, a number of obviously innate universal fears, such as fear of the dark, fear of great heights, visual chasms and precipices, as well as fear of being left alone and abandoned, in addition to uneasiness about strangers or unfamiliar animals, and dread of being devoured. Fear of great heights, for example, appears a long time before the infant has had any real possibility of becoming acquainted

with such dangers. And even infants seem to have nightmares. Via his or her genes the child also inherits the purely physical expressions of fear.

Fear of the dark is mainly explained by the fact that small children, when darkness conceals *real* visual images of the surroundings, are to a great extent dependent on *imaginary metaphorical perception* rather than, as in the case of older children, on inner *verbal* symbols, with whose help the latter can better understand and process reality for themselves. In the dark the imagination and “hallucinations” of preschool children get out of control, and the often formless, imaginary threats are frightening precisely because of their diffuse, changeable and private nature. Other people in the surroundings even maintain that the threatening images do not even exist, which, of course, the frightening images of a film do, thank Heavens, after all, in an external and “real” sense. In other words, they are shared with other members of the audience. One can therefore *talk* about them.

It is true that there are those who would maintain that children do not spontaneously create images of horror and dread, but are only inspired to become afraid by the stuff of culture. It is reported that the English 19th century poet, Leigh Hunt – long before the advent of “video nasties” – was firmly resolved to bring up his son without the contagion of cultural terror. The boy “was never allowed to hear of goblin or apparition, or scarcely to be told of bad men, or to read or hear of any distressing story”. Nevertheless, this nurse-child of optimism seemed to experience just as great a sense of fear as any other child at night and flew up at “shapes, unborrowed of tradition, in sweats to which the reveries of the cell-damned murderer are tranquility”. “It is not book, or picture, or the stories of foolish servants, which create these terrors in children. They can at most give them direction.” [Note 1]

Biological and cultural origins of fear

Accordingly, fear is partly a biological inheritance and partly a phenomenon that is culturally learned. *What* is feared in the dark, *which* strangers and animals are dangerous, and *who* could conceivably want to eat one up vary from culture to culture. The processing of formless fear, its refinement into fear with recognisable forms and distinct contours, takes place – at least in our day and age – culturally. Nowadays, children do not learn purely physically to fight with wolves or snakes, but rather they eradicate their fear through reading and viewing. Moreover, wolves and snakes are rare in urban societies, where they are more likely to be disguised in sheep’s clothing, for example, or, according to Disney, as Cruella de Vil in much more expensive coats of Dalmatian fur...

But is Disney the one who has invented the idea that one should above all be on one’s guard against envious (step)mothers, like Snow White’s or Cinderella’s? The Disney group

has of course been criticised for its wicked (or else excessively harmless!) portraits of women. Why are the representatives of motherhood so often figures of horror? Women have quite simply been more important in the lives of small children. The helpers, the forces of good in the films, are likewise most often women.

The mother, whom the child has been most dependent on, is also the most common child abuser in folk tales. Popular literature is flooded with child abuse and lethal threats on account of women's greed, envy, vanity, uncontrolled anger or mental illness. A German called Ruth Böttigheimer has studied illustrations of cannibalism in the fairy tales of the Grimm brothers, in editions from the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. Böttigheimer has called attention to the fact that it is without exception *women* who eat human flesh. [Note 2] In other words the face of evil is in this context indisputably female. In the actual text too it is women who are singled out as wicked. Moreover, in the fairy tales of the present day, monsters that devour humans are also often female (for example Katla, Astrid Lindgren's female dragon). In the modern lore of children we have something that is usually called "mummy-mummy jokes". It is a question of cruel jokes made up by girls at primary school (or at least passed on by them second hand) about mothers, for example "Mummy, mummy, I don't like tomato juice!" – "Shut up and drink up before it coagulates!"; or "Mummy, mummy I don't like daddy!" – "Shut up and just eat your meal!"

In all cultures the maternal archetype seems to possess two diametrically opposed poles. On the one hand a positive pole, which provides food, warmth and shelter. And on the other hand a negative pole, which stifles one, shuts one in, gives one disgusting or poisoned food, and in the end kills one or eats one up.

The fear of being devoured

Everything that at first (at the preschool age) gives rise to the Good Mother is reversed at the school age (and even more in the teens, of course), giving rise to its stifling antithesis, the Evil Mother. What is important to notice is precisely the *connection* between the two. The Evil Mother does not exist as a separate and totally monstrous figure, but she *is at first kind, after which she becomes cruel*, impatient and envious, or whatever.

A long time before Disney's first animated feature films, the child psychiatrist Melanie Klein noted children's fear of being devoured, cut-up or torn to pieces, as well as their fear of being surrounded and persued by menacing figures. She explained the source of this dread as follows, "I have no doubt from my own analytic observations that the real objects behind those imaginary, terrifying figures are the child's own parents." [Note 3]

Klein's heiress, Dorothy Bloch, states in her book, "So the witch won't eat me", that "children are universally predisposed to the fear of infanticide by both their physical and their psychological stage of development ... Why shouldn't children be afraid of being killed? To begin with, consider their size. Is there anyone more "killable"? To be born tiny and defenceless in a world where even a mouse has the advantage of mobility is surely to find oneself at the mercy of every living being.." [Note 4]

Perhaps this explains children's apparently insatiable interest in time and again seeing Disney's mice managing to stand up to big cats, above all in the short cartoons, but also in feature films such as *Cinderella*, *Dumbo*, *The Rescuers* and *Basil the Great Mouse Detective*? In all of these seemingly uneven contests, children are able to see plainly how mice manage well after all – unless the National Swedish Board of Film Classification (i.e. the Swedish film censors) has been at work with its scissors...

The Censors' cuts

An examination of all of the cuts made by the Board of Film Classification in Disney's films shows that the censors seem to have wanted most of all to spare children precisely from seeing animated characters who are threatened with being *devoured*. Scenes with jaws, piercing teeth and claws, as well as open mouths, have been consistently cut away (or at least shortened), unless they are as comical as in the currently uncut version of *Peter Pan*, where Captain Cook is seen swimming towards the horizon, being chased by crocodiles' jaws. HOWEVER, through these cuts, which have removed sequences where characters run the risk of being eaten up, children are also "spared" the reassuring message that NO LIVING BEING IS ACTUALLY DEVoured...

In *Cinderella*, for example, the censors cut away about ten seconds in which Lucifer the cat tries to catch Gus the mouse, who defends himself by flicking buttons at the cat, like a kind of projectile. The cat has been endowed with enormous jaws full of sharp fangs, which shut thrice with a snap – but do not catch Gus, who escapes of course. However, children were not allowed to see this. In *The Sword in the Stone* the censors cut away a short sequence where the boy hero, Wart, now transformed into a little fish, is hunted by a huge pike.

In *The Jungle Book* the pursuing jaws belong to Shere Khan the tiger, who chases little Mowgli, but the children's audience were spared seeing a close-up of the tiger's sharp claws. In this scene Baloo the bear is comically dragged along, hanging onto Shere Khan's tail, which creates a screamingly funny impression that removes most of the menace. It is perhaps more understandable that the censors also cut away parts of the scene in which Kaa

the snake is trying to hypnotise Mowgli and strangle him, by winding himself around the boy's neck (with a view to eating him up afterwards).

However, certain other cuts are difficult to comprehend, for example the shortening of the scene where the dwarfs chase the witch (in *Snow White*) up towards the precipice. What motivated the removal of these fifteen seconds, before the witch, hit by lightning, falls down into the abyss watched by hungry vultures, is just incomprehensible to me. The children's audience usually rejoices at this final witch scene – which was perhaps considered to have a brutalising effect.

The first animated feature film in particular, *Snow White*, has been subjected to a great number of cuts and restorations over the years. At the Swedish premiere in 1938 the “uncensored” original version was shown, but as early as 1939 one and a half minutes of the film were cut away, and in 1949 eight of the original version's 83 minutes were removed by the censor's scissors. Therefore, there are probably extremely few (grand)parents in Sweden who have actually *witnessed* the hunter raising his knife against Snow White, or seen how she then flees from the castle... Four of these minutes were reinserted in 1982, however. For example, the sequence where the Evil Queen is transformed into a horrible witch in her basement lab was put back. The scene where the dwarfs chase the witch towards the precipice was also included then, although in a shortened form. Finally, in the year 1992 the original version from 1938 was shown once again, completely without cuts.

According to the censors, the reason for this last-mentioned decision was the recently passed regulation concerning age limits, meaning that preschool children could see films with a seven-year age limit in the company of parents. (The cuts of 1982 were made when the film had a “U” certificate, while the restoration of 1992 was made when the film had a “7” certificate.) Consequently, no five-year-old runs the risk of being exposed to this “child torture” *alone*, without the explanations and consolation of adults, as was the case in the matinees of the '30s, '40s and '50s.

However, the Evil Queen's transformation from a beautiful lady into a terrifying witch is precisely a scene that generally frightens preschool children. Undeniably, what horrifies them most of all is sudden *transformations* from a relatively normal appearance to monsters, animals or grotesquely deformed beings; e.g. when Jafar in *Aladdin* is transformed into a wicked cobra, or when naughty boys in *Pinocchio* are transformed into donkeys with tails and donkeys' ears and the audience can witness their hee-hawing in panic, when they see themselves in the mirror. Uncertainty with regard to physical status still fires the imagination too much. Transformations in the opposite direction, from ugly or evil to beautiful

and good, like that of the Beast in *Beauty and the Beast*, or from a wicked witch to a wicked dragon, are of course a great deal less terrifying.

Why the final scene in *Sleeping Beauty* was cut is beyond my comprehension. With the help of his enchanted sword, the Prince makes his way through the hedge of roses and approaches the castle. The Evil Fairy flies into a rage, swirls like a cyclone and is transformed into a fiery dragon, which the prince kills with the sword of truth and love. All that remains of the dragon is air and, to the sharp-eyed, the empty cloak of the “witch”. The scene was cut in such a way that the transformation became incomprehensible. It was therefore equally incomprehensible how the Evil Fairy was destroyed, and children wondered with alarm, “Where did the witch disappear?”

The whole final scene in this rococo film is also so stylised and abstract that few children should be frightened by it. For children already know that heroes always defeat dragons. *Or otherwise this would be the perfect opportunity to acquire this knowledge!* If scenes like this are cut away, it just becomes incomprehensible how/whether the hero actually succeeds – which is the real reason for going to the cinema at all! It is important that terror should be dispelled, and that children should understand the connections and be calmed by the message that the witches and dragons do not exist any longer. More children have probably had nightmares through not knowing that the evil beings have been eliminated for good than from magnificently murderous denouements.

The cuts in *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* and *Aristocats* are completely incomprehensible. It is true that Cruella de Vil tells her two henchmen to start chasing the pups (which are to be turned into a fur for her...). Then a wild car chase follows in which the villainous lady in all probability is killed in a car crash. But none of this ought to frighten small children more than anything else in the film that has not been cut. Nevertheless, Cruella is perhaps the most frightening of all of Disney’s characters – partly because she is relatively realistic compared with the unreal witches, and partly because (just like Medusa in *The Rescuers* and the Queen of Hearts in *Alice in Wonderland*) she is so uncontrolled and develops childish fits of rage; but above all because this everyday monster wants to kill the most defenceless of beings for the sake of her own beautification. Though the censor could naturally not cut half of the film away...

In *Aristocats* the censors’ scissors have, strangely enough, been hacking at one of the film’s most comical and least threatening situations. This cut concerns the ride in the sidecar, when one dog gets his teeth into the servant’s (=villain’s) trouser seat and another dog tries to bite his foot. In other words, here we have the standard ingredients of slapstick.

[Note 5]

In Mummy's belly

As yet no one has succeeded in elucidating exactly how children's fear of being devoured is to be explained. It is perhaps a question of some mental relic from a distant past, when the law of nature – eating or being eaten up – still included humankind too. Eating is the central activity of life, at least for small children, and the fear of not finding food, in the event of having to manage by oneself, troubles children right up to puberty. [Note 6] Nor is it particularly far-fetched that the more disgusting dishes served by mummy should actually be poisoned.

A possible result of eating being a symbol of security is that being eaten up becomes a symbol of insecurity and menace. The idea that one's very own mother should want to eat one up is perhaps connected with the knowledge that one has been in one's mother's belly. *How* one entered one's mother's belly is less clear, on the other hand, but that is where one's food ends up, of course...

It can then be a relief to have this threat proven to be illusory by an animated film: NONE of the small central characters actually end up in the belly of a larger character, apart from in some exceptional cases when the little guy soon returns safe and sound (e.g. the sewer cat Ratigan's mouse underling, who in *Basil the Great Mouse Detective* ends up most temporarily in the stomach of Felicia, the boss' feline executioner, but is spat out again when Ratigan changes his mind. Prior to this, however, a drunken but extremely peripheral mouse has been "eliminated" in the background, precisely by being devoured. However, this is a fate that at the very most befalls villains.)

Disney is obviously of the opinion that, instead of being afraid of devoured, all normal well-behaved children should fix their diffuse fear on death's-heads, bats, vultures, ravens, crocodiles, snakes, hyenas, witches, dragons and ghosts. People surrounding the children can then reassure them that there are no witches, dragons or ghosts – only in films! Of course, mummies do exist, on the other hand and without any doubt... And people around the children can then promise them that there are no crocodiles here and almost no snakes that are dangerous. Of course, the child can still keep her eyes open for crocodiles and vipers, but the fewer she encounters, the more she exhausts her fear.

“Childminding”

One can also see Disney's film sagas as tales of warning similar to those which contributed to the “childminding” of previous generations. I myself, brought up as I was between a river and a canal, was made afraid of the “water ghost”, which would come and take me away if I went too close to the water. Other such members of the “childcare staff” encountered at an

early age included the “well man”, the “forest witch” and different “trolls”. At that time no adult assured the child that these beings were merely invented either – quite the contrary! Disney tends more to make children scared of fire, snakes and certain strangers with suspicious intentions.

Instead of saying “Look out for all fawning, malevolent and treacherous people!” – abstract words whose meaning children must first acquire concrete experience of – the film says, “Be on your guard against (people who resemble) snakes!” – like Kaa in *The Jungle Book* or the somewhat more ridiculous and more comical Sir Hiss in *Robin Hood*. Or “Be suspicious of ‘foxes’ and ‘wolves’ and their simulated friendship.”

Unfortunately, children must also, in preparation for the journey away from the protection of the family, learn to doubt the benevolence and morality of certain people. They have to learn that there is a positive and a negative side of social relations. Where can one find a more suitable place of learning than the cinema, where the misjudgements of the audience do not have any real nasty consequences?

So who are Disney’s villains and, more importantly, what are their motives?

Disney democracy

As we have seen, it is not until the children in the films have become quite grown-up that they are threatened by mother figures. The threat to the *small children* in the animal fables and pet biographies (who fortunately have good, protecting parental figures at their side who do everything to ensure the security of the small children) is in contrast represented by childless villains who have a fixation on money and come from outside the family unit.

The threatening figures of Disney’s films are often very obviously “aristocrats”. They are not infrequently of noble birth, highbrow and use upper-class language. Some of them are eccentric, while others are snobs: well-dressed, well-educated and eloquent. They are often “foreign” in the sense of “unfamiliar”. They belong to the old world, to monarchies, other countries, other times. At any rate they do not belong to a democratic society.

The Evil Queen (*Snow White*), Prince John (*Robin Hood*), the Queen of Hearts (*Alice in Wonderland*), the Horned King (*The Black Cauldron*), Prince Scar (*The Lion King*) and “Prince” Hades (*Hercules*) are all sovereigns or pretenders to the throne who want to have even more power. Captain Hook (*Peter Pan*), Jafar (*Aladdin*), Frollo the judge (*The Hunchback of Notre Dame*) are all of noble birth, as the stepmother in *Cinderella* probably is too – to judge from her appearance; and likewise Ursula the sea witch (*The Little Mermaid*) and Governor Ratcliffe in *Pocahontas*. The last three hope to achieve social

advancement, at any rate. The remainder are rich, or wish to become rich – so strongly that they do not let themselves be stopped by any moral considerations.

Just as in the old fairy tales, the motives for the villains' evil deeds are greed, craving for money, envy, vanity and lust for power. The Evil Queen is cruel and envious, and cannot bear anyone surpassing her in beauty. Cruella de Vil is wealthy and well educated and drives a Rolls Royce. She is obsessed by her ruthless and extravagant egoism and only thinks of beautifying herself, whether or not the price is the lives of the small puppies. Medusa is perhaps more mad than evil, but she is just as obsessed – for her part by getting hold of the Devil's Eye diamond and becoming immensely rich. Cinderella's stepmother and stepsisters are vain, conceited and totally preoccupied by the thought of social advancement, which also means financial advantages, of course.

Prince John is malevolent and he only thinks about himself and money, Edgar the servant in the *Aristocats* is also controlled by greed and a fixation on money, like Stromboli, the director of the puppet theatre, and the other villains in *Pinocchio*, the rich loan shark Sykes in *Oliver and Company*, McLeach, the poacher in *The Rescuers Down Under*, and Governor Ratcliffe.

The evil fairy in *Sleeping Beauty* is perhaps “absolutely evil”, or else wants revenge, driven by envy caused by not being invited to the christening party. Captain Hook is probably also controlled by a craving for revenge. Shere Khan is motivated by a lust for power, like the Horned King, Ratigan, Ursula the sea witch, Jafar the sultan's counsellor, the pretender to the lions' throne, Scar, the god of the kingdom of the dead, Hades, and Shan-Yu, the leader of the Huns. Several of them are motivated by a combined craving for wealth *and* power.

The message of the films is: “Look how sick people become from just thinking about money, beauty or power!” “Watch out for people who just want to take advantage of you financially!” “Be careful not to have a fixation on your appearance, to be crazy about money or to crave power – otherwise you will become as terrible as these characters!”

Disney solidarity

The wealthy but wicked are contrasted with the many who are poor but good. Luckily the child is not left alone in the threatening world of those who are crazy about money and power. Here there are also a great number of unselfish and kind helpers, who are uninterested in riches and willing to free or in some other way assist the little characters who are vulnerable and innocent.

We have the dwarfs and the animals of the forest in *Snow White* and the mice and birds in *Cinderella*. Here the aristocratic cat Lucifer is even contrasted with the “working-class mice” Gus and Holger. In *The Jungle Book* all of the animals, including the vultures, show their solidarity with Mowgli against Shere Khan and Kaa. In *Robin Hood* there is a direct thematization of the solidarity of the humble people under the yoke of taxation. We also have the solidarity of the inhabitants of the swamps in *The Rescuers* and the collective rescue missions of the country animals and the dogs in *One Hundred and One Dalmatians*; and *Aristocats* is also teeming with animals who show their solidarity. In *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* it is the “masses” of Paris who support the main trio, and in *The Lion King* all the animals are against Scar and the hyenas, etc.

The good Disney characters say “No!” to selfishness, lust for power, a fixation on money, upper-class snobbery and aristocratic refinement. And “Yes!” to unselfishness, consideration, co-operation, the spirit of democracy and folksy simplicity. Just like the old folk tales, the “conservative, capitalistic and commercial” Disney shows that coveting money and power destroys people. And that those who value children most and money least become the happiest. This is a moral that is as good as any other one. Or is it merely a way to keep the humble people stuck in their poverty?

Causing their own death

What happens to the haughty and repulsive old villains? How do the kind and good young heroes and heroines get rid of them for good? Do they have to kill them? Who actually dies and how is the “violence” depicted?

The fact is that none of the central characters ever kills or seriously hurts anyone, either in the animated feature films or in the cartoons. The one exception is when Tramp kills the ship’s rat that is threatening the baby of Lady’s master and mistress. The characters that die in these films are caught in their own trap, or are removed by minor characters like the princes in *Sleeping Beauty* and *The Little Mermaid*. The evil types that these young men eliminate are monsters, however, not human beings: a dragon and a deep-sea monster, respectively.

For evil punishes itself. Cruella de Vil is (probably) killed in a car crash driving her own Rolls Royce, as is Sykes the loan shark in his luxury car. Scar the fratricide dies by falling over a precipice, like McLeach the poacher in the Australian Crocodile Falls. Frollo the judge also falls a good many metres to his death, like the Evil Queen in *Snow White* and Gaston in *Beauty and the Beast*. Medusa’s crocodiles turn against her, just like the crocodile

that chases Captain Hook. It is true that the avalanche caused by Mulàn probably took the lives of many Huns, but this is only depicted as a way for her to escape the invaders herself.

The animal underlings of the wicked also fall over precipices, e.g. the treacherous cat Lucifer (*Cinderella*), McLeach's malevolent lizard, Joanna, as well as the bear in *The Fox and the Hound*. The satanic feline executioner, Felicia, in *Basil the Great Mouse Detective*, is taken care of in a suitable manner by royal bloodhounds – out of sight behind a wall, it is true.

Most often the villains meet with precisely the horrible fates that they have planned for their good intended victims. In all of the cases their death is caused by the villains themselves, at any rate. Our representatives of goodness, thanks to this poetic justice, do not need to soil their clean small hands. And the audience does not need to bother or worry about this, which of course is the very point of this “violence as entertainment” and “fright as entertainment”...

(1985 + 1998)

Notes

1. Charles Lamb: "Witches and Other Night Fears", in *Essays of Elia*, London 1906 (originally 1833), pp. 79-80.
2. Ruth Böttigheimer: "The Face of Evil", *Fabula* 29 (1988), pp. 326-41
3. Melanie Klein: *Contributions to psycho-analysis 1921-1945*, London 1964, p. 268
4. Dorothy Bloch: *So the witch won't eat me: fantasy and the child's fear of infanticide*, London: Jason Aronson 1994, p3.
5. The only cut in a Disney film that the Swedish National Board of Film Classification made after 1980 concerns the “U” certificate version of *The Rescuers* (1988). The three cuts show a “threat to a girl among the reeds”, a “scene with mice shut inside an organ” and an “accident where someone almost drowned”.
6. Compare the central position of eating in all children's culture. See for example chapter 3 in my book on the screen versions of Astrid Lindgren's books, *En lek för ögat*, Uppsala 1987.

5. Beauties, stepmums and godmothers

Portrayed in a more unfavourable light than their male counterparts?

Whatever way Disney has turned – either alive or in his grave – “he” has not been able to avoid criticism. Sexism has been alleged when many men but few women have figured in leading roles (e.g. in *The Jungle Book* and *The Lion King*), or when the villains are women; but not, on the other hand when the ratio is four to one in favour of women (as in *Cinderella* or *Sleeping Beauty*) or when the villains are men. The Disney group has been criticised not only for wimpish, compliant and passive teenage girls, but also for wicked stepmothers who are far too active and feminist witches who have a lust for power.

If the female villains have been slender (like the stepmother in *Cinderella*, Snow White’s beautiful stepmother, the evil fairy in *Sleeping Beauty* or the “death’s-head-like” Cruella de Vil in *One Hundred and One Dalmatians*) or fat (like the hideous Medusa in *The Rescuers* or the repugnant, octopus-like sea witch, Ursula, in *The Little Mermaid*), both choices have been subjected to equally strong criticism. And ugly female villains or stepsisters have been condemned just as much as beautiful female villains and exquisitely beautiful heroines.

There is a tendency to forget the fact that the ratio between male and female villains is approaching 50:50 (although a male predominance still prevails). Nor have the most vociferous critics noticed the fact that the heroines almost always struggle against female antagonists, while the heroes (such as Robin Hood, Aladdin, Simba, Quasimodo and Hercules) mostly take up the fight with male opponents – and that these male villains are sometimes fat, ugly and coarse (like Stromboli, the director of the puppet theatre in *Pinocchio*), and sometimes thin and refined (e.g. Captain Hook, the Sultan’s counsellor, Jafar, and Frolo the judge). Moreover, such critics have not noticed that the good female helpers of the girls are almost always plump, grandmotherly godmothers or fairies, just as the helpers of the boys are mostly equally fat and comical men. Evidently, no one can be bothered either to reflect on what the underlying reasons for these polarised relationships might conceivably be.

Was it better in former days, in the stories upon which the wonder tale films were based? It is sometimes asserted that the old fairy tales form the basis of all the film genres of today. It is maintained that all conspiracy stories begin with “The Emperor’s New Clothes” and

that “Ninja feminism” of the “Thelma and Louise” type begins with Gretel in “Hansel and Gretel”. “Beauty and the Beast”, for example, has been adapted for the screen about ten times in a more direct form, as well as in disguise as *King Kong*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* or *Edward Scissorhands*. And now Disney provides one more version. The previous animated feature film with a teenage girl in the leading role, *The Little Mermaid*, was also based on a fairy tale, namely H.C. Andersen’s art tale, “Den Lille Havfrue” from 1837, so that a comparison may be appropriate.

The folk tales in the adaptations of the Grimm brothers or Charles Perrault, for example, are to a small extent sacred original tales. Rather, they are versions of earlier orally related stories which have been skilfully written down and doctored, and which in the case of the German brothers, who were unable to let things alone, have even been called the “Grimm genre”. Similarly, Disney’s film sagas too are not always faithful to the tales on which they are based. Of course, all folk culture changes in the course of time and the fact that the old 16th century tale “Beauty and the Beast” (or the much older myth of “Amor and Psyche” on which it is based) on the “animal bridegroom” theme is today rather difficult to recognise is therefore quite in order. The fact that Disney has also slightly changed more modern tales (e.g. “The Little Mermaid”), whose copyright-owning authors are known, is also connected with the fact that times change, but is primarily due to the fact that Disney has endeavoured to adapt the original adult content to true *children’s culture*.

Is it then possible perhaps to notice any historical change, in the sense that Disney might have been influenced by the debate on gender roles that has been going on for the past few decades? Absolutely, but I think that the question of the activeness or passiveness of the main character is connected with the genre, the age of the central character and the complex of problems treated by the story, just as much as it is connected with the year in which the film happens to have been made.

As early as in *Cinderella* we had in fact quite an active and even humorous heroine. In *Bambi* we have a clumsy young boy, in *Pinocchio* a foolhardy and gullible schoolboy and in *Dumbo* a boy who is both ugly and insecure – but no one gets irritated at *these* gender roles for these reasons.

Hints of sexuality

Teenage girls should not be compared with small boys, but should be judged in relation to other teenagers. Consequently, it seems most reasonable to compare the 40- to 50-year-old Disney versions of the magical wonder tales about Snow White and *Cinderella* with *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*. Both Snow White and *Cinderella* have been

accused of being passive and wimpish, indeed scarcely alive, but both are in fact also hard working young women who are depicted in a much more positive light than their lazy stepsisters, for example. The fact that Snow White and Sleeping Beauty have to be woken up and brought back to life again by a man is of course to be interpreted symbolically, as is the fact that Beast must be brought back to life by Belle.

The hints of sexuality in the fairy tales are always very subtle. We perhaps do not even think of the fact that it is when they have reached sexual maturity that Snow White is sent out into the forest to be murdered, Sleeping Beauty is put to sleep and the little mermaid eventually – but only temporarily – is allowed to visit the world above the surface of the water. In other words they have their freedom severely restricted at that very time in life when the male heroes usually reach full independence.

Perhaps this occurs as a protection for the heroine, who must remain pure for the only man who will finally lay claim to her, as well as because the consequences of premarital relations were previously so much more devastating for the female party. And quite rightly, sexuality is a good deal more accentuated in the two most recent wonder tales, with teenage girls as heroines, which were made after the advent of the contraceptive pill. However, in all of Disney's films there has been *visually* depicted sexuality, even if it has not been discussed so much.

Otherwise, sexuality in children's tales seems to be confined to raised swords and growing beanstalks. Nor do any equally powerful female equivalents of phallic symbols exist, even if shoes, jars, houses, rooms and forests – things that offer penetration as well as ensnarement of the man – are usually interpreted as feminine symbols. This type of sexual imagery is of course incomprehensible to most children or is not even always noticed by adults, but it can be learnt by constant repetition as part of our cultural heritage and thus contribute to unconscious understanding. So let us now see how the films – and books – describe their young women.

H.C. Andersen

H.C. Andersen's art tale is about a mermaid who on her fifteenth birthday is allowed to visit the world of humans, becomes completely captivated and wishes to become a human being. She wants to marry a prince and achieve immortality, but needs the assistance of a witch to realise her wishes – at a high price: a great deal of suffering and the loss of her beautiful voice. When the prince falls for a princess instead, the mermaid's sisters provide her with a dagger to kill the prince, but she chooses instead to sacrifice herself, so that she might possibly, within the next 300 years and through good deeds, thereby obtain an immortal

soul. She dies as a martyr and is moved to a third kingdom, that of the “daughters of the air”. As can be seen, the tale has clear religious overtones.

The mermaid comes from a world dominated by women (even if she grew up without her mother and with her paternal grandmother, the queen mother, as her mother substitute) where her father, the king of the sea, is only a figure head and the sea witch is the one who possesses the real power. The witch is frightening, old, ugly and wicked. In other words, she is not a good helper of the classical type figuring in fairy tales, but rather her “assistance” is precisely what makes the mermaid’s endeavours impossible. The girl is the youngest and most beautiful of the sea princesses, courageous and good. The prince is also young and handsome, but self-centred, egoistic and passive, and really does not deserve the mermaid.

The plot of a folk tale emphasises trials, of which the main character may generally fail the first two, but pass the third and decisive one. With the version of the mermaid in Andersen’s art tale, it is precisely the reverse. Initially it can be said that she passes several tests, partly by repudiating her seductive and deadly nature as a tempting sex object (whose task is to entice sailors to sail towards the rocks), when she instead rescues the shipwrecked prince from drowning, and partly by sacrificing her enchanting voice in order to obtain human legs instead of her tail fin, in a very painful way.

However, when the decisive trial comes, namely that of securing the prince’s love and thereby an immortal soul, she is suddenly not successful at all. Since the mermaid cannot speak, she cannot express her feelings either, so that the prince instead marries the little princess whom he thinks is the one who rescued him from death by drowning. But perhaps this is not the final test after all? The mermaid is given the opportunity of returning to the world of the sea if she kills the prince, but she refuses, because her love for him is unselfish and because such an act would be unworthy of a person who desires immortality. The reward, however, is entirely spiritual.

Christian allegory

Now, is this story really about unrequited love? No, the mermaid does not in actual fact want to have the prince at all, for she remains silent and hides every time she has the opportunity to show herself. The loss of her tongue does not really make any difference, because she never used it any way while she still had it. The prince passes her over because *she makes herself* invisible and mutely suffers. For even a dumb person can in fact give signals, use gestures and facial expressions, but she does not move a limb.

The mermaid obviously does not want to achieve eternal life either at any price, since she abandons her struggle for this as easily as she abandons her struggle for marriage, as soon as

she encounters the slightest setback. Her longing is not a yearning for the prince, but he is merely a symbol for her desire for paternal protection, a “higher” world and eternity. She displays a masochistic, romantic and Christian passiveness. Andersen’s story is therefore more a Christian allegory than a fairy tale. Religious needs are rather often regarded as representing the longing for a good father.

H.C. Andersen’s tour de force is in actual fact a story about death. When the mermaid is finally saved by the “daughters of the air”, she is rewarded with something even “finer” than human love: good prospects of an immortal soul or eternal life. Consequently, the tale renounces love between human beings. As is so often the case with H.C. Andersen, more than one story is told here. The author himself believes that he is telling a love story, but between the lines he reveals instead his fear of love and death. [Note 1] Fear of death becomes instead a death wish.

The passion of the mermaid is not aimed at a real live prince, but at a dumb marble bust. She confuses the prince with the exquisitely beautiful statue that she has fallen in love with, just as he confuses the princess with the mermaid who has saved his life. The mermaid’s aspiration for immortality smells, in no mean way, of sublimated or repressed sexuality, but *she* in fact has a greater fixation on the favourable appearance of the object of her love than he has. Andersen’s self-centred and conceited prince loves his future consort merely because (he believes that) she rescued him.

Traditionally mermaids are mythological sex symbols, but this mermaid is completely the opposite: an asexual, innocent child who is seeking to enter a sexual phase, but converts this sexuality to spirituality. The pagan is transformed here into something Christian, and perdition is transformed into deliverance. In “The Little Mermaid” the author contrasts innocence with sexuality, but does not even realise that the siren is far from being “small” any longer. Very early in the tale the mermaid reveals in a conversation with her grandmother that it is not so much her yearning for the prince, but immortality that is her real goal. Accordingly, it is not (as for example in the tales about Snow White and Cinderella) a question of yearning for confirmation from another person, love, happiness or a positive attitude to life, but the Dane is motivated by a fear of death.

It is true that the removal of the mermaid’s tongue (and thereby the loss of her power of speech and ability to sing) can be seen as a form of female castration and denial of identity. She now becomes severely handicapped by not being able to speak for herself, but, considering the motive of bargaining for a soul that will live forever, the price immediately feels absurd and sick. Since her goal is not really the prince, who has noticed that she has so “expressive eyes”, it does not really matter either that the mermaid, like Echo before

Narcissus, is dumb. Her “self-realisation” can, of course, only be achieved in and through death, and when she will be serving God, it will not make any difference whether she has a voice or not.

Untruthfulness

Andersen is therefore lying both to himself and to the reader. He wants to persuade us that the story is about “spirituality”, when in actual fact it is a question of a disguised denial of death – and therefore of life itself. However, a desire for immortality based on fear of death is not more “spiritual” and commendable than earthly love. H.C. Andersen gives expression here to his customary psychological sadism, at least in the eyes and ears of the child recipient, who too easily takes it personally when hearing formulations like “[The Prince] smiled upon those who stood round him. But to her (=the mermaid) he sent no smile; he knew not that she had saved him.” Describing the egocentric prince’s feelings for the mermaid, whom he calls his “foundling”, Andersen compares his feelings for the girl to the affection that one would feel for a good, dear child. The prince does not love her as he would love a future wife. [Note 2] Here we have examples of a sadistic rejection of both children and the mermaid. And this receives the stamp of great children’s literature!

Moreover, Andersen lets the possibly happy ending be the responsibility of the reading or listening children, and not of the mermaid herself or God. For it is not until 300 years later that the siren, as one of the daughters of the air, will be allowed to die and hover in the Kingdom of God, but this *can* happen earlier, on condition that the children make their parents happy and *deserve* their parents’ love! Otherwise God will extend the period of probation of the daughters of the air by a year for each “bad” child, rather than shorten it by a year for each “good” child... So if you do not behave, my dear, you prolong the mermaid’s suffering.

Here the children listening to the story are made more powerful than God, but merely concerning their self-humbling. Or is it rather the parents who control God, since it is *their* rules that the children are to follow?

As remarkable as the fact that children should need to prove themselves worthy of their parents’ love, is the fact that the mermaid in this way should need to deserve her ascension to Heaven. For all the time she *has* been living a morally exemplary life and has constantly proved to be unselfish and good. The mermaid should already possess the immortal soul that she desires so much, considering how persistently she has always chosen good deeds instead of bad deeds. Surely choosing goodness *without* any promise of a reward, without barter or ulterior motives is fundamental for Christian ethics? Is it not self-chosen goodness – rather

than external decrees – that entitles one to “eternal life”? And where did the Christian grace and the God of love disappear?

This newly added ethical demand is neither Christian nor just. [Note 3] It is quite simply a question of disciplining children – apart from a wretched ending to a bad story.

And why are there no “sons of the air” who in a similar way are compelled to provide care for human beings on God’s behalf, before deserving an immortal soul? Is it because serving is “female” according to nature? Moreover, Christianity unequivocally has a *male* head... Why does no one accuse Andersen of creating gender role stereotypes when he shows how women evidently choose the path of suffering voluntarily [Note 4] and how women so willingly sacrifice their own happiness...?

Disney’s little mermaid

The mermaid’s longing for immortality has naturally been completely omitted from Disney’s animated film. His version is instead more true to the classic folk tale’s struggle between good and evil. Here the mermaid’s yearning for the prince is the equivalent of longing for a more independent life of her own. Here the wicked sea witch Ursula proves to be identical to Ariel’s double, produced by magic in the form of the “life-saving” princess whom Prince Eric has fallen in love with on account of her voice. Ursula is seeking power over both land and sea. When the princess’/witch’s true nature is revealed, the mermaid regains her voice and gets her prince.

It stands to reason that earthly love is more comprehensible to a child than spiritual love and immortality. Likewise it should be quite apparent (at least to adults) that earthly love and sexuality are also morally superior to Andersen’s “spirituality” and religious conceptions of eternal life, with God as a kind of protecting but strict father figure for “beloved” but lost children – who are not, however, vouchsafed any gifts of grace without prior conditions.

Accordingly, Disney’s children’s film is more a story about maturity and liberation than any religious philosophising about an immortal “soul”. The film’s fearless, headstrong and red-haired sixteen-year-old mermaid, Ariel, rebels against her father by dreamily collecting human things from ships that have sunk. Just as these odds and ends (e.g. a silver fork and a pipe) — in an adult way – can be interpreted as signs of materialism, so can they be seen as the objectively worthless “treasures” of a child, which constitute the pretext for leaving home. For Ariel believes that human beings have above all more *freedom* than the inhabitants of the sea.

Her father, Triton the king of the sea, is angry with her because she has been up to the surface, but she declares, “I’m sixteen years old - I’m not a *child* anymore.” However, Triton forbids her to swim up to the surface again, since he does not want her to be detected by “those barbarians”. Human beings “[are] all the same. Spineless, savage, harpooning, fish-eaters...” “I consider myself a reasonable merman. I set certain rules, and I expect those rules to be obeyed.” “As long as you live under my ocean, you’ll obey my rules!”

Ariel does not know how she will be able to get Triton her father to understand. She wants, in other words, to become human (i.e. adult) *long before* she falls in love with the prince. She sings in the almost obligatory Disney language the song entitled “Part of Your World”, where she expresses her dream of being part of THAT world: “I want more. I wanna be where the people are. I wanna see, wanna see 'em dancin'... Up where they walk, up where they run, up where they stay all day in the sun. Wanderin' free... Bet you on land, they understand. Bet you they don't reprimand their daughters...What would I give, if I could live, outta these waters? What would I pay to spend a day warm on the sand? ... Sick o' swimmin', ready to stand, and ready to know what the people know. Ask 'em my questions, and get some answers. What's a fire and why does it ... burn?” At the same time she is holding a book in her hand, symbolising her thirst for knowledge. To Ariel making her way up onto land means admission to a more adult world: independence, standing on her own two feet, freedom of movement — power over herself.

After saving the drowning Prince Eric, she sings once again, “If we could stay all day in the sun? Just you and me. And I could be part of YOUR world.” If the prince of the world of the land in Andersen’s tale is a symbol of a “higher world” than the world of the sea (at any rate halfway to the highest), for the mermaid of the film he is rather a symbol of freedom from dependence on parents and a more exciting life. Here “up there” stands for “adulthood”, in contrast to the “down here” of childhood. In the film the *prince* is also won as a kind of “prize” in fact – just as so many times before the princess in the folk tale has been the youngest brother’s reward for proving his adulthood.

Feminist contempt

Ariel already *has* a soul and a wonderful voice that she is prepared to use for bargaining with Ursula the sea witch. She purchases a magic potion that will transform her into a human being within three days. If the prince has not kissed Ariel before the sun has set on the third day, she will become a mermaid once again and then belong to the sea witch. Ariel wonders indeed how she will manage to reach the prince without her voice, but Ursula

points out ironically, “You'll have your looks! Your pretty face! And don't underestimate the importance of body language! Ha! The men up there don't like a lot of blabber.” Ursula has already been able to provide “help” previously, “To help unfortunate merfolk - like yourself. Poor souls with no one else to turn to. ... This one longing to be thinner, that one wants to get the girl. And do I help them? Yes, indeed.”

Certainly, here the witch gives expression to a feminist contempt both for certain men and for certain women, but the children's audience as yet probably understands as little of this as the mermaid does. In Ursula's ironic song about the fixation that members of *both* sexes have on their own body, we see the “smoky contours” of both a very thin young man and a fat girl who have previously received “help” from the witch to acquire “ideal proportions”. But in fact we do not see Ariel *suffer* in order to obtain the right kind of body proportions, because she already has them. And it is wrong to assert that Prince Eric is only interested in Ariel's appearance, for the mermaid, *in spite of* her physical attractiveness, is in fact not capable of seducing him without her enchanting voice. Rather, it is Ariel who has a fixation on the prince's appearance.

It is obvious that the fat, white-haired Ursula, with her eight octopus tentacles, is crazy about power and in actual fact does not want to harm Ariel in particular, but wants to become mistress of land and sea: “Poor little princess - it's not *you* I'm after. I've a much bigger fish to...” To all appearances Ursula lived previously in King Triton's castle, but was then banished and is now living in exile, and we can only guess the reason. Obviously she tried to take power over her husband, and the difference between Ursula's evil and Ariel's good rebellion is that the princess only wants to take power over herself, while the queen also wants to take power over others, including the king. And quite rightly, Triton finally changes places with Ariel as an enchanted prisoner and Ursula can triumphantly place his crown on her head, “The sea and all its spoils bow to my power!”

Like a giant monster she rises to the surface, but is killed at the right moment by Prince Eric, who has so far been passive and dreamy, but now steers the remains of his wrecked ship straight through her. And at the same time those who have been enchanted and imprisoned magically regain their freedom. It turns out in the end that Ariel's father, Triton, in actual fact also possesses the ability to transform his daughter from a mermaid into a human being, so that the wedding between Eric and Ariel can take place. The newly-weds set out on a honeymoon cruise and Ariel says farewell to Triton with the words, “I love you, Daddy.”

Is Ariel then forced to choose between these two men, Triton and Eric? Can she not conceive of a life without male protection? Does she have to accept the prince's culture, to

be able to relinquish the culture of her father? Are girls not able to obtain an identity independently of their parents in any other way than by entering a new dependence on a man? Is love here the same as marriage without sexuality? Or is marriage merely the means of achieving an end – a convenient symbol of adulthood and liberation – and not an end in itself? Does Ariel trap the prince? Does Disney's Ariel only make *painless* sacrifices? It is undeniable that Andersen's mermaid *suffers* more – but is that *better*?

In my opinion we must also consider these questions from the perspective of children. Is this really about killing the *mother*? Is there not actually an exceptionally positive female bond between the sea witch and the mermaid in Disney's tale? As is the case in almost all of Disney's films, the story is more about a complex of problems connected with identity and about growing pains than it is a drama about relations.

Children's perspective

If we consider the fact that Disney's regular audience consists of children under the age of ten, many of whom are only five years of age, this accentuation of the father becomes more comprehensible. If the heroic character had been a boy, the final phrase would probably have been, "I love you, Mummy." But why then are so few of Disney's leading characters *young men* in their upper teens who are interested in marriage? It is true that Robin Hood is married in the final scene, but the theme is definitely more common in the case of teenage girls.

For boys the problems of liberation probably occur in an *earlier* and less complicated phase of their development process than such problems occur for girls! Even at an early age, boys *want* to grab their freedom, especially from their mother. Of course, dependence on parents, which is primarily represented by the relationship with the mother, involves at the same time for girls a *positively* close bond of community and the source of a gender role model, which makes their emancipation more difficult.

Boys, on the other hand, are expected to separate from the mother more completely than girls need to do, and therefore must at an early stage go out of the home in order to find out "who they are" and what really is "male" as opposed to "female", since the man seems to completely lack power in the home. For them gender role problems are instead more conspicuous in their younger years. Boys do not know what they should be like, just that should be the *opposite* of mummy and be "*anti*"-everything represented by all the women surrounding them. Boys turn away from the women around them and do not compare themselves with them in any other sense than that they use them as contrasts. Perhaps that is also the reason why they are constantly fighting against those who are *totally different* to

themselves: monsters, trolls and dragons, etc. This dualism is also noticed at an early stage in their play: good against evil, defence and attack, and life or death, etc.

Since girls to a high degree resemble and will become roughly like all the women surrounding them, they have to look for *small* but still distinguishing *differences* between themselves and their mother and schoolmistress, in order to detect both their own and other people's individuality. Boys instead look desperately for *similarities* to other boys and to men, but since the boys' relations to them are not close, are always changing and take place in large groups, the similarities become "*rougher*". Girls recognise themselves more easily in *concrete individuals* (e.g. mothers). Boys, on the other hand – on account of the more often absent (or at any rate more diffuse) father – concentrate on a *social role*, on certain aspects of the man's role as it is represented by heroes, for example.

For Sleeping Beauty and other young women, therefore, becoming a woman involves an "awakening" rather than a more radical development and exploration *outside* the home, which boys require for their maturity. Development and exploratory excursions are for the most part a more exciting but also more dangerous business. For many children, both boys and girls, a friend of their own age can provide temporary support on the road away from this dependence and this uncertainty. Managing all by oneself still appears to be far too frightening, but what "should" a boy or a girl be like?

Small boys need peers to back up their "opposite identity" (in relation to the mother) and feel that they are not "wrong", but like everybody else. Teenage girls, on the other hand, require contrasts so that their uniqueness will emerge more clearly, since they previously experienced their similarity to their mother strongly. The fact that this freedom from parental supervision can be perceived as absolute freedom, and not as a new confining bond with a friend of their own age, is easy to understand and is probably needed as an antidote against the teenager's feelings of loneliness. The relations between the sexes are for a long time experienced by children as ties of friendship, even if adults describe them in terms of love.

Disney's films have also been criticised for being asexual and above all for omitting "dangerous" female sexuality. Nevertheless, female bodies are accentuated in a completely different way compared with those of the flat paper men, which, however, is not regarded as positive, because women's bodies are now regarded as merely being objectified and exposed to men's eyes for their delight. Here the Catch 22 of the film makers is that female bodies and sexuality are to be shown, but not so that boys and men can see them. However, a ban on the male sex visiting the cinema is probably not immediately imminent. But on what grounds can one actually assert that the *girls* in the audience are not interested in these girls' bodies just as much?

Bodily messages

The Disney group has almost always used both film stars and living actors as models for its drawings, which Elisabeth Bell has pointed out. [Note 5] Snow White (from 1937), with her big, expressive eyes, her pouting lips and her broad features, resembles, according to Bell, the *ingenue* of the silent film (particularly the simple, innocent and angelic Janet Gaynor). Cinderella (from 1950) makes one think of Grace Kelly's sophisticated elegance. It is said that Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*, with her blue eyes, her snub nose and her fringe, has been modelled on Farrah Fawcett. There is a definite likeness, in my view, between Pocahontas and the supermodel Naomi Campbell, just as I see Demi Moore in Esmeralda.

Moreover, not only the heroines' faces, but also their bodies have living models, and in the case of the three fairy tale princesses, Snow White, Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty, the models were classical ballet dancers. *Sleeping Beauty* was even filmed all the way through as live action before it was drawn. And since the main characters were meant to be royal, an aristocratic deportment was required, as well as the formal way of carrying oneself that the trained bodies of ballet dancers "innately" and "naturally" express. Accordingly, this is the reason why Cinderella trips along as unnaturally as a prima ballerina, not just in the song and dance scenes. Of course, this appeals to all the small girls who want to be both a princess and a ballerina when they grow up...

However, ballet is "highbrow culture", while wonder tales are folk culture, which, according to Bell, easily results in an animated cultural clash. The young women of the wonder tales are by definition meant to be silent, passive and helpless victims or martyrs. In other words they are also to behave in accordance with the real live young girls of today, who, having been active, verbal and self-confident, suddenly in puberty become taciturn and insecure. Disney's heroines undergo the same metamorphosis, but thanks to their straight-backed ballet models, an interesting conflict arises in fact.

Here, to quote Bell, a "somatic mixed massage" is created. For while the heroines obediently conform to the feminine passiveness and spirit of sacrifice of the wonder tale, their bodies radiate the strength, discipline and control of the ballet dancer. (Cinderella's wicked stepsisters, on the other hand, are not portrayed as walking on tiptoe in the animation, but place their heels firmly on ground first and then bend their knees extra.) Likewise, the minor characters, in the form of princes, correspond to the supporting dancers of classical ballet, whose foremost asset is strong legs. Body language is something that children pay special attention to...

“The politics of innocence”

In *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast* (as in the films after them) the animators no longer use any elitist, asexual classical ballet dancer as a model for their drawings, but rather a young girl from a modern improvising dance troupe. Moreover, both heroines are active and almost burlesque. In some scenes Ariel in particular, with her shell bra and her body language, resembles a family-friendly, but still tempting stripper. At the same time these leading characters are neither suffering nor passive, so that, as I see it, there is no longer any significant cultural clash.

We must not forget the fact that Ariel is not only the character that has to be rescued by the prince, but that previous to that she has saved his life. She has all the time been extremely active and has been transformed from the headstrong girl who wants to make her own decisions, who collects human things from sunken ships, who has a crush on the prince, and who loses her voice, her fins and her friends. She has been transformed into the girl who regains what she has lost; who acquires legs and fine clothes, but once again takes them off; who leaves her father, but returns to him, only to leave him once again; who marries the prince in different imaginary and real forms, and alternately leaves him once again for her underwater friends. [Note 6] Ariel tries out all sorts of different female roles and in this connection undeniably reminds one of the boys of the animal fable, as well as the fancy-dress games of preschool and primary school girls, where nothing is irrevocable either.

Not only does the film remind one of the dressing-up games of small girls, but also of their dancing in front of the TV. Chris Richards [Note 7] describes the “TV dancing” of his six- and ten-year-old daughters (especially to the mermaid’s song “Under the Sea”), when they borrow ideas from the film and combine them with material from many other sources. He is of the opinion that, when children (and perhaps even teenagers) dance, they do not do so in the form of their own self, but pretending to be “someone else”, e.g. a character from a film or a pop star.

In other words, they are anticipating a future self of their own by enacting and imagining similarities to and differences from different models. Dancing means pretending to be someone else (Janet Jackson, Madonna or the Spice Girls, for example), someone older, more sexy and more advanced. Here one is testing the rules in the performance or game that the models seem to be involved in. One is “trying on” the other person’s *body* above all, and for small girls a woman’s body obviously means breasts and a bare navel, both of which Ariel possesses, quite clearly. While dancing, one sees oneself (indistinctly - fortunately enough) reflected in the mirror, in a window or even in the reflections from the TV screen.

For small girls teenagers are often associated with dancing, and to be able to dance one has to have legs, which is why it is important for Ariel to obtain such limbs. With feet one can dance on firm ground much more steadily than if one has fins, with which one risks being drawn along in the whirling water of the sea. Evidently small girls wish to have more stable ground under their feet, which perhaps means precisely that they want to be able to make their own decisions to a greater extent and do not want to be subjected to the unpredictable changes of their parents.

Girls' uncertainty as to their future life oscillates between dependence and independence. In order to grow up, Ariel must become an individual who is free from her father and sisters - not to mention free from her mother (the sea witch). The song entitled "Part of Your World" provides a mixture of quasi-feminism, teenage rebellion and childish curiosity. It can certainly seem somewhat paradoxical that a film intended for an audience of small girls includes a lament from a sixteen-year-old who above all wants to *leave* childhood, but this obviously fascinates small girls, who themselves perhaps already vaguely share her feeling.

Divas and femmes fatales

In all of the films, craving for power and money, treachery and consumer hysteria are placed in middle age in the female life cycle. As far as Disney's "evil" women are concerned (witches, queens and (step)mothers), they also have a kind of bodily model: the *diva* of the silent film and the so-called *femme fatale* of the classic Hollywood film, with their rolling eyes, the exaggerated movements of their hips and arms, and their snake-like necks in low-cut dresses. Even if the hypersexualised animated characters are not directly modelled on living actresses, Ursula the sea witch, for example, has according to Elizabeth Bell been created with the femme fatale of *Sunset Boulevard*, Norma Desmond, in mind, now with a dash of the transvestite Divine in the brew.

The adult men - kings and fathers - mostly resemble Father Christmas and are almost always short, fat, baldheaded, pompous and conceited, as well as inefficient and without any control over their children, women, lackeys, castles and kingdoms. They are most often approaching the age of retirement, i.e. are a decade or two older than the "vixens", and rather appear to be impotent, in contrast to their over-sexualised female counterparts. Bell points out that here the patriarchy is not only challenged by the women and children, but also by the way in which the Disney group animates the fathers. At the same time sexuality is made slightly repulsive by being associated only with the predatory witches. Fortunately, love interests *children* more than passion and sex does...

Disney's helping grandparents, on the other hand, have no direct iconic precursors, either in dance or in film history. Here the Disney group has been compelled to create an image of supernatural female goodness by itself: good fairies, godmothers and elves, who take care of, look after, assist and protect, in addition to being scatterbrained and rather confused. Purely physically the old ladies are most often not curvaceous, but pear-shaped, and in general they lack hips, but possess bosoms all the more. Their hair is gray or white and often covered with a bonnet, and they have no make-up on and wear no jewellery. The disposition of these ladies is calm, friendly, warm, kind-hearted, forgiving, generous, and indeed even self-sacrificing.

In other words, here the sacrifices of women are not placed in a period when they are mothers of small children, which is the case in reality, but in their age of retirement. These asexual, not very threatening ladies re-establish the order that the femme fatale has destroyed. Here good motherhood is depicted, oddly enough, through the grandmothers who have themselves quite obviously failed in bringing up their own daughters!

This definitely supports the view that the women in these films are not really divided up into good or evil characters, but move in terms of time in a continuum consisting first of good mothers of small girls, then evil mothers of teenage girls, and finally, once again, good mothers of young women. Consequently, the witches will themselves in a decade or two become good fairies. And the princesses will tumble into the black hole of motherhood, become femmes fatales, divas and evil "stepmothers". Their bodies will at the same time slowly fatten.

Good Disney women evidently do not produce children, but rather grandchildren. Consequently, their care and sacrifices become, of course, even more unselfish, since they are not given or made of necessity, but as a free choice. They simply appear with their magic and willingness to help when they are most needed during the girl's transition to womanhood (sexual maturity, marriage and childbirth). Otherwise they display great insight in keeping themselves at a suitable distance. In contrast to the "black witches", these "white witches" do not in their magic brews use herbs that actually exist or drops of blood, but achieve their effect with the help of more magically glittering stardust and magic wands. We can also observe that there are few "male fairies" in Disney films: only Ariel's father, Triton, who with the help of magic is capable of giving his daughter a human body, and possibly Merlin the magician. Fathers are, as mentioned previously, seldom experienced as possessing any power at home...

However, precisely because Disney resorted to the cinematic convention of the femme fatale, the animated hyper-wicked women also appear all the more clearly in all their

artificiality: they simply refer to a cinematic cliché and not to any prototypes fetched from everyday reality. Similarly, the almost nauseatingly super-good and supernatural "elves" or "angels" associated with the glittering stuff of Disney's animated films (the Blue Fairy in *Pinocchio*, and Tinkerbell in *Peter Pan*) become just as obviously creations of the imagination. A girl can perhaps hope to become a princess, but not to become an "elf" – possibly a scatterbrained godmother. At the same time she does not need to worry about ending up as a witch herself. The two antitheses are merely an ideal type and an anti-type, respectively, which one has to strive towards or be on one's guard against and which only exist in fiction, as luck would have it.

The boys for their part have to devote all their energy to attempting to escape transformation from handsome princes with strong legs into impotent, semi-confused, baldheaded and fat old men or dwarfs; or else horrible, rather often feminine monsters who deny their instincts. Accordingly, both sexes are treated equally unfairly.

Double standards

For some reason, however, there is an abundance of double standards applied when judging the products of children's culture – and in particular if they bear Disney's hallmark. Disney's films are rather often accused of containing violence, even if they are free from violence in comparison with the (extolled) books on which they are based. In Carlo Collodi's original book version, for example, Pinocchio is a real waster, who clubs the cricket to death and bites off the cat's paw, after which he spits it out. The punishments are also very cruel. For example, the wooden puppet's feet are burned off and Collodi has a murderous shark (instead of a "Disneyan" whale) chasing Pinocchio, who also gets hanged and is left in the tree, presumed dead. Likewise, J.M. Barrie's "Peter Pan" is a morbid book about kidnapped children, and Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland" is a frightening story about the nightmarish nature of reality seen through the eyes of a child. In other words, not exactly good alternatives to the supposedly violent "Pied Piper from Hollywood".

Or consider the grossly gruesome details in H.C. Andersen's fairy tales, for example when the witch cuts the tongue off the mermaid as payment for her "help", or the illustrations in the picture book of the ghastly polyps which have captured and strangled a little mermaid. The film version is now accused instead of containing *too little* suffering, of withholding how painful it is for the mermaid to dance on two legs! [Note 8] The fact that Disney's heroes of the male sex are violent is not considered good, at the same time as Gretel in "Hansel and Gretel" is applauded for her enterprising murder of the witch/(step)mother in the oven. [Note 9] Killing is considered an act to be condemned, but at

the same time feminists complain that, typically enough, it is the *prince*, and not the mermaid herself, who gains the honour of killing Ursula the sea witch. And when day nurseries and schools teach small girls to be patient, obedient, industrious and quiet, as well as help the schoolmistress to calm down the boys who are too impatient and active, this is apparently praiseworthy. But when Disney shows young girls with the same qualities, this is to be condemned immediately.

So why does the *prince* kill the witch? *He* has, of course, suffered much less on her account than Ariel has done. Why can Ariel not kill the sea witch herself and take responsibility for her own actions and desires? Is it because good girls are not allowed to have too much *power*? Is it because the evil women are *their* mothers? Or is it because girls *are not allowed* or *do not want to* kill? Would one then glide over into the “male” tale of adventure about the dragon killer? Or is this due to the fairy tale convention saying that the enchanted animal bride or animal bridegroom must of necessity be delivered by *another person*?

Certainly as early as in the preschool age, girls dislike characters of the female sex killing people, and they prefer, therefore, to leave this dirty work to the boys. Not only from the perspective of equality between the sexes, but also from an ethical point of view, it would undeniably have been preferable if the girl character, like her older contemporary sisters of the cinema (Thelma & Louise, and Linda Hamilton’s Sarah in *Terminator*, etc.), had herself been allowed to start taking responsibility for her possible (symbolic) killing.

However, I am more inclined to think that this is due to the fact that there is a kind of bond between Ariel and Ursula, who are not at all mutual antagonists. To all appearances the sea witch is something as unusual as an “evil” female helper. One could in fact assert that this feminist, when she purchases Ariel’s voice, *helps* the girl to cease using her seductive voice to entice men to their ruin on the (in both senses) surface rocks. [Note 10]

“Female masquerade”

In the most successful song of the film, Ursula teaches Ariel that “femininity” is merely acting. It is merely a question of a facade, a masque. The sea witch ironically instructs Ariel in putting on make-up and waggling her hips, teaching her that “femininity” is simply a public performance on a stage. Here the differences between cultural and biological gender are clearly demonstrated. When all is said and done, “femininity” is merely “style”. Sebastian the crab is also acquainted with this acting and he is the one who has to teach Ariel to blink her eyes and pout in order to be kissed. Ariel does not perhaps understand the lessons properly yet, but in the final scenes we are given clear proof that she has really learnt

how to *imitate* the masquerade. [Note 11] Here Ariel's helpless manner is quite obviously nothing other than a performance: "the empress' new clothes".

Does the film then give its concealed consent to simulated feminine helplessness, female dependence and male oppression? Ariel has in any case a good deal more power over her own life than her little Danish counterpart. Disney shows us both a male and a female figure of authority, both of whom abuse their power, even if Ariel's father Triton in part is not as central or as present as Ursula, and in part is gradually transformed, becoming more understanding, through the help of Sebastian the crab and court composer ("Children got to be free to lead their own lives."). However, the evil, stifling mother figure, who is keeping Ariel down on the level of childhood and is running the risk of hugging her to death with all her tentacles, must be symbolically destroyed (temporarily). She is both too motherly and too sexy. Daughters really do not want to see their mothers as sexual beings.

Ursula is fat, but content with her body, for she *can* in fact change her shape as much as she wants to, which she shows when she enters the body of her rival and comes very close to marrying Prince Eric. As so often happens in tales about mothers and daughters, Ursula functions as an "evil mirror", a rival and a well-meaning but overprotective mother. The daughter's dilemma is that the girl wants to feel a sense of belonging and attachment to the mother, but does not want to be obliterated or hugged to death by this apparently eight-armed being. The daughter, who is closer to the mother than the son, can also experience physical similarity as stifling, so that Ursula's corpulence in fact has the advantage of making her less like Ariel.

The girl wishes to escape from the sticky nearness of the mother and turns then to the more distant, reserved or absent-minded father, who promises a kind of freedom. However, the girl still lacks a positive nearness – for which the prince can be used. However, the "prince", the boy who was at an early age accustomed to distance and separation from his mother, does not always appreciate the young woman's "advances".

Therefore, the prince becomes primarily a means of overcoming teenage feelings of loneliness. When the girls turn away from their mothers, whom they love and have "identified themselves with", they suffer more than the boys – a loss that no prince in the world seems to be able to replace. Perhaps this is also the reason why Ursula is quite an amiable female villain. Her corpulence makes it easier for the girls in the audience to dissociate themselves from her on purely "aesthetic" grounds, but her verbal humour and ready-wittedness make her the most interesting character of the story and also acknowledge the verbal advantage held by women, just as Ariel's voice would have done.

Nor is Cinderella's villainous stepmother really so terrible. [Note 12] As early as in his film about Cinderella, Disney organised the conflict around the rivalry between the mother and the daughter, and turned it into a conflict between the generations, while earlier versions (e.g. Perrault's from 1697) had instead highlighted the rivalry between the sisters. Accordingly, the film makes the mother a great deal more malevolent and the sisters a good deal less nasty (though more absurd) than they were in previous versions. The stepmother's only "crime", however, is being a good mother to *her own* daughters and promoting *their* plans for marriage. She is (in contrast to the Prince's father, the little, fat and totally incompetent King, who is constantly throwing potentially lethal weapons around him) never violent or directly dangerous in any other way, but still stands out as the most evil character in the whole film due to the fact that she is not comical in the least. When the Prince was a *boy* he probably also thought that his father was not particularly comical...

Cinderella's meetings with the Prince visually repeat (at a fountain) her happy childhood memories of her father, who is now dead. However, her desire for a nearness and a bond resembling her relationship with her father is not a question of some revived Oedipal crisis, but rather concerns quite simply a desire for nearness to someone who is not so like herself (as the mother is) that she runs the risk of being obliterated. Here too this desire for close bonds of community is given a promise of fulfilment through a young man.

The same woman

Therefore, one characteristic of all children's culture for centuries has been the *transformation* of the young girl's wonderful mother *into* the horrible (step)mother of the teenage girl. It is in other words a question of the *same* woman. Moreover, the female villains are always the most erotic of all the animated characters, and for this reason too those female role models which are far too frightening must be shoved out of the picture for the time being. The girls' dads are most often not present, spiritually at any rate, but, according to the girls' memories, used to be wonderful when the lasses were small. The father figures of the young men are also evil now (even if they were not previously) or else merely comical, but they are never sexy. As is customary with the "capitalist" Disney, the villains of both sexes seek to obtain riches, but it is only in the wonder tales, with their teenage central characters, that the antagonists' craving for money is combined with a striving for power.

In *The Little Mermaid*, however, it is the *father* who sacrifices himself for the daughter and takes over her stunted, enchanted role as a prisoner in the mother's power. Disney's Ariel, on the other hand, is not at all passive, evasive or dumb, merely because she lacks a

voice. She solves her problems by herself partially at least and *deserves* her independence, even if it is the father who finally provides her with legs to replace her fishtail. Even if she had remained a mermaid, however, she would no doubt have continued to go her own rebellious way.

H.C. Andersen's "little" (but in actual fact fully grown) mermaid annihilates herself and loses love, but through her "suicide" wins eternal life. Ariel is far from annihilating herself and wins both freedom from dependence on parents (even if the father and daughter remain close to each other) and a partner of her own age, for her continued voyage on the seas of life. It remains to be seen how her love life develops...

However, it would not surprise me if Ariel, once she had experienced independence from her parents a while, would want to play a completely different and more rewarding role. In the scene where Ariel stumbles away from the beach into Prince Eric's arms, she blinks with a look full of meaning at her friends of the sea, as if she wanted to say, "Look how well I play the 'feminine role'." That she has now learnt how to set about acting the part means, of course, that she also knows how to switch off her acting. Ariel has in fact kept her voice, which she can use for a more meaningful purpose than seductive calls. And her legs will probably become steadier as time goes by. The final kiss does not at all have to mean the end of her striving for freedom in the future, but this is the beginning of another film...

Beauty and the Beast

This ancient fairy tale is one of the most ambiguous and puzzling of all the magical folk tales, for it attempts at the same time to moralise in the same way as a fable. On the one hand it asserts that ugliness (like beauty?) is merely a surface phenomenon. On the other hand, the principal *raison d'être* of the story is precisely the expectation of a reversal of the enchantment through which the Beast *is to return* to his "real" *handsome* self, which appears to be a betrayal of the subversive force inherent in the story. For if beauty really "springs from within", then the appearance of the Beast would not need to be changed at all. But perhaps this is more a story about human versus beastly, than about ugliness versus beauty.

In spite of the order of the characters in the title of the film, *Beauty and the Beast*, and in spite of all the time that we spend following Belle and sharing her perspective, this story is in actual fact mostly about the development of the Beast towards self-knowledge and sympathy for others. The film can be said to be a direct reversal of *Sleeping Beauty* from 1959, insofar as a young woman must save the life of – and (symbolically) kiss life into – the slumbering prince and thus confirm that he is unselfish and capable of giving and receiving love.

By way of introduction we are told that the prince was once so selfish and so uncharitable to a repulsive old woman, who one raw and chilly evening knocked on the door and wanted to obtain shelter for the night in return for a beautiful rose, that she transformed him into a monstrous beast. Before celebrating his 21st birthday – and before the enchanted rose has withered – the prince will have to learn to love and be loved in return, or else he will remain a beast for the rest of his life.

In a sense the Beast can thus be said to be both a hero and a villain in the very same character – as well as his own worst enemy — even if he is eventually also confronted with an external enemy, in the form of Gaston, Belle the beauty’s conceited, narcissistic and self-righteous suitor. At the beginning the Beast’s hot temper is, incidentally, his own worst inner enemy. He is not master over himself, in spite of the fact that he is both the lord of the castle and the son of a king. However, in the course of time he displays self-restraint, unselfishness and helpfulness, and, for example, rescues Belle from attacking wolves.

At the beginning the monster is mostly portrayed as a horrible great shadow, afterwards appearing as a cross between a bison and a St. Bernard dog, and finally being groomed into resembling a tamed circus lion cross-bred with a wild boar. He walks on all fours, is sullen and grim, and roars at the slightest setback, but Belle is a tough girl who refuses to be frightened by his roaring and dares to contradict him. However, in actual fact, Beast’s ferocity is quite superficial, and his growling bass voice changes relatively quickly to a more boyish vocal pitch.

Gaston, who definitely does not excel as a fiendish scoundrel, is extremely self-centred and has a fixation on his exterior, his biceps and the hair on his chest. Like the teenage girl characters of the old wonder tales, he likes to stand in front of the mirror, admiring his swelling exterior. Moreover, he stops at nothing in his attempts to catch the totally uninterested Belle on his hook, even bribing a doctor, for example, to commit Belle’s father to a mental hospital. Throughout the film this muscular macho type never desists: he is constantly bashing his comical companion Lefou, when he is not shooting birds, drinking beer or admiring himself.

In the decisive final battle between the lion-bison and Gaston, Beast (as more proof of his goodness) spares his opponent when he pleads for his life on the edge of the roof. The next moment, however, Gaston finally really lives up to the traditional image of the villain, by stabbing Beast in the back with a dagger. We do not feel any loss at all when Gaston, stuffed as he is with testosterone, is caught in his own trap, like the witch in *Snow White*, and falls off the “precipice”. Finally, Beauty declares her love for the dying or already “dead” Beast, whereupon the animal bridegroom is delivered. At the same time, the last petal on the magic

rose falls, whereupon Beast dies and the prince appears. The macho man must first die before he can be reborn as a whole person.

Belle is a courageous, happy and beautiful bookworm with a mind of her own, at the same time as she is extremely loyal and faithful to her old father. She sacrifices herself for his sake and, in the customary manner of the fairy tale, changes places with him in Beast's dungeon (i.e. just as Ariel's father, Triton, sacrifices himself for his daughter), as an *external sign* of her goodness and unselfishness. In one of the opening scenes Beauty sings about her yearning to travel about and see the world, and to get away from the confinement of life in a little town. Her books, in their way, also make it possible for her to "travel about" in the world, but in addition Beauty actually sets out from home in a purely physical sense, to actively deal with the surrounding world, instead of sitting still and waiting for success to come on account of her pretty face or dainty feet.

The emphasis placed by Disney on the joy of reading ought to appeal to all unfavourably disposed critics. It is precisely Beast's surprise for Belle, in the form of a gigantic library in the castle, that makes them come "spiritually" closer to each other. It is probably because he himself likes books that Beast believes that this would be a suitable bribe for the beauty. The couple are then also seen reading together. From now on his voice is softer and calmer.

And certainly Belle finally understands the film's message about tolerance and every being having an inner beauty. (Do not judge the book by its cover!) But it is in actual fact more a question of merely growing accustomed to the external ugliness of Beast than any deeper conversion on her part. The half-bison himself has to be responsible for his development. A character like Belle, who even at the beginning is so wonderful, understanding and completely kind-hearted, can of course hardly improve... However Beast really improves – and "dies" in the process.

The role of "death"

In the best-known version of the fairy tale, Jeanne-Marie LePrince de Beaumont's "Beauty and the Beast" from 1757, Beauty's father is spared "on condition that one of [his daughters] come willingly, and suffer for [him]". Beauty then answers her brothers and sisters, "I am very happy in thinking that my death will save my father's life, and be a proof of my tender love for him." To her father she explains, "Although I am young, I am not strongly attached to life, and I prefer to be devoured by this monster than to die of the sorrow that losing you would cause me." In our *children's film*, it is of course understood that there is never any question of Belle dying, but Beast, on the other hand, dies a little every day love buds and the rose withers.

Real growth takes place when one experiences something new and rather often painful. In fairy tales, different forms of death are used (permanent, temporary and apparent death, quasi-death) as symbols of a stage of development that has passed, because one has to abandon what has become antiquated or useless in favour of what is new and unknown.

The association of puberty with death in the wonder tales in particular is based on an ancient rite of initiation into adulthood, which was closely connected with belief in a journey into the kingdom of the dead. The initiation reached its climax in a temporary death for the child who once was, soon followed by a new life as an adult. The apparent death marked the transition to sexual awakening, or at least the entrance into puberty. Being reborn does not only mean living once again, but also changing and acquiring a new status. For thousands of years these mysterious rites, which contained tests of courage, “death” and rebirth, as well as admission into the community of adults, were the most powerful experience of humankind and were much more important than marriage.

In the folk tale, states resembling death are therefore a marker of a crisis or a transition that makes the next stage in human development possible. Accordingly, the fact that Snow White or Sleeping Beauty, or Pinocchio and Beast are almost dead is not a sign of “feminine” “passiveness”, but signals the transition to a new, more advanced and mature stage of development. Here “death” often promises new and exciting adventures, although, on the other hand, it gives no promise of “everlasting life”.

Moreover, “quasi-death” is used by Disney to emphasise the heroic nature of a self-sacrificing deed. The tales teach us that the only complete death is the omission of not daring to risk one’s life. Permanent death is in the folk tale usually the same as the meaningless self-annihilation of something that, to begin with, was not alive at all in the true, human meaning of the word.

This is something that H.C. Andersen has obviously missed, for his characters either dread death (like the Little Mermaid) or die “in reality” without deserving to do so (like the steadfast tin soldier, the little match girl, and other central characters in his children’s torture). Actually, considering his view of an “immortal soul”, this is perhaps to be interpreted as a positive “development”. But what kind of a “life” did they actually have?

In Madame de Beaumont’s pedagogically rewritten folk tale, Beast almost commits suicide. However, here the beast is all the time friendly and kind-hearted, and Beauty’s task is to see deeper than the ugliness of his exterior and not to judge Beast from his hairiness, but discover his inner beauty. Accordingly, Beast himself does not need to change or learn to love someone, for he already does love someone. The monster attempts to starve himself

to death in his sorrow at losing Beauty, whom he loves. Here Beauty is rewarded because she gradually adapts herself and prefers goodness to beauty.

Accordingly, the beast in the 18th century version is a victim, while in Disney's portrayal, to begin with, he is a villain, who, to be sure, is just as much a prisoner in his own castle as his own prisoner, Belle, is. The beast of the old tales therefore has a horrible exterior, but a good inner self (and actually does not deserve the terrible enchantment). However, this does not apply to begin with to the young rascal of the film version, who in contrast quite clearly has to improve himself. Accordingly, Disney's beast is enchanted so that people around him will not be dazzled by his beautiful exterior – since he is so ugly inside – and so that he will be compelled to exert himself to change deep down inside. In this way it is in fact “confirmed” that ugliness *is* a sign of evil...

Some day my princess will come...

In the 1990s, therefore, the male beast is compelled to look at his reflection in the heroine and adapt himself to her wishes, in contrast to the former state of affairs, when the woman had to adapt to the laws of the man. Here it is thus the man who must change according to the conditions of the woman – i.e. he must be feminized. Belle teaches him good table manners, to comb his hair and dress up, as well as to bow, dance elegantly and speak in a low voice in stead of roaring. It is true that on one occasion Belle shows solidarity with him at the dining-table, sympathising with his difficulty in handling his cutlery properly, by also drinking her soup from the soup plate, but this is merely a kind gesture, an exception for this one evening.

Note that all of these changes which Belle brings about are superficial. Beast evidently manages the inner transformation himself without the slightest difficulty. The logic of all this is beyond *my* comprehension at any rate. Surely Beast was enchanted and made ugly so that women would not be dazzled by his beautiful exterior and thereby neglect his self-centred and intolerable inner self, and so that he would be compelled to exert himself all the more to care for others and be loved in return? Here peevishness merely conceals quite a fine inner man in an ugly shell.

His rough body does not seem to constitute any problem for Belle, while his working-class manners and lack of etiquette do, on the other hand. The hairy, repulsive body of the old tales about the animal bridegroom has, incidentally, always been interpreted as a description of sexuality repulsive to young brides. In *The Little Mermaid*, love is more instinctive, physical and spontaneous, while in *Beauty and the Beast*, on the other hand, it is incorporeal, psychological and culturally fostered. But perhaps “infatuation”, “swooning” or

“playful love” are more suitable names for Ariel’s feelings, while both Belle and Beast more truly experience the deeper feeling of love. Nevertheless, it is precisely in *Beauty and the Beast* that the *physical* enchantment is broken...

At the same time, it is Beast’s more frightening and course nature that has made him interesting and enduring. One certainly has certain misgivings when one finally contemplates the beast transformed back into the prince, who appears completely dumb and merely possesses a striking beauty. Who has deprived this statuesque being of his voice? The sea witch Ursula? Is it particularly likely that he will be able to satisfy Belle’s love of adventure and need for opposition? Could he not have been a *little* wilder? When will Disney – and we in the audience – be mature for stories where both sexes are able to give and take, i.e. go half-way each?

Beyond the ending

Nowadays, however, there are hardly any children any longer who take the happy endings of films seriously. They are sure to be followed soon, as in the case of *The Little Mermaid*, by TV series or sequels, in which everything can be turned upside down. In other words, the films are, like life, *to be continued*... Moreover, children know that happiness has at the most a fifty-fifty chance from “Blind Date”. This TV programme and similar “dating games” (nowadays veritable children’s programmes) have taught them that, after their first date together, it is more common for both parties to dislike each other intensely than to fall in love. And quite rightly, Disney’s teenage heroines and their princes are seldom particularly interesting after falling in love with one another. Therefore, the films too must now come to an end as quickly as possible.

In most stories the wedding is a static moment, an anticlimax (or else it is completely omitted), for through the wedding the wheel turns full circle in the process that has given rise to the actual searching and longing. Marriage kills this yearning, since one cannot long for what one already has. Surely this is also precisely why the final words – this famous marker of unreality, “... and then they lived happily ever after” – through their effect of contrast, provide encouragement: luckily our yearning is never satisfied *in reality*.

However, hope is allowed to live on, since it is the last thing in this world that deserts mankind. Talk about eternal life!

(1992 + 1998)

Notes

1. I base this on Gregory Nybo: "A Synopsis", *Scandinavian Studies* 62 (1990):4, pp. 416-18.
2. See Pil Dahlerup: "*The Little Mermaid Deconstructed*", *Scandinavian Studies* 62 (1990):4, pp. 418-28.
3. Cf. Anne Scott Sørensen in *Det flyende spejl. Analyser af H C Andersens "Den lille havfrue"* (ed.: Finn Barlby), Copenhagen: Dråben 1995.
4. Waller A Hastings ("Moral Simplification in Disney's *The Little Mermaid*", *The Lion and the Unicorn* 17 (1993):1, pp. 83-92) reproaches Disney because his mermaid is not seen to suffer (physically) to a sufficient degree! Nor does she herself take the initiative in forming her desires and taking responsibility for them, unlike Andersen's mermaid. The sea witch merely *assists* the Dane's little mermaid, while Ursula in Disney's version is the active character, who concocts terrible schemes and is the one who plants in the mermaid the idea of winning the prince by being transformed into a human being. Accordingly, in Andersen there is no external enemy to place the blame on, but rather the mermaid is a victim of her own desire, which is apparently to be preferred.
5. See Elizabeth Bell: "Somatexts at the Disney Shop. Constructing the Pentimentos of Women's Animated Bodies", in Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, Laura Sells (eds): *From Mouse to Mermaid. The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*, Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 1995, pp. 107-24.
6. I base this on Susan White: "Split Skins: Female Agency and Bodily Mutilation in *The Little Mermaid*", included in Jim Collins, Hilary Radner & Ava Preacher Collins (eds): *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, New York & London: Routledge 1993, pp. 182-95.
7. Chris Richards: "Room to dance", included in the anthology *In front of the Children. Screen Entertainment and Young Audiences*, edited by Cary Bazalgette & David Buckingham, London: British Film Institute 1995, pp. 141-50. Here pp. 145-47.
8. See Note 4!
9. It was not until the fourth edition of their collections of fairy tales that the Grimm brothers started referring to Hansel and Gretel's "mother" as the children's "stepmother".
10. In fairy tales invented by children themselves, witches are likewise most often extremely capricious. They can at the same time provide advice, assist and punish. See Kristin Wardetzky: "The structure and interpretation of fairy tales composed by children", *Journal of American Folklore* 103 (1990), pp. 157-176.
11. Concerning the idea that women only "*dress up as*" women, the term "womanliness as a masquerade" was coined as far back as 70 years ago by Joan Riviere: "Womanliness as a Masquerade", *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* X (1929), pp. 303-13.
12. See Naomi Wood: "Domesticating Dreams in Walt Disney's *Cinderella*", *The Lion and the Unicorn* 20 (1996):1, pp. 25-49.

6. Choosing one's path in life

Pocahontas as a new type of androgynous heroine

Traditionally there have been two types of fairy tale heroes and heroines: the active “dragon killer”, who alone defeats monstrous *external* enemies, and the passive, enchanted “human animal” who is “delivered”, i.e. overcomes an *inner* enemy, with the assistance of a character of the opposite sex and of the same age. Pocahontas cannot be placed in either category. Here it is obviously a question of a completely new type of heroine, extremely suited to the twenty-first century.

The conflicts in the children’s films available have for a long time been an echo of those depicted in the folk tales, but nowadays the controversies are extremely seldom personal, but concern ideology (good versus evil, freedom, progress, etc.), or even the survival of society, the environment or the whole of humanity. At the present time the actions of the main character are rather often motivated as a question of survival for large groups or “all humankind” – not for a private individual, as has previously been the case. In *Pocahontas* the conflict primarily concerns semi-good versus semi-evil, and survival does not concern the survival of the Indians or the white men, but that of both.

Survival myths

In former times creation myths were in circulation for a long time, while children’s culture at any rate has, rather, been characterised during the second half of the 20th century by *survival myths*, especially in the form of animated films or cartoons figuring super-heroes. Such myths involve supernatural heroes who, alone and following Superman and Batman, magically rescue the world from destruction on account of some super-villain who has a fixation on money, is equipped with nuclear weapons or toxins, and above all constitutes a threat to the environment.

It is true that the films and the TV series of the ‘80s and ‘90s show a good deal fewer examples of physical aggression than previously, but they are still often described as being more violent, containing as they do one or more long scene of confrontation. And, of course, super-villains with super-weapons can only be stopped in super-battles by super-heroes with super-weapons. Here super-physical powers or super-cunning do not suffice any longer. The stories that interest girls to a greater extent deal instead with some co-operative democratic group (in which everyone possesses her or his valuable specialised knowledge) under a good leader, and here the representative of “evil” is far from being as invincible as in the boys’ genres. Nor is he or she as super-evil...

Pocahontas, however, does not correspond to any of the old ideal types of either sex. The Indian princess neither makes war nor is passive, in an enchanted wait to be delivered. Nor is she a member of any good group where each person possesses *her* or *his* own unique quality, which in the end is needed for common success. She is not suffering under some evil female power either. She does not need to set out on some journey to distant regions in order to prove herself, and does not stay obediently at home either, but roams freely in the countryside quite far away from her home. She dives from high cliffs and is enterprising and courageous in every possible way. Nor does Pocahontas set out on some “inner” journey, as so many principal female characters in literature do, but she is interested in the surrounding world. Above all, she attempts to prevent violence and bloodshed and instead act to promote communication between the parties in the conflict.

Previously fairy tales have forced heroes to undertake transcendental journeys through forests, across seas, out into the wilderness or down underground, in order to *fight against the different and the foreign*. Here the world has been divided up into inside and outside, close and remote, the well-known and the foreign, what is similar and what is different, our civilised culture versus that of savages and monsters – good versus evil and we versus them. The hero has been compelled to cross the border to what is foreign, merely to be able to annihilate it and then return to his own, familiar and secure sphere again.

Boundary-breaker

Girls in principal parts have instead had to remain at home standing over the stove, and daydreaming about and *longing for those who are different* from themselves ("princes"). Pocahontas lives rather in a *sphere in between*, is neither at home or away, but halfway between. She has not been forced out into some reserve in the countryside by some "evil mother", but rather her mother is dead and in fact deeply missed by the daughter, who has not been provided with any evil stepmother either. All the time the Indian princess sets out voluntarily into the countryside around the Indian camp, contemplating at a distance, as well as at close quarters, the English intruders. She is a symbol of the boundary-breaker and pioneer.

Pocahontas dares to make a kind of approach or transition that makes perspectivistic perception possible. Thus she can see her own familiar sphere slightly at a distance — for example from the outside perspective of the white settler — and she can see what is foreign from the initiated perspective of someone who understands from within. Often closeness to a foreigner also involves one experiencing oneself as quite similar to him, in the same way as distance to one's ingrained culture and one's own people leads to one suddenly experiencing

them as relatively foreign. Such perspective taking is considered difficult for preschool and primary school children to manage, but here they receive guidance in this way.

In fact the whole film seeks to teach the ability to adopt perspectives, which is most clearly illustrated by the cross-cutting of the redskins' and the palefaces' escalating war songs. The white men sing about the "filthy little heathens... They're not like you and me, which means they must be evil...", while at the same time the wording of the Indians' song about the palefaces is almost identical: "The paleface is a demon... Beneath that milky hide there's emptiness inside... I wonder if they even bleed... They're different from us, which means they can't be trusted".

With Pocahontas as his guide and "eye-opener", the settler John Smith is also induced to start to see things from a different perspective and through the eyes of another person. At first the two young people bicker about being different from one another, when John states that there is so much that the white people can teach the Indians: "There's so much we can teach you. We've improved the lives of savages all over the world..." As so often happens in Disney's films, the actual moral of the story is expressed in a song. In "Colors of the Wind" Pocahontas sings:

"You think you own whatever land you land on;
the earth is just a dead thing you can claim;
but I know every rock and tree and creature
has a life, has a spirit, has a name.
You think the only people who are people
are the people who look and think like you,
but if you walk the footsteps of a stranger
you'll learn things you never knew, you never knew."

And she asks the "civilised" John:

"Can you sing with all the voices of the mountain?
Can you paint with all the colors of the wind? [...]
Come... taste the sun-sweet berries of the earth,
come roll in all the riches all around you,
and for once never wonder what they're worth.
The rainstorm and the rivers are my brothers;
the heron and the otter are my friends;
and we are all connected to each other
in a circle in a hoop that never ends.

...

You can own the earth and still
all you'll own is earth until
you can paint with all the colors of the wind."

The wind in particular plays a significant minor role throughout the film, and for many Indian tribes the "winds" or "spirits" are completely crucial to a person's development.

Irrespective of the colour of our skin, if we are to be called human beings, we must comprehend the major connections in this world and, instead of digging and blasting for gold and devastating the forests and the fields as the colonizers do, we must, like the indigenous people, protect nature and hold life dear. Moreover, as the talking tree Grandmother Willow asserts, *someone* must begin, like rings on the water, which are small at first, it is true, but which then become bigger and bigger.

In the “mirror scene”, which is an almost obligatory feature of Disney’s films, a crucial change has also been introduced here. When John washes his face in the river, he sees a face reflected in the water. However, this is not a reflection of *himself*, which has always been the case in previous films, but a reflection of Pocahontas creeping up behind him. Here the hero’s interest is directed at the other and is no longer directed at himself in a self-centred way.

Mediator

In spite of her beautiful exterior, Pocahontas is not portrayed as particularly “feminine” or as “masculine”, but rather as “androgynous”. She is neither a child nor an adult, neither rich nor poor, neither “typically” Indian nor white in her appearance, but rather Asian, if anything. She does not really belong anywhere and therefore feels at home everywhere. She finds herself constantly in a sphere *between* the foreign and the well-known, between the settlers and the indigenous people. In this way she demystifies what is foreign, at the same time as she mystifies the familiar. Nothing has “its given place” any longer, but everything has “its time”.

Pocahontas does not declare her love to John Smith in private, intimate seclusion, but shows it in public action and speech. She learns how to speak the language of the white man, just as John acquires a passable command of the language of the Indians. She opens his eyes to the mystery of nature, induces him to propagate among the settlers for mutual understanding and co-existence, at the same time as he gets her to realise the advantages of certain customs of the white man and instruments such as the compass. She relativises old “truths”, for example the fact that the periphery of her own tribe can be close to the centre of the settlers and vice versa, but it is precisely here and now that they are all living. They must therefore seek a *modus vivendi*. After Pocahontas’ energetic burst of activity both the Indians and the settlers are transformed.

To find her path in life Pocahontas does not need to set out on any journey, because, just as in the case of the TV medium and the video film, foreign phenomena *come to us* nowadays, for example in the form of immigrants. It is merely a question of being open and

receptive, and of attempting to understand that which is foreign! Consequently, the Indian heroine corresponds in *one* respect to the "female" complex of problems of the old fairy tales: the conflict is "internal", "psychical", cognitive — not "external" or physical, as it was in the case of the male hero. However, she does not for that reason focus on her own reflection. Openness, the urge to discover and interest in what is different are her "weapons", and not the sword and the spear, which were used by the dragon-killer. Nor do her weapons include cunning, which was practised by the boy who competed with the giant in eating and thereby tricked him into committing suicide. It is the desire of the Indian princess that "giants" too should be allowed to live.

Pocahontas possesses neither magic weaponry nor the art of sorcery, but merely the magic of the independent thinking of a fearless and honest person. Therefore, fantasy is toned down here to make an unusually realistic Disney film, without a collection of jokers. The only supernatural element is Grandmother Willow, who, however, in spite of her magic powers, merely gives the girl advice. In spite of the fact that the real-life model for Pocahontas lived at the beginning of the 17th century, the Indian princess is the most modern of all of Disney's principal characters — an excellent example for the twenty-first, so-called electronic century. The TV medium has undeniably prepared children (as well as film makers) for this heroine.

Like our thought process, the TV medium is not very linear, but consists of memories, expectations, gazing into the future, presentiments, impressions of reality, dreams and fantasies — all in a single jumbled-up mosaic, which also characterises the overlapping nerve paths of the brain. The children of today, who have grown up with the aesthetics of the TV, can also relate without difficulty to this non-linear associating brain of a free individual. Pocahontas has dreams and presentiments without, for that reason, letting herself be blindly controlled by them. She is not portrayed in the film as an exotic, primitive savage who believes in the religious power of magic, even if she is described as a sort of "earth mother", who listens to the spirits of nature.

It is true that the "earth mother" is a traditional female symbol of growth and creation, and is associated with expressions such as "full of life" or magical "oneness with nature", but here Pocahontas rather acquires the character of a kind of *rationaly feeling* mother of society and goddess of peace, figures of whom we need a great many more. Moreover, in the present age of ecology and criticism of civilisation, the idea of connecting "womanliness" with "nature" is not an expression of "essential" conceptions of the woman as life-giving and peace-keeping. Pocahontas is not at all portrayed as some naturally good, life-giving, flourishing first mother, but rather as a playful and rebellious, freedom-loving, life-

embracing young woman on the verge of being an unruly tomboy, without, for that reason, being experienced as audacious or as bridging gender differences. She is associated more with air and water than with the earth. The earth is far too prosaic and stationary for her. The winds are her element.

Here *women* are not depicted as morally superior – Pocahontas alone is portrayed in this way. Nor is “womanliness” described as some “naturally” good quality, but the Indian princess is seen as a unique, independently struggling, and wise young woman among other traditional and less wise women.

Opportunist?

However, this daughter of an Indian chief can, of course, be viewed from different perspectives. One could, for example, maintain that, from the Indians’ point of view, she is a traitor or opportunist, while from the perspective of the white man she is an ally. The real historical figure of Pocahontas, on which the film is based, is quite rightly described in the American legends as an angel who came to the rescue, an ideal wife and mother, as an “earth mother”, and not as a traitor of her people. But then it is not the Mattaponi Tribe that has created the legends, but the English settlers. Consequently, in the white USA, she is a symbol of courage and justness. For today’s audiences of this Disney film, however, she is experienced all over the world primarily as a curious innovative thinker, as a mediator and a peacemaker.

Children in particular are said to be characterised by curiosity and openness, and if anything, Pocahontas is curious and extremely open for modern things. Moreover, she is independent. She does not want to comply with the agreement made by her father and marry the serious Kocoum, even if he is her father’s bravest warrior. Her dream tells her something different: “But, father, I think my dream is pointing me down another path!” Her father thinks that she is far too stubborn and independent, and does too many things all by herself (just like her deceased mother). She goes “where the wind takes her”, steers her canoe with ease through the wildest waters, follows the tracks in the forest as skilfully as the best scouts of the chieftain. However, her father warns her, and tells her to calm down.

However, Pocahontas declares that rivers are not at all calm and peaceful, but are changing all the time. Like the philosopher Heraclitus, she asserts, that you can’t step in the same river twice: “the water’s always changing, always flowing...to be safe, we lose our chance of ever knowing, what’s around the river bend.”

On several nights Pocahontas dreams that she is running through the forest and in front of her suddenly sees a rotating arrow (which later turns out to be something as yet unknown to

the Indians, namely the compass of the settler). Her confidante, Grandmother Willow, believes that this rotating arrow is pointing out Pocahontas' path in life. The film deals precisely with the importance for people of choosing a path on their way from the creek to the river. For, with today's diversity of directions, the pathfinder must be replaced by the "path selector". When choosing a path, on many occasions one cannot follow old and well-worn tracks, but needs a new orientation and a "pioneer", for who tells the way where it can go: "the right path isn't always the easiest." Pocahontas is precisely one such pioneer paving the way for progress.

Listener

What then is Pocahontas' path in life? She says on one occasion to her father that she does not want to follow the path of hatred (i.e. war with the white men). Instead she wants her father, Powhatan, to *talk* to the white men and *listen* to them. The wise Indian chief then realises that his daughter has great wisdom for her age. Instead of harbouring anger in her heart like the others, she has demonstrated courage and understanding, and it is this spirit that will lead them to peace. "[There] will be no more killing. Let us be guided instead to a place of peace," Chief Powhatan declares. Consequently the fighting ends thanks to the mediation of Pocahontas.

Pocahontas' father finally lets her choose her own path, even concerning whether or not she will follow her beloved John (in need of treatment for his gunshot wound) to England. Consequently, here "Romeo and Juliet" do not have to die for each other. However, Pocahontas realises that, if she were to depart, the conflict between the Indians and the settlers would probably flare up again, so she chooses to remain: "I'm needed here!" However, in this respect too, thoughts are more important than physical nearness: "You never will [leave me]. No matter what happens – I'll always be with you, forever!" These are Pocahontas' parting words to John at his departure. Love lives to a high degree in our memory, dreams and conceptions. To many preschool and primary school children, the feelings between Pocahontas and John are also almost a question of brotherly and sisterly love, in spite of the tender kiss at the end.

Sister

The old, bipolar "cognitive maps", characterised by antitheses and clear borders, do not only concern Indians and white people – "good and evil" – but also constitute, unfortunately, a model of orientation for adults and children, men and women, rulers and subjects, bosses

and subordinates, doctors and patients, providers and recipients of subsidies, the cultural elite and “consumers of mass culture”. Instead of focusing everywhere on the antitheses of child-adult and child-parent relations (as well as woman-man), should we not perhaps, in family life, social policy and children’s culture, concentrate more on the concepts of “brotherhood and sisterhood”?

We remain brothers and sisters all through our lives, even if we change from children into adults. However, brotherhood and sisterhood remind one more of a seesaw that tilts up and down than a ladder which one has to climb in order to follow someone or catch up with someone – which is impossible in the case of focusing on age. Brothers and sisters can develop at different speeds and all the time they are transformed *side by side*; the one can outgrow the other, although the latter can later on catch up with (and outgrow) the former, etc. Like John and Pocahontas they can learn a great deal from each other. Brothers and sisters change all the time parallel with each other. Their perspectives are much more similar, and the borders never absolute. As brothers and sisters we also share early experiences and can remind one another of our roots – just as we can correct nostalgic delusions about our “idyllic” past, when necessary. Moreover, brothers and sisters negotiate and mediate rather often between brothers and sisters who fight, as well as between parents and brothers and sisters.

We are all (irrespective of our age) brothers and sisters in the sense that we want both to be small and to appear to be big. We want partly to be independent and partly to avoid being big sometimes, and instead to be looked after by our parents. In part we are rivals with each other and want to boss our younger brothers and sisters, to have the same privileges as our older brothers and sisters, and even to have power over our parents; and in part we compete for our parents’ favour, protection and care, and to receive the same consolation as our younger brothers and sisters. As far as adults are concerned, these “parents” can consist of other adults, or society at large, for example the social safety net or the armed forces.

However, instead of acting as small mothers for the unruly boys, the girls at day nursery and primary school ought to be allowed to really be sisters: sometimes older sisters and sometimes younger sisters. And the boys ought to be allowed to be protective brothers who take responsibility, as well as to be protected. A parenthood which in all respects is characterised by real equality between the sexes and which is also shared in practice would naturally facilitate such a change of course, as would more films of the *Pocahontas* type.

The quisling of the female sex?

To judge from the critical reception (mainly from male reviewers) the adult generation of today is not yet truly open to this sort of message. *Pocahontas* has been criticised for being both “politically correct” and “historically incorrect”, as if the film were a documentary. The Indian princess of reality was not so old, quite rightly did not look like Naomi Campbell, did not sing in Broadway musicals, and did not speak with either raccoons or trees. Nor was she animated. One wonders what the critics would have said if Pocahontas really had been 12 years of age and had run around naked.

Here the term “politically correct” is used with roughly the same meaning as “complying with a certain etiquette”, when it is actually a question of fundamental moral positions. However, these middle-age male critics have found the film far too mawkish and tiresome and would like to see a conflict and a climax. They miss veritable evil and a really mean villain. In other words they miss a super-evil enemy, a man whom, like Scar in *The Lion King* and Ursula the sea witch in *The Little Mermaid*, one can hate and destroy and thus get rid of for good. In other words a *male* solution. Fortunately, this kind of thinking is antiquated and is dying out.

This is the classical dilemma of the Disney group: if they have too much violence, then they are criticised for this, and if they have too little violence, they are also at fault. If the villains are too evil, they are dealing with stereotypes, and if sufficiently evil characters are lacking, then the whole film is mawkish and tame. Keeping races separate without any contact with each other is called racism, while collaboration over racial boundaries is called treachery. If they have Indians who are too evil, this is racism and stereotyping, and if, as in *Pocahontas*, there is an indigenous people that is good and lives close to nature, this is considered dishonest.

And in a sense this is true, of course, but how is one to provide “ethnic minorities” (or children on the whole) with the “positive role models” that are always being sought? Here the white settlers are portrayed as a gang of stupid, brutal and rough customers, and the Indians as honourable and dignified heroes who are living ecologically and close to nature. Nor have the “Indians” of today had anything against this “stereotyping”...

To a woman like Ana L. Valdés (*Dagens Nyheter* 1/12/1995) Pocahontas also represents, strangely enough, a “hate object”, a “quisling of the female sex”. Here she refers to the historical Pocahontas. It is somewhat unclear if Valdés has seen Disney’s film herself, but she has, at any rate, “categorically refused to take one of her godchildren” to the cinema.

That is a pity, in my opinion. Perhaps her godchild could have pointed out the fact that this is not a documentary that “is attempting to cover up the responsibility of the white people in the extermination of millions of Indians” (or “paying tribute to the repression and

effacement of the identity of the Red Indian”), but an ethnic tale about the environment and peace.

The film can neither change the writing of history nor undo the past, but it can in fact influence our view of the future. It can start a series of “imagine if...” fantasies: imagine if more “rings on the water” had succeeded in stopping the white man’s extermination of the indigenous people. The “whites” would doubtless have colonised the Red Indians’ land anyway, but less killing might possibly have provided the prerequisite for a mestizo culture, with a mixture of the best of the two united cultures.

Disney’s Pocahontas does not propagate, as Valdés suggests, for a “‘non-meeting’, full of mistakes and misunderstanding”, but on the contrary for a meeting, for dialogue and understanding. Nor does she turn her back on her own people and become “one with her enemies” – possibly one with nature. The film sides with all sorts of “underdogs”: *with* the Indian environmentalists versus the greedy, polluting colonizers, *with* negotiating, conciliatory “female” ways of thinking versus “male”, aggressive solutions involving war, *with* the sailors versus the greedy aristocrat, Governor Ratcliffe, *with* Pocahontas’ playful raccoon, Meeko, versus Percy, Ratcliffe’s stuck-up snob of a pug, etc.

Nor, if we are really to be “historically correct”, did the supposedly “naive” Pocahontas’ “alliance with the conquerors” result, as Valdés maintains, in the repression of the cultures and identities of the blacks, the Red Indians and the Orientals, but, at most, a few years’ respite from the fighting between the palefaces and the redskins. Pocahontas was quite simply too alone in her view that it is meaningless to seek to solve all conflicts and cultural clashes with violence.

If this Disney film had been shown at the beginning of the 17th century, the philosophy of dialogue would perhaps have had more advocates and led to more “rings on the water”. And possibly more “brothers and sisters” would have been born.

Healer

Anyhow, this allegory of coexistence can be seen here and now and, since the film has had its video premiere, one does not even need to risk being seen by “progressive friends” at the cinema, but can ponder upon this peacemaker in the privacy of one’s own home without being seen. And one can reflect on what would have been the consequences if there had been more historical heroes and heroines of her type, who had sought to reconcile differences and build bridges. However, I have already drawn my own conclusions.

Then perhaps we would also have, both in children’s play and books, in films and on TV – as well as in the workplaces of adults – new types of less “fatherly” and more “sisterly and

brotherly” heroines and heroes. In other words (as Mark Gerzon propounded in his book, *A Choice of Heroes*), we would, in a more boundaryless world, replace old well-tried (male-defined) public heroes, such as the “settler” and the “soldier”, who are both based on a denial of men’s dependence and fear. Moreover, we would replace the “heroes” and “heroines” of our private life, such as the “male breadwinner” and the “female (home-)expert” with more androgynous heroes and heroines of Pocahontas’ type.

Instead of the “settler”, who alone conquers the earth and tames the forest, we would then have the “doctor”, the “healer”, who devotes his or her life to healing the wounds inflicted on nature by the “settler”. Instead of the “soldier”, who protects women and children by misusing his own body and denying his own suffering (to defend those who rather often slander him on account of his “violence”), we would have the “mediator”, who like Pocahontas is capable of hearing opposite voices and understanding the “enemy”, thanks to the fact that he or she understands himself or herself from within and hears his or her own conflicting desires, rather than projects everything “evil” and different on others.

Instead of the “breadwinner”, we would have the “companion”, who shares our work, family and leisure, while the “expert” would be replaced with the “colleague”. And the “savages” and the “demons” would become “people, roughly like you and me”.

However, then we have to start with the adults, of course – not with the children. *Pocahontas* is an unusual Disney film about the interplay between different racial and gender cultures, insofar as it should primarily be seen by adults. The old Indian proverb, “It takes a whole village to raise a child,” can be given the following angle, “It takes a child to raise a whole village.”

(1997)

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7. Knowing one’s place or taking a leading position?

How a girl becomes a “man”: the girl-power model *Mulàn*

If Disney’s earlier wonder tales featuring teenage girls in the leading parts have shown how one makes women out of girls, then we can now see a young girl “becoming a man”. The company’s androgynous trend, commenced with *Pocahontas*, is here given a more warlike continuation.

However, if *Pocahontas* says that the man’s role ought to learn more from the woman’s role, then *Mulàn* suggests the opposite, namely that the woman’s role ought to be toughened up and assimilate more masculine characteristics. However, here both gender roles are highlighted as mere acting, as external attributes that anyone at all, irrespective of their biological gender, can assume after a little practice.

In this film a young Chinese precursor of Joan of Arc (without the knowledge of the people around her and for a long time without revealing her female identity) dresses herself up in her father’s suit of armour and saves the whole of China. At the beginning, however, she overacts and merely becomes comical, appearing “too masculine”. Towards the end of the story the men dress up as women too, in order to outwit the villain in the Emperor’s palace in this (amusing) way. However, it is not merely the clothes that make the man and the woman respectively, but above all their mannerisms and speech. Both of these can quite clearly be taught – and learned.

The steadfast girl soldier

Mulàn is the only child of a sickly old man with a strong sense of duty and bound by tradition, who preaches obedience to his tomboy of a daughter, telling her to “know her place”. (“I know my place, it is time you learned yours.”) Mulan, on the other hand, wants to take her place – and at the very head of a disreputable platoon fighting against the Huns of the villain Shan-Yu. Consequently, she assumes her aged father’s role in the imperial army, well aware that he would never survive the hardships.

The ties between the father and daughter are strong, while the mother is relatively peripheral. For once the main character does not have any helper of the same sex by her side, but a tiny, young, male guardian spirit by the name of Mushu, who resembles a lizard more than a dragon (in the original version voiced by a completely fantastic Eddie Murphy, but the Swedish Papa Dee performs the part well). The fact that Mulàn has a male companion, however, is completely appropriate and almost necessary in this world of men,

considering her training in a male gender role and her need for mobility and readiness for action.

In addition to having Mushu the mini-dragon as a helper in her heroic endeavours, Mulàn is assisted by Cri-Kee the restless cricket, who is dogged by misfortune although supposed to bring good fortune. Mushu and Cri-Kee are undeniably the most memorable of the minor characters. The guardian dragon Mushu, who through his thoughtlessness runs the risk of being more of a hindrance than a help, is unforgettable. This protective dragon has actually been sent by the ancestors to fetch Mulàn home, but instead wilfully assumes the role of the guide and maker of heroines.

Here he is the one who urges her on, but in the original ancient Chinese tale on which the film is based, there is nothing to suggest that it is not Mulàn's own initiative and resolution that decides her heroic deeds. Even in Disney's version, Mulàn admits on one occasion that she perhaps has not set out on her adventure merely for her father's sake, but also for her own sake. The (incompetent) spirits constitute the only "wonder-like" element in this wonder tale. It is true that interfering spirits are not a particularly "Chinese" feature, but in China it would have been fully conceivable for Mulàn to consult her ancestors for guidance. All families had a kind of altar where they conversed with the souls of their ancestors, whose task was to protect later generations. However, if the Chinese way of thinking had been allowed to prevail, these spirits should preferably not have returned to haunt the house, as they do in the film, but merely remained partners in the conversation.

As always in Disney's films, the complex of problems connected with identity is central. Mulàn the tomboy feels inside that she can never be the person that her parents want her to be, and never honour her family through a respectable arranged marriage. And quite rightly, she fails completely at the matchmaker's and does not recognise herself in the expectations of the people around her as to what a woman should be like. When she sees her image in the mirror of water, she wonders (in song), "Who is that girl I see...?" When will the reflection show the person that she really feels herself to be? She realises finally that she no longer can or wants to conceal who she is inside.

Honour thy daughter!

Accordingly, Mulàn is a young woman who rebels against a hierarchical society bound by tradition. The story about the girl who, contrary to all the rules and customs, takes brave initiatives and shows resolution has for a long time been extremely popular in China. All Chinese children are familiar with the story, which is said to be based on real events and was first transmitted orally, before being written down later on as a poem in the style of a ballad.

The events take place at that time when China was still divided, with Chinese leadership in the southern, agricultural parts of the country and several nomadic peoples in the north, who all the time were moving towards the south. The Chinese Wall was intended to keep the nomads away, for these Huns were regarded as “Viking-like” invaders.

Mulàn belongs to a long tradition of strong women soldiers, who have been very important in China. At that time women could undeniably ride as well as men, took part in hunting and moved long distances on horseback. It is true that the central character is not that exceptional at the beginning, but later on a crisis arises and she rises to the challenge.

The message of the film is that a woman does not need to obey her father unquestioningly, but can honour him, nevertheless. Moreover, honour is paid in two directions, between both generations: “Do not just honour your father, but honour your daughter too!” For the moral of the story is, “Respect your parents, but pay respect to your daughter too for the person she is.”

The tale about Mulàn was enormously popular in China about 40-50 years ago, as a prime example of what a faithful girl ought to be like and how she should act in a Communist society. All citizens were encouraged to participate on equal terms, to make their contribution to the state. The Chinese army was also one of the first to boast of a great number of women soldiers. Mulàn definitely does everything that an ideal Chinese girl should do according to Mao: look after her father, overcome difficulties, contribute her share to Chinese society. In other words she should do the right thing for her family and the state, including taking up arms if, for example, the capitalistic USA should invade with anything else than films... This is evidently a question of a pure propaganda film from the Chinese Ministry of Defence: “Victory through Girl-Power!”

In spite of this the film is a brilliant tale about loyalty, honour and discipline, about personal courage and female participation on equal terms. Of course, it is far from being a documentary about the China of one thousand years ago (or today or tomorrow), just as Shakespeare’s “Hamlet” is far from dealing with the state of affairs at the Danish court in the 16th century. It is quite simply a story about maturing.

To children of all countries Disney’s characters belong to their own country, and indeed to their own specific local district. The characters speak the children’s own language, and even if they look slightly Asian, the children do not conceive of them as being more “foreign” than their multi-cultural friends. To the youngest children the film is quite simply about a young girl who is courageous, smart and independent, and dares to follow her own conviction.

Changing the system

Mulàn attempts, just like children, to change the system from within by, from an unfavourable starting position, stretching the rules and showing that things can be done differently. In contrast to previous Disney heroines, who have “dreamt”, “wished” and “yearned”, Mulàn actually “wants” something and is also firmly resolved to see to it that she actually gets it *accomplished*. She gets the men to listen to her, in spite of the fact that she is “merely” a woman. And now we witness at last a woman who no longer lets the men do her killing for her, but takes the matter into her own hands, even if the killing mostly takes place with cunning and liveness, rather than with brute force. For some (inscrutable) reason, killing with cunning is considered “better” than killing using physical force...

The story teaches us the value of women and shows us that both women and men *can* step out of their gender role. However, is this possible only up to a certain limit? Towards the end of the film Mulàn seems to return to a more traditional woman’s role, but she and, not least, the people around her are undeniably transformed forever. She returns home to her father to show him the Emperor’s gifts of honour, given as proof that she has honoured her family in her way. However, male soldiers too usually take a badly-needed break in the protection of their own home, having satisfactorily performed their duties.

It is true that the charming young Captain Li Shang comes on a visit, bringing with him Mulàn’s father’s helmet, which she has left behind, and is invited to stay for dinner (and according to Grandma is welcome to stay forever). However, young Shang replies, “Dinner would be great!” Perhaps this exceptionally interesting “Disneyan” Prince Charming is himself unwilling to act as a “prize” or reward for the great exploits of the “princess”? Moreover, arranged marriages were also the custom for young men in China at that time. Shang now seems to be without parents and is therefore not a good enough catch, perhaps.

Accordingly, we do not know anything definite about any possible continuation of their romance, merely that it is Mulàn who has actively tried to win her “prince”, rather than be won or married off herself. But perhaps the actual “winning” has whetted her appetite. At any rate she will never let herself become dependent on some man who has to see to it that everything will turn out well. Mulàn can defend herself. She has challenged the male-dominated society, and both she and the men have realised that a desirable woman should have brains and a will of her own, just as Mulàn suggests in the song sung with her brothers at arms about what is “worth fighting for”.

Here, just as in *Pocahontas*, a young woman has asserted herself in a male-dominated world and even preserved the scheme of things, after which she turns away from this world.

She has achieved what she wanted to achieve: she has proved that she – and thus other women too – *can* tackle a man’s job successfully, if only she puts her mind to it. It is normally only the will that is lacking, not the ability. Mulàn has rescued the honour of her family and her father’s self-respect. When hearing the Emperor’s final words, “You don’t meet a girl like that every dynasty,” every girl in the audience realises, of course, that *she herself* is precisely such a girl in her present family dynasty...

It is therefore no traditional, subservient woman’s role that Mulàn returns to. She merely does not want to continue to act the man and participate in a meaningless power struggle. She realises that she would always have to fight against male opposition, without achieving anything else than climbing upwards in the imperial hierarchy. It is precisely by declining and relinquishing male hierarchies of power that she demonstrates her superiority and her real victory.

This is something as rare as a female war film for children, which, however, does not at all revel in violence or death. I would even venture to assert that *Mulàn* is the best animated children’s film ever from the Disney studio. (It is true that Disney has made animated films that from an “objective”, adult and technical perspective of quality are better, for example *Snow White*, *Pinocchio* and *Beauty and the Beast*, but film experiences are seldom “objective”, but tied to age, gender and time.) Mulàn’s budding romance with Captain Li Shang does not at all diminish this positive impression. Everything, including the characters, the animation, the songs and the accelerating tempo, is brilliant.

A successful film needs seven ingredients: a good heroine/hero, an evil villain hungry for power, with both horrible (preferably flying) and comical (preferably lisping) underlings, amusing helpers for the good main character, toy-friendly minor characters for the very young, and a few good songs and mirror scenes that relate the thoughts of the characters. *Mulàn* has all of this and much more besides.

But what is to be said about the “militarism” in the film? Indeed, in contrast to *Pocahontas*, this is no radical-pacifist film, but here there is no defence of aggressive violence either. The horror, sorrow and devastation resulting from war are described more than clearly. Here we find, quite simply, an expression of the same point of view as that adopted by Sweden at present: that the defence of one’s country against any aggressors should also be conducted on the basis of discipline and equality. If we are to have a defence at all, women should also take their share of the responsibility. Waging war, of course, is not a question of individual aggressions or testosterone, but a question of politics, economics and ideology.

For a long time, the only alternative that women have had to fleeing from the physically superior force, has been to charm, seduce and seek protection behind men – a more concealed, verbal and psychical power strategy. Men have devoted themselves to self-transformation, battle and revenge, while women have devoted themselves to seeking to change the men, to charm and force them into battle, by appearing as defenceless and dependent. Mulàn departs from this pattern in that she herself fights for that which – and those whom – she believes in, in addition to fighting for her own sake.

“Agonists” versus “hedonists”

Animal researchers have distinguished between “agonistic” and “hedonistic” power strategies. *Agonistic* power is based on real violence or the threat of violence and is backed up by physical strength, as well as, on the human level, by weapons, training, expertise and money. *Hedonistic* power, on the other hand, is achieved, both in the world of animals and in the world of humans, by beautiful plumage or artificial adornment and parading, by indirect methods of control, such as withholding proof of affection/sex, or by the demonstration of dependence on the agonist.

Attributing hedonistic power to women has, of course, reinforced the importance of women’s appearance. When women channel all their energy to being seen and looked after, instead of being strong and independent, then attracting men becomes a substitute for acting. As long as we teach people that girls are weak and cannot themselves fight beside men, or give them compliments for their looks, then we confirm their hedonistic dependence on power and on protective men.

Being a girl/woman has for a long time involved physical restrictions. The more feminine we consider ourselves to be, the more we experience ourselves as being immobile and frail, the more physically restrained we become, and the more we need protection. We then prefer to remain in the place assigned to us, at home in some hidden corner, like Cinderella, Snow White and Sleeping Beauty... Mulàn, however, breaks the trend! She does not want to know her place, but takes a place and even seizes her position on the battlefield. And, if we are to have any soldiers at all, then, naturally, they must be of both sexes, or else of neither.

The customary aesthetics and dreams of transformation of the female sex have at last, in *Mulàn*, been mixed with dreams of fighting and the aesthetics of battle. (And what aesthetics we experience: the clouds of smoke, the shadows and the snow are dazzling in particular!) The old male privilege concerning freedom of movement, independence and battle has at last been rescinded. It was definitely about time too, not only in Disney’s world, but also in children’s culture on the whole. This does not mean that women should go out and fight –

merely that they experience themselves as *capable* of doing so, which also leads to significant consequences for the more peaceful actions of daily life.

Mulàn is probably appreciated most by 7-8-year-olds and older children. Girls, however, derive even greater pleasure from the film than primary school boys, who undeniably look rather bewildered when they leave the cinema. Bewilderment is always beneficial. Some of the scenes are relatively terrifying for the smaller children, who ought to wait until the film is released on video. The Huns in particular are really treacherous and the war scenes are quite scary; in other words, playfully realistic, even if they are not like the representations of reality on TV news broadcasts. The Huns' brutal leader, Shan-Yu, keeps himself mostly in the background, however, and is mainly depicted as a *symbolic* threat, which is an additional feature in favour of this morality about a historic girl. In a wonder tale, evil ought to be anonymous, while goodness must not be anonymous.

In contrast to the "Virgin of Orléans", who was burnt at the stake, the Mulàn of Disney's film is accepted as the true heroine she is: as a girl who is not a saint and has neither been chosen by God nor canonized, but who is a self-appointed ace at using big cannons.

Ex Disney lux?

(1998)

8. Taking one's place in the circle of life

The Lion King as a lesson in political science?

If Bruno Bettelheim had analysed “Hamlet”, he would doubtless have maintained that the uncle had not killed Hamlet’s father at all, but that the fratricide was merely Hamlet’s projection of his own murderousness. Just as Freud in “A Child is Beaten” (1919) contests that the father has really beaten the child, Bruno Bettelheim denies the cruelty of adults for the most part in “The Uses of Enchantment” (1976). *Children*, on the other hand, are in his interpretations rather often sadistic and nasty.

However, in Disney’s sombre children’s version of Hamlet, a fable entitled “The Lion King”, we see with our own eyes that it is without doubt the black sheep of the family, here called Uncle Scar, who kills his good sandy-haired brother, Mufasa the King of the Lions. The somewhat refined, slightly “feminine” uncle, with eyes as green as his envy and sporting a black lion’s mane, stages this foul deed so that he himself may come to power, but lays the blame for Mufasa’s death on his nephew, Simba. Little Simba then wastes a great deal of time through diversions and escaping from reality, instead of investigating his father’s death and fulfilling his duty and taking his responsibility as the rightful heir. This is a cautionary and tragic, but still wonderful tale.

In detail Scar’s plot involves luring Simba the “preschool” lion into a ravine, so that he might be trampled by a stampeding herd of gnus. Daddy Mufasa rescues his son, but in the tumult the uncle succeeds in perpetrating his planned fratricide and placing the blame on Simba. Simba flees in distress from his feelings of guilt into the jungle. The tragedy is especially diabolic as it alludes to the myth of Oedipus (which tells of the alleged wish of the son to kill his father to have his mother all to himself), and, quite rightly, just before the murder Simba has been singing about how he can hardly wait until *he himself* becomes king, is able to stand in the limelight and make decisions:

“I’m gonna be a mighty king
So enemies beware!
...
I’m gonna be the mane event
Like no king was before
I’m brushing up on looking down
I’m working on my ROAR!”

Oedipus complex?

The comparison with Oedipus, however, has serious shortcomings, since Simba and Mufasa are seen to have the best of father-son relations. They set out on expeditions together, play and have fun, and the father obligingly initiates his little cub into all the mysteries of life. There is not even a hint of any rivalry between them, and Simba does not have any

incestuous relationship with his mother, Sarabi, either. On the whole the mother and son almost have no contact at all, and the only thing that we see the mother doing with her little son is washing (=licking) him, to his immediate disapproval.

The obscure role of the mother (and of women on the whole) has been perceived as sexism and gender discrimination. However, the male dominance here, as in all the other Disney films about a small boy, is not at all connected with this. This male dominance is rather related to the fact that mothers not only tend to inspire dependence but also are (for sons) anti-role-models, in terms of gender, which it is important to distance oneself from.

The boy's positive experience of being a "prince" spoiled by his mother is countered by the negative feeling of motherly omnipotence, which inhibits him and leads to stagnation. Therefore, he must (like all boys in fables) take himself away from his mother. Sarabi seems to realise this herself, since she never looks for her son...

Mufasa is experienced by most children as an ideal dad and a good example: he loves his child, teaches his son useful knowledge, and helps him out of different tight corners. The film depicts this in a way worthy of emulation by, like the ancient fables, *showing through concrete actions* how Mufasa rears his son with love. The father is not only sympathetic in general, but is seen to protect, help and rescue Simba through different kinds of easily observable intervention.

The story deals with a number of common concerns that bother children: rejection, outsidership, loneliness, abandonment, lack of knowledge, powerlessness and being small in a world of giants. The film also suggests to the children's audience that their own gullibility can constitute a deadly danger for their beloved parents. Simba is seen being naively deceived by the false, wheedling and, to all appearances, kind uncle, who, however, immediately goes behind his nephew's back as soon as they separate. Whom exactly can one rely on?

Nor is it easy for a pitiful little tuft of hair to believe that one day he will really become King of Pride Rock (i.e. an adult), when, with his small paws, he literally attempts to walk in his father's giant footsteps. The lion is, of course, a symbol of power, strength and wisdom, but there is so much that the little cub still does not know or understand. To crown it all, Simba is all the time being pinned down by his girlfriend, Nala, when they wrestle. Moreover, Zazu the bird is constantly calling attention to the fact that Simba is too young, and the lion boy does not even know what "betrothed" means.

Zazu has to explain that Simba and his playmate, Nala, "[little] seeds of romance blossoming in the Savannah", according to tradition are predestined to become a couple. The young ones protest, however, and Simba says, "I can't marry her. She's my friend!"

No worries?

Is Simba then the first lion to need a children's psychiatrist? Well, I do not think so. It is true that in the Shangri La of the jungle he makes friends with two joking "counsellors", Pumbaa, the fat and sluggish warthog, and Timon, the little but, of course, smart meerkat (a kind of ground squirrel). These two young men are either unemployed or playing truant, and they teach him to repress his guilt with the help of their "problem-free philosophy", "Hakuna Matata". This is an African Swahili equivalent of "Don't worry, be happy", whose message is that, when your worries accumulate, you should turn your back on them, "put your past behind you", forget it – and hey presto, "no worries for the rest of your days!" Just live for the moment!

At first Simba does not believe that he can do anything about the troubles that Scar has caused his people. However, when his "fiancée", the blue-eyed Nala, points out that it is his *duty* to cease turning his back on his flock, to return to Pride Rock, to deal with Scar and to change things, Simba realises his obligations, his "mission in life", or whatever we are to call it: "Besides, this is my kingdom. If I don't fight for it, who will?" The lion kingdom has been devastated, it is true, and is not a particularly great realm to rule over, but, nevertheless, right is right and wrong is wrong. Returning home means, however, that he must deal with his past, the feelings of guilt and aggression, which he has been avoiding for such a long time. Simba admits that the past still hurts. However, his guide, Rafiki the baboon shaman, maintains, "Oh yes. The past can hurt. But the way I see it, you can either run from it, or learn from it."

The moral of the story (for every fable has to have one) is that becoming an adult means that the time of freedom from care and of play has come to an end and that social obligations and duties commence. Fortunately for the children viewing *The Lion King*, the duties in the lion kingdom do not exactly include any boring chores, no official entertaining or boring paperwork, but mostly consist of roaming around, expeditions and hunting. The obligations in this case involve being a good leader for one's flock and fighting injustices.

The succession of the generations

In *The Lion King* the environmental theme is combined with an understanding of the succession of the generations. Moreover, here Mufasa's death is not depicted as traumatically as, for example, the death of the fawn's mother in *Bambi*. For Simba's father has prepared his little son for his future demise: "A king's time as ruler rises and falls like

the sun. One day, Simba, the sun will set on *my* time here and will rise with *you* as the *new* king.” Mufasa has also taught Simba that every being on earth is living together in a fantastic equilibrium and as king one has to understand that balance.

Here children are taught to understand the devouring of weaker animals as a natural part of the ecological balance. Of course, not even a predator is allowed to kill indiscriminately or to excess, but must respect all beings, “from the crawling ant to the leaping antelope,” as Daddy Mufasa explains the matter. It is true that lions eat antelopes, but as Mufasa continues, “When we die, our bodies become the grass. And the antelope eat the grass. And so we are all connected in the great circle of life.”

Evidently, “becoming king” means nothing more than becoming an adult, understanding and coming to terms with this circular movement, and thus taking *one*’s place in the cycle of life:

“It’s the Circle of Life
And it moves us all
Through despair and hope
Through faith and love
’Till we find our place
On the path unwinding
In the Circle
The Circle of life.”

And in the circle of life, death too has its place and its meaning.

Every being lives on after death, of course, but the “spiritual” aspect of this fable is not religious in a nauseating way at all. Life after death takes place quite simply in the memories of those left behind. When Simba asks his father to confirm that they will “always be together”, Mufasa instead shows him the stars in the sky, as if they were dead lion kings: “So whenever you feel alone, just remember that those kings will always be there to guide you. And so will I.”

And so, towards the end of the film, the fully-grown Simba, looking up at the stars, remembers the advice of his father and fetches guidance from an inner conversation with Mufasa, who accuses him, “You have forgotten me. ... You have forgotten who *you* are and so forgotten *me*. Look inside yourself, Simba. You are *more* than what you have become. You *must* take your place in the circle of life. ... Remember who you are. You are my son, and the one true king.” The message of the film seems to be that no one can escape the responsibility of taking control over their own life, becoming king of themselves, taking mature responsibility and doing the only right thing.

Another reason why Mufasa's death is experienced as less ghastly than the death of the fawn's mother in *Bambi* – in spite of the fact that the latter, in contrast to the former, is not actually shown *on the screen* – is that the fawn's sense of loss is depicted precisely with the help of visual symbols and music, which can more easily be experienced personally by the child viewer than the more direct representation of Simba's trauma. The viewer is thereby invited to react and feel on *his or her own* behalf (potentially), in a completely different way than in the case of Simba. The children's audience seems in fact to be more worried that the lion father might fall down than that he might die, which for them does not really seem to be the same thing! (Great heights have always frightened children.)

Moreover, *Bambi* appears to be much more vulnerable and helpless than the plucky Simba. The fact that the fawn's father, the King of the Forest, does not seem to be totally crushed by the death of the mother, but rather to be unemotional, also makes *Bambi's* suffering more lonely and therefore even heavier to bear. The whole of *Bambi* is in other respects more frail and naturalistic than *The Lion King*, which strikes a more humorous tone.

The circle of life

Taking one's place in the circle of life also involves sowing small seeds of romance, even in the dry Savannah. For the meaning of life is to continue life itself, i.e. to reproduce. In the final scene of the film the opening sequence of pictures is repeated, with the difference that it is now Simba and Nala who are the proud parents of a lion cub, who is small and timid, but in spite of this the future king or queen (we are not told the gender of the cub). Here the animals bow down (just like the animals in *Bambi*), not for the future ruler but for life itself.

Accordingly, *all* children are born to become kings and queens, and the question that princes and princesses sometime must ask themselves is if they are ready to ascend the throne of adulthood, shoulder the responsibility and deal with the past as well as the future. Moreover, they must finally answer the question "Who am I?" by replying, "Both myself and those who have gone before me." When the adult Simba, at the request of the baboon shaman, looks at his reflection in the mirror of water, he does not only see his own reflection, but also an image of his father. Every parent lives on inside his or her child, but if the child does not lead a satisfactory life and is not conscious of his responsibilities, then the parent is also dead and forgotten. For taking one's place in the cycle of life involves making certain significant moral choices – precluding vegetating and pretending that there are "no worries".

This requires a certain amount of experience and courage, of course. However, Mufasa has taught his son Simba that he should only be brave when he *has to be* and that lion kings can also be afraid – above all of losing their loved ones.

Lesson in political science?

Of course, many adults (who are as egocentred as children) see the film as an allegory about leadership, about democracy versus dictatorship and about striving for power. They like to interpret the ideology of the film on the level of political science, as a question of polity. They see a militaristic march in perfect time in the style of Hitler & Co, including Scar, the hyenas and a herd of gnus, with slogans that remind one of a totalitarian regime. In contrast to this one has Mufasa's absolutely good hierarchy, possibly called a democratic monarchy.

The children have never heard of Hitler, but anyhow they place the marching animals among the "evil" beings, whom they do *not* wish to imitate. They understand the plot of the film mainly as a story about nice beings versus nasty beings, and about biological growth, maturity and generation changes – and perhaps as something mythological or "religious" (the transience of earthly things), even if they as yet lack notions for such things.

Instead of interpreting the father's lines (namely: "A king's time as ruler rises and falls like the sun. One day, Simba, the sun will set on *my* time here and will rise with *you* as the *new* king.") as a question of the accession of a new "monarch" in the individual family, the critics *choose* to interpret the film's "message" in a way less plausible for a children's film, namely as a question of a monarchy with male succession to the throne versus a dictatorship. In order to get their "critical reading" to make any sense at all, they also have to maintain, with great "profoundness", that the order of succession to the throne in the monarchy is "naturalized" here to become as natural as the rising and setting of the sun...

However, the fact that the film can also meet with such a positive response from the hearts of anti-royalists can only mean that becoming a king quite simply means becoming master or mistress of oneself, i.e. reaching adulthood. A person who is whole and mature must take responsibility, show a passion for justice, take a moral stand and assume certain roles both in the family and in society. Moreover, he must also deal with the unpleasant things in his life, instead of running away from them. The responsibility that from the very beginning is predetermined to be Simba's is not that of the monarch whose crown is inherited, but that of reaching adulthood and the succession of a new generation.

As Bruno Bettelheim himself has maintained in "The Uses of Enchantment", when fairy tales end with the main character becoming the king of a realm, it is a question of him now becoming master of his feelings, gaining control of his fate, governing himself and not a

question of him becoming the ruler over any subjects. Moreover, the king is never seen reigning, but after the adventure becomes once again an ordinary but more mature citizen. The “king” in the fairy tale is not a constitutional concept but a psychological one. “Kings” do not rule over any other people than themselves. Each person is a country where his own will, his own feelings and reason must finally be allowed to govern, even if the will of the parents has for a long time been spreading all over the kingdom like a foreign power of occupation.

Accordingly, *The Lion King* is about reaching maturity and assuming responsibility, and poses the question, “When does one become an heir of the human race and the family?” Does this occur at birth, or when one *chooses oneself* to take responsibility for one’s own life and the lives of other people? When actually does the wheel turn full circle in the dynasty of the family? More children are actually of the opinion that the film ends with Simba (and Nala) having a child, rather than with the lion cub becoming the Lion King.

The fact that a jubilant crowd, at the beginning of the film, welcomes the little newborn lion up there on Pride Rock is to be interpreted less in political terms (as support for male leaders or male succession to the throne), and more as an illustration of the fact that the next revolution in the circle of life has just commenced, in addition to a recognition of every child’s wish to be the centre of attraction, draw everyone’s attention, and be important. For most children under the age of ten dream of becoming a star and standing on an elevated “rock” (most often called a “stage”) in front of a great number of admiring people...

The film has also been accused of finally (with the birth of the next offspring) just celebrating the status quo. However, as mentioned above, there is nothing to contradict the fact that Simba and Nala’s cub might be a girl. And Simba does not completely give up the alternative, more carefree existence that Timon and Pumbaa personify, but brings them along with him into the new kingdom. What is to say that Simba, who has learned to appreciate Nala’s physical strength and his friends’ different values and less bloody dishes, will not change things and make life a little more playful, equal and democratic?

Rites and myths

The Lion King exhibits great similarities to myths and rites that are many thousands of years old. The religious myths seek to answer the three fundamental questions of “Whence?” “Whither?” and “Why?” and, just like the film, they contain sacrifices and therefore violence. They seek to explain the reasons for “evil” in the world and to find answers to the question of whether this “evil” can be defeated. This is accomplished by the conflict between “good” and “evil”, in a “life-and-death” struggle, through the battle between the

“saviour” and the “Evil One”. However, the issue cannot be brought to a conclusion before Simba the “saviour”, just as in the case of Jesus, has realised and accepted that *both* good and evil, both love and aggression also exist within himself.

Just like the myths, the film *The Lion King* takes as its starting point a state of “wholeness”, goodness and stability, which is then overthrown. The hero is at first unwilling to deal with the threat and destroy the antagonist, but is urged on by an oracle, a wise man, or by a dream. Only the hero can restore the balance, of course, for this is his destiny in life.

As a representative of goodness and wisdom (who has already fulfilled *his* duty in the struggle against the representatives of “evil”), Mufasa also exhorts his son, even after his death. It is true that Simba does not have any customary magic weapon (even if he has helping friends), but, nevertheless, he finally decides *voluntarily* – and this is important – to take on his adversary, Scar. If the final battle did not take place voluntarily, the hero would, of course, assume the character of a potential sacrifice.

The hero can finally apply all his energies to fighting the antagonist, since they are no longer partially spent concealing the darker sides of his character from himself. He comes close to death, but is reborn at the same moment as everything is lost. Moreover, the hero does not fight for his own sake or his own cause, but for the whole of his “herd”, as well as for his descendants (the little son or daughter who will one day be compelled to repeat the same battle for survival). The Lion King has been authorised by the herd as a kind of agent for goodness as well as violence. However, Simba does not kill Scar (and does not kill anyone else either), for otherwise he would not be different from his uncle, the murderer. Scar is seen falling off a precipice, after which he is attacked by the hyenas.

However, Simba has realised that he has both “good” and “bad” within him, and that he must exert himself to control his aggression, so that it will not lead to violence. It is, of course, extremely seldom that excessive aggression constitutes the actual problem, but rather too little empathy, thoughtfulness and responsibility. In the final scene then the distinction ceases to exist between the hero and his society, for which he has had to function as “the part for the whole”. The wounds of the lion kingdom are healed, the balance is redressed, and once again it has been proven that “good” defeats “evil” – until the next time...

Rites are *enacted* and day nursery children will probably find great pleasure in pretending to be, in other words acting the part of, the Lion King. In contrast to the case of myths, which have been claimed to be true, the children of today realise fully, however, that animated characters are invented. And, in contrast to the ancient myths, no one is killed in the “aggressive” media games or day nursery games of today. But, as usual, the high priests

and shamans of the present day will, of course, assert that these rites are in the long run dangerous for society: “conducive to violence”...

In actual fact, all of us, irrespective of our age and gender, probably need to work on both our “roaring” and our fear of “evil”, death and our own aggressions. Disney provides a good deal of assistance along the way.

(1998)

9. Weak young man's path to maturity in (and for) Notre Dame

Concerted action taken in solidarity—instead of magic

It is extremely unusual to see a 20-year-old young man starring as the principal character of an animated Disney film. I can only recollect Robin Hood (and the somewhat younger Aladdin) from previous films. Most of the central characters of the male gender have so far been between 7 and 11 years of age. The complex of problems dealt with and the solutions to the problems have, of course, been accordingly.

In this animated version of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* from the Disney studio, the young Quasimodo, in spite of his mature age, is still walking in the shadow of a (foster) father who is strictly watching over him and restricting his freedom of movement, in the same way as a countless number of teenage girls previously have had their freedom restrained by nasty mother figures, while no trace has been seen of the fathers. Here we have, logically enough, an absent mother, and the Cathedral of Notre Dame, i.e. Our Lady (also known as the Virgin Mary), is as close to an (immaculate) mother as we can come. She protects her son and encloses him with warmth, but unfortunately only speaks through the peal of her bells.

From a story we expect to obtain answers to three questions: “Who is the story about?” - “What does he or she want?” – “Who or what is standing in the way?” It is clear that the film is mainly about Quasimodo, who is a foster son reluctantly taken care of by the austere Judge Frollo. What then does Quasimodo *want*? He wants to cease being shut up in the tower of the cathedral, merely *seeing* the people far away down below, and he wants to *join* them and *be in their midst*. Accordingly, here there is no spell to break, no dragon to kill, no princess to long for – only the courage to dare to be out among the people of the city. This may seem to be a modest wish, but not to a “monstrosity” like the misshapen hunchback... For it is not only the deceitful Frollo who is standing in his way.

“Half-formed”

Judge Frollo has, of course, taught his “foundling” the outsider's acceptance of being stupid and loathsome. “Daddy” Frollo has given the misshapen young lad the name of

“Quasimodo”, which means “half-formed”, “a half-person”, but if anyone is “half-formed” and lacks wholeness as a person, it is precisely Frollo himself. He is not only a fanatical racist and hypocritically pious, but also directly responsible for the killing and expulsion of the gypsies from Paris. Moreover, in a decisive eye-to-eye fight at the end of the film, the judge reveals to Quasimodo (just as Scar reveals to Simba in *The Lion King*), that it was he himself who was responsible for the death of his foster son’s parent, when Quasimodo’s mother had desperately tried to rescue her little child from the pursuing Frollo. And all these years Quasi had believed himself to be abandoned and unwanted...

It is rather unclear why Frollo does not want Quasimodo to be out among the citizens of Paris. This is perhaps due to the fact that the judge’s responsibility for the mother’s death might then be discovered, that Frollo would risk being perceived as being friendly to gypsies if it was known that he had been sheltering a gypsy child for 20 years, or that the judge really realises what an outcast a deformed person would be in the Paris of the 15th century. Frollo maintains, at any rate, that he is protecting Quasimodo from the cruelty of the city’s inhabitants. Irrespective of his reason, he does not allow the young lad to leave the tower.

However, Quasimodo would very much like to participate in the carnival revelry of the annual “Feast of Fools” and is encouraged to do so by his amusing, speaking gargoyle friends, Victor, Hugo and Laverne, who have likewise been rejected and who act as his “brothers and sister”. He lets himself be persuaded and climbs down to the crowd of people. The clumsily limping hunchback becomes oddly lithe and nimble when he moves down along the facade. Down there he meets the beautiful gypsy girl Esmeralda and Phoebus, the new captain of the city’s guard. By mistake Quasimodo is crowned the “King of Fools”, because he is believed to be wearing a superb disguise. However, when his true identity is revealed, he is instead subjected to scorn and egg-throwing. Esmeralda (unlike Frollo) defends him and comes to his rescue. Both of them take refuge in the sanctuary of the cathedral.

Frollo now wants Captain Phoebus to take Esmeralda prisoner and assist him in weeding out the gypsies. However, young Phoebus has fallen in love with the beautiful Esmeralda and made friends with Quasimodo, and together they help each other to protect the gypsies. Not only Phoebus, but also the shyly blushing Quasimodo and Judge Frollo, who has denied his instincts, have become enamoured of the beautiful gypsy. Indeed, Frollo is almost consumed with an inner fire, for which he blames the object of his feelings, however. Esmeralda must either be his, or be put to death. Esmeralda chooses to be burnt at the stake as a witch. The ending will of necessity be both painful and violent, because Quasimodo is

compelled to fight the only parent whom he has ever known. Need one mention the fact that goodness and justice prevail in the end?

No magic

In this film, the conflict is not resolved with magical assistance or by some external deliverer, as has so often been the case in previous stories of this type. Instead, the three main characters manage completely by themselves, but only through concerted action taken in solidarity. Are perhaps individual solutions and magic a stage that has passed at last? In Disney's last three films, *Pocahontas*, *The Lion King*, and now *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, there is no longer any room for magical solutions, fairies or magicians with magic wands. Nor are the opponents as satanically evil as in the "good old days"... I myself interpret this as a sign of maturity in both children and children's culture.

The cold religious fanatic, Frollo, is perhaps the most tragic of all of Disney's villains so far. For once we see a villain who is hunting for neither riches nor power, but only for Esmeralda's love. Frollo is almost consumed with his longing for Esmeralda, which is here given a very concrete (and at the same time metaphorical) depiction as a "sexual fire". For all that, his unusually "normal", controlled and controlling manner and his lack of humour make him more terrible than most of his predecessors. Moreover, the film contains some wonderfully frightening, fiery scenes with the cruel Frollo in focus. His thin, austere, "Gothic" appearance signals a much more credible and more difficult opponent than the customary crazy witches. Controlled madness is, of course, much more dangerous than the uncontrolled variety.

The evil characters in Disney's animated feature films are the only ones who are shown in close-up (sometimes in extreme close-up). Moreover, they are the only characters who turn directly into the camera and thus look directly into the eyes of the viewer. To this is added the cinematic effect that magnifies this code of fright: their faces and background fade into black, whereupon their eyes stand out like big, yellow, luminous, "spirally rolling" globes directed towards the victim – and towards us in the audience. Not only do these outbursts of madness intensify the malicious intent of the characters, but they also evoke – by transforming their faces into cats' eyes – a primitive fear. However, fortunately these monsters are "merely characters in an animated film", of course.

The brand name "Disney" is rather often alleged to represent the weeding out of violence, sex and politics from films, but soon this will only apply to violence. Now perhaps the political message that one should not persecute ethnic minorities is no longer as radical as it would have been a couple of decades ago. The view of women presented in this film would

also have been perceived as a great deal more rebellious if it had appeared in the '50s. However, repudiation of the bullying of handicapped people appeared as early as in *Dumbo*. None the less, the social pathos and the sensualism of the film are not to be despised.

Disney's portrayal of teenage girls in recent years has been much less asexual than Snow White and Cinderella, for example Ariel the "stripper" in *The Little Mermaid*. The present film's heroine, Esmeralda, takes the prize as the sexiest animated Disney girl so far. But then she is also a gypsy, of course, and is probably regarded as having the seductive dance "in her blood", so to speak... However, she made me immediately think of Demi Moore, with her breast implants and all – even before I discovered from the list of credits that, quite rightly, Esmeralda was voiced by Ms Moore herself in the original version.

Active girl

The children's audience will probably notice Esmeralda's undaunted and independent image rather than her alluring body and her challenging temperament. The Disney group has evidently been influenced by feminist criticism and has really exerted itself to portray a girl who is active and fearless. Esmeralda is impulsive, spontaneous, humorous and alert. The bearded young Captain Phoebus is also full of fun, humane and independent in his thought. He is no steadfast soldier who blindly obeys orders. Nor is he portrayed as a wonderfully handsome Prince Charming.

It is precisely humour and human kindness that are emphasised as mankind's foremost qualities, and consequently no longer muscles, striking beauty, compliancy or "innocence". Quasi and his joking gargoyles, as well as Esmeralda's goat, Djali, also possess humour and goodness as their foremost characteristics. The early Disney heroes and heroines delegated to a great extent the task of being humorous to amusing small minor characters.

The themes of the film, namely outsidership and the equal value of all humankind, probably interest most people, even if the plot is unusually complicated compared with the typical Disney plot, and a great deal is beyond the comprehension of preschool children at any rate. Perhaps *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* cannot be said to deal directly with bullying and xenophobia, but the film alludes to situations which have been experienced by many people in the audience or which become more comprehensible through the film. All of the main characters are outcasts in fact: Quasi himself on account of his appearance, Esmeralda because she is a gypsy, Phoebus because he refuses to take part in a dishonest assignment. The gargoyles were discarded because they were not perfect and Frollo turns himself into an outcast through his fanaticism. Even the Notre Dame Cathedral was at this time an "outcast", since its Gothic style was considered vulgar.

However, Quasi has in fact less trouble due to his appearance than due to his poor self-esteem and his disgust at himself, which Frollo has effectively drummed into him. Moreover, the animators have succeeded in portraying the hunchback in such a way that the children's audience even thinks that he is "cute". This social outcast is an eccentric, who like every other person merely wishes to be accepted. In contrast to Beast in *Beauty and the Beast*, Quasimodo does not, thank Heavens, become handsome towards the end of the film. Nor does his biological father appear and he does not win Esmeralda. However, Quasi does in any case dare to show himself as the person he is.

(1996 + 1998)

10. Hercules redefines heroism

Muscles can come in useful, but do not work without a heart

Sixty years after the first animated feature film about Snow White, Disney presents a male counterpart who is equally snow-white, in a film about the teenage Hercules' search for his adult identity and for a place to belong to in life.

Of course, in contrast to the heroes and gods of the Greek myths, the animated superheroes have always been hyper-moral. Accordingly, here we do not meet the Hercules who, in an attack of madness, killed his own children, or Hercules the rapist (or the oversexed Hercules, who in a single night satisfied 50 sisters), but a modest and clumsy 18-year-old, who only has a crush on Megara and does not kill any other beings than magically created monsters.

We would perhaps like to believe that the ancient myths were withheld from children, but this was not the case at all, of course. On the contrary, the myths about gods and heroes were used in bringing up children as early as 2,500 years ago. At that time children (according to Plato's *The Republic*, for example) were fed contemporary values at home through myths related by their mothers, wet-nurses and older women. One group of horror stories, for example, circled around frightening female characters who murdered children, such as Lamia and Mormo. When the Greek women told these nightmarish stories, their express purpose was to seek to control difficult children by conjuring up a picture of what could happen to them if they continued to behave badly. However, the classical authors only mention the female story-tellers to chastise them. Today the situation is quite the reverse in that it is more often women who lecture male story-tellers, particularly if the stories are told in pictures...

Strangely enough we use the Roman name for this hero from Greek mythology, who is called Heracles by the Greeks. Hercules is the most celebrated figure of the Greek myth. He was the illegitimate son of Princess Alcmena and Zeus, the king of the gods, and therefore the object of the jealous hatred of Hera, Zeus' bitter wife. Even in his cradle little "Herc" strangled two snakes sent by Hera to kill him. Moreover, his stepmother, Hera, sent out the Hydra, a many-headed water monster, to destroy him, but this plan failed too.

Unconcerned by this, Hercules continued to perform his great exploits and a series of other heroic deeds in his battles with monsters, giants and foreign kings. This gigantic superman is, in the classical version, a veritable killer of monsters, impossible to defeat, but

nevertheless predetermined to suffer a tragic death. He endures many trials, possesses brute strength, boldness and intelligence, but the heroic side of him eventually prevails over his humane side.

His life is characterised by man's urge to achieve the superhuman, but he finally accomplishes that other task of the hero, namely to yield to an unavoidable fate. Hercules preferred to climb onto the funeral pyre rather than to live eternally with extreme pain (caused by the poisonous blood of the sea monster, Hydra). In order to free himself from the pain caused by the poisonous tunic stuck on his body, he climbed voluntarily onto the pyre, from whose flames his soul rose to Olympus, where he was admitted to the circle of the gods, became reconciled with Hera and received the hand of her daughter, Hebe (i.e. his half-sister), in marriage. In other words a story with sensational and spicy details!

As is well known, Plato wanted to censor the ancient myths narrated for children, as he found it unsuitable, for example, to tell a story about a father throwing his son out of Olympus because the son had tried to protect his mother from his father's wife-battering. Plato was of the opinion, as so many of his successors in the present century, that children could not differentiate between allegory and reality, and he therefore recommended instead "more sensible" tales on a higher level of morality. However, it is not clear whether he thereby wanted to prevent wife-battering or mediating sons...

Plato vs. Disney

In *The Laws* Plato gives one to understand that at that time the youngest children, just like the children of today, preferred puppet shows, the somewhat older children comedies, and the oldest tragedies. Children also took part in a great number of festivals where myths and rites were central, and they were therefore not protected from adult stories to any great extent, just as the TV-viewing children of today are protected to a small extent from such stories. However, the ancient myths were not considered for that reason to exclusively belong to children's culture, but adults also experienced them in ritual contexts, which also explains why they have become so long-lived. As early as 2,500 years ago there were parodies and farces based on the mythological heroes, in particular humorous travesties of Ulysses and Hercules, and here Disney now follows in their footsteps.

The animated film is precisely a kind of modern puppet show for the youngest children, and with *Hercules* Disney has returned to the musical comedy, after his previous visit in the realm of (moderately sad) romantic tragedy with *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. In the customary manner of Disney, both killing and creating people (i.e. sex) have been removed from the story on which the film is based, as well as excessively nasty family conflicts.

It is also typical that in this film, which is about a young man hunting for his identity, two diametrically opposed types of father are contrasted with each other. Here the malevolent stepmother, Hera, is replaced as a villain with the anti-type, Uncle Hades, who is set against the benevolent father, Zeus, and the good earthly foster father. Accordingly, the two mothers are not seen very much, in the same way as the fathers are most often invisible in the films about teenage girls. Boy heroes almost always have different male role models to make up their mind about, while the girls are contrasted with female villains and helpers, so that the conflict between different male and female choices of roles, respectively, will be so much the clearer.

Here, on the adult level, we also have the brotherly rivalry between Zeus (the King of heaven) and Hades, who rules in the underworld over the souls of the dead. The discontented Hades wants, just like Scar in *The Lion King*, to overthrow his brother and make Olympus his own kingdom, but first he has to remove his nephew. Hades employs the assistance of the gigantic Titans, monsters whom he conjures up, as well as the comical demons, Pain and Panic. The latter pair succeed in kidnapping the little baby Hercules and giving the boy a lethal potion, it is true, but the plan fails partially and the boy is to grow up as a foundling in the house of a poor old couple.

Where do I belong?

Hercules is therefore ignorant of his divine descent and cannot handle his enormous strength correctly. On account of all the trouble he unintentionally causes, he feels like an outsider who is disliked by those around him, but attempts to fit in and hopes and longs to belong somewhere, “someplace else”. He has often dreamt of “a far-off place”, where he is welcomed, and he sings the usual wish song: “I need to know: Who am I? Wh-where do I belong?”

Slowly the young man also realises who he really is, but his father Zeus explains at his first meeting with him that only gods are allowed to live on Olympus and, since Herc is merely a demigod, he first has to become a hero on earth before he can gain access to heaven. How then does one *become* a hero?

Hercules is the patron of sports, of course, so it is fitting that his magic assistant here can appear in the role of trainer: the comical satyr Phil, who teaches his novice and takes Hercules to Thebes as a kind of “road test” in preparation for much greater tasks. And quite rightly, Hercules tackles all kinds of “curves” successfully, apart from the female curves possessed by Megara, whom he rescues from the lusting claws of a nasty centaur. However, Meg, who calls him “Wonderboy” all the time, is in the super-villain’s power. She has

ended up in Hades' service in exchange and as a sacrifice for her beloved, who later on turned his back on her and has been having a good time with other girls. This experience has made her cynical and free from all illusions.

Accordingly, as in many other Disney films with a boy in the principal part, the theme is "How do you make a man out of a cute young lad?" However, here the focus is on how a lost and clumsy *teenager* can become a Greek god. It is true that the little lad has been enormously strong ever since he was a baby in the cradle, but it seems to require a good deal more than strength to become a "god", i.e. a fully fledged man. The young man is still going through ordeals by fire...

What is a hero?

Hercules defeats a great number of monsters, fixes a "landslide victory" when boulders fall down and block his opponent's advance, and soon becomes a hero. Heroism is depicted both humorously and ironically, with details fetched from the world of today: jokes about Herc fever, Hollywood-like sightseeing tours past the abode of the celebrity, merchandising with sports shoes of the AIR HERC brand, hordes of screaming female fans, meetings booked with amazons and D.G.R. (Daughters of the Greek Revolution), of which Megara could have been a member.

Meg is seductive, but she is also strong, tough, amusing and independent. In an attempt to rescue Hercules from a falling temple pillar, she pushes him out of the way, merely to be hit by the pillar herself and thus fatally wounded. However, this is not a question of any customary female sacrifice, "female suffering", but happens in the usual manner of heroic deeds. This signifies important progress, in other words, in comparison with the classical myths, where women only had two duties: to sexually excite men and give birth to legitimate children. They were never heroines, never important in their own right, but merely because they gave birth to heroes.

This is what Megara does now too, although without the pains of labour, when she acts as a catalyst for Hercules' heroic qualities. She becomes a pawn in Hades' game, when he understands that Herc's only sensitive spot is his weakness for Meg. The demigod does not become a true hero until he realises that "... a true hero isn't measured by the size of his strength, but by the strength of his heart". He offers Hades his life in exchange for Meg's: real heroes have a big heart and not only big muscles. However, since Hercules is immortal, he cannot die, just as the god Hades cannot die when Hercules sends him flying into the river of death. The battle has been won *symbolically* at any rate.

In the end it is not only a star that is born, but a whole constellation (fully comparable with Marilyn Monroe). However, Hercules finally chooses not to take up his abode on Olympus, but to remain down on earth with his Meg. It is probably quite suffocating up there in heaven, and what would then be left to strive for?

Hercules is a film which is full of verve, is entirely entertaining and has an action-packed tempo, but which perhaps appeals more to boys. The story is driven forward by a great rhythm and blues quintet of muses. As usual there is an abundance of wonderful minor characters, like the shrivelled-up old Fates: Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos, who spin, measure and cut with scissors, respectively, the thread of a person's life. The film can probably be slightly frightening for the very youngest, with all of its horrible monsters and the fiery and wonderfully scary blue-haired Hades. With children under the age of six, one should perhaps wait until the film is released on video, which has a smaller and thereby less frightening format, and which allows playback, enabling the child to look again at certain scenes and thus alleviate any anxiety.

Now what would Plato have said about this "censored" version? A spectacle for the gods, but not for children... However, since we today know that feelings are not, as Plato believed, irrational and that pictures do not, as Plato imagined, undermine reason, we do not need to pay attention to this opponent of all art and drama employed in bringing up children.

Moreover, Plato was afraid that the audience's feelings, such as compassion, sentimentality and fear of death, would make young men unwilling to take part in wars. If one maintains that Plato was right in holding this view on emotionally charged stories, then one should for this reason too recommend *Hercules* to all children.

Falsification of history?

But what is to be said about Disney's "falsification of history" then? Of course, the winged horse Pegasus did not at all belong to Hercules, Hera was, as mentioned above, not the motherly origin of this super-gladiator, and we do not even get to see all of Hercules' twelve labours. Will this not obstruct children's future success at school, whenever Greek mythology appears on the timetable?

In that case "falsification of folk tales" would perhaps be a more suitable expression to use, but how can something be falsified that has never pretended to be true? Folk tales have always been time-bound and changeable. This version created by Disney, which is a good deal more moral and does not glorify violence very much, stands steadily on its own two feet. Moreover, it has been shown that 8- or 9-year-old children of the present day, with their

games of violence, perceive the ancient tales of violence where evil triumphs as unbelievably cruel. [Note 1]

Folk tales have always been rewritten for ideological reasons, whether these have been conservative or liberating. For example, Perrault's 17th century tale about Little Red Riding Hood adapted earlier oral versions by removing their "vulgarity", making the young girl more beautiful, and adding a violent ending. Then the Grimm brothers continued the adaptation, but camouflaged their own authorship and pretended to present "authentic" fairy tales. The Germans made Little Red Riding Hood younger, turned her into a disobedient but charming little girl, and rewrote the violent death at the end, making it into a rescue scene where a passing hunter rescues both the girl and the grandmother out of the belly of the wolf.

Nevertheless, present-day adaptations, for example Disney's, have wrongly been perceived as inappropriate rewritings of the "originals" bearing the signatures of the Grimm brothers. As early as in the 19th century, however, their tales were rewritten by a group of women (Kaffeterkreis) who disliked the gender roles of the tales. They produced versions where the heroines were far from patient, silent or passive, but rather curious and thirsting for knowledge. During the past century, Disney has undeniably been the foremost transmitter and recreator of old folk tales and myths that have been out of fashion with the time. [Note 2]

Tales about Little Red Riding Hood, the Dragon Killer or Hercules seem to live on, not because they are universal and timeless, but precisely because they are *not*. They are constantly being recreated to correspond to the dominant outlook of the times, and thank Heavens for that!

(1997)

Notes

1. See Anne Haas Dyson: "Cultural Constellations and Childhood Identities: On Greek Gods, Cartoon Heroes, and the Social Lives of Schoolchildren", *Harvard Educational Review* 66 (1996):3, pp. 471-495.
2. Dyson, Anne Haas: "Rewriting for, and by, the Children: The Social and Ideological Fate of a Media Miss in an Urban Classroom", *Written Communication* 14 (1997):3, pp. 275-312 (see especially p. 282).

11. Tarzan's search for his identity

Someone whose hand you could hold

Tarzan is yet another Disney film that is completely preoccupied with the complex of problems connected with identity and with the roles of different ages. Peter Pan wonders, "What's a mother?" and thereby indirectly, "What distinguishes a child from a teenager and from an adult, respectively?" "What is a baby?" is the question posed by Lady, the cocker spaniel who is shoved to the one side and neglected in *Lady and the Tramp*. By and large all of the pet biographies wonder, "What is a dad?" - and *The Lion King* asks in addition, "What does it mean to be grown up?" Both Mowgli the man cub and Tarzan the ape-man are curious about what a human being is. What - if anything - actually distinguishes animals from human beings? In addition to posing the question, "What is a human being?" Tarzan asks, "What characterises a man?" These questions are direct parallels to the question that teenage girls in the wonder tales have been asking themselves all the time, "What does it mean to be a woman?"

A usual misconception is that children's films should be about children. The fact is that films that portray children and are intended for adults circle much more often around children than do children's films. Just because Disney's films are children's films, they do not of necessity focus on child characters. Of the 31 animated feature films treated here, only 10 actually have children figuring in principal parts. It is much more common for them to deal with young people in their upper teens or whole families. The films are not for that reason mainly intended for teenagers or adults, even if they too obviously derive pleasure from the films.

This is not a new phenomenon. Of the approximately 200 original Grimm tales from 1814-15, only fourteen are about children (the best-known are "Hansel and Gretel" and "Little Red Riding Hood"). There are a few tales which, just like *Tarzan* and *The Lion King*, tell the story of a child who quickly grows up to become a hero/young woman, but there are extremely few where the child remains a child at the end of the tale. And even fewer of these have a happy ending, i.e. are fairy tales "by definition" (Solms 1999:100-1). Moreover, apart from "Little Red Riding Hood" and "Hansel and Gretel", there are few of the Grimm brothers' tales about children that children on the whole want to hear. Here one can without doubt speak of "the disappearance of childhood".

Now, this is the case because children are more interested in what they are to become or what they once were, than in seeing themselves from the perspective of the present; at least if they are depicted, as so often is the case in films portraying children, as vulnerable or incompetent. However, Disney's film sagas are among the few that cover the whole range of ages and answer all these central questions about identity, which probably also explains their unparalleled success with audiences. By and large all of Disney's animated films end up on the top-ten list of the films attracting the largest audiences in Swedish cinemas, and they are most often seen by over half a million filmgoers, in a country with a population of 9 million.

On the top-ten list

Without any exception, Disney's films with boys/young men in the principal part attract most filmgoers: for example, during 1999 only, *Tarzan* was seen by 827,000 children and adults. However, the record is held by *The Lion King*, which during 1994-95 attracted almost every fourth Swede, or almost 2 million (1,962,476) filmgoers, while *Aladdin* was seen by just over a million Swedes during 1993-94, but was still beaten by *Beauty and the Beast*, which had reached almost 1.2 million filmgoers during 1992-93 (Söderbergh Widding 2000:19-32). These films also usually dominate video sales statistics, for example more than 21 million copies of *Aladdin* have been sold in the USA (Byrne & McQuillan 2000:73).

However, it is then claimed that Disney's success is mostly due to enormous PR campaigns. It is alleged that Disney has been effectively colonising our minds in this way for over 60 years now. Is it really true that Disney's films and toy figures have influenced the thought of the western world more than, for example, French intellectuals such as Foucault, Bourdieu, Derrida, Baudrillard, Lacan, etc.? Considering the similarity of the film sagas to ancient genres such as fables, wonder tales, myths and pet biographies – and their adaptability to cultural changes in society on the whole, not least concerning gender roles – the direction of influence ought rather to be the opposite: namely from everyday reality to Disney's films.

Surely vulnerable and innocent children do not read Derrida? But the "constant bombardment of Disney films" does not even succeed in influencing children's own storytelling. Kristin Wardetzky (1999) has compared slightly more than 300 tales composed by 10-year-olds themselves with reference to differences between boys and girls, and she has found that the boys' tales resemble ancient heroic myths to a greater extent, while the girls' tales resemble archaic romance above all. The boys select Hercules' fights with monsters and choose to exclude his interest in women – at least women as partners in love and sex

objects. Young women may, if the worst comes to the worst, serve as a formal excuse for a rescue mission, but are extremely peripheral. The sexual awakening of these boys will have to wait for another while. In this respect Disney has undeniably met them half-way, by toning down the romance in the wonder tale films when young boys figure in the principal part. In comparison with the tales on which the films are based, however, Disney clearly draws closer to the “female genres”.

The girls do not fight with monsters, but paralyse them with their magic or disenchant them. They identify that which is “foreign” with the opposite sex, which is experienced as inferior in terms of maturity, while the boys rank that which is “foreign” with physical superiority. This explains the strategies of transformation and alliance and the methods of confrontation of each sex, which the critics in a routine fashion have interpreted in terms of “passiveness” versus “activeness”.

In this respect *Tarzan* constitutes another step along the road to equality between the sexes. Here there are no monsters precisely, but for this King of the Jungle it is rather the female sex and his own physical development that represent what is “foreign” and “different”. In contrast to Mowgli in *The Jungle Book*, here the focus is on the teens of the ape-man and during one single song the film manages the leap in time between childhood and adulthood. Tarzan is unusually sensual to be one of Disney’s human characters and, indeed, unique to be one of his male animated characters. His “animal” childhood and adolescence and his animalism certainly invite an accentuation of his as yet untamed wildness.

The plot of the film is the well-known story. After a shipwreck a British family lands on the coast of Africa with their baby boy, but the parents are soon killed by a hungry (or evil) leopard. Kala the gorilla, who has just lost her own child on account of the same leopard, saves the son of man and adopts him as her surrogate child, to the strong disapproval of Kerchak, her husband and leader of the herd.

Motherly love cannot prevent Tarzan from becoming aware of his outsidership at an early age, and he is even bullied by his “friends” because he is different. However, Tarzan strives to become “the best ape ever” and soon feels at home in the jungle, just as much as the otters.

Torn between two worlds

Nevertheless, when a British expedition arrives, Tarzan is torn between both worlds, represented by the people from “civilisation”, not least Jane, the young daughter of the leader of the expedition, and the animal family that he has belonged to up to then.

In the animal fables no distinction has been made between human beings and animals, but rather Dumbo, Bambi, Tod and Copper, Oliver and Simba have naturally, in spite of their animal physiognomies, been regarded as humans. In *Tarzan*, on the other hand, this borderline has been thematized, but the answer to the question of what actually differentiates humans from animals is finally, “nothing, really”: both eat, sleep, play, love, and defend those whom they love.

Significantly enough, the boy’s confusion about his identity is greatest during his childhood, and it is then that the mirror scene takes place. When Tarzan experiences himself as most different, he looks at his reflection in the water, angrily hits at it and with mud in his face tries to produce a mirror image that bears a greater resemblance to his ape friends and ape parents. Just before this he had been mistaken for a “piranha”, and, in addition, Terk calls him “freaky-looking”, a proud elephant friend calls him “some subspecies of elephant”, and Jane even refers to him as a “thing”. However, as a teenage guy he manages admirably as an ape swinging on the vines.

After Tarzan has had his human sides revealed and confirmed, above all by Jane, he is delivered from the threats to his true identity as a human, a man and a being of nature. Now he does not need to dread either Sabor the leopard or the wildly shooting Clayton any longer. Tarzan can remain at home in the jungle, which is no longer the same as his parental home, however. And, if he had really travelled to England, he would never have felt at home there, of course.

”Hairless wonder”

The only supernatural element in this wonder tale is indeed Tarzan himself, whom the apes call a “hairless wonder”. He undeniably possesses almost magic powers when it comes to moving about in the jungle. The film completes the trend commenced by the Disney films of the last decade, in which people (and even children) no longer need to resort to the help of supernatural beings such as fairies or even genies in bottles, and in which even children of nature can take matters in their own hands and create their own “magic solutions”.

One factor contributing to this is the fact that the villains are no longer in possession of any supernatural powers of magic. Like Shan-Yu, the leader of the Huns in *Mulan*, Frollo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* or Governor Ratcliffe in *Pocahontas*, the villain in *Tarzan*, Clayton (drawn as a cross between Clark Gable, Gaston in *Beauty and the Beast* and Walt Disney himself), does not have any magic power. Here Disney for once does not even force the villain to magically burst out in song. I interpret these toned-down threats as a sign of a more child-friendly attitude in society on the whole, where the youngest children no longer

feel as small or vulnerable as previously and thus are not in such an acute need of magic solutions either.

What then is there to be said in favour of classifying *Tarzan* in the wonder tale genre? Well, the main character is a teenager in a semi-human form at least. It is true that, in the manner of the boys of the fables, he is still searching for his identity, but, nevertheless, he is extremely competent, has already acquired the basic adult skills, and is even superior to the males in the herd, being able to beat his “foster dad” Kerchak in wrestling. Although Kerchak did not exactly actively want to kill Tarzan, he did order Kala to put the boy back in the wooden hut: “Kala, look at it! It's not our kind.” And later on Kerchak says, “He will never be one of us.” Just as in the case of the teenage girls of the same age in the wonder tales, liberation from the authority of parents takes place through a showdown with parental figures of the *same* sex, here chiefly with Kerchak, who has for a long been treating him unfairly. Moreover, “he” and “she” find each other.

Tarzan’s “true identity” as a fully-fledged adult ape and son is denied by Kerchak, until the young man has shown himself to be stronger than the leader of the apes and then also takes his moral responsibility for the herd. Kerchak is not an “evil father figure” as much as a reluctant and remote role model. However, the jungle is big enough for both of them, so that the young man does not need to make his way to any isolated reserve, even if the vines can be interpreted as such and Tarzan is recommended to keep out of the big male ape’s way. And despite Tarzan’s physical struggle with the leopard and Clayton, the decisive factor, however, is the inner conflict inside him as to whether he is to satisfy the wishes of the humans or those of his jungle family. When the dying Kerchak says, “You came back!” Tarzan replies, “I came home.” And when Tarzan asks Kerchak to forgive him, Kerchak replies, “No, forgive me for not understanding that you have always been one of us. Our family will look to you now.” However, Tarzan returns to a home of his own, without anyone ruling over him.

Full of sexual allusions

After meeting Jane for the first time, the King of the Jungle (just like the teenage princesses) also dreams undeniably about future romantic rendezvous (for which he does not exactly need any lessons in love, unlike the small boys of the animal fable). From the very first time he met Jane, he seems to be quite instinctively familiar with the rituals of courtship, which here can probably be ascribed to his more “animal” nature...

Disney films are seldom, or rather never, as full of sexual allusions as *Tarzan* is. When Jane is chased by a group of baboons, she is rescued by Tarzan in a flying scene which is

just as fantastic as it is comical, which takes them between and over the vines, and during which neither of them seem to be especially afraid of flying. Jane even clings onto Tarzan's back. She shouts, "Put me down! Put me down!" – but quickly changes her mind, "No, pick me up, pick me up, pick me up!" In relative safety up in a tree he explores her anatomy. He counts her toes, looks under her skirt, but then receives a kick in the face that makes him fly backwards: "Now you stay away from me, like a very good wild man. You stay! I'm warning you... No, that's, now that's close enough!" However, Tarzan does not give up, but when he comes close to her face she says angrily, "How dare...," and is about to give him a box on the ears, when he catches her hand, takes off her white glove and then compares their hands, palm against palm. He listens to her heart (as Kala once did with him) and Jane listens to his, which she finds to be in good condition.

Afterwards Jane excitedly describes to her father this "flying wild man in a loincloth", who has "NO respect for personal boundaries". In the next scene both Jane and Tarzan explore both nature and each other, to the sound of the background song, "Take my hand, there's a world I need to know." When they take leave of one another they place their palms against each other, whereupon Jane puts on her white glove to preserve the feeling and the smell. However, one glove then blows back to Tarzan on the shore, whereupon Jane swims back, since Tarzan has won her heart. Moreover, in the final scene Jane has taken off her long Victorian dress, which has now been replaced by a loincloth.

Just like the pet biography, this film certainly contains the theme of mixing the classes. Here too one definitely has to keep out of the way of dangerous humans (even if one is not an animal), and here security and adventure are mixed, to be sure. Eventually Tarzan and Jane will also, just like Lady and Tramp and the other boundary-breakers in the form of animals, form a family within the master and mistress' home, since both his "mother" and her father are now there in the jungle... However, there will probably never be any question of breaking the "racial boundaries" between Professor Porter and Kala the gorilla. Having one parent close by is quite adequate, however, for the ending to be experienced as a happy one.

For a wonder tale without a happy ending is not a real wonder tale, but what is experienced as a happy ending varies in the course of time. A hundred years ago travelling to civilisation was considered a happy ending, but not today in times of environmental awareness and big city congestion. Accordingly, in contrast to the book on which the film is based, Tarzan turns down the offer to return to England with Jane. Maybe *Tarzan* can be said, after all, to remove the border between dream and reality in this way, when the film

shows that Londoners can manage in gorilla territory and that civilisation and unspoiled nature can live in harmony.

Hand symbolism

However, is humankind still predestined to become the leader of the animals like Tarzan – on account of their better grip with their thumb? It is true that a human being's greater ability to oppose her thumb to the rest of her hand is said to explain her superiority to the gorilla. But, considering the computerization taking place today, surely this small superiority will soon regress too? It is precisely the hand that runs as a metaphor or symbol through the whole film. The hand is thematized seven times. The first time is when Tarzan's foster mother, Kala, compares her little foundling's hand with her own big hand. On two more occasions she and Tarzan call attention to their resemblance: "... two eyes... and a nose... two ears...", "Two hands...", and especially a heart, which make them "exactly the same".

Thrice Tarzan compares his hand with Jane's, as mentioned above. Finally, Kala also tells Jane that she is welcome to stay by taking her hand in hers, as a communicating link between herself, Tarzan and human beings. As early as in an introductory scene, a picture of an ape mother throwing her young one up in the air has changed into a picture of Tarzan's mother accepting in her hands her little son, who has likewise been thrown up and is on his way down.

And the young loving couple are suited to each other without doubt, like a glove fits a hand. Tarzan is definitely someone whose hand you could hold when the thunder and lightning rage. He is always open-handed, generous and helpful to everyone. Jane is fearless and amusing. The following words from the introductory and concluding song formulate the kinship between animals and humankind and between all the inhabitants of the continents:

"Beneath the shelter of the trees
Only love can enter here
A simple life, they live in peace." [...]
"Put your faith in what you most believe in
Two worlds, one family
Trust your heart..."

(2000)

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12. Tricksters who break the rules

– moral examples that *confirm* the rules of society

The cautionary fable has disappeared more and more from Disney's repertoire and from children's culture in general, and in parallel with this development, the correct morality has had to be taught instead in a more flexible and easily digested way by different playful rule-breakers. This has meant that the so-called trickster has acquired a more prominent role. Moreover, in recent years, the central characters themselves have been equipped with a large portion of humour, which has also meant that more *accentuated* tricksters (in the form of children) have been required, so that the minor characters might be able to surpass the main characters in jocular and rebelliousness.

It was not until the '80s and '90s that Disney's heroes and heroines (e.g. in *The Little Mermaid* and *Aladdin*) were themselves allowed to be the butt of a joke. Previously this was regarded as unworthy of a principal character. At the beginning even the supportive companions were mostly serious voices of conscience or moralising helpers. It is true that as early as in *Cinderella* the mice Gus and Jaq appeared, who in contrast to the heroine are allowed to perform certain acts of rebellion and clumsiness. These inseparable friends (and the corpulent Gus in particular) are, in contrast to *Cinderella*, allowed to lose their self-control and be mischievous and childish sometimes. However these mice are industrious, nevertheless, and do not seem to be as aware as the tricksters of today that they are actually doing something that is forbidden by society.

Children in revolt

The warthog and the meerkat in *The Lion King* and the gargoyles (usually monsters) on the Cathedral of Notre Dame are, on the other hand, self-assured tempters and troublemakers. Abu the monkey in *Aladdin* and Mushu the dragon-lizard in *Mulan* are likewise really riotous brats.

Pumbaa the warthog, with his clumsy exterior and his slightly imbecile air, is not exactly the smartest in the world, perhaps, and he is most often the butt of his friend Timon's jokes. Nevertheless, it is often Pumbaa who hatches "Timon's" bright ideas and possesses insight that the "profound" Timon lacks in fact. One evening when the gang are gazing at the stars, Pumbaa says that they are balls of gas billions of miles away, while Timon insists that they are fireflies. Moreover, in contrast to his friend, the warthog possesses empathy and

brotherly feeling. However, together these teenage loafers for a long time succeed in drumming it into Simba the lion cub that duty, responsibility and conscience are things that one can easily forget.

The little and thin Timon, who resembles a squirrel, is a typically ambiguous trickster, i.e. a cunning joker who is rather often deceived himself. Consequently, like so many other traditional tricksters before him, he is an extremely adaptable, half-stupid tease, who the next moment is smart and capable. Timon is good at repartee and, for example, when Pumbaa asks Simba what is “eating” him, Timon quips, “Nothing, he's at the top of the food chain.” Just like most tricksters, he also dresses up as a woman. Wearing a grass-skirt and a garland, he dances the hula-hula (singing a song about his friend, the warthog, about to be served as juicy pork), in order to act as “live bait” and divert the attention of the hyenas, thus enabling Simba’s return to the lion kingdom.

Together Timon and Pumbaa have a philosophy of life which is as split as it is defeatist, and which says that there is nothing that one can do about all the sad things that happen. Whatever has happened has happened. Put it behind you, forget it, and look – no worries! “Hakuna Matata!” This is what they are trying to teach Simba. And it certainly sounds appealing to begin with, but Simba still chooses in the end not to follow their advice. He realises that one cannot escape one’s past.

Therefore, the moral of the story is not at all that one should ignore one’s responsibility or just shrug one’s shoulders, but, on the contrary, that one should deal with injustices and wrongs and do the only right thing – even if this is not as problem-free as just eating, belching and taking each day as it comes. As we all know, eternal summer holidays would become boring in the long run.

The three statues on Notre Dame are gargoyles of stone, which for Quasimodo become somewhat dubious cheerleaders and protectors. However, here it is not at all a question of magic, for the gargoyles only become alive in young Quasimodo’s imagination; just as Benjamin Cricket in *Pinocchio* expresses the different aspects of the central character’s own conscience in conflict. One of the gargoyles (fat Hugo) represents the wild, impudent and ill-mannered side of the bell-ringer, the part of him that wants to go off into the world and do crazy things. This Hugo is porcine, short and corpulent. He is of the opinion that the young man should definitely take part in the “Feast of Fools” (“Heh, heh, heh...go scare a nun!”) He tempts Quasi with the possibility of sneaking out from his prison and dressing himself up: “What Frolo doesn't know can't hurt you!” In actual fact, this self-indulgent type does not especially care about what happens to Quasimodo.

The somewhat taller, upright and more well-built Victor, on the other hand, tries to be more cautious. He is wiser, behaves in a more dignified manner and knows his Shakespeare. His language is well articulated compared with Hugo's lingo ("Hey, hey, what gives?"): "As your friends and guardians, we insist you attend the festival. ... It would be a veritable potpourri of educational experience!" He is polite and courteous and tries to restrain Hugo's often ill-mannered behaviour (for example when the latter tries to spit on the people down beneath the bell tower). He is more sensitive than Hugo and when, during the final battle, he drops a brick onto the soldiers, he shuts his eyes to avoid seeing the consequences. However, Victor is, nevertheless, of the opinion, "Better to beg forgiveness than to ask permission." (The pair definitely remind one of Baloo the good-humoured bear and Bagheera the serious and responsible panther in *The Jungle Book*.)

Laverne, on the other hand, is a toothless old woman, possibly a former diplomat or civil servant, who acts as a more correct adviser in the background. "Grandmother marble" definitely possesses psychological insight and says, for example, that Quasi is "not made of stone, like us". As a woman in particular she realises, "Nobody wants to stay cooped up here forever." However, Laverne remains more peripheral than the two men.

Carnival and Fast

Of course, the male duo remind one of Oliver Hardy's smart and Stan Laurel's stupid character in the famous "Laurel and Hardy" duo, even if Disney most often turned the IQ of the physical stereotypes upside down and, since it is a question of children's films, let the small member of the duo be smarter. On the whole, contrasts are important. Even in Cinderella, Jaq the mouse is thin, smart and the boss, while Gus, on the other hand, is a slightly daft, but funny "follower" without self-control. The circus has also had its fat simpleton and its thin, smart white clown.

Abu the monkey steals (like the orphaned Aladdin) food, such as fruit from the dealers at the market, but mostly because it is fun. He then gets a bad conscience and gives part of his loot to hungry children. Mushu the little dragon in *Mulan*, who mostly resembles a scarcely terrifying lizard, directly disobeys the orders of his superior relations and ancestors, when he is sent to fetch Mulan home from the war. Instead he wants to make her a heroine – and indirectly make himself a hero. Consequently, he embodies, just like the gargoyles, the anti-rule, "Thou shalt not obey," but it is precisely through his disobedience that this self-centred joker learns to obey and care about others. However, his disobedience is extremely close to ending in disaster.

One purpose of these targets for verbal or even physical jabs, of course, has always been to relieve the tension in exciting or gloomy situations, with the carnival's jesters and similar topsy-turvy characters as early examples. However, the carnival was also, as Michail Bachtin has asserted, a festival of change and renewal – providing opposition to all that was constant and cemented, and an abolition (albeit temporary) of the hierarchical order of rank, which could also in fact plant ideas of a new order.

Through officially sanctioned breathing holes, the citizens were allowed for a few days to give full expression to ideas and emotions in a way that was not otherwise allowed. Both for adults and for children, the purpose of the carnival has always been to revile and unmask the truth. The prisoner has been able to reprimand the judge, the child to punish the parent, the wife to rule over the master of the house, and the pupil to teach the teacher. Everything that has been of “high status”, and has been powerful and serious has been degraded, and everything ingrained and proper has been turned upside down. Nowadays the carnival has been forced to come in from the streets, has entered people's homes and has thereby also changed its character. Nowadays the rebellion is not as strong, but in return children receive their *daily* dose via TV and films (see Rönnerberg 1982).

The characters of the carnival festivities, “Carnival” (a fat, florid and merry man) and “Fast” (a thin and joyless old woman) have lived on, not only in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and in modern comedy double acts, such as Laurel and Hardy, Morecombe and Wise, and the two Ronnies, but also in most of Disney's films. However, we definitely find few female tricksters in the popular culture of the last century. One contributing factor is perhaps that today “Fast” would risk being accused of encouraging anorexia.

Safety valves?

The carnival and similar temporary reversals of the order of things have, however, also been accused of merely acting as safety valves. Do these outbursts of emotion and this children's revolt, which for once are permitted, merely facilitate social control? Do they serve the purpose of disciplining? Perhaps they do, but it is in that case a more flexible version of discipline than previously, which even sows small seeds of change... Moreover, in contrast to the carnival, which did not make any difference between the participators and the spectators, the viewer of the film can reflect, at a greater distance, from the outside and in an uninvolved manner, on different rules and roles in conflict with each other.

The moral of fables normally says that one should put discipline, sacrifice and hard work before play, but this is not the case in Disney's present-day versions for children. Instead, the tricksters embody all the less restrained fantasies of the central character, but they do not

for that reason completely lack a leash of control. The textbook author Collodi certainly never tried with the help of the cricket to cultivate Pinocchio's imagination, but rather tried to restrain it, which did not permit any space for tricksters or cunning little characters. Disney's characters provide more entertainment than instruction, thank Heavens, but the Disney films are still mainly children's culture; i.e. they do not target teenagers and adults, unlike the wilder characters of Warner Brothers, such as Bugs Bunny, who bear a greater resemblance to traditional "tricksters".

The classic trickster demonstrates extreme individualism, selfishness and impolite speech. Within him he often combines the roles of the fool, clown, rogue, court-jester and hero. He invents ploys and challenges the accepted ways of doing things, but thereby demonstrates possible changes too (just like his child version of the present day). The trickster has always found himself *between* categories (for example man-woman, stupid-smart) and has always been a rule-breaker and boundary-breaker. By infringing the rules in his crazy manner, the trickster (both the adult and child version) most often confirms the rules, in actual fact, but succeeds at the same time in starting thoughts beginning with "imagine if...". This is especially true of children's tales, of course...

It is true that tricksters are comical, but they definitely put their finger on important social values. They cause laughter when they desecrate almost all the fundamental values, but they also undoubtedly focus on these very same values at the same time. We laugh, but we reflect at the same time.

The trickster tales can be seen as depicting negative moral examples, which through their very infringements confirm once again the rules of society; or they can be seen as serving as a model showing what happens if the rules, laws and norms of society are *not* obeyed. However, this role is played in a flexible and permissive manner. The trickster characters are not individually motivated madcaps, but socially sanctioned asocial breakers of norms. Trickster tales have always served a moralising and socially sanctioning purpose, but at the same time they have encouraged change.

Disney's child tricksters also make it possible for the viewer to experience that which is not permitted – within a certain limited framework. The correct roles are demonstrated at the same time, although by turning things upside down, which is experienced less as indoctrination... The trickster balances between innovative ingenuity and destructiveness. By breaking certain rules the trickster in fact finally *confirms* these very rules.

Every time a trickster infringes an established rule, the same rule is *emphasised* for all non-tricksters, i.e. for all of us "normal" people, who imagine doing, but would never dream of really doing everything that the crazy trickster actually does.

The actions of the trickster serve the same purpose as the contravention of norms in play. The trickster allows such thoughts to emerge as “if I could, if I were, if things were as I wished, then I would...”, etc. The mini-trickster enacts precisely this subjunctive mood – leading us to a contemplation that is both critical and enjoyable – and thus represents essential things such as wishes, possibilities and hypotheses. The crafty little character is able, not least, to ventilate children’s need for more concealed rebellions against power and more or less subtle power techniques. By playfully testing and playing down their own dirty tricks, these tricks can also be made slightly less attractive.

Absence of girls

Now, do only boys have tricksters as their companions? And are all tricksters male? On the whole the answer to these questions is yes. It is true that Mulàn has her amusing maker of heroes, Mushu, although Mulàn is a tomboy, of course... Tinkerbell the fairy in *Peter Pan* could possibly be classified as a trickster, but she is slightly too tragic. One undoubtedly finds extremely few female tricksters, not only in children’s culture, but also in culture in general. For once the contrast between masculinity and femininity has been forgotten here, or perhaps it has rather been included in the very character of the trickster, who is rather often a hermaphrodite. Of course, girls learn from childhood that people around them do not appreciate cheeky or questioning behaviour, so that boys have to bear that burden too for them.

Girls and boys quite rightly agree completely on the fact that boys, in contrast to girls, are *characterised by* mischievous behaviour (Falkström 1997). Interviews with Swedish 6-8-year-olds about their experience and descriptions of girls and boys show quite clearly that mischief belongs to the domain of the boys. Both sexes maintain that it is the boys who are mischievous. The boys themselves experience living up to this demand as both amusing and tiresome, since mischief at this age is most often given physical expressions, in addition to resulting in schoolmistresses telling them off.

The girls, on the other hand, first in reality and then in films, are to behave as older than they really are and to be non-physical, i.e. to be serious and avoid physical contact. For girls represent the order of reality, while boys are able to deal with (and give full expression to) the chaos of fantasy and of dreams, above all through explosive, close physical contact and with the help of clever repartee.

Laughing with the boys and learning from the girls have constituted the model, ever since the educational children’s literature of the 19th century. Girls are to occupy themselves with serious things and boys with mischief. Consequently, almost all boundary-breaking

concerning stereotyped gender roles has appeared in humorous “junk culture” and comedy – and not in the more pedagogic and edifying books or plays. This is also the reason why Pippi Longstocking and *Mulàn* are also liked by boys.

(1998)

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13. Those outside want to enter and those inside want to exit

The family patterns in Disney

Are the pictures of family relations presented in Disney's films really conservative and in poor agreement with the reality of today? Do they reflect ancient family patterns, or do they indeed construct and confirm modern "capitalistic" norms and "myths" about the "nuclear family as the only social norm in force"? And are the animated films primarily sagas for children or melodramas for women?

These are some of the questions that Gunilla Muhr's article (1996) on "the nuclear family in Disney" gives rise to. Muhr claims that the depiction of social relations and roles in the popular film classics reinforces the ideological message that the nuclear family (i.e. marriage) should be preserved. Is it really so simple? Is the picture unambiguous? Are these the pictures that enter the viewer's mind directly?

How many nuclear families (consisting of a mother, father and child) do Disney's films actually contain? Without having seen the films again during the past few years, I can only recollect a few such families. If, as Muhr seems to do, one specifies as a requirement for a nuclear family that the procreating couple must be *married*, I can only find three married couples with children, all of which are *extremely peripheral* for the central plot. In addition to the royal couple in *Sleeping Beauty* and the parents of the three children in *Peter Pan* (Mr and Mrs Darling), there are the husband and wife in *Lady and the Tramp*, although they are in fact the grandparents of the pups of the unmarried central characters, i.e. of the four-legged "grandchildren". [Note 1] Accordingly, the families in *Lady and the Tramp* and *Aristocats* are almost extended families, or at least three-generation families, if we regard the animals as people. The central characters in all of Disney's films are, however, the *children*, and not the parents or families.

Bambi's parents are possibly live-in partners, but the fawn's mother has probably been deserted by the father, if anything, although he takes responsibility when the mother dies. It is possible that when Bambi himself becomes a father, he stays at home with Faline in due time, but this is mere speculation on the part of the viewer. At any rate the adult deer does not marry during the film.

The mouse couple, Bernard and Bianca, are not even live-in partners or live-aparts, but rather they “date” each other at most. Nor do they have any children, in spite of being in upper middle age, even though they join up with little Penny and become a kind of substitute parents. (In the first Disney sequel ever, *The Rescuers Down Under*, Bernard succeeds, thirteen years later and after a great deal of shilly-shallying, in proposing at last to Bianca, who accepts, but as yet we have never been invited to any wedding.) Mowgli is only 10-11 years of age and has not even fallen in love yet, even if he is curious about the human girl whom he has seen fetching water. Peter Pan will probably never marry, possibly enter into a registered partnership. He is constantly putting off the persistent girls, Tinkerbell, Tiger Lily and Wendy.

Single parents

In *Aristocats* and *Cinderella* a single mother of three children figures (who is hardly a woman of the ghetto), while the poorer but likewise unmarried Mrs Jumbo, who appears in *Dumbo*, as yet has only one “illegitimate” child (who has evidently come to the world through an immaculate conception, delivered by a stork). It is true that *Aristocats* ends with a couple being formed, and that *Lady and the Tramp* and *The Lion King* also end with common offspring, but there are no wedding bells at all ringing for the central characters.

Gepetto is a father of exemplary patience and the model single father of Pinocchio (the result of an equally immaculate, although here patrilinear, conception as in the case of *Dumbo*). Likewise, Triton the King of the Sea is the conscientious single father of Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*, and there are Belle’s single father in *Beauty and the Beast*, and the rather weak and confused widowed father of Jasmine, the Sultan in *Aladdin*. However, the last-mentioned father does not lack self-insight, when he wonders why his daughter is so fastidious concerning her suitors: “Her mother wasn’t nearly so picky.”

The Indian chief Powhatan, the father of Pocahontas, is obviously also a widower and now the single parent of Pocahontas. He attempts to marry his daughter to his bravest warrior, Kocoum, but the Indian princess protests and declares, "But father, I think my dream is pointing me down another path!" She falls in love with the white man John Smith, but at the end of the film he travels back to England alone and she remains single. [Note 2] Of these five fathers we only *know* with certainty that Powhatan and the Sultan have been married.

It is true that a wedding takes place as a symbolic finale in *Cinderella*, *Robin Hood*, *The Little Mermaid* and *One Hundred and One Dalmatians*, but it is only in the last-mentioned case that we get to see any (animal-)children coming to the world, in the form of sixteen

pups, although they form part of an enormous extended family including over a hundred dogs. In actual fact, in several films (*Aladdin*, *Pocahontas*, *The Lion King* and *Mulan*), the children rebel against the parents' attempts to marry off their children according to their country's traditions. The children want to follow their own path in life and only obey their own feelings.

Is it perhaps the case too that the bridal couples clearly belonging to Homo Sapiens even refrain voluntarily (or through compulsion) from both matrimonial bonds and children, as so many of the young people of today? It is true that we do not learn anything about this, but nor can we see any fully formed nuclear families. These examples of Disneyan family formations seem to me in actual fact to represent a multi-faceted picture of the family.

What alternative family patterns exist then in parallel with the so-called nuclear family? Well, the "extended family" seems to have predominated in the agrarian society, but historians are extremely doubtful about this collective way of living together, which has been given a nostalgic emphasis. For example, life was often so short that few children managed to form any real relationships with their parents' parents: "As a result of a low average length of life and marriage late in life, it was unusual for children to have any contact with or receive any care or upbringing from their grandparents" (Ohlander 1994, p. 17). Nor are small nuclear families a modern, capitalistic invention: "Historians are in agreement that the nuclear family, or two-generation family, was established at the end of the Middle Ages in northern and central Europe" (Norman 1996, p. 43). From a statistical point of view, the extended family probably occurs more often in Disney's films than in reality. However, as yet polygamy has not appeared at all in this part of the dream factory...

Extended families

Collective living involving non-relatives has occurred during the hippy era, in kibbutzim and in experimental socialist communities, but nowadays it has only survived on a modest scale. It can also be said that collectives figure in many of Disney's films: the swamp folk in *The Rescuers*, the inhabitants of Never Land Island in *Peter Pan*, the dwarfs in *Snow White*, the humble people of the forest in *Robin Hood*, and the dogs in *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* and at Fagin's home in *Oliver and Company*.

Homosexual "marriages" are only legal in a few countries (mainly the Nordic countries), and lately opinions have been divided as to whether homosexuals should be allowed to adopt children. It is not impossible to interpret Basil the mouse and Dr David Q. Dawson in *Basil the Great Mouse Detective* precisely as homosexual partners, who in future intend to share a home. Basil's "friend", David Q. Watson, who is the narrator of the frame story in

the film, sums up nostalgically with the words: “From that time onwards, Basil and I were a perfect team. We were to solve many cases during the following years, but I will always look back on the very first case with special tenderness.”

However, as early as in 1937 the seven dwarfs possibly formed an early underground brotherhood within the gay movement. And perhaps the three cohabiting and unmarried good fairies in *Sleeping Beauty* in actual fact form a lesbian ménage à trois. It is true that Pumbaa the warthog and Timon the meerkat in *The Lion King* are regarded as the first *openly appearing* homosexual couple in the world of Disney, but the untidy wardrobe of the dwarfs’ cottage probably hides a good many secrets. Moreover, the relationship between the mice Gus and Jaq in *Cinderella* and that between Gaston and Beast in *Beauty and the Beast* have been interpreted in homoerotic terms.

However, whether or not the children’s audience on the whole really understands these ways of living together in the same way as an adult, or merely sees them as forms of friendship is a completely different – but decisive – question. Children have, of course, a tendency to interpret roles and relations in terms of what they are already acquainted with.

Muhr, however, is of the opinion (together with Linker, 1984) that “the only way in which we can reach knowledge of our existence and the world is through our representative systems, there is no possibility of acting outside them”. However, this does not make sense, for *lived actions* precede the “representations”. [Note 3] We must not forget that “representation” literally means “re-presentation” or “re-production”: that the medium in question interacts with our *already existing* ideas about male and female, for example. With the help of linguistic systems of signs, on the other hand, we can *reflect* on our experiences, and as times goes by even reflect on earlier “representations”, i.e. on cultural reproductions or renderings.

In other words, *first* comes the socially lived life, for example with mum and dad, and possibly the brothers and sisters in the family, *after which* come (as a suggestion) Disney’s films and talking about – and comprehending – these roles. We experience with our body and not until afterwards can words and pictures name our experiences. It is not until we ourselves have experienced something that we also have something to compare with and something in relation to which we can interpret the depictions of films, for example.

It is precisely interpretation that is important in all assimilation of culture. Preschool children are for a long time only capable of understanding and naming similarities to their own lives. It is not until a long time afterwards that they can reflect on differences. Children reinterpret incomprehensible and newfangled ideas and contraventions of norms in the

direction of what they already are familiar with. Consequently, recognition is for a long time crucial. This applies not least to family roles and gender role patterns. [Note 4]

A question of perspective

Moreover, it is important to establish the fact that children watch the films chiefly from the perspective of the child characters, and not, as Muhr maintains, from the adult, matrimonial perspective. My research experience tells me that preschool and primary school children, the regular audience of the film sagas, perceive fictive relationships in terms of family roles, such as mother, father, child, brother and sister, little brother, big sister, grandmother, grandfather, cousin, etc., even in those cases where such relationships do not actually exist.

Furthermore, the children themselves do not see it as a “romanticization” of family life that the parents, irrespective of whether they are animals or humans, take good care of their offspring, who seem to mean everything to the adults. To the children’s audience, the nuclear family does not stand for heterosexual marriage either, but for the opposite of being orphaned or being without one of one’s parents. Consequently, one’s interpretation is completely determined by the *perspective* from which it is made.

Muhr herself shows an example of how important the “family-oriented” interpretation also is to adults. She states, for example, that it does not take long before Snow White has become “like a mother” to the seven dwarfs, merely because she sweeps the floor, washes, bakes and cooks food for them. Why then does she not write, “like a maid/housekeeper”? And why are adult miners described here in terms of children, merely because they are dwarfs? However, it is fully understandable that *children* can experience this as if Snow White is *pretending* to be grown up (with the dwarfs as her children or living dolls). Of course, Snow White uses a tone of voice that clearly indicates that she is *mimicing* a mother when she urges the dwarfs to wash their hands. However, mimicing is not the same as imitating, but means rather playfully exaggerating the original.

Muhr asserts at the same time that the films erase the borderline between humans and animals, which is said to contribute to confusing the relationship between nature and culture and to rendering marriage something determined by nature. However, after all is said and done, Snow White does not marry one of the dwarfs or Bambi – and Lady does not mate with the Lion King. (Indeed, Snow White is not even seen marrying the Prince at all, but the film ends symbolically with a “castle in the air”, rather than a wedding.) [Note 5]

The animals that figure as *principal characters* in Disney’s films are, within the framework of every individual film, to be regarded as humans and no sexual intercourse occurs across the biotopic boundaries between the species. The fact that minor characters in

the form of animals or things are also anthropomorphized is an (often humorous) answer to children's animistic and self-centred way of thinking. However, these animals most often do not speak, and this significant difference can be most easily illustrated with the help of Goofy and Pluto, both of whom have the appearance of a dog, while only the former is supposed to represent quite clearly a human and is the only one of them who wears clothes and can speak.

Naturalisation?

However, one cannot simultaneously maintain that an animal is a *human being* on the one hand, and on the other hand behaves like a human being in a way that is inconceivable concerning *animals*, which at the same time is said to aim at “naturalising” human beings’ forms of social coexistence – making them something “determined by nature”, as it were, suggesting that they are features of human nature. Asserting that the *animals* in *Bambi* are anthropomorphized only because they mix across the boundaries between the species (the owl and the rabbit are best friends, for example), or that the newborn fawn, Bambi, is lying wrapped up in foliage “as if in a little home” is based completely on the perspective of the viewer.

Maintaining, as Muhr does (p.87), that Disney has animals and nature behaving like humans is a total misunderstanding of anthropomorphization. Nowhere does Disney pretend that animals possess the cognitive capacity of humans, but rather he shows *human beings* in the disguise of animals. Nature illustrates or “enacts” human states of mind. Consequently, no confusion arises concerning what is “naturally” constructed and what is culturally constructed. It is extremely clear, of course, that Disney’s animated animals are culturally constructed.

It is Muhr who interprets into the film and not the film that says that the *animals* Bambi and Faline “fall in love” and “form a family”, and thereby see to it that “the nuclear family is handed down to coming generations”. The whole film is rather an allegory, with animals in the roles of humans. From time immemorial people have had themselves represented by animals. Animals are used as cultural metaphors for humans, as effective illustrations of human society. When animals enter the world of humans, they become useful, charming and possible to approach (most often as “children”), precisely because, with the help of the imagination and speech, they are *differentiated* from the world of animals.

However, the animals are rather often slightly better than their human models – a kind of better role model for a more democratic, equal, more harmonious society. We humans seem

to feel less aversion to being told off by “animals” than to being told off by more decent, more direct reflections of ourselves.

At the beginning of *Bambi* we can see the morning tasks of two or three families: washing their face, eating their breakfast, quarrelling with sisters and brothers, flocking around their mother, who is about to go shopping. We are *not in the forest, but in the suburb*, where dads go to the office and mums take care of the children. No Princes, Queens or Kings who govern whole nations live in the suburb, but here only princes of families and private princesses are born.

Accordingly, *either* we are shown concrete examples illustrating that animals too have rituals of courtship and give birth to children, and that in the supposedly more primitive world of animals there are also monogamous couples. *Or otherwise* Bambi and Faline are *humans* in the guise of animals, as animals have been in the world of fables for at least a couple of thousand years by now.

However, perhaps we are seeing instead man the mammal being animalised and sexualized in this way (rather than animals being anthropomorphized)? The Swedish novelist Artur Lundkvist (1943/1988, p. 106) once caught a glimpse of an “exceptionally organic nativity propaganda on the theme of biological renewal”. Otherwise, Disney has been accused of *concealing* reproduction and merely showing nephews and nieces, omitting sons and daughters that might indicate the characters’ own procreation. While Muhr asserts that the animated feature films “naturalise” marriage, making the married couple with their common child the only natural couple, Disney has been criticised, ever since Dorfman & Mattelart (1975) at least, for the exact opposite: for his lack of parents and the smallest hint of how children come into the world – above all in the animated cartoons and short films.

There Disney’s world is composed of families consisting of uncles and nephews, aunts and nieces, great uncles and old aunts’ aunts, apart from fiancées and boyfriends. In other words, both the men and the women are in most cases unmarried and without children of their own. The idea that this facilitates the children’s rebellion against adult authority does not strike self-absorbed adults, of course. However, at any rate, all the young Disney fans who are precisely the *children of parents* know that childlessness, for that reason, is not something that is “natural”.

Instead of asserting, as Muhr does, that onto the speaking *animals* in *The Lion King* are “projected cultural patterns constructed by humans [...] which serves the naturalisation of social hierarchies”, one might therefore expect her rather to maintain that in this Hamlet drama for children we see a “socialisation of nature’s hierarchies”. It is “unnatural”, of course, for mammals walking on more than two legs to murder their own kind, like Simba’s

Uncle Scar. And most humans nowadays (even soldiers) are, just like the hyenas, cultivated eaters of carrion, who themselves do not have enough decency to kill their own prey, but leave this killing in the hands of certain “predatory people”, called butchers, who receive payment in return.

Accordingly, everything depends on the perspective that we adopt and on us forming an opinion of the characters as *either* animals *or* humans. Simba is obviously a boy who loses his father through fratricide, grows up and forms a family – and *not* a lion. The animals play the roles of humans.

Normally Disney only lets pets and relatively harmless wild animals like foxes “be” humans, alongside animated humans, and these animals most often represent human children or young people. In this ideal world of humans, cattle are almost never spoken to as equals by the animals playing the leading parts (i.e. symbolising humans). Moreover, there is no prohibition against eating agricultural animals, which makes pigs, for example, especially unsuitable as human metaphors. Likewise, predators are seldom used as humans, unless they are made extremely humorous. However, if no humans figure in the film at all, such as in *The Lion King* and *Bambi* (where the hunters are extremely peripheral), all of the animals are to be regarded as humans. In the latter film, *human beings* with weapons are even portrayed as a kind of predator or thoughtless monster, who spreads death and terror around him in the forest. Or shall we instead call them “thoughtless and robbing murderers”, if we have now decided to localise the plot in the suburb?

Dogs, cats and mice in particular are allowed to constitute a parallel world of humans, which, however, is characterised by a higher level of humanity, excitement, democracy and solidarity, and where the “children of nature” form families, build communities and heroically struggle against external threats. The pets always prove to be unskilful at catching food in the form of living prey when they are lost in the countryside, which further shows their “human status” and “cultivation”. They have to be fed on food cooked by humans. We do not see the principal characters in *The Lion King* hunting either.

However, dogs never marry cats, although dogs are more often portrayed as “masculine” and cats as “feminine”. In marriages between dogs, the male dogs are most often (big) mongrels and the bitches (small) pedigree dogs. The dubious “message”, of course, is that women mammals are refined, more high-class and in need of protection, while the males are unpolished, course and forward, on the other hand, but brave and protective, since they must “deserve” their female. Consequently, Disney has socially constructed gender roles *illustrated or caricatured* with the help of the metaphorical “animals”.

The role of love

Extremely few of Disney's films are love films, but surprisingly enough the films in this genre have been produced during the last decade. Even if yearning, kisses and engagement or marriage are to be found as ingredients of the three wonder tales about Snow White, Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty, the love affairs in these films are merely a side issue – a symbol of adult status or maturity. In *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin* and *Pocahontas*, on the other hand, love is for once the actual main theme. [Note 6] In *Pocahontas* love lives on perhaps precisely *because* the couple do not win each other, do *not* form a nuclear family. (But now Disney is instead accused of avoiding the portrayal of interracial marriage!)

While the romances in *Snow White*, *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty* seem unproblematic and without complications *between the parties involved* – since they scarcely get to know each other, but make their best impression at a distance as an object of yearning – the love stories of the '90s are much more difficult, i.e. they are more like real love stories. The current genre names make a clarification more difficult here, for few so-called love films (just like the early wonder tales) are anything other than films about infatuation. Moreover, pet biographies like *Lady and the Tramp* and *Aristocats* (in which the love of the principal characters is never questioned, while the institutionalisation of that love is an open issue) are family comedies rather than love films.

True love is rather often problematic, demands a deeper acquaintance and is often regarded as signifying something that must be “worked on”. In order that the plot may develop into a veritable love story – the preliminary stage of a family story – obstacles must be added, and here differences and divergences are depicted, as so often in Disney, as “racial differences” (sometimes as differences in kind) and class differences expressed in terms of etiquette (animal versus human, ghetto thief versus the daughter of a sultan, Indian princess versus an English aristocrat). These differences must be modified somewhat, but must never be erased completely.

Both the half-fish and the half-bison must be made human and civilised. It is true that the yearning of the siren is instinctive, physical and spontaneous, but it must be given a “suitable expression”. Ariel the princess of the sea is definitely not a woman of the people, but she is still ignorant of the rituals of the fine life above the surface of the sea, and somewhat “animal” and “oversexed”. In *The Little Mermaid* it is Prince Eric who hesitates to become involved, while in *Beauty and the Beast* it is Belle who is extremely unwilling when faced with courting. She literally barricades herself against her suitors Gaston and Beast. Here love is nurtured forth psychologically and culturally.

Ariel the siren and Belle the bookworm represent two opposite types, both of whom turn old stereotypes upside down, for mermaids are supposed to seduce and Belle the bookworm is supposed to represent more an intellectual feminist with an inquiring mind. Sirens are meant to lure sailors to their doom in shipwrecks, but Ariel, in contrast, helps the drowning prince to survive. Women with a good head for studying are not traditionally regarded as very desirable, but the beautiful Belle has the eyes of all the men focused on her. However, one of her suitors, Gaston, declares, “It's not right for a woman to read – soon she starts getting ideas ... and thinking.” Instead this trainee seducer wants Belle to marry him and bear him a great number of children, but she stubbornly refuses. She is waiting for someone with both a heart and brains. Consequently, Disney is not always so traditional...

Process of civilisation

In spite of Belle's epithet, “Beauty”, she has brown eyes and ordinary dark hair kept in a simple hairstyle. Here it is Beast who, just like the mermaid, has “seductively blue” eyes and beautiful wavy hair, tied in a tail with a bow. Of course, the muscular he-man Gaston is a hopeless case, since he is so feather-brained, but Beast – the hairy, animal nature of the male – is in Disney's version able to go through a process of civilisation by means of literature and classical music. Accordingly, here it is not a question, as in the case of the tramps O'Malley and Tramp, of a more folksy, livelier jazz music being allowed to change the aristocratic partner (Duchess and Lady, respectively) in a “wilder” direction. Here it is instead the girl of the people who learns to appreciate salon music.

Since Beast has actually been brought up in an environment characterised by art collections and an enormous library, no major transformation is required, of course. Here it is rather the social rituals of courtship that are taught, with a fine dinner in the light of a candelabra and dancing on a terrace in moonlight, and including table manners, well-groomed attire, and gentlemanly behaviour and speech. It is now the man who is to be adapted to please and resemble the woman. Naturally, this appeals to small girls.

One should probably also be careful about interpreting adult meanings into the love themes of these magic wonder tales. In the adult melodrama happiness is most often the same as the heterosexual desire of the adults, while in the children's saga, on the other hand, a happy ending is “being loved” and being able to “be together”. Declarations of love are perceived by children as confirmations from another person and in children's sagas are most often merely a non-erotic idea of “happiness”, consisting of not having to be alone. Melodramas, on the other hand, more seldom end happily, and are characterised by suffering and the injustices of life (and in this respect remind one more of ballads).

“The prison of sexuality?”

Muhr’s interpretation of the marital family as the “prison of sexuality” and of Disney’s sagas as a kind of “children’s melodramas” with a “Hollywood” idealisation of the patriarchal family is therefore a very adult (but hardly “modern”) interpretation of the main function of the family and its power relations. Children, of course, perceive the family as a form of security, in which mummy decides – not as the true abode of sexuality.

Moreover, it was a long time before industrialism or the Victorian era that the procreating married couple became the norm. As Seifert (1996, p. 136) asserts concerning the fairy tale, it was “primarily during the seventeenth century that sexuality was relegated (by Church and State) to the confines of the family unit”. However, this tendency had started as early as the 15th century. Furthermore, Seifert regards the wedding-bell ending of the fairy tale as a *convention* within folklore. Meletinsky (1974, p.64) too has ascertained that marriage to a princess “is the highest in the hierarchy of fairy tale values”: the ultimate reward of the leading character, as well as the solution of many a social conflict or family schism. [Note 7]

From Seifert’s point of view, the highest goal of the fairy tale, the happiness of marriage, can certainly be interpreted as something “normal”, or “naturalised”; but it can also be interpreted – precisely because of the explicitly *unreal and supernatural character* of the fairy tale – as something extremely unusual, abnormal and unnatural! Of course, in order to explore sexuality and cultural gender in the fairy tale, including the film saga, one must penetrate the way in which this genre relates to the “real” world. The foremost characteristic of the fairy tale is in fact its supernatural element. Reality, including sexuality and gender, is all the time treated as parenthetical in an over-explicit manner. The characters exist beyond the limitations of the commonplace and the everyday (p. 12).

Consequently, the fairy tale can, through its *contrasting effect*, contribute to a clearer definition of what the recipient sees as “original” and “natural”, self-evident or normal, in her own everyday reality. This reality most often consists of weddings that *have failed to materialise* or marriages *without* happiness. The magic and romantic unreality of the fairy tale establishes, through its presentation of an antithesis, what reality is – and is not. The listener/viewer can then react in (at least) two ways: either strive for a happier marriage or question the whole ideal of marriage. The idea that the happy ending to the love story in the fairy tale might be possible in reality is pure wishful thinking, since the gender relations of reality are rather often unhappy.

Contrasting effect

Accordingly, one must pose the following question: “Why is marriage *interpreted* as ‘living happily ever after’?” In fact, expressions like “fairy tale romance” and “fairy tale wedding” are neither used ironically nor as a confirmation of reality, but as a romantic, though almost *unattainable*, goal. The love, wedding euphoria and marriage of the fairy tale are therefore both an ideal for mutual and complementary heterosexual relations (including taking care of the resulting children) *and* at the same time unbelievable.

It is said, however, that through the fairy tales women in particular are induced to agree that marriage is the best of all possible worlds. Is it so simple? The fact of the matter is that the fairy tale ending in the form of a wedding is also the *only* form of happiness ever experienced by the *male* hero: marriage is his reward for displaying courage (Meletinsky 1974, p. 67).

However, double standards thrive when the sexes are being assessed both in the fairy tales and in Disney’s films. For example, the portrayal of Prince Eric in *The Little Mermaid* is never criticised as resulting in a character who is “merely an object for Ariel’s desire and striving for social advancement”. However, it is said that *her* teenage rebellion and love merely lead to “female subservience under a husband: one more wife has been born”. When Aladdin falls in love with Princess Jasmine, a different tune is heard suddenly, and no one maintains now that “yet another husband has been produced”. Nor does anyone declare that Aladdin’s life is “valued only because he solves a woman’s problems”, which was an opinion expressed (with gender-inversion) about Belle in *Beauty and the Beast*, for example.

It can definitely be said that the gender stereotypes of the fairy tale depict the roles of the sexes as “natural”, but *why* actually are the stories so preoccupied with limited descriptions of masculine and feminine norms and eternal coexistence and happiness, that they almost become parodical? Surely the reason must be that the corresponding phenomena in everyday life are *not* so unambiguous, and real men and women possess certain shortcomings in this respect? For example, some people do *not* marry (despite bringing children into the world), or do *not* devote themselves to sexual exercises for the express purpose of having children. Are the fairy tales not capable, when all is said and done, of “*forming* people’s perception of reality”, in spite of the clear “representations”?

Fairy tales are completely preoccupied with femininity, with what differentiates women from men and, in particular, with what is unbecoming for women. Is this because *women* held such a dominant position during these centuries, or because women were so one-dimensional? And why, for example, are the fathers in a patriarchal system so absent or

irrelevant as they in fact are in the fairy tales? Is it because they played such a *small* role “in reality”, or because their absence is to be “naturalised” or legitimised? Or is it because here, just as in the case of gender roles, fairy tales give expression to wishful thinking, and *in spite of this* have not succeeded in having full impact on reality? As can be seen, theories based on reflection and copying can seldom provide any tenable answers.

But it is also believed that Disney has something against mothers. Mulàn’s mother is peripheral, and we know nothing about Megara’s mother, not to mention Esmeralda’s or Ariel’s. Pocahontas’ mother is dead, like Jasmine’s and Belle’s. Just like the three classic fairy tale princesses, all of these girls are in their upper teens, and for their liberation they need to avoid close combat with their mothers. These mothers are not missing because “motherhood” is to be rendered “unnatural”. On the other hand, motherhood is depicted in an almost idealised way in the case of the youngest central characters, for example in *The Fox and the Hound*, *Lady and the Tramp*, *Bambi* and *Dumbo*. Here the mother is still indispensable. Are we then supposed – in the context of children’s films – to see idealised motherhood from the point of view of the *child* or the *woman* (or man)?

In those cases where the main characters are boys in the preschool or primary school age, of course, the father plays a more prominent role in training the boy for his masculine roles (*The Lion King*, *The Jungle Book*, *Oliver and Company*). But the young men in their upper teens are also much less sure of their identity than the girls, so that the father is still a central role model *and* contrasting figure. Those fathers who are standing in for the mother encourage their teenagers of both sexes to embark on adventures to a much smaller degree, for example (Triton, Frodo, Powhatan the Indian chief). The answers to the question of the composition of the family and the absence and presence of the father and the mother, respectively, must therefore be sought in the main characters’ gender and age, as well as in the complex of problems connected with their development.

It is far from possible to say that Disney’s films cement the supposedly “western”, “socially constructed” nuclear family. Indeed the films show the whole spectrum of ways of living together and parental roles. Rather than “naturalise” a certain way of living within the protection of marriage that makes matrimony the “only natural choice”, the films open up the way for alternative forms of living together that are in good agreement with a changeable and complex reality. Couple relations in the fairy tale world of *children* do not constitute the preliminary stage of marriage, but are a symbol of maturity, the spirit of community, friendship, support and freedom from smothering parental supervision.

Overcoming childhood

Teenage girls who with the help of their fiancés survive cruel stepmothers, witches or evil fairies, and are then finally rewarded with “true love” are to be found not only in the three classic wonder tales (*Snow White*, *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*), but also in *The Little Mermaid*. We find an equally “passive” but *male* example in *Beauty and the Beast*, which, in spite of appearing to focus more on Belle, has Beast as its leading character, a prince who has been enchanted (by an old woman), is childish and self-centred, and must be released from his withering rose sleep by Belle declaring her love for him.

The comic adventure film *Aladdin* is for once a “boy meets girl” story. The homeless young man of the ghetto, who must steal bread and fruit to survive, falls in love with Princess Jasmine, because she is intelligent, amusing and beautiful – and in that order. As yet he does not know that she is the daughter of the Sultan and has put off all the royal suitors from the whole Middle East.

Aladdin is not a prince in disguise, while Jasmine is a princess disguised as an “ordinary poor girl”, but according to “the law” she must marry a prince within three days. However, she protests against the Sultan’s laws, declaring, “If I do marry, I want it to be for love.” And later on she insists, “I am not a prize to be won!” The Sultan’s counsellor, Jafar the magician, is, like so many Disney villains, refined and well dressed, has a fixation on jewellery, and bears a greater resemblance to a woman. Perhaps this “man” is supposed to make one think of a certain “woman”. The magician succeeds in deluding Aladdin into believing that he will become as rich as a prince if he obtains the magic lamp for Jafar. Then the “golden rule” will apply, i.e. whoever owns that which glitters and sparkles is also the person who makes the rules!

After various trials Aladdin succeeds in outwitting the power-hungry magician, but realises that he must be himself and tell Jasmine and the Sultan the truth: “Jasmine, I do love you, but I've got to stop pretending to be something I'm not.” The father now declares that he himself, in his capacity as Sultan, has the right to create whatever laws he wants, whereupon he decides that the princess from now on may marry whoever she wishes. However, we do not get to attend any wedding, but Aladdin and Jasmine set out instead on a fast journey around the world on the magic flying carpet. In other words, Jasmine *may* marry Aladdin, but *does she actually marry* him? This is left to the imagination of the viewer.

Aladdin is definitely driven by love and riches, and love and a thirst for adventure also motivate Jasmine, but all the major characters in actual fact seek *freedom*. Aladdin wishes to free himself from poverty, Jasmine seeks freedom from being cooped up and from royal confinement, the Sultan wants to be free from his dominating adviser, Jafar, while the Genie

wants to escape from being shut up eternally inside the lamp. Jasmine in particular complains throughout the film that she is tired of never doing anything all by herself, never being outside the walls of the palace, never having any friends: "But I can't stay here and have my life lived for me. ... People who tell you where to go and how to dress." She feels half-smothered and Aladdin agrees that she ought to be allowed to take her own decisions to a greater extent.

Agent of freedom

Aladdin also sings, "I can show you the world... I can open your eyes... No one to tell us no or where to go," whereupon Jasmine sees in front of her, "A dazzling place I never knew ... a whole new world with you!" – "A whole new life." Together they wish to "share this whole new world". And quite rightly, with the assistance of the magic flying carpet, the two young people set out on what is probably a long journey of exploration all around the world – and not on any short honeymoon trip. However, they are not completely alone on their travels, as the Genie (formerly inside the lamp) is now seen as the man on the moon, cheerfully laughing and supervising their excursion in a fatherly way. The partner in these films is more of an *agent of freedom* than a prospective restrictive husband or wife.

All of these magic wonder tales (where magic is employed against enchantment that is equally magic but evil) end with the teenage girl or young man reaching maturity or adulthood by *apparently* being separated from her or his parents and (with their blessing) being linked together with a person of her or his own age and of the opposite sex. In the case of the younger children, such as Pinocchio or Penny in *The Rescuers*, separation from one's home, parents and family is still far too frightening (just as it is to the children's audience), which has been shown by the temporary separation in the course of the adventure.

One is far from ready at that young age to leave (even in one's thoughts) the security of the family, with well-meant adult protection and friends of one's own age, in order to take responsibility oneself and make new friends. Independence has to be based on growth. These film fables are about childhood, while the wonder tales, on the other hand, depict the overcoming of childhood and in some cases the loss of childhood (e.g. in the case of Sleeping Beauty, Wendy in *Peter Pan*, and Belle).

Freedom from all the negative aspects that *also* characterise childhood (confinement, overprotection, lack of responsibility, powerlessness) drives most of Disney's adolescent characters to leave home, either in reality or in their dreams. Ariel the siren wants to be a human being (i.e. an adult) above the surface of the water *even before* she falls in love with the prince. The half-fish sings, "I want more. I wanna be where the people are. I wanna see,

wanna see 'em dancin'... Up where they walk, up where they run, up where they stay all day in the sun. Wanderin' free..." In other words, she wants to be "grown up" .

Having saved the drowning Prince Eric, she sings once again, "If we could stay all day in the sun? Just you and me. And I could be part of your world." Consequently, she feels unfree long before she is imprisoned in a purely physical sense by Ursula the sea witch. Moreover, in a scene at the beginning of the film, Belle the beauty also sings about her longing to travel about and see the world and to get away from the confinement and narrow-mindedness of life in a small town. The partner becomes the symbol of a travelling companion – and not a new oppressor.

The influence of fairy tales?

Bruno Bettelheim (1976) has become famous for his thesis that the "classic" folk tales were to help children in their own liberation from their parental home. But the main audience of the fairy tales, namely children under the age of ten, definitely do not yet want to be separated from their parents or stand on their own two feet! It has also been shown that primary school children, who are well acquainted with our treasure of classic and modern fairy tales, do not include any themes of liberation when they compose stories by themselves. This definitely indicates that neither orally transmitted tales that are several thousand years old nor Disney's animated tales have been capable of "constructing concepts of reality through the pictorial and narrative strategies that they utilise" (Muhr 1996, p. 86). However, this is something that is achieved by lived family life itself.

What influences have these "representative systems" actually had on children? Do they work within or outside of the framework of these film sagas? Kristin Wardetzky's study (1990) shows that fairy tales and films about fairy tales do not determine the outlook of children at all, but rather the 2,470 children studied in her research select or reformulate the elements of the tales that they themselves wish to include in their own stories. It is true that in those tales made up by the children that include an external conflict, one finds a main character and a villain, and in tales with an inner conflict one finds an enchanted central character (who struggles against himself or herself in other words) and his or her female helper or rescuer. Here the all-vanquishing magic power of the heroine corresponds to the all-vanquishing physical power of the hero. Consequently, the dragon killer (who is sometimes in addition the "rescuer of the princess") is here contrasted with the "passive" animal bridegroom, who in this case is himself in need of a female liberator.

Therefore, the animal bridegroom is in the children's own stories most often an enchanted male character who (just like Disney's Beast) must be rescued by a female leading character.

The female central character differs from her male counterpart in that she does not prove herself through fighting, but by rescuing her bridegroom, brother, father or male friend by breaking the spell. The girls' "weapons" are good deeds and altruistic help, magic or magic formulas. Both of these heroic types return home and/or get married and/or ascend the throne.

The traditional fairy tale characters predominate likewise as opponents in the children's own stories: the witch, magician, monster and giant. However, the monstrous animal bridegroom is most often completely harmless in the children's stories (just as he is in the Disney version), in contrast to the traditional folk tale, where a magic transformation is required in addition. In the children's stories he rather often keeps his animal form, remains a friend and lacks erotic features. As yet the children seem mostly to need a strong protector, so that a kind-hearted monster with a threatening appearance seems to be the best guarantee for protection and security (Wardetzky, p. 167).

Kind-hearted stepmothers

The opponents invented by the girls themselves are, quite rightly, most often witches and stepmothers, but these characters do not at all resemble the prototype of "female evil". Sometimes a friendly soul can even be concealed behind a hooked nose and a chin covered with warts. However, most often the witches are extremely unpredictable and can at the same time give advice, help and punish. Sometimes they are outsiders, have been banished and are loners, while sometimes they are even humorous. The picture of the "stepmother" seems therefore to vary and correspond to the children's relations with their *own* mother: at times she is ruthlessly malevolent, really and thoroughly evil *here and now* – and not "magically" evil in some invented kingdom at no specific time and in no specific place, like the stepmother of the fairy tale. On other occasions she undergoes positive changes, or is from the very beginning kind-hearted and considerate.

The boys, however, are tested *against* someone, through confrontation, while the girls are tested *for the sake of* someone else, through co-operation, which demands just as much courage and activeness as the boys' struggle. On the other hand, no trace of any long and patient female suffering can be seen in the children's own stories. The girls' tales deal less with eliminating an opponent than with winning a partner (most often a fiancé, sometimes a friend). Longing for bonds of community and support plays an important role and many of their tales are pure love stories. Moreover, in some of the girls' stories, the ugly animal bridegroom, just like Disney's Beast, is transformed into a prince of wonderful beauty.

Nevertheless, two-thirds of the main characters return home towards the end of the tale. Even if the central characters win the prince or princess, they *remain* bound to their parents. Returning home evidently means more than merely closing the circle of the story. The homecoming transforms conflicts and crises into a permanently good condition that is free from tension. And the parents welcome the children with open arms in a loving embrace. To the children their parental home is the centre of the world and there is no better place: “The strongest symbol of a social utopia is the harmonious nuclear family,” asserts Wardetzky on the basis of the tales composed by the children themselves (p. 170).

Considering the importance which the children themselves attribute to the family in their system of social values, Bettelheim’s thesis that the folk tales help children in their separation from their parents is extremely doubtful. The final separation from the family is still very remote and belongs to the upper teens. The children are preoccupied with clouds of menace here and now and not with those that might come in ten years. The tales are about trials and challenges during childhood, not about conceivable problems far later in the life cycle: “Their dragons, monsters, castles, and bridal couples are not projections of future dangers and longings, but are symbolic reflexes of their immediate experiences” (pp. 170-1).

No accession of a new monarch to the throne

In about a third of the East German children’s own tales, the main character ascends the throne, but according to Wardetzky this is to be interpreted in psychological rather than social terms. “High” (e.g. up on the throne) means victorious and happy, while “low” means alone, abandoned, threatened and persecuted. The “throne” symbolises successfully having tackled individual trials, and it is a kind of “victor’s stand”, but has no social, hierarchical or royalist relevance. Only in five of the almost 2,500 tales is a bad king *replaced* by a new king who is good. And with respect to Disney’s films, it is only in *The Lion King* that we see the rightful pretender to the throne, the “Prince”, actually ascending the throne, but then Scar is also a fratricide and the throne in actual fact symbolises adulthood.

It has been shown that those film themes that above all make children sad are, quite rightly, families or family-like constellations being split up. For younger children especially the family is the source of safety and security – at least in fiction. Family harmony being crushed by death or separation, as in *Bambi* and *The Lion King*, is absolutely the worst experience that can be imagined by children. Children’s anxiety about being abandoned is, of course, due to their emotional and material dependence on adults. Friendships being broken is also a source of dejection (Buckingham 1996, pp. 149-50).

Moreover, when playing and taking part in games (e.g. rounders), children want to return “home” after their adventurous raids in threatening enemy territory. Some researchers even interpret this as a so-called phylogenetic relic of primitive structures from the early hunting expeditions and military incursions of the human race. An initial “shortage” (of food, territory, riches, positive human relations) was removed, and the successful outcome was symbolised by returning home with the hunted quarry or the spoils of war. The victorious were rewarded by the oldest man in the tribe with land or consorts.

Irrespective of whether the “shortage” concerns a wife/husband/partner for the adolescent, a child for the childless, parents for the child, food for the hungry, or riches for the poor, a (“female”) searching or a (“male”) struggle takes place that will hopefully turn out well. Accordingly, this pattern is many thousands of years old, and not an invention of present-day popular culture.

The fact that all of the leading characters who actually do “get married” in Disney’s films *marry a prince or princess* means, quite rightly, that the young couple *are able to continue living at home*, in the castle of daddy the King and mummy the Queen; i.e. they do not have to form their own family and move from home for a good while. The royal succession is guaranteed, but the accession of a new monarch to the throne is postponed until some time in the future and the “court” now becomes a veritable extended family. A spirit of community, and not marriage in itself, becomes the reward.

Rather than propagate for the preservation of the heterosexual marriage with the “nuclear family as the only social norm in force” (an adult point of view), Disney’s films, just like the children watching them, seem to want to cement the continued existence of good parenthood. And in that I can see no wrong.

The reasons why the young adults of today continue to live in their parental homes for such a long time are, in my opinion, to be sought in unemployment, shortage of money, and the housing shortage, rather than in the “representations” in the Disney films that these young people saw as children. And I do not exactly think that these young people still living with their parents perceive the cramped three-roomed flat of the suburb as a castle...

Accordingly, it is not a question of Disney forming concepts of reality, but of reality “influencing” Disney’s films, so that children may recognise themselves in the films and learn to name the patterns in the surrounding world.

(1996 + 1998)

Notes

1. Since this was written in 1996, Mulàn's and Hercules' parents have been added. We can at least presume that they are married.
2. The Pocahontas of reality was not in love with John Smith, whom she regarded as a father and who regarded her as his child (according to Smith, 1624). However, the Indian princess at the age of 18-19 married the coloniser John Rolfe, with whom she had a son. She died, a mere 21 years of age, of TB or pneumonia on a journey in England.
3. Psychologists have attributed a central role to gender role stereotypes (with a supposedly direct effect) in their socialisation theories and have maintained that our gender roles are to a high degree formed directly by media, in spite of the fact that all research has shown that we pay attention to the media messages that reflect the outlooks that we already have and dismiss or reinterpret such messages as do not agree with our own experience. Cultural theory, on the other hand, has placed more emphasis on "cultural representations" (i.e. descriptions) and on the fact that pictures are never seen in isolation, but in a context; i.e. are precisely "re-productions".
4. Gunilla Muhr *talks* about "representations", but obviously *means* "stereotypes", since she does not seem to pay attention to the well-known roles of the local environment and the viewer's own interpretation, but evidently believes in a direct effect through copying role models, in the absence of an active mental activity on the part of the individual.
5. See for example Carlsson 1983.
6. Disney eliminated in fact a scene from the Grimm brothers' version of "Snow White" (*Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, 1812), namely the final wedding scene, in which the Evil Queen dances herself to death in red-hot shoes.
7. Love plays an equally prominent role in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *Hercules*, whereas marriage does not, on the other hand.
7. Meletinsky (pp. 64-71) calls attention to the fact that the classic wonder tale's search for a marital partner, as well as the great number of trials in the form of marriage tests, is preceded by the folk tale's wedding customs, which are sometimes strange because they have been reformulated in the course of time. In archaic myths or in non-written folk tales, on the other hand, marriage does *not* play a prominent role, but here it is *initiation* that is more salient instead.

Initiation takes place with *groups* of young people and is considered as constituting the historical roots of the folk tale. Having successfully gone through trials of initiation, the boy is entitled to marriage, which in tribal society was regarded as an uncomplicated handing over of women. Women had an exchange value that favoured the tribe – the collective – which is also reflected in the myths, while marriage in the folk tales and wonder tales concerns *individuals*. Today we no longer live in tribes or large extended families ("half-tribes"), so that the "more individual" fairy tale is now experienced as being more meaningful. Marriage also offers the hero a miraculous escape from all family conflicts and conflicts between generations.

Incidentally, comical love stories that only stretch as far as to the actual wedding (and therefore do not include the birth of any child) were even written 2,000 years ago by the ancient Greeks and Romans, for example Plautus and Terence.

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14. Is Alice in the land of children or the land of adults?

In the land of wonders or in an underground hell?

Ever since childhood I have felt an instinctive dislike for several of the so-called classics of children's literature. This aversion has above all appeared when reading Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland", certain of H.C. Andersen's fairy tales (e.g. "The Little Mermaid", "The Little Match Girl" and "The Steadfast Tin Soldier"), and A.A. Milne's "Winnie-the-Pooh". When I as a parent discovered the same feelings in my own seven-year-old daughter and noted that the film makers of the day were reluctant to adapt these books for the screen, I felt a need, for my own sake at least, to analyse my reactions (as well as those of my daughter and others).

In the present chapter there is only room to examine one example of a film, namely Disney's screen version of *Alice in Wonderland* from 1951, which has had several reruns in Swedish cinemas and several re-releases on video. Moreover, I would like to declare that my basic objection applies to an even higher degree to the original literary works.

Reading on two levels

What then does my objection consist of? In brief it concerns the fact that in these books there is an unpleasant "adult tone" superimposed onto the "children's tone", which not even the more child-friendly films that are better adapted to children are completely free from. By targeting a children's audience on the one hand and pretending to want to communicate with them, and on the other hand targeting the children's parents, one is acknowledged as "unique", in spite of the fact that one is trying to sit on two chairs at the same time. This approach makes it possible for adults to read the book on two levels, but in a way that lacks solidarity and is at the children's expense.

The child becomes a make-believe recipient, but at the same time a real (even though unintentional) recipient of the adults' superior comments, parodies and ironies. Certain central characters, or the narrator himself, are allowed to be the adults' "self-dissociating", "doubting" spokespersons, who have a great deal of experience of life and who in a strange way take away the otherwise child-friendly features of the text.

The reading on two levels makes it possible for adults to experience the feeling of "having been there before", "knowing more", "realising what children have to go through" and "showing indulgence". However, for children this type of reading means a vague but

unpleasant feeling that the adults are commenting on them above their own heads. Even at an early age children strongly dislike their parents talking about them with other people as if they themselves were deaf – or not even present.

Unfortunately it is rather often the case that this “speaking with two voices” is the only kind of children’s literature defined as “quality”. The work becomes a “classic of children’s literature”, in spite of the fact that children only like “half” of the book and prefer “doctored” versions. The children’s only alternative, quite simply, is to completely ignore – or choose “not to understand” – the levels in the text that make it extolled by adult critics, who know a great deal about “great art” but very little about young children.

Are children’s classics always intended for children?

A typical example of literature that is supposed to be meant for children but cannot be understood by children under the age of 11-12 (i.e. before they have *left* childhood) is precisely Lewis Carroll’s Alice books. Of course, nonsense, if anything, must be comprehended! Disney’s screen version – with its more concrete pictures and toned-down verbal jokes – is perhaps somewhat more understandable, but even here children express a need for explanations, meaning and an attitude that shows more solidarity with children.

The books and the film about Alice are quite obviously about the anguish of growing up, about children’s simultaneous striving towards *and* resistance to the world of adults. We are able to share Alice’s experience of constantly being bossed about by and receiving orders from adults, and being forced to accept the incomprehensible yet formal rules according to which they live.

Alice does not have a stable identity, but changes size several times as an expression of her uncertainty. She has two selves: a childlike and inquisitive self and a teenage (adult-like and rigid) self, and here it is obviously impossible to unite the two or arrive at an alloy of the two. It is evidently impossible to be small and rational at the same time, judging from the books (and the film). Alice and the young audience are compelled all the time to accept that they do not understand anything. However, this is not a true reflection of “real life”, where children themselves create meaning when faced with the incomprehensible with the help of their own fantasies.

In “Alice in Wonderland” there is instead an anxiety or uneasiness about fantasy that is typically adult: a flight *away from* the fictive world. Otherwise, children themselves or children’s culture are not usually characterised by any such fear of fiction or the leap into fantasy. This alone is enough to make both Carroll’s “classic of children’s literature” and the film typical examples of “children’s culture for adults”.

As so often is the case in children's culture, it is completely legitimate for its adult producers and spokespersons to devote themselves to an escape from reality. The consumers of children's culture, on the other hand, are always scolded for attempting to escape in this way. Now, who is constantly preoccupied with the risk of prisoners escaping, if not their warders?

Sententious fantasy

To Carroll fantasizing is the same as consciously expanding one's way of thinking, *looking at things in a way that is different* from the ingrained perspective. To children it is instead a question of *seeing at last*, i.e. *understanding in their way* things which they are far from familiar with. To someone who has not yet fully comprehended "what things are like" or "should be like" – and therefore cannot yet question and be critical – fantasising is usually the same as *understanding* a strange "rational" everyday reality with the help of fantastic logic. To children fantasies are always logical, even if they are not rational in an adult way. Therefore, Alice's incomprehensible world of fantasy is frightening and it is precisely the emphasis on the rational that makes it especially unsatisfactory. Moreover, here a logical power of deduction and questioning behaviour are attributed to the seven-year-old Alice, which are capabilities children normally do not possess until the age of twelve or thirteen. In addition Alice has a knowledge of Latin...

Adults can see fantasy as a parody of their own world, but children want fantasy to explain or improve reality, or make it more bearable. Young children cannot just watch a *frightening* and crazy world of fantasy like this one – which in addition resembles the "real world" to a great extent – but must be offered worlds that are crazy in a *funny* way, or at least explanations as to why existence is crazy, as well as hopeful promises of improvement.

It is true that to adults the characters whom Alice meets can seem ridiculed and comical. Nevertheless, to smaller children they are adult authorities, parental figures who make the children frightened or confused. The adults in Wonderland are all cold and arrogant, unpleasant and mean – not to mention "pedagogical" and playing a fostering role. Alice is constantly being teased by the inhabitants of Wonderland for her inability to understand their absurd world. The children reading the book or viewing the film also feel irritated, and all the time they feel like a bullied outsider in this world of adults. For preschool and primary school children at least, the film presents an excessively gloomy picture of existence. The adult world is described as false and oppressive and there is nothing to indicate that any change will take place. Alice only survives by fleeing from Wonderland and waking up from the nightmare.

Carroll is constantly tempting Alice (and the listening or viewing children) to pose questions, after which he makes fun of the attempts of reason to find answers. Each episode induces the viewer to wish for some explanation, some meaningful outcome – but none emerges. Carroll pokes fun at the way in which children think, their way of taking things and expressions literally, and at children’s need for rules. This is experienced as threatening, since it is no relief to children under the age of ten to see that rules are not of any use. It is true that children themselves can play with words and test the “sense” and “nonsense” of language – but they definitely do not appreciate it when adults do this as an answer to children’s own questions.

Alice is constantly attempting to define, delimit and control chaos, but this turns out to be impossible. As I see it, this is an ironic game being played by Carroll and adults over the heads of children, and it is an expression of a condescending attitude. The author shows how language, logic, behaviour, time and room are all relative, and that it is essentially impossible to achieve real communication. Certain adults can endure (and even enjoy) such perversions, but children cannot do so – in any other way than in the form of play. However, here everything, in spite of the fantasy, appears to be extremely “real”.

In my opinion it is not advisable to attempt to convey to children the idea that life is meaningless and that everybody one meets is hostile. At any rate, such an approach does not exactly provide encouragement for growing up. Young children want to have some kind of safety and security which they can organise their world around. In Wonderland they feel suffocated, oppressed and bullied by the adults. Is this supposed to be called humour?

Walt Disney, who evidently possessed an intuitive feeling for children’s reactions, was quite rightly extremely doubtful about making a screen version of “Alice in Wonderland”, but finally let himself be persuaded – unfortunately. And quite rightly, the film resulted in a gigantic financial loss (running at a loss of a million dollars and wasting all of the profit earned by *Cinderella*), for luckily children have effective tentacles and bush telegraphs.

Educational film on the psychology of puberty?

One could actually maintain that this film to a great extent follows the pattern of the animal boys in the fables, even if this time it is a 7-year-old human girl who plays the leading role instead of a male animal of the same age. Alice definitely changes her physical shape, just like Pinocchio, according as the world around her decides. Precisely like Dumbo she often feels clumsy, undesired and exposed to the irrational exercise of power of others.

However, initially Alice is not at all uncertain as to her identity (a little girl), but on the other hand she becomes increasingly uncertain in the course of her journey. *She* is not

asking, “Who am I?” – but everybody she meets wants to know, “Who are *you*?” Instead of becoming increasingly sure of who she is after her trial discharge into life, she merely becomes increasingly confused. It is not Alice who believes that she is a monster, but the White Rabbit, Bill the lizard and Dodo the bird. She knows that she is neither a serpent, as the mother bird in the “Alice tree” says, nor a weed, as the flowers maintain. Instead Alice has to fight tooth and nail against the attempts of others to determine her species, which are becoming more and more sick. The girl does not reach any clarification of her identity in Wonderland, but rather here her identity becomes even more diffuse. Here there are no helpers or good role models either, no protectors or figures of conscience – only antagonists, scorners, tempters, threatening characters, etc.

The film also exhibits certain similarities to the wonder tale, for example the distinction between dream and reality is suspended. Just like the teenage girls in the wonder tales, Alice is also compelled (although far too early in life) to ask herself the question, “Am I big or small, ugly or beautiful?” And just like Pocahontas and Mulàn, she wants to find her own path in life. Like Snow White, Alice is threatened with annihilation, though not by some Evil Queen wanting to get at her heart, but by the queen of the playing-cards, Queen of Hearts, who is constantly demanding, “Off with her head!” In contrast to the teenage girls, however, Alice stubbornly asserts that she *is* still small. Moreover, she calls attention to her good brains more than to her kind heart.

And just as the class issue is touched upon in the pet biography, this film asks, “Is Alice an ordinary ‘mobile vulgaris’, i.e. a weed, or a young ‘plant’ of class?” However, Alice herself never has any doubt at heart, and it is only those around her who are constantly in doubt. Just like the pet biography, the film contains pure elements of the thriller and exciting chases, although not in any ideal underground community, but in the exact opposite. Here Alice herself plays the role of the threatened “pup”, but in this case without the security of adult protectors.

It is probably the fact that this story does not clearly belong to any genre that made the film so unsuccessful in appealing to children and led to the book receiving such ovations in the world of adults. The development problems dealt with are also out of place, both with regard to the age group viewing the film and considering the alleged age of the principal character. If one compares the central character of the film with the behaviour of Disney characters of the same age, the differences are striking.

Alice’s chronological age is said to be seven, but she exhibits a behaviour characteristic of a 12-14-year-old, i.e. the characteristic reactions of early puberty. At the beginning of the film the girl is so young that she has books read to her and still prefers picture books to the

boring history book that her big sister is reading for her. Alice becomes so bored that she falls asleep or daydreams off somewhere else. In front of her she sees a rabbit who is pressed for time and dressed in a suit with a pocket watch, and who hastens down into a hole in the ground. Alice follows him curiously into the hole and then falls and falls in slow motion, being reflected during her fall upside-down in a mirror, as a sign that she has now come to the upside-down world.

She is ordered by the rabbit to enter his house and look for his gloves, but only finds biscuits that immediately make her so big that she gets stuck, jammed into the rabbit's small house with her arms and legs sticking out through the windows. However, Alice gets hold of a carrot from the rabbit's garden, eats it and becomes small once again.

Who are *you*?

Early puberty is above all a question of biology. Coupled with the big physical changes that take place, one has a new and unclear conception of one's identity, which can easily result in a kind of identity crisis. Am I big or small, a girl or a woman? One feels as if one were three metres tall one day, and half a metre tall the next. Here, in symbolic form, enlarged and shrunk physical sizes represent their psychological equivalents, respectively. The changes in one's body image take place so quickly that it is difficult to retain the feeling that one is the same person.

"Identity" is, of course, experiencing oneself as a well-defined and cohesive self. Alice changes size no fewer than twelve times in the film, always in accordance with her changing self-esteem and how "tall" she feels at the moment in question. Her size ranges from that of a flower (7 cm) to that of a tall tree, depending on what she has just eaten or drunk. She swallows quite thoughtlessly the contents of a bottle labelled "Drink Me" and a carrot or biscuits bearing the text "Eat Me", "Try Me" or "Take One". But most often it is the upper and under side of some mushroom that produces extremely varying effects.

As a result of her indistinct body image, the girl going through puberty also becomes emotionally unstable, experiencing sudden changes in her moods that are inexplicable even to herself. Sometimes she feels grown up and independent, and sometimes small and dependent. At the same time she defends herself against her desire to be small once again and therefore becomes even more aggressive. The adults in her surroundings are also full of contradictions: at times they expect from the child a childish obedience and at times the logic and independence of an adult.

Alice oscillates between tears and defiance, politeness and insolence, fear and fearlessness, obedience and independence. She wants both to leave home and to return home, for

example. Up to now Alice has believed that she knows who she is through her *appearance* and through what she *knows*, but now both of these “identity tests” suddenly fail her. Both are now changeable and unstable. So who *is* she then? Is she a monster, a serpent or a weed – or “just a little girl”, as Alice herself insists when she happens to be 20 metres tall? Is she beautiful enough? Is her social background good enough? Is that something that one can determine oneself?

No, it is the social environment that decides that she is only an ordinary, simple “mobile vulgaris”, belonging to the family of weeds, and is not worth much. She is treated in a condescending way by Marguerite, Snapdragon and Rose, and feels out of it, belittled, and looked down upon. Alice is shoved and frightened out of the garden by these lady flowers and reacts to the expulsion with the threat, “If I were my *right size*, I could pick every one of you if I wanted to! And I'd guess that'd teach you!”

Everyone whom Alice meets wonders, “Who are you?” It is no wonder that she herself starts to doubt. Nor does she know what direction she should be going in. When Alice exclaims, “I can't find my way,” it is the Cheshire Cat who informs her, “Naturally. That's because you have no way. All ways here, you see, are the queen's ways.” And when the girl stands face to face with Queen of Hearts, who asks her where she comes from and where she is heading, Alice answers, “I'm trying to find my way home...” The queen then shouts, “*Your way? All ways here are my ways!*” Otherwise it is normally the teenage girl who does everything to *avoid* following the path of the queen, to *avoid* treading in her footsteps, and to *avoid* becoming like her, but rather strives to find her own path. Here it is rather the Queen's self-preoccupation and “right of possession” that is emphasised.

Adult bullying

In the film we see several examples of how the benevolence of adults towards more easily controlled *children* changes into scorn, superiority and criticism when the adults approach the *teenager* – a form of adult bullying. When Alice happens to pass by the Mad Hatter's and March Hare's unbirthday party, they tell her that there is no room for her, in spite of the fact that there are at least ten chairs unoccupied there. When she is invited to the party any way, she is described as “silly”, because she does not know what an unbirthday is. As yet she cannot really take up the cognitive struggle and cannot master the competitions in abstract logic, but she is certainly practising.

The adults use language, above all, in their oppression of Alice. The more incomprehensible their language becomes, the more threatening Alice experiences Wonderland as being. The girl is to be given an additional lesson in logical thinking by adults: you can

always obtain *more* than nothing, but never *less* than nothing. When she is asked by the Mad Hatter if she wants more tea, Alice says, “Well, I haven’t had any yet, so I can’t very well take more...” The March Hare then replies, “Ahh, you mean you can’t very well take *less*!” – and the Mad Hatter agrees, “Yes! You can always take more than nothing!” Finally, Alice gets so angry at the ridiculous party that she leaves. But where is she to go?

As the Cheshire Cat quite rightly says, it does not make any difference which way one goes, if it does not matter where one is heading or where one wants to go. Above all Alice wants to depart. She is seeking a rational foothold in an uncertain chaos. However, instead of fleeing from the crazy world of adults that is trying to control reason, she challenges it at first in terms of rationality and henceforth questions everything. In pre-puberty one’s thinking switches from concrete to abstract operations, which makes hypothetical thought and complicated logical argumentation possible, which the teenager then loves to excel in. Young people are rather often affected by so-called cognitive hubris and believe that they are a great deal smarter than adults. They point out absurdities and errors in the argumentation of adults and love intellectual fencing.

Accordingly, Alice practises winning thinking and being the smartest, with the Caterpillar, Cheshire Cat, Mad Hatter, March Hare, Dodo, Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum, all of whom are fat older (or middle-aged) men and all of whom succeed at first in catching her in different logical traps, false syllogisms or nonsense deduction, when she is rather in a hurry or is overconfident in herself. She learns here that one must not be vague and that winning a discussion requires greater logical precision. If she is best at thinking, then she will probably find her way out of “Wonderland”.

The girl also revolts against the fact that *one set* of rules obviously applies to adults, while *another* applies to children. The adults believe that they have the right to demand answers to the questions that *they* ask children, as well as the privilege of refusing to answer children’s questions. The adults pose questions, but they themselves never give any answers to Alice’s reflections. For example, when Alice wants to ask the Queen something, the latter gives an all too familiar reply, “*I’ll* ask the questions!”

However, with greater intellectual self-confidence Alice can finally take on the adult authorities, as well as challenge and crush their illogical assertions when they are arbitrary, inconsistent, unjust and sick. It is true that almost everyone is mad in Wonderland, as the Cheshire Cat puts it, but he predicts that the Queen in particular, when she meets Alice, will “be mad about [her], simply mad” (or perhaps he means “mad at her”). However, the girl becomes more and more wise, confident and aggressive (although always in a calm and restrained manner) and finally dares to confront the “evil fairy”, Queen of Hearts.

Adults' exercise of power

The Queen exclaims angrily “*And who is this?*” She then says in a friendly tone, “Why, it’s a little girl.” After that she roars, “*Look up, speak nicely, and don’t twiddle your fingers! Turn out your toes. Curtsey. Open your mouth a little wider, and always say ‘yes, your majesty!’*” Alice obeys the order and, mimicing her, shouts back, “*Yes, your majesty!*” She has already been practising taking orders like this with the White Rabbit, Caterpillar, Cheshire Cat and the others and is beginning to become quite immune.

Now commanding voices or the capricious exercise of power of adults no longer have any effect. The child has exhausted her dread of adult bullying and the roller-coaster terror of adults. The more frightening the Queen becomes, the more challenging and defiant Alice becomes. Then she also grows physically, her language becomes less childish, and she becomes less subservient. Here self-assertion is needed if the intrinsic value and rights of the child are to be protected.

Queen of Hearts invites Alice to take part in a croquet match, but she has struck terror into the “ball” (a shaggy little animal) and the “hoops” (soldiers from Her Royal Majesty’s army of cards), who do everything to enable the Queen to get through the hoops and make Alice miss. At times the girl now feels so superior that she can show a little indulgence with the Queen’s need to decide the rules of the game herself and to cheat to win. Moreover, Alice does not want to irritate the Queen unnecessarily, for she is constantly threatening, “I warn you child, if I lose my temper, you lose your head, understand?”

Queen of Hearts now realises that Alice is equal to her, or even superior, as far as logic is concerned, and therefore also wants to eliminate her intellect. “Someone’s head will roll” or “Off with her head” are the Queen’s strongest arguments when Alice irritates her. The Queen is the opponent of all logical and clear thinking – those qualities that Alice has worked so hard to acquire as her survival strategy in this land of adults called Wonderland.

Alice has now attained an advanced level of moral development, which also provides a foundation for her rebellious actions and her belief in telling the truth, however unpalatable it is. Previously she has only been able to react by saying, “Oh, all right, if that’s the way you feel about it.” Now the opinions of the authorities are no longer automatically the right ones, and she propagates for the equal rights of all individuals, for rules and democratically passed laws (e.g. the right to be tried *before* a sentence is passed). As Alice points out, it is the height of illogical thinking to sentence an accused first, before the trial and before a verdict has been delivered: “Sentence? Ah, but there must be a *verdict* first!” But the Queen declares, “Sentence first! Verdict afterwards.” Alice now defiantly objects, “But that just isn’t the way!”

Rebellion against authority

It is now a question of life and death and Alice is now finally compelled to rebel against the authority of the Queen. She now receives a certain assistance from the weak and much less threatening King (who is a fifth of the Queen's height). This weak father figure defends the girl and wants at least to give her "just a... uh... little trial" and at least examine a few witnesses before the execution: "Uh... we called no witnesses... Uh... couldn't we... uh... maybe one or two? Ha? Maybe?" The Queen pats the King on the head and concedes, "Oh, very well. But get on with it!"

However, Her Majesty is unable to listen to the witnesses for any length of time, but soon shouts, her face turning scarlet, "*Off with her h...hmpf!*" But at the same time Alice finds a piece of mushroom in the pocket of her pinafore, eats some of it and, to the consternation of Queen of Hearts, grows right up to the ceiling of the law court. The girl plucks up the courage to shout at her majesty's soldiers, "Oh, pooh. I'm not afraid of you! Why, you're nothing but a pack of cards!" – so that the cards fly into the air. And, turning to Queen of Hearts, Alice shouts, "Why, you're not a queen, but just a fat, pompous, bad tempered old ty- tyrant..."

However, just as Alice pronounces the word "tyrant", she shrinks again and finally sounds quite piteous. She takes to flight, with the Queen chasing her, repeating all the time, "Off with her head!" Before little Alice is caught, however, the much larger and slumbering Alice fortunately wakes up from her nightmare. She is now in the field together with her big sister and they go home to have a cup of tea.

In the nether regions, in truth, no marvellous wonders have taken place. The blue-eyed Alice's "adventure in Wonderland" is, right up to the last five minutes, a question of an inferior subject's submission to the strange teaching of adults. And everything takes place under the false label of subtle entertainment in the wonderful land of wonders!

Alice has not tackled a single trial successfully and has not passed a single test, but has constantly been forced to flee. However, she has learnt something which she never intends to forget and which can also benefit other children: "When I get home I shall write a book about this place... If I- if I ever do get home..."

Tale of warning

The book that the "girl" Carroll wrote turned out, quite rightly, to be a tale of warning, which, to be sure, is something that is not understood by all adults – or even the author himself. The reader is being warned about excessively free fantasies and dissociated logicians as parents. Seven-year-old Alice is a textbook example of a princess who, even as

a young girl, has not been able to idealise her queen (who here bears a greater resemblance to a grandmother, into the bargain, but who nevertheless is not kind). Normally the king and queen serve two purposes, neither of which is fulfilled in Alice's case. In addition to letting themselves be admired and being figures whom the child can look up to, they are also supposed to admire the child.

Children have a need to idealise, to be able to idolise and seek protection and strength in good and powerful characters. If the parents – like in this case the Queen, King and all the other old, rather confused and impotent father figures and ladies – are scarcely admirable and are cold, frightening, threatening or condescending, and if they do not take the child's needs into consideration, then the child's self-esteem is influenced, of course.

No one in the whole film has ever confirmed the positive aspects of Alice's identity. Nor have the negative threats against her identity been eliminated, either by herself or by anyone else. If the father is not alive (as in so many of the wonder tales), it is much more understandable if the girl stands alone against the terrible mother, but it is even worse if the father is weak, as the King is here. Then one is really vulnerable and the only remaining possibility is flight.

Moreover, it cannot be asserted that Alice (like the principal characters in so many portrayals of children) is looking at the strange adult world of Wonderland *from the outside*, in surprise, and with a "child's eyes", for she herself is too involved to be able to reflect. That requires a certain distance. Moreover, Alice is in fact the most grown up and sensible of all the characters in this collection of infantile adults, but, nevertheless, she is the victim of the adults' oppression. Although she does not meet a single person of her own age or younger in this land (apart from the baby flower Rose Bud, who says that Alice is pretty), everything reminds one most of the sandpit of a day nursery. However, there is no fear of fantasy in day nurseries, of course...

Perhaps Carroll's (and other authors') fear of unbridled fantasies – and consequently their unpleasant fictive worlds – is a way for the producers of children's culture to attempt to "counteract escapism" and aid children's transition from the land of children to the land of adults? In spite of all the fine speeches celebrating the significance of children's fantasy, it seems to be extremely important to restrain children so that they may keep both their feet firmly on the ground.

It is then a question of both frightening children up from the nether regions and ensuring that they do not end up high in the clouds either. In *Alice in Wonderland* this is also achieved with the help of the unpredictable appearance of the unpleasant Cheshire Cat in the sky, when one least expects him. The Cheshire Cat, with his physical decomposition, his

evil smile and drawling and lisping speech, is almost as terrible as the Queen's continual orders concerning decapitation. Has the Queen in fact already succeeded in beheading him?

It is completely incomprehensible how the otherwise so discerning Walt could have been deceived into believing that this is really supposed to be a *children's story*.

15. Films of adaptation?

No – but a source of support for children’s “self-realisation”!

Children’s development towards adulthood can be characterised as an upward and outward movement away from a state of subordination. Disney’s films depict this movement from a condition of inferiority and confinement.

Being a child is the equivalent of playing the role of the underdog: being undersized, inferior, misunderstood, underestimated, underpaid and placed under the adult masters of power. This is depicted most clearly in *Alice in Wonderland*, which is about a little girl who is subjected to rejection by about ten middle-aged (or older) gentlemen, who is frozen out by a small group of frightened ladies, and who even suffers the attempts of a terrifying mother figure to annihilate her. This mother figure most of all resembles a grandmother, into the bargain, and grandmothers are expected to be supportive, of course. Moreover, the seven-year-old Alice is not furnished with any kind helpers, supporters, good role models, or even children of her own age whatsoever. The only way out for the girl is to flee.

Therefore, this is not a Disney film that is liked by children. Children want to have positive, optimistic stories with a happy ending, even if adults imagine that open endings are better. However, films with open endings do not differ from reality... In the animal fable the child is also at first subordinate to the parents and disapproved of. Nevertheless, he pulls himself together and in the end almost attains a level equal to that of the adults. However, this does not happen until he has departed from home and set out into the world, which is described as vital for his “advancement”. The excursions turn out to be extremely instructive, but as yet merely concern reconnaissance.

In the wonder tales the teenagers are still oppressed by a malevolent mother or father figure, but with the help of a partner of the same age, the adolescents now succeed at any rate in setting themselves free from the claws of the parental generation. Therefore, their attempts to break out succeed, but in most cases the separation is never fully accomplished. In the pet biography too, of course, the couple of marriageable age are — in spite of the relocation — still subordinate to the master and mistress, grandfather and grandmother.

Consequently, breaking loose can be successful, but according to Disney’s films never leads to a complete withdrawal from the hierarchy of the generations. The power struggle between characters of a different age never results in complete equality. Children remain children, even when grown up. Overmature characters are also treated as children once

again, i.e. with a certain condescending indulgence. Experience is not always unbeatable, but sometimes it is possible to teach both old and middle-aged dogs new tricks...

Moreover, freedom, tolerance and understanding can increase – on the part of everybody involved. One learns peaceful coexistence and the fact that everyone is dependent on one another. Above all one realises that everybody goes through *all* these ages and roles: everyone will try their hand at being a prince or a princess, a king or a queen, and a scatterbrained court jester or a confused godmother. And one understands that people are what they are depending on the different roles that they have to play and the different tasks that they have to fulfil at different times in their lives. One learns too that no child should “take it personally” but understand that their difficulties “are a natural result of their age” and are universally shared.

However, the objection has been raised that the boy of the fable, the girl of the wonder tale and the future parental couple merely adapt themselves to prevailing norms, values and roles, and that they do not learn (and do not teach the viewing children) to question and change things, and do not exhibit any alternative, more complex role models.

Nevertheless, by and large, all of the central characters question the parental figures, even if some of them (such as Pinocchio) finally humble themselves. What the child viewing the films notices and remembers, however, is the rebellion and not the capitulation.

The present book has maintained that Disney’s film sagas function as a symbolic framework of orientation that helps the children viewing them to organise and channel different feelings and to create a simplified picture of an inner chaos. It has also been maintained that this stuff of the imagination thereby makes the children’s development of their own identity easier to handle and take stock of.

Does this then mean that Disney’s stories lead to children *adapting themselves* to prevailing role expectations and social conventions? Definitely not! However, the films do help the children in the audience to become alive to and *more easily understand* prevalent role expectations and dominant conventions, which undeniably facilitates the development of their identity. Of course, it is only when one has understood something that one can start to question and change it – *not beforehand...*

It is only when one *knows* that an ideology is the dominant one that one can question its dominance. However, many profound adults, both researchers and laypersons, cannot comprehend that simplified conceptions (of the world and of humankind) are needed, since they facilitate a provisional understanding of the surrounding world. One believes, on the contrary, that these simplifications result in the child not understanding the complexity of life.

Moreover, one imagines that every understanding that the child creates of a phenomenon is the definitive and final one. This is naturally not the case. The child's conceptions of teenagers, fathers, professional women, pensioners and conservatives, for example, are developed during their whole life and exhibit a stable changeability.

Children's roles

Misconceptions about the influence of gender roles are just as difficult to eradicate as the misconception that media violence has a direct effect on reality. As soon as children's adaptation to society is involved (also referred to as socialisation), one imagines that it is a question of an immediate introduction to *adult* roles (gender roles, etc.), when in actual fact it is a question of masculine and feminine *children's roles* – or rather the foundation (or confirmation) of children's gender identities.

Children must first learn to become *children*, learn to become girls and boys respectively, a long time before they can start to train themselves to become adult women and men respectively. Just as is the case concerning all other roles, one's understanding of gender roles, (as well as one's very actions in accordance with gender roles), *changes* throughout one's life. Disney's films are precisely stories about maturing and changing.

One contributory factor behind critics mixing children's and adults' roles is the fact that most adults cannot for the life of them switch from their own perspective and contemplate children and children's literature through the eyes of children. Therefore, Disney's films are also interpreted as if they were primarily melodramas intended for adults (women), which in fact they are not.

Disney's animated films are *not* fateful *melodramas* that target women and describe women's suffering in the patriarchal family, but rather *children's films* with children as the central characters. Thanks to the video medium in particular, the films have tended more and more to lose their role as family entertainment, since children no longer need an adult escort (as they do when going to the cinema). It is true that the films, just like the melodrama, expose antagonisms in the middle-class family (rather than depict the nuclear family as some utopian way of life), but these conflicts are more often on the generation level than on the gender level.

Moreover, exposing female suffering (as in the wonder tales) is not the same as asserting that this suffering is "natural" or equivalent to recommending such suffering. The task of the melodrama is to evoke both sadness and admiration for those affected. The task of the wonder tales, on the other hand, is to provoke anger and encourage initiatives to bring about change, by showing clear injustices.

The idea that Disney's animated films should give rise to the formation of nuclear families or to gender role inflexibility, for example, is scarcely reasonable, for the formation of couples and the nuclear family *precede* both the child itself and Disney's production of ideology. It is true that the films show socially sanctioned ways of living and can therefore, without doubt, be said to "reinforce" these. However, the question is whether these conventions actually make any difference either way, or whether the family roles are even *in need* of reinforcement any longer, considering their cultural prevalence ever since the Bible's depiction of Mary, Joseph and the Child Jesus, at least.

Moreover, the pictures are extremely contradictory and far from being unambiguous descriptions. As we have seen, side by side with Disney's cosy nuclear families stand terrible mothers and fathers who want to see their children dead, and indeed, are not content with *wanting* to see them dead...

Accordingly, rather than "adapt themselves" to the prevailing ideology, children assimilate the dominant ideology in an easily comprehensible and non-authoritarian way, after which they can slowly start to question and bring about change. How can we otherwise explain the changes that have in fact taken place after all in the sphere of gender roles, for example, both in reality and in the films since *Snow White* and the 1930s?

Stereotypes are more easily questioned

Carolyn Steedman (1982) and Anne Dyson (1996, 1997a+b), for example, have described how children, with the help of well-known, stereotyped stories (starting at about the age of eight) can transport themselves beyond the "self-evident" and become more aware of gender role choices, precisely *because of* the over-explicitness of the stories. [Note 1] Stereotypes can hardly be accused of concealing the distribution of roles, of course... Accordingly, through the repeated processing of well-known media roles, children are finally able, due to the actual repetition and over-explicitness, to become alive to stereotypes both in the content of the media and in reality. Consequently, in contrast to "multi-faceted" diffuseness, stereotypes invite one to question things, which the adult criticism is also an indication of. However, adults have had the privilege of watching and studying these limited roles for a much longer time than children.

Carolyn Steedman (1982) has shown how three 8-year-old working-class girls, in stories that they have written themselves about "The Tidy House", prove to be well acquainted with, critical of and often even contemptuous of expectations of the woman's role that involve women being at home, cleaning and looking after the baby. Consequently, the girls are very familiar with norms and values and with expectations of women/mothers, but they

can *for that precise reason* question them and oppose the idea of themselves living according to these “rules” in the future.

Is it really the case that fairy tales or films might be able to “naturalise” a certain socially created phenomenon, i.e. legitimise it by depicting it as “natural” – and thus impossible to change? Even if something is depicted as permanent by using the argument, “This is the way it is and always has been,” this does not exclude the possibility of us still wanting to do something about it. This does not at all imply that “this must always be the case”. On the contrary! One only has to consider the case of women ministers and bishops in Sweden. All the film characters representing these offices have been male, but still there are women ministers nowadays in reality. How then can this be possible? Within only one or two generations (who have even been brought up on Disney films) [Note 2] the position of the man in the family has changed from being the absolute master to being the woman’s equal partner, or even underling.

If, by and large, all of the films that we have examined have in fact been about central characters who have questioned and wanted to change prevailing conditions, surely one cannot readily maintain that the films teach us that what is ingrained or established is impossible to change? The wonder tales in particular, but also the animal fables and the pet biographies, have focused on change and have shown that authoritarian oppression, as well as gender differences and social differences, *can* be removed.

As we have seen, Disney’s films have often emphasised modern and transformed outlooks belonging to the present day, and with their global distribution have in fact propagated for social change (Indians and gypsies are the equals of all other human beings, women are just as competent as men, men are just as afraid as women, adolescents should not have to marry the person selected by their parents, and one should not bully those who are different, covet money, or crave power over others – only over oneself – etc.).

On the other hand, *all* stories must “reproduce” or “represent” certain norms, roles and “self-evident conceptions” if they are to be comprehensible at all. In the case of children this is even more fundamental, of course. However, fairy tales, whose chief characteristic is that they are unreal, are probably the worst means of teaching us “what things are obviously like”. Rather, they illustrate our own fantasies desiring change, as well as our potential to change slowly and against all the odds.

Fairy tales – including the stories told in Disney’s films – are *wonderful* precisely because they conceal in a clever way how they make use of the conflict between their *normative* function (it undeniably feels secure to trust in established roles, norms and traditions, particularly for social newcomers such as children, who need to recognise

themselves) and their *subversive*, undermining function (it is wonderful to rebel against parental authority, test one's strength and show that the others are wrong in regarding one as incapable). It is precisely the wonder, the magic and the enchantment that in fact magnify the desirability of the transformation and the renewal. The wonderful – the violation of the “self-evident” – is thus depicted as extra desirable.

It is true that in recent decades Disney's films have toned down the role of supernatural magic and have instead emphasised the decisive power of collective action and solidarity. At the same time the villains have become less and less superhuman. The potential for change does not for that reason become less, merely more likely to produce results.

Would it *really* be possible, on the other hand, for fairy tales or films *alone* to reshape a certain socially created phenomenon, i.e. depict it as “unnatural” and thereby needing to be changed? Would this be possible in the case of innovative gender roles, for example? No, believing that children, in a world populated by a countless number (from the perspective of children) of more or less diffuse gender role variants, could create a new and better type of their own, with the help of isolated, ideal media role models, is roughly as wise as propagating that children should be encouraged to learn a language of their own. Role acting is one of the principal means of communication available to human beings, and children are not taught Latin before they have learned their mother tongue.

Role models or after-images?

Moreover, all research indicates that films *themselves cannot* erase well-established ways of viewing things, but that cultural expressions and everyday experiences must go hand in hand. Cramming films with “positive role models” does not help in the least, if these role models do not already have their equivalents in real life and in the local environment. The breeding ground for new roles and relations must be well prepared, and the person who is to change must already have *desired* the change. The fact that boys and girls react so differently, for example to the scene where the witch gives the poisoned apple to Snow White (with a “protective instinct” and with sorrow at the “mother's” treacherousness, respectively), cannot be explained by any simple line of reasoning concerning the influence of films.

Adults' demands for better “role models” (not only for children) rather often disguise a kind of striving for dominance and include a dubious belief in authorities and “leadership”. Certain feminists in particular regard role models as ideals to imitate. They encourage us to look up to exceptional women, instead of looking around for women whom we can imagine

ourselves acting together with. Role models seldom have any liberating power if one is lost and does not already feel a need for, or is not in an active way striving for, change...

Similarly it is said, when discussing the principal characters of children's culture, that it is important for girls to be able to "identify with the heroine". However, in this connection "identifying with" is considered to be an imperceptible and unconscious act, which would hardly be fruitful in bringing about social change. "Taking or having someone as one's role model", on the other hand, is an act performed completely consciously and with our control, and is nothing that *happens to us*, as if we were passively captured by foreign powers without our knowledge. Here the viewer does not ape, but is almost abreast of the object of her or his admiration. She or he **makes** someone her or his role model, voluntarily and consciously **selects** a certain person, to a great extent **creates** this role model by merely choosing *certain* features of the character in question (features which best suit her or his own ends at present) and can even abandon the model later on.

Children are constantly preoccupied with solving current problems in their own lives and choosing a path in life. They then look for guidance in Mulàn, Pocahontas or Simba the Lion King, for example, who have already found their path in life – a path which the children themselves have *also already* followed just a little in their thoughts, for otherwise they would not have chosen this precise role model. However, children seek support, backing, and confirmation that they have made the right choice. The role model represents rather the belief in a certain desirable direction or change that the child *already has*. When one chooses a role model, one takes, quite simply, a more active and conscious *responsibility for oneself* and one's continued development. Of course, the fact that someone else or some other people support one's choice of path feels good.

Disney's films, like the oral tales which they are often based on, have a great number of authors whose contributions are superimposed on one another. This is why the films are able to crystallise what is essential for children: the everyday conflicts and the process of becoming independent. Breaking up from one's family and parental home and then creating a home of one's own and perhaps a family of one's own are the two greatest upheavals in growing up, and, by and large, these themes are treated in all the traditional folk tales. The process of maturing, the gradual liberation from the parental home and the independence won bit by bit constitute recurring themes.

Children's "self-realisation"

The film saga offers symbolically powerful scenarios that help children understand and solve their current tasks and problems. Just as the folk tales and the fables, Disney's films

have *ideal characters* who demonstrate the right way of acting and *anti-characters* who demonstrate the wrong way of acting. The comical characters are often full of life, while the young heroes and heroines are rather often less lively, but still more interesting personalities than the corresponding characters in the book versions of the fairy tales. The films also show terrible parents side by side with idealised good parents (the former being called monsters, dragons and witches, the latter being called gods and goddesses, kings and queens, as well as godmothers, fairies, magicians and female angels), as a reflection and processing of well-known roles.

Growing up is depicted here precisely as it is, namely as a series of confrontations chiefly within the family, in which the children both react in a conformist way and rebel. Young boys want in fact to be like their fathers, while fewer teenage boys want to do so. All young girls want to pretend to be and to become like their beloved mothers, while teenage girls most often do *not* in fact want to imitate their nagging mothers. One should not be surprised by the fact that children prefer films without maternal power and paternalism, without conspicuous kings and queens, and prefer to focus on princes, princesses and helping friends and grandmothers. Mothers both compete and control, and not only do they possess malicious power, but they are also powerless in their kinder self, i.e. resemble “grandmothers”.

The fact that the girls in the wonder tales are fond of their (quite peripheral and powerless) fathers does not mean that their only possible role in a patriarchal society is either as daughters or wives, but that the girls still want to keep at least *one* link to the good parental home. However, nowadays the girls are far from being passive or suffering, and the boys are no longer either particularly self-confident or heroic. But all of them seek freedom, self-determination and co-operation.

To judge from their favourite stories and games, the boys seem, both within and outside the home, to have even fewer roles, accessible paths in life and ties to their family compared with the girls. They know that they should not be like the powerful mothers, but what they see of the fathers does not exactly concern independence and power. However, they are promised future victories and independence. The boys seem to feel powerless and constantly threatened by annihilation by those whom they do not resemble. Therefore, they constantly have to eliminate opponents, overcome obstacles and pass tests. The poor creatures must unceasingly perform exploits and accomplish some apparently impossible task.

Either they bear so strong an imprint from the necessity to achieve in their ordinary everyday tasks that they also extend this necessity to their leisure. Or else in their exploits they are able to experience a wonderful distance and counterbalance to their subordinate real

life situation, when in their worlds of fantasy they are for once able to be acting subjects and experiment with power and meaningful tasks. The latter explanation seems to be the more probable. Moreover, Disney's films in fact enlarge the repertoire of the boys (particularly the films of the last decade) and, for example, show "motherly" fathers, "ugly" and insecure young men, and men who are afraid and acknowledge their weakness and fear, but who nevertheless manage quite admirably.

Moreover, fortunately Disney's film narratives focus on humour as the most important ingredient in life, next to goodness and unselfishness, and here the boys have undeniably had an advantage over the girls. In all situations boys are quite simply allowed to joke more and have more fun than girls. It is true that the principal characters are not always particularly funny, but almost all of Disney's comical minor characters belong to the male sex. However, the girls from the '90s, for example Belle the beauty, Esmeralda the gypsy girl, the woman soldier Mulàn and, indeed, even Megara from ancient Greece, have in fact been endowed with an abundance of humour.

Accordingly, progress is also being made in this respect, with the result, however, that it has become less clear what genre the films belong to. There is a risk that Disney will end up crossing the border where the films start to become difficult to understand, where the characters are no longer as easy for an audience of younger children to recognise, but where the films are at the same time applauded more by adults, of course...

The Disney films of the last decade are a good deal more complex than Disney's previous productions. The animated films have also become "heavier" in that more serious themes have appeared in *The Lion King*, *Pocahontas* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Both *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *Hercules* have been difficult for the youngest children to understand. The fact that it has been more difficult to assign the films of the '80s and '90s to a specific genre is also partially due to the fact that the stories are now children's variations of modern adult (hybrid) genres – parodies of detective stories, comic adventure films, fantasy films and legends. The stories no longer belong to children's genres that are hundreds of years old and easily accessible to children.

However, all the most popular films faithfully follow the basic pattern of the three types of model described in the present book. Together they contribute to children's audiences learning in a pleasurable way what children "are like": both wild and tame, both big and small, but above all changeable. With the help of the characters in the films, children can have their own diffuse experiences elucidated. In this way the animated film saga becomes the place where children *achieve self-realisation* – in spite of or perhaps precisely because of its fictitious character.

For, as mentioned before, children are not merely *born*, to then grow up and learn what they are to be like in order to be called adults. Children must also receive guidance in becoming children, or rather in constructing their own child's identity together with other people. Through observing both real and fictive characters, one learns the rules and roles of childhood, after which one is able to rebel against them or remould them in interaction with one's environment.

Few have succeeded better than Disney in providing such guidance. In an entertaining way "his" films teach viewers both to take their place in the circle of life and to choose their own path in life – both to know their place and to dare to take a place.

(1998)

Notes

1. For a more detailed discussion of the Berkeley researcher Anne Dyson and her observational studies of children's gradual questioning of stereotyped gender roles in films, see pp. 134-142 in M. Rönnerberg: *TV är bra för barn*, Stockholm: Ekerlids Förlag 1997.
2. Here I do *not* intend to suggest any direct causal relationship in which Disney's films influence reality.

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