

Princesses and wild girls.
New female identities in animated cinema for young viewers
Principesse e ragazze selvagge.
Nuove identità femminili nell'animazione per l'infanzia

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OPEN ACCESS



DOUBLE BLIND PEER REVIEW

ABSTRACT

Female imaginary has undergone strong transformations in recent decades, leading to more complex and multifaceted representations of female protagonists in children's narratives. Through stories that employ numerous narrative and artistic techniques, today's filmic characters are demonstrating an increasing adherence to socio-cultural changes as they are giving voice to diversified forms of identity in order to deconstruct those stereotypes that, historically, have categorised girls and women, both real and fictional. Starting from a theoretical basis grounded in Gender Pedagogy and Film Studies, the paper aims to offer a pedagogical overview of the portrayals presented in contemporary children's cinema, from the latest Disney heroines to the female protagonists of Hayao Miyazaki's works, up to independent cinema's products.

KEYWORDS

Children's films, animated films, female representation, visual pedagogy, gender identity.
Film per l'infanzia, film d'animazione, rappresentazione femminile, pedagogia visuale, identità di genere.

L'immaginario femminile costruito attraverso le narrazioni filmiche per l'infanzia ha subito negli ultimi decenni forti trasformazioni che hanno portato a rappresentazioni di protagoniste sempre più complesse e ricche di sfumature. Tramite storie che utilizzano tecniche narrative ed artistiche diverse, gli attuali personaggi filmici stanno dimostrando una sempre maggiore aderenza ai cambiamenti socio-culturali, dando voce a forme identitarie diversificate e oltre gli stereotipi che, storicamente, hanno caratterizzato bambine, ragazze, donne, tanto reali quanto fittizie. A partire da una base teorica fondata sulla Pedagogia di genere e sui Film Studies, il saggio intende offrire una riflessione pedagogica sui nuovi ritratti femminili nei film di animazione contemporanei attraverso una panoramica dei nuovi ritratti presentati nel cinema per l'infanzia, dalle nuove eroine Disney al protagonismo femminile nelle opere di Hayao Miyazaki, fino ai prodotti del cinema indipendente.

Citation: Forni D. (2023). Princesses and wild girls. New female identities in animated cinema for young viewers. *Women & Education*, 1(1), 80-85.

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Conflicts of interest: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflicts of interest.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.7346/-we-1-01-23_16

Pensa MultiMedia: ISSN 2975-0105 (online)

1. Introduction

The paper aims to explore some contemporary films that offer a new perspective on the construction of female characters. Two filmic macro-sectors will be considered, namely western and eastern cinema, and common features or divergent aspects will be highlighted. As far as western cinema is concerned, the contribution will briefly investigate the evolution of Disney and Pixar characters, juxtaposing them with an example of an independent production. Similarly, eastern cinema will be examined through an overview of recurring traits in Hayao Miyazaki's films, together with a Chinese film. The works were selected for their deconstruction of gender norms, and specifically for their non-canonical portrayal of female characters.

The analysis is based on the assumption that cinema, like many other forms of narrative for young readers or viewers, shapes children's idea of themselves and otherness and prevents or reinforces gender-based discrimination (Ulivieri, 1999; Antoniazzi, 2015; Trisciuzzi, 2019). Even when not overtly didactic, films offer a powerful formative opportunity to their audiences (Faeti, 1983; Cambi, 2010; Morin, 2016; Di Bari, 2019): watching films, young viewers build a socially shared imaginary which can establish precise identity and behavioural models that, starting from the fictional sphere, will influence concrete, real attitudes and actions. Quoting Morin, human reality is intertwined with the imaginary, which constantly cooperates with the real and creates "a phantom universe gifted with the effect of reality" (2021, p. 8). Cinema for children share children's literature tropes, issues and educational impacts (Boero, Boero, 2008) and through its visual storytelling, it gives boys and girls a double opportunity: on the one hand, they can find themselves mirrored in new subjectivities and refer to new models; on the other hand, young viewers are encouraged to conceive diversity and embrace those forms of self-expression that lay outside of pre-established gender canons. Therefore, films can provide new egalitarian possibilities, but may also strengthen stereotypes and gender bias if the characters or plots are not constructed with sufficient attention and sensitivity to these issues or if the viewer is not guided by a critical understanding of the product (Forni, 2019).

2. Fairy-tale princesses and wild children: western cinema

Disney cinema constitutes one of the most important western cultural markers. Disney has historically placed female characters at the centre of its narratives, however, this quantitative dimension is not combined with a qualitatively significant representation of female characters or, more generally, by a revaluation of the male-female binarism (Davies, 2006; Forni, 2019; Wellman, 2020). From the very first full-length film, Disney's framework – which is the offspring of the last century but which is often anchored in traditional representations – is based on the confinement of women within socially defined gender boundaries: *Snow White* tells the story of a girl, but she is seen from a male perspective, she is characterized by normative and ideal traits (beauty, kindness, patience, fragility, and passivity) and told through a discourse that

pits women against women in competition for male approval (the mirror) of their beauty, which is short lived. [...] There is no doubt that Disney retained key ideological features of the Grimms' fairy tale that reinforce nineteenth-century patriarchal notions that Disney shared with the Grimms (Zipes, 2006, p. 204).

While Mickey Mouse explores the world as the captain of a steamboat in *Steamboat Willie* (1928), *Snow White* preserves a feminine canon that becomes an indirect educational model for girls. Indeed, while *Steamboat Willie* is targeted at a heterogeneous audience, *Snow White* is conceived as a product targeted toward female viewers.

Following the spectrum of female identities proposed by later Disney films, some features have been changing in more recent times, but a concrete renewal has not taken place yet. The princesses that followed *Snow White* were, until the late 1980s, based on the same characteristics: young, beautiful, affable girls who had to be saved by a Prince through a kiss and a marriage (*Cinderella*, 1950; *Sleeping Beauty*, 1959). A first attempt to portray a different social perception of femininity was made in 1989 with *The Little Mermaid*, where the protagonist, a mermaid called Ariel, maintains specific aesthetic characteristics but also shows a new temperament: she is an active, rebellious, disobedient girl, who wants to break free from family restrictions to explore the human world and get out of her daily routine under the sea. Although the film ends with a marriage, the driving force that pushes Ariel out of the sea is curiosity, rather than her feeling for the prince. In 1991, *Beauty and the Beast* proposes a further revision of the canon with the figure of Belle: the girl is depicted as beautiful right from her name, she is kind and patient, but she is also intelligent, cultured, with a strong interest for books and a constant desire for adventure. Belle refuses the advances of Gaston, the villain of the story, in order to find a more genuine love based on a gradual acquaintance with the Beast. Their relationship is grounded on a different kind of feeling if compared with previous relationships based on love at first sight and immediate marriage. Disney's empowering effort continues with films like *Mulan* (1998), where the protagonist, a Chinese girl, disguises herself as a man and leaves with the army in the fight against the Huns in order to save her father from the dangers of war. *Mulan's* emancipation is strong, but

hidden behind a masculine veil, leading her back to culturally feminine clothes and practices once she returns to the domestic sphere. It is significant how Mulan-themed merchandising rarely depicts her in her warrior clothes but, much more frequently, presents her in her feminine outfits with an accentuated femininity. In the 2000s, Disney's films witnessed a major revolution: from Tian's career ambitions in *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), where the girl wants to open a restaurant in 1930s New Orleans, or *Tangled* (2010) and the character of a Rapunzel, a girl trapped in a tower who wants to explore the outside world and becomes the Prince's helper in her escape, rather than a mere princess to be rescued, up to the story of a sisterly love narrated by *Frozen* (2013), where it is not the Prince's kiss which saves the protagonist, but the symbolic embrace of a sister. Disney opens up to new female horizons, but in doing so it preserves those characteristics and dynamics that recall fairy-tale imaginaries, far from real emancipation. From the aesthetic features to the characters' behaviour, Disney's female protagonists rarely appear as heroines, but more frequently as princesses undergoing a slow transformation (Caso, 2012).

The least stereotypical films are those not directly aimed at an audience composed of little girls, even though they lack numerically significant representations of the feminine. For example, *The Rescuer* (1977) presents a co-protagonist – the mouse Miss Bianca – who apparently follows a pre-established canon since she is elegant, beautiful, vain, and sometimes haughty, but behind this guise she proves to be much more courageous, bold and daring than her adventure companion Bernard, a fearful, goofy, insecure mouse.

However, Disney villains present a different approach to gender identity. Antagonists are the most emancipated characters in all respects: they do not necessarily follow an aesthetic canon, they show 'other' bodies or bizarre clothes, out of the norm (Ursula in *The Little Mermaid*; Maleficent in *Sleeping Beauty*; Madam Mim in *The Sword and the Stone*) and their attitude differs from social gendered standards. Female villains have resolute personalities, great self-awareness, strong agency, and considerable independence. Villains are the only ones who dare to deconstruct gender mainstream imagery from its very basis, subverting fixed norms related to femininity and masculinity. However, the viewer will hardly take a villain as a model as far as he/she is proposed as the main antagonist of the narrative and therefore as a deviant archetypal not to be followed and, rather, to be rejected (Davies, 2006; Forni, 2022).

Today, Disney princesses are still configured as characters relegated to female spectators, both in their narratives and in their merchandising products, thus fuelling a gender binarism that is incoherent with the narrative changes taking place in the films. A different strategy has been implemented over the years by Pixar (now united with Disney), whose works, aiming at a heterogeneous and less gender-segregated audience, have featured fewer female characters on the one hand, but more interesting and out-of-the-ordinary ones on the other, breaking down the Disney princess model to encourage new personalities and new female storytellings. A contemporary, inspiring example is the Disney-Pixar film *Red* (2022): set in early 2000s Toronto, it tells the story of Mei Lee, a 13-year-old Chino-Canadian girl. Mei is an excellent student and is surrounded by a valuable group of friends (Miriam, Priya and Abby) who constantly support her both in her studies and in some teenage fooleries. Mei has some ordinary difficulties in dealing with the transformations of her body and personality – a problem metaphorically interpreted through the girl's sudden and uncontrollable conversion into a red panda. The film, selecting an approach that is never didactic but extremely natural and entertaining, hints at topics such as first loves, teenage rebellion, and growing up between two different cultures, but also issues that are often perceived as taboo, such as periods. *Red* also shows, like Disney's *Brave* (2012), the delicate relationship between a mother with high expectations and a daughter who does not share her mother's dreams. The film underscores the importance of dialogue and empathetic listening to others' perspectives to overcome opposing views and find a balance.

Considering film studios apart from Disney, we find several narratives with female characters beyond gender standards. A key example is *Wolfwalkers* (2020), produced by Irish animation studio Cartoon Saloon. The story is set in the town of Kilkenny in 1650. The protagonists are two little girls: Robyn, a human girl, and Mebh, a wolfwalker, a creature whose spirit transforms into a wolf while sleeping. The two girls build a strong friendship and, following Mebh's bite, Robyn experiences a wolf's perspective too. The two girls are visually opposed right from the beginning of the film (Figure 1). By day, Mebh is a human, but her features are wild as she has uncontrollable red hair and she moves and acts like an animal, for instance showing her teeth when becoming aggressive. Robyn appears as an elegant, calm, well-groomed figure, she shows her craving for adventure, but her identity is restricted by social gender norms that trap her inside her city, where she can be safe under her father's control. In the beginning, Robyn is presented as a character that cannot understand and 'feel' nature: she chooses her father, a hunter, as a model, replicating the norm she was educated to. However, when the girl befriends Mebh, her attitude radically changes. Through Mebh's bite, Robyn experiments with a new shape and her identity too becomes fluid. The girls become "boundary creatures" (Haraway, 2000) and can simply act as children/puppies, forgetting any social or gendered label and any division between human and non-human (Hawley, 2022, 166).



Figure 1: *Wolfwalkers*

Robyn's metamorphosis into a new body can be interpreted both as a metaphor for adolescence, for real physical transformations, and as a symbolic evolution beyond patriarchal values. Robyn's transformation set her free from gender norms and social canons since she is free to develop her own personality, disrupt human hierarchies and connect with the natural world. *Wolfwalkers* presents to its young viewers an ecofeminist, pedagogical perspective that intertwines the issues of gender and ecologies, creating a common space for challenging those social norms and hierarchies which are harmful to any kind of minority, human or non-human.

3. Taking flight and diving into the sea: Eastern cinema

The narratives created by Studio Ghibli, founded in 1985 in Tokyo, show a very different approach to female representation. First of all, these stories are intended for a mixed target audience, regardless of gender. Nevertheless, the female presence is quantitatively and qualitatively significant. The protagonists of Studio Ghibli's films, among which Hayao Miyazaki's works stand out in quality, clearly differ from Disney's imagery since they implement a new feminine awareness that passes through both the characters' aesthetic and their actions. Therefore, they overcome fairy-tale and edulcorated features to present extraordinary heroines who move in fantastical spaces but display common, ordinary emotions and desires, typical of children or teenagers and "cruelly real" (Trisciuzzi, 2013, p. 39) with an impressive ability to "stay close to themes and problems related to childhood without overusing clichés or blunt sentimentalism" (Trisciuzzi, 2013, p. 47).

Whether they wear animal furs (*Princess Mononoke*, 1997) or flight suits (*Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, 1984) Miyazaki's heroines lose the urge to appear in favor of a desire to take action. Hence, their adventures do not unfold in domestic spaces, such as towers, houses, and castles, but in new settings historically forbidden for the feminine, including the forest (*Mononoke*), the sky (*Nausicaä*), the sea (*Ponyo*, 2008), the city or across multiple cities (*Kiki's Delivery Service*, 1989). Moreover, we no longer find princesses to be rescued: these films present heroines who actively struggle not just to establish themselves – Miyazaki's protagonists are already presented as empowered children, girls, and women – but also to protect their ideals, their darlings and friends, their home. Miyazaki's characters are round and offer multiple identity interpretations: traits such as beauty, gentleness, and sensitivity can be juxtaposed with features such as courage, initiative, wisdom, pride, and also aggression and rudeness. In addition, these characters are depicted in close contact with the natural world (*Mononoke*, *Ponyo*; *My Neighbour Totoro*, 1988) as they are able to establish themselves through their respect for nature. The natural world is constructed over animism, which is effective in demonstrating a multi-level anti-speciesism urge that considers Otherness beyond human perspective. Even when these films put on stage princesses (*Nausicaä*, *Mononoke*), they are portrayed in their role "of peace and of a return to nature" (Trisciuzzi, 2013, p. 35), not as fairy-tale royal characters.

Moreover, these narratives do not offer answers and predetermined and clear endings like Disney films because they aim to prompt new questions and multiple interpretations in the viewer, encouraging an active role of the spectator. This also applies to gender issues: these narratives capture the essence of identity, losing its gender-marked traits and therefore offer life stories that are both ordinary, universal, and yet personal and intimate. Studio Ghibli's love relationships, for example, differ from Disney's love stories as they dwell on long-established feelings that are the result of an intimate acquaintance, a personal exchange, and are manifested according to dynamics that do not see a male character gaining a female counterpart, but that mix these classic roles by addressing more equal and truthful dynamics.

Among the films that delicately deal with the growth of a female character we mention, for example, *Kiki's Delivery Service*. Kiki is a 13-year-old young witch. As an apprentice, she leaves her family and sets off on a journey to explore the world and discover her identity so that she can choose her future profession. This formative opportunity is willingly accepted by her parents as it is a common practice that allows young witches to experience the world's diversity. Kiki flies on a broomstick and is accompanied by her talking cat Jiji (whom only Kiki can understand). Here, as in other Miyazaki's films, the flight is synonymous with freedom, with crossing physical and identity boundaries. However, Kiki idealizes her journey and faces a reality that does not always match her dreams, leading her to sudden mood swings and constant uncertainties (Trisciuzzi, 2013, p. 67). Beside her, several female figures (Ursula, a girl who works as a painter in a small house in the woods) and male figures (Tombo, a city boy with a passion for flying) act as a support, demonstrating a strong bond of sisterhood and friendship - once again a central element in the director's narratives. Friends and sisters, whether related by blood or acquired, are key figures in the process of growth and self-discovery and affirmation, a process that is achieved, not through adult guidance, but through a constructive confrontation with peers (Totoro; Kiki). Kiki, dismantling the Prince Charming stereotype, will be responsible for saving her friend Tombo from a misadventure and in so doing the girl will acquire a renewed maturity. The girl, as she grows up and finds her way, meets a happy ending marked by a sad but highly metaphorical event: the girl will no longer be able to fly and to understand her friend Jiji, the cat. Childhood comes to an end with this new incomprehension of the surreal, of the fantastic, but a new adventure into her womanhood unfolds for Kiki.

Continuing in the oriental field, Chinese cinema also offers some noteworthy works regarding female counter-narratives. *Big Fish and Begonia* (2016) by Liang Xuan and Zhang Chun tells the story of Chun, a girl who lives in a magical/spiritual world that lies beneath the bottom of the ocean. The film opens with a ritual: as they turn sixteen, the girl and her peers are transformed into red dolphins and visit the human world for a week. During a storm, Chun is rescued by a boy that loses his life in the attempt to save her. So, she makes a deal with the Soul Keeper, who will set the boy's soul free (in the form of a baby dolphin) in exchange for half of Chun's lifespan. Chun has to take care of the dolphin, called Kun, to accompany his soul into the human world again. The story is told by an elderly Chun that looks back at her past, giving an interesting storytelling filtered by her mature age.

In the film, the boundaries of identity are often blurred. If compared with Disney, Chun is an atypical female character as she moves in outside spaces and does not simply leave her home, she also explores other worlds (Figure 2). Although her friend Qiu constantly helps and supports her, Chun is an independent character, she is conscious of her own choices, she has a strong personality and agency. Furthermore, the film manages to successfully promote stability between independency and love relationships. Chun feels love and she is loved by another character, but feelings do not reduce her independence, her freedom, but strengthen them. It is not necessary to eliminate love from the narrative to give voice to an empowered female character - a technique often used by Disney (*Brave*, *Frozen*). On the contrary, Chun's desire to save her lover makes her even stronger, deconstructing the trope that traditionally sees male characters rescuing damsels in distress. In addition, all characters are shown in a growing process not related to gender canons. Even when Chun decides to sacrifice for her community, her sacrifice is not related to femininity (i.e., mothers' sacrifices), but is a social decision that will positively affect her society and configure Chun as a heroine.



Figure 2: *Big Fish and Begonia*

4. Conclusions

The selected case studies demonstrate a fresh commitment of children's and adolescent cinema to a new depiction of gender models. Through very different approaches, several contemporary films offer valuable suggestions for an inclusive society where differences are enhanced. Contemporary cinema manages to tell concrete experiences related to childhood and adolescent, to make its viewers feel deeply narrated (Boero, 2009). In particular, femininity seems to have found its own narrative space, sometimes overcoming the cliché of the princess to be saved – although in some cases the bond with tradition remains strong – and sometimes proposing completely innovative characters, free from gender constraints and therefore able to involve a heterogeneous target audience (although gendered marketing still plays a very strong role in the construction of Western film productions). The affirmation of such female protagonists occasionally moves from the abandonment of the 'happily ever after' ending, centred on love relationships and marriage, while in others it develops through new relationships built on dialogue and mutual acquaintance. The bond with nature also proves to be fundamental in the construction of tolerance and respect, transcending gender boundaries and fostering a harmonious living with all life forms. The intra-gender relationship also becomes a recurring element: the figure of Prince Charming is replaced by crucial sisterhood bonds that can overcome a long-standing female competition to build mutual support, to promote a dialogue between peers that may lead to stronger gender awareness (Ulivieri, 2019). More recent narratives also focus on the concrete difficulties encountered by girls while growing up: from the menarche to earliest crushes, from the transformation of the body to family rebellion. Since the mid-1980s, these ordinary and at the same time emancipatory themes have found their place in films dedicated to young audiences, showing opportunities for representation, empowerment, and indirect education.

New filmic heroines not only vindicate a female voice that has often been denied (Ulivieri, 2007; Dato, De Serio, Lopez, 2009) but also show the diversity and precariousness of gender categories, sometimes working beyond gender dichotomies. Recent films cleverly encourage a new consciousness that speaks directly to young viewers without the aim of lecturing them, but rather of silently educating them – through the fascination of stories – to greater social inclusion, to a meaningful search for equality.

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