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Once Upon a Time Women and Weapons: Ideology Dynamics Behind Armed Heroines in the Fairy-Tale Films *Snow White and the Huntsman* and *Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters*

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Abstract

This paper draws attention to a twenty-first-century Hollywood tendency of weaponizing the fairy-tale female characters and involving them in armed and deadly but “just” conflicts. It evaluates the ideological implications of this trend, in both their patriarchal and capitalist dimensions. The films *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012) and *Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters* (2013) serve as samples of a larger bulk of recent fairy-tale cinematic adaptations that put forwards the unorthodox association of fairy-tale heroines and weapons. The cinema industry claims to offer new, “feminist-friendly” representations away from the stereotypes in the fairy tales and the “damsels-in-distress” of the Disney Studios’ adaptations. Putting this claim aside, the positions of the films within or against the dominant ideology backgrounds of patriarchy and capitalism are the centre of this study, which is thus theoretically framed within feminist (Laura Mulvey’s) and Marxist (Louis Althusser’s) thoughts. The suggestion of female empowerment through handling weapons and immersion in violence is here evaluated in its efficacy. It is argued that complacency to the male gaze expectations and patriarchy persists, but also that the association of fairy-tale heroines and weapons creates an inharmonious hybridization of femininity and some masculinity aspects. It is reasoned that the combination of fairy-tale heroines and weapons serves another facet of dominant ideology that is capitalism by promoting gun use among the rather pro-gun-control women. Overall, the research details one example of the mechanics through which dominant ideology maintains itself by subtly countering oppositional thoughts.

Keywords: fairy-tale films; heroine; male gaze; ideology; patriarchy; capitalism; weapons.

This paper is focused on the narrative form that is fairy tales and their expression through the most contemporary medium that is cinema. Fairy tales have been handed down from generation to generation, forming thus a cultural heritage which has been preserved through the various transmission forms: the oral tradition, drawings, songs and ballads, literature, and now cinema. One could assume that what preserves the fairy tales and help these survive time is not merely the variety of media but the fact that they are re-invented. On the one hand, in transitioning to a new medium, the fairy tale is transformed in its form. On the other hand, in

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transitioning to a new historical context, the content of the tale is re-adapted to the changed time of the telling. The fairy tales are then far from static and so aspects –ideological ones in particular– are interesting to investigate.

Regardless of the cultural and historical context, storytelling has served to impregnate meaning to the world around. In fact, Fairy tales have a didactic, moralistic role and function as re-enforcement of social and individual values and of belief and ideology systems. They are indoctrination tools par excellence, especially with consideration to the impressionability of its young target audience. The recent filmic adaptations of popular fairy tales –though destined to a wider age and gender range of audience– are no less powerful, dominant ideology vehicles. In the twenty-first century, American cinemas have been flooded with adaptations of Western fairy-tale classics like those collected by the brothers Grimm. Most of these films claim to offer another side of the story and they make attempts to depart from the tale when all the while keeping a certain amount of the familiarity it inspires. Central to the research is the fairy-tale films’ alleged mission of de-stereotyping the tales’ female characters. Whether the filmic form of the fairy tale successfully negotiates between preserving the familiarity of the tales and de-constructing their female stereotypes is debatable.

Snow White and the Huntsman (Rupert Sanders, 2012), and *Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters* (Tommy Wirkola, 2013) are the focus fairy-tale films of this paper. However, one ought to emphasise that they are selected as mere samples on the ground that they illustrate a recurrent tendency, in roughly the last fifteen years, for fairy-tale-inspired films to attempt a new spin to the popular tales and a new version of the female heroines. Lately, the film industry has been more openly and vehemently criticized for its gender-bias and abuses on the “Other” sex. In re-adapting the fairy tales (which are similarly infamous to the feminist eye) and in suggesting the empowerment of their female heroines, perhaps Hollywood shows an endeavour to redeem itself or, at least, polish its image. The way it proceeds in this endeavour and the degree of success it achieves are significant concerns which the scrutiny of the selected films might illuminate.

Examining the politics of cinema necessitates to enlighten what exactly ideology refers to and Louis Althusser does so in his essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)” (1970). He indeed elaborates the concept further than the traditional Marxist understanding of ideology as “the system of the ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social group” (Althusser, 1970, p.113). He establishes that “ideology is a 'representation' of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (Althusser, 1970, p.115) and that it operates through institutions which “smuggle” and “ingrain” its illusion into the unconscious –an illusion that surrounds existence as “ideology comprises the stream of discourses, images and ideas that are all around us all the time, into which we are born, in which we grow up, and in which we live, think and act” (Ferretter, 2006, p.77). Most importantly for this paper’s discussion is the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) among which is “the communications ISA (press, radio and television, etc.)” (Althusser, 1970, p.107) and which he identifies as tools that normalize, communicate, and maintain the dominant class’s ideology. Cinema is then a dominant-ideology vehicle that draws the unconscious towards its hegemony of thought and practices. Althusser, however, argues that the ISAs are not the tools of an uncontested monopoly as these are also sites of oppositional ideology struggle. Are the films loaded with dominant ideology or do they constitute the exception: cases of oppositional ideology?

The filmic productions indeed claim to offer a new feminist dimension to the fairy tales by transforming the heroines from passive damsels-in-distress to active warriors. In the contemporary background of feminism (very different from the Grimm brothers' "pre-feminism", 19th century context), it is expected that a retelling would involve transformations of the female characters to adapt to the changed times. Transformations are indeed effected. One though might ponder over the degree to which the films are feminist renderings of the tales. In *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (1984), Teresa de Lauretis quotes Claire Johnston who asserts that "[n]ew meanings have to be created by disrupting the fabric of the male bourgeois cinema" (Johnston, 1974, as cited in Lauretis, 1984, p.04). This project though meets serious hindrance in the fact that to go counter current to the dominant ideologies and the socially-constructed meanings can only be done with and from within the same semiotic space rooted in patriarchy. Lauretis (1984) indeed explains that the dominant discourse is "[s]o well-established that, paradoxically, the only way to position oneself outside of that discourse is to displace oneself within it" and therefore "feminist theory itself [is] at once excluded from discourse and imprisoned within it" (p.07). Meeting such hindrance from the onset and Hollywood's doubtful authenticity of motivation behind the transformations complicate the journey towards a feminist ideal.

It is important to note though that the two films succeed in a significant point: the heroines Snow White and Gretel reject embracing the state of victimhood. Both heroines start off as victims caged to be abused. Gretel transitions to revolt early in the film, more precisely from the second sequence where the audience discovers a grown-up Gretel who, alongside her brother, hunts down witches and defies local authorities. Her early confrontation with authorities is all the more interesting in that they symbolize patriarchal power, being represented by four men issuing a death-sentence to a woman for sorcery. There also—at least initially—appears a kind of complicity and unity of cause among the female characters as Gretel firmly steps up to side with the accused woman. Similarly, Sanders's Snow White, despite an initial emphasis on her victimization, gradually steps out of the role of passive victim merely at the receiving end of action to actually taking part in the action. Both the Grimms' and Disney's Snow Whites are highly passive and though being the protagonists of the stories they are far from having any catalyst effect on the plots. Consequently, the rejection of the status of victim could be refreshing to the eyes of the films' audience.

In the two films, the struggle of the heroines may thus have a feminist appearance because of the recovery of a sense of agency, which when denied very possibly leads to objectification (Nussbaum, 1995, p.257). This agency is even taken further to break another stereotype attached to women: the image of life-givers which is here substituted for by the unorthodox image of life-takers. The struggle is shown in its physical dimension as Snow White and Gretel literally do battle and are ready to kill. Nevertheless, there are several added aspects and some preserved elements of the tales that somewhat discredit the proclaimed feminism of the contemporary adaptations. For instance, motherhood and nurturing may be detected at a deeper surface, especially in *Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters*. Indeed, Gretel is associated with motherhood through the instinct of protecting the children of the village and sacrifice to save them from the witches. Even the story of Gretel's mother and her abandonment of the younger Hansel and Gretel in a forest that is part of the Grimms' version is modified to fit the patriarchal rhetoric defining a romanticized, unfailing motherhood. Thus, the abandonment is presented in the film as necessary motherly sacrifice to distance the young

siblings from harm's way. The transition from life-givers to life-takers reveals that the violence communicated in the "original" tales and which is universally inherent to folktales is restored after having been suppressed for a long time (most of the 20th century) in the Disney renditions, though restored and modified.

Now the once innocent is violent, albeit in a justified way as the protagonists' violence is equated to rightful and necessary struggle. Additionally, the heroines' agency, crystalizing as a struggle though it may be, can be dubbed "unfeminist" because of the gender-limited space in which it is manifested. In other words, the battlefield opposes woman to woman: Gretel to the female witches and Snow White to Queen Ravenna. As a result, the confinement of the fight gives a sense of almost-petty competition and thus does not disturb the gender power dynamics. In addition, with focus on *Snow White and the Huntsman*, one might detect a rape-revenge cycle which is conceded in contemporary patriarchy as one rare rationalization of female violence against the male (Coulthard, 2007, p.168). The same is suggested in other fairy-tale films like *Maleficent* (Stromberg and Rønning, 2014) where the rape-revenge cycle constitutes the narrative and where the evil side of Maleficent from the tale of "Sleeping Beauty" is given justification as a result of rape. Queen Ravenna's evil in *Snow White and the Huntsman* is given a similar background of rape but it is not given the same justification nor is she triumphant in her revenge as is Maleficent. Contemporary patriarchy indeed condones the rape-revenge cycle but only so long as female violence does not exceed retribution exacted from the individual male perpetrator of rape. Queen Ravenna, however, is defeated for she goes beyond this line and attacks all male possessing power (especially political), that is to say, she targets patriarchy and so fails. All in all, although it is conceded that female and violence are not necessarily two separate realms, the combination remains circumscribed.

In addition to these power limitations –particularly when opposed to the male's power– the female characters' violence is in a sense toned down and smoothed by their physical appearance. Indeed, the film medium, unlike the written and oral forms of the tales, offers a visual telling aside from the one linguistically communicated. In fact, the visual representation of the woman in the films is inconsistent with their claim of a progressive, feminist rendering. In feminist film theory, Laura Mulvey's article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) psycho-analytically diagnosis a patriarchal, cinematic image of the woman that suits male desire as "cinematic codes create a gaze, a world and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of [male] desire" (Mulvey, p.352). The camera is manipulated to re-created the human eye mechanism and, naturally, as technology advances, the camera of contemporary films gets nearer its ideal. It is not only the human eye that is mimicked though, but the dominant ideologies that give direction to the gaze and therefore the films offer the woman as image with the idea that man is the bearer of the gaze as Mulvey explains:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly... women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and

erotic impact so that they can be said to connote
to-be-looked-atness. Woman ...holds the look,
plays to and signifies male desire. (Mulvey, 1975,
p.346)

The woman's body constitutes an integral part of the cinematic spectacle with a focus on it ranging from blatant to subtle.

The presented images of the female characters in the two films meet the expectations of the male gaze in a number of ways. First, the actresses cast to perform the lead roles (Kristen Stewart as Snow White and Gemma Arterton as Gretel) in both films conform to the standard "beauty norms" like white skin and a slim silhouette and often appear on the covers of fashion and beauty magazines. Even the traditionally "bad-looking", evil female characters are played by actresses (Charlize Theron as Queen Ravenna and Famke Janssen as the witch Muriel) who satisfy the required "to-be-looked-atness" as Mulvey puts it. Moreover, the costumes are designed to enhance femininity and exhibit the female body. Gretel, for instance, is dressed for most of the film's time in a tight, body-fitting, leather trousers and a matching leather corset on top, an attire that is out of place and time considering the tale's Medieval setting. Furthermore, there is a significant number of shots and scenes that are superfluous to the narrative construct and that are present because rather necessary to gratify the male gaze. For example, in a *Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters* scene, Gretel appears asleep, with a high-angle, close-up shot of her face, and from there the camera creates a moving frame, a slow tilting to focus on Gretel's chest and cleavage. The visual high angle, the close-up and the tilting hypersexualize the heroine while the male character dominates through the look, inviting the male gazer in the audience to have the illusion of the same control. Similarly, in *Snow White and the Huntsman*, the action is broken for a narratively-unwarranted scene with a cut to show a medium, back shot of Queen Ravenna as she undresses to lower herself into a fountain of thick white liquid, to then languidly immerse in the next medium front shot covered in the white liquid, creating the impression of a Greek goddess's statue representation of perfection. Furthermore, the validation of the image is sought for by Queen Ravenna in a mirror that does not give reflection but comes to life in a figure with a male voice. In this way, it is overall suggested that it is through male eyes that woman identifies and defines herself, dependent on finding echoes of her "physical beauty" in a male's perception.

Thus, ultimately, cinematic visuals of the woman are created for the pleasure of the male audience, probably to ensure the sustaining of another dominant ideology besides patriarchy: capitalism. Indeed, cinema is often referred to as an industry and it is not without consistent reason. Large capital is put into the production of the fairy-tale blockbusters mentioned in this paper and the studios rather opt for a diplomatic stance to ensure the largest return possible to the investment. Concretely, *Snow White and the Huntsman* and *Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters*, with production budgets of respectively \$170 million and \$50 million, have had (in the same order) worldwide gross profit of over \$396 and \$226 (IMDbPro, n.d.). Sensibly, in consideration of the financial incentives, the films are imposed a fine line to tread on so that not to alienate a potential "consumer" audience. On the one hand, the familiarity of the tales to many cultural and age groups of female audiences draws a sizeable pull to the films and the promise of ridding the tales of the now unpopular damsel-in-distress trope strengthens this pull. On the other hand, the double spectacle of female "to-be-looked-atness"

and of extended, elaborate fight choreographies appeal to male audiences. To cash in on the enormous, mainly male, interest in superhero comics and Marvel action science fictions with central female heroines like Wonder Woman and Black Widow, the fairy-tale films take inspiration from said comics in the representation of their female characters. By and large, the fairy-tale films are consumer goods that take little risk due to the aim of appealing to the widest possible range of spectatorship.

Moreover, in the surface intent of female empowerment, a solution that is in accordance with capitalist ideology is advanced in the films: weapons. In fact, similar reasoning is to be found in the postfeminist Girlie Rhetoric where Girl Power is not antithetical to femininity and is accessible through commercially-derived products like make-up and fashion. In the films, Girl Power is achievable by means of yet another consumer product (weapons). This short-cut to empowerment through weaponizing the fairy-tale heroines constitutes a “capitalist celebration of the superficial markers of power that dominate much of the popular discourse of postfeminism” (Coulthard, 2007, p.173). Weapons and their by-product war occupy much screen space and time in this trend of fairy-tale adaptations, with other examples including *Alice in Wonderland* (Burton, 2010) and *Hanna* (Wright, 2011) to state a few. The role of weapons is most apparent in *Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters* where they are so focused on in both the cinematography and the narrative that they are almost characters in themselves despite being entirely incoherent with the Medieval-like setting. In a scene, a kind of priestess even blesses the heroes’ guns and ammunition and thus a certain sanctity and Christian endorsement of weapons are suggested. Furthermore, waging war is presented as the only way to resolve the tales’ tensions while pacifist voices are toned down. No sooner does the Mayor in *Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters* utter the words “hasn’t enough blood been shed,” than he is shot dead. In these “inevitable”, bloody confrontations, the heroines’ weapons even triumph over magic wands, a hyperbole of the empowerment they procure to their possessor.

However, the result is ambivalent at best especially that female empowerment is translated into the films as a simplistic transplantation of some masculinity features in the portrayal of the heroines. Jack Zipes (2016) writes that “[t]he implicit message... [is that] in order to become a “true” woman in today’s world, a woman must become a man. That is, she must evince qualities that are generally attributed to maleness” (p.280). This hybridization is neither harmonious nor successful in its said feminist departing point as the heroine’s weaponization and violence is compensated for by their hypersexualisation. Martina Lipp (2004), though making the comment on other films, considers that “hypersexualisation could be also considered as a masquerade in the sense... [that the female character] has to hide her possession of power behind an exaggerated femininity, thus reaffirming her status as a woman by constructing her sexuality as a spectacle” (p.21). Moreover, this empowerment is no threat to patriarchy as it is relativized by juxtaposing it to an even greater male power (like that of the Huntsman). The empowerment is implied to be artificial, assisted and unnatural. Girl Power then becomes a dangerous patriarchal recuperation (Genz & Brabon, 2009, p.79) combined to a capitalist hijacking.

Media promotional material, subtle as in films or overt like in advertisement, has oftentimes willingly conflated progress and consumerism. In the 1970s, cigarette advertisement centred on the image of a woman smoking as a symbol of progress towards liberation and gender equality (Coulthard, 2007, p.155). It seems that the same promotional

strategies are at work in the fairy-tale films in making a pro-gun plea. In “Gendering the Second Amendment” (2017), Jennifer Carlson and Kristin A. Goss consider that the contemporary governance type in the United States is fixed in that the government is mistrusted and considered to fail in protecting the people, thus leading them to fix the state by taking matters into their own hands (p.121). This type is recognizable in the two films’ governments. This attitude is especially encouraged amongst the female population by pro-gun advocates and lobbying forces like the National Rifle Association which proclaims that “armed self-defense is the only practical response in the face of unreliable institutions of paternal governance” (Carlson & Goss, 2017, p.126). With consideration to the fact that women, regardless of political party affiliations, tend to vote more favourably to stricter gun control than men do (Carlson & Goss, 2017, p.128; Cooperman, 2018), the female market is to the arms industry a sizeable profit potential that is yet to conquer. Drawing on these facts in addition to the films’ war-oriented narratives and visual embellishment of weapons, one is given reason to speculate over the covert, promotional material that they constitute in favour of the arms industry.

The suggestion of female empowerment through handling weapons and immersion in violence in the two films can be deduced in the end as inefficient. Indeed, complacency to the male gaze expectations and patriarchy persists. Moreover, the association of fairy-tale heroines and weapons creates a hybridization –neither harmonious nor liberating– of femininity and some masculinity aspects. Also, the combination of fairy-tale heroines and weapons could be said to serve another facet of dominant ideology that is capitalism. In short, it is reasoned that this Hollywood trend operates as promotion to the arms business which has extended lobbying reach to subdue gun control and pacifist voices, mostly carried by women. Overall, the research details one example of the mechanics through which dominant ideology maintains itself by subtly countering oppositional thoughts and revolutions. The Ideological State Apparatuses (more specifically here, the communications ISA) and their working are illustrated in this paper. They function to appease and eventually dispel tensions (raised by oppositional, feminist ideology here) by an appearance of absorbing or adopting oppositional ideology at the surface while re-enforcing dominant ideology at a deeper level.

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