

## Princess Bodies, Commodities for the Wicked. A Marxist Reading of Disney's Animated Films *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and *Tangled* (2010)

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**Abstract:** Theoretical effervescence regarding on the one hand the social phenomena of body commodification as discussed in the context of organ transplant and commercial surrogacy industries and on the other hand Disney's princess culture and its making of the female body image entitle a Marxist reading of Disney's animated films *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and *Tangled* (2010).

The present research relies on Marx's (1867; 2010) understanding of commodity as presented in 'Section 4: The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof' of his famous work 'Capital. A Critique of Political Economy', van Niekerk, Anton and Liezl van Zyl's (1995) on the ethics of commercial surrogacy, Scheper-Hughes's (2002) work on commodity fetishism and organ traffic to determine whether one can talk about commodification of the body or of body features in the case of the two Disney princesses, Ariel and Rapunzel.

Due to the exploratory nature of the inquiry connecting the theoretical dots between Disney's princesses and body commodification, it cannot hope for closure, but only for leaving an alluring trail of breadcrumbs, as in Hansel and Gretel's story, to be picked up by the next research(er).

**Keywords:** commodification; Disney princess; sociology of the body; gender roles; young femininity versus elderly femininity.



***Marx&Disney: Towards an Uncanny Encounter***

The interest for the present research and, shortly after, its conception are grounded on two utterly different directions of study, which are both gaining popularity within the academic and the journalistic community. One regards the concept of *body commodification*, which, in its most general meaning, refers to attaching economic value to one's body or bodily parts or features, therefore, turning it into an object of trade. In this respect, the present article will engage with theoretical issues of organ transplant and commodifying life (Scheper-Hughes, 2002), commercial surrogacy (Orlov and Orlov, 2007) and the woman's reproductive system as a space of power (Dworkin [1978] 1983) and emotional labour (Toerien and Kitzinger, 2007) or the commodification of emotions. The second direction of research, which finds itself at the very heart of the present endeavour, revolves around the journalistic concern about the '*princess effect*' of Disney culture - promoting an aesthetic appearance, a submissive attitude and a fundamental urge to be saved (Orenstein, 2006; Hains, 2016). Disney's making of femininity and especially of young femininity is also of interest for the academic community. On these lines, Sarah Coyne advances findings which endorse the idea that the princess culture enhances stereotypically feminine conduct, is preferred by girls with a body image falling behind the so-called beauty standards and does not whatsoever foster pro-social tendencies in consumers' behaviour. Craven (2002) highlights the absence of mothers, new-borns and pregnancies in Disney's narratives and the iterative array of dead femininities.

A recurrent theme of journalistic (Orenstein, 2006, Bronson, 2009; Mechanic, 2011, Hains 2016) and social research such as sociology and psychology (Craven, 2002; England, Descartes and Collier-Meek, 2011; Johnson, 2015; Do Rozario 2004) refers to Disney's princess culture and its depiction of the feminine body. Therefore, the present study focuses on the concept of '*commodity*' as it is explained by Marx (1867; 2010) in his fundamental work '*Capital. A Critique of Political Economy*', by van Niekerk, Anton and Liezl van Zyl (1995) in relation with commercial surrogacy and by Scheper-Hughes (2002) in the context of organ traffic and its application on Walt Disney's animated productions *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and *Tangled* (2010).

Due to the fact that there is no previous research on this particular matter to be found, the article is meant to fulfil an exploratory function, therefore, a hypothesis is not to be formulated. However, a research must always start with an inquiry. In this case, the core research objective refers to the following topic: are the main female characters of Walt Disney's animated productions

*The Little Mermaid* (1989) and *Tangled* (2010), Ariel and Rapunzel, cases of body commodification? On these lines, a qualitative analysis was performed on the film narratives and musical lyrics of the animated Disney movies *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and *Tangled* (2010). The qualitative endeavour focuses on the concept of 'commodification' as it is defined by several authors and aims to determine whether certain bodily features of Ariel and Rapunzel or themselves as a whole:

- (1) represent 'a value in use' (Marx, [1867]; 2010, 46),
- (2) possess the power of satisfying human desires (Marx, [1867]; 2010, 46),
- (3) are altered as a state by means of human labour (Marx, [1867]; 2010, 46),
- (4) are given economic value, meaning they are subjected to financial operations (buying, selling, trading and stealing) (Nancy Scheper-Hughes, 2002, 62)
- (5) are instrumental or a purpose in itself (Buber apud. Van Niekerk, Anton and Liezl van Zyl, 1995, 347)
- (6) are involved in transactions, that convey no emotional bearing and only focus on financial ends (Prokopijevic, 1990 apud. Niekerk and Liezl van Zyl, 1995).

At a first glance, it might seem that the present article represents an attempt to bring a serious matter such as body commodification, which can be easily associated with most of the contemporary world's horrors, into a trivial realm of animated movies. Moreover, the research might appear to some as airy and even slightly inappropriate for the thematic of this number: *Communism/ Postcommunism. Perspectives on Gender*. However, it is not the case because starting from the popular image of the cave man dragging 'his' woman by her hair up to Marilyn Monroe's icon and Hugh Hefner's bunny wives, the concept of *gender* has always been constructed around the body in terms of body difference or body features. Therefore, the present paper is about gender, probably in its most intimate bearing. It is constructed around *femininity*, the configuration of traits, behaviours, experiences and roles commonly ascribed to girls and women. Furthermore, it revolves around the *lived femininity*, the embodied experience of being a girl or a woman, saturated with a subjectivity which, by means of popularization, establishes itself as normative. Women's bodies are and have always been a symbolical space of power and ideology as well as of opposition and resistance.

### **King of my castle<sup>1</sup>. Detachable body parts & commodification**

In a nutshell, contemporary times are those of Dr. Frankenstein with a hint of Steven Spielberg. Just a couple of days ago, Saudi Arabia offered its citizenship to a humanoid robot called Sophia. Yesterday, *Newsweek* wrote about Sergio Canavero's quest of the impossible - allegedly the doctor intends to perform the first head transplant at the end of this year, in China. Although the same article states that there are strong medical voices advocating against the success rate of such a surgery, it has been on the table for some time now and it is probably going to happen soon. So, transplanting a human head might still be Sci-Fi, but humanity has already witnessed human trafficking, organ trafficking and surrogate mothers, therefore, a discussion about gender, body parts and commodification in post-communist times is not only justified, but also necessary, especially from the point of view of an Eastern-European female researcher in the field of sociology and gender studies.

Discussing about how recent biomedical developments and transplant technologies suddenly divide the world into organ givers and receivers, Nancy Scheper-Hughes (2002, 62) focuses on the ethical implications of turning such an intimate part of the human body into a commodity: *'The problem with the markets is that they reduce everything - including human beings, their labour, and their reproductive capacity - to the status of commodities that can be bought, sold, traded, and stolen. Nowhere is this more dramatically illustrated than in the market for human organs and tissues'*. Furthermore, she argues that it is life itself that becomes the ultimate of commodity fetishisms as no more virtue is found in suffering and death. It all comes to prolonging life at all costs and with no consideration whatsoever for the social, long-term effects on the human condition and on society itself of such an endeavour.

Organs' transplant issues place the life one already possesses in the position of a commodity fetishism. Another topic surrounded by ethical controversy in the works related to modern commodification of the human body is commercial surrogacy. This means that, in exchange of a fee or for other financial privileges, a woman accepts to offer her egg and womb or just her womb to conceive a child who will be delivered shortly after birth to a couple who remunerates her and who will hold all parental rights over the previously mentioned child. According to Orlov and Orlov (2007), critiques of this practice argued it equates with turning both children and the reproductive system of women into commodities, therefore, making a commodity from something

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<sup>1</sup> Named after a popular song of 1999 in which a robot woman is created.

that is not. Then again, surrogacy's advocates compared it to the act of sperm donation. Feminist radicals, however, such as Andrea Dworkin ([1978] 1983; Orlov and Orlov, 2007, 177; Niekerk and Liezl van Zyl, 1995, 345) went even further and labelled it as “*new-wave prostitution*”. Dworkin argues that, with the support and intervention of medical specialists, the woman's womb now becomes a space of experimentation and power, hence, of commodification: *'The formidable institutions of scientific research institutes and medical hospitals will be the new houses out of which women are sold to men: the use of their wombs for money'* (Dworkin, [1978] 1983, 183) ; *'It is the womb, not the vagina, that is being bought; this is not sex, it is reproduction'* (Dworkin, [1978] 1983, 182). In this respect, Anton van Niekerk and Liezl van Zyl (1995, 345) explore the subject of surrogacy from the point of view of the mother and try to determine whether it is the case of *'alienated and/or dehumanised labour'*, which could draw a parallel between such reproductive labour and the act of prostitution.

Flourishing industries such as the one of organ transplants or that of commercial surrogacy flag the current tendency of contemporary markets in that it makes no exceptions in saturating the world with financial values. The previous paragraphs have detailed industries which function at the very edge of morality and social justice because they commodify the human body, breaking it down to its parts which can be themselves committed to operations of exchange. In their article *"Emotional Labour in Action: Navigating Multiple Involvements in the Beauty Salon"*, Merran Toerien and Celia Kitzinger (2007) address the relational part of labour, which has been rarely brought up although it is commonly acknowledged in lines of work involving services. In this regard, I believe I recall a scene or two from famous movies where a client confesses in front of a bartender. For that matter, it is not an uncommon practice to see women discuss their intimacies with their hairdresser or cosmetician. I could also include here the whole American-style marketing trend which implies that displaying a polite and friendly, even caring attitude towards clients is part of one's labour obligations (Fineman, 1996: 546 apud. Toerien and Kitzinger, 2007). However, emotional labour can go much further than this in fieldworks which ask from their employees to perform interactional tasks such as ‘soothing tempers, boosting confidence, fuelling pride, preventing frictions, and mending ego wounds’ (Calhoun, 1992: 118 apud. Toerien and Kitzinger, 2007).

Due to the precariousness of human relationships in the contemporary society, the natural need for connection and support is substituted by solutions offered by businesses focused on

emotional labour maybe now more than ever. On June 7th, 2017, *The Business Insider UK* writes about professional cuddling as a cure for loneliness, depression or lack of affection in everyday life (Romeo and Ibekwe, June 7, 2017). On November 7th, 2017, just a few days ago, *The Atlantic* reads: *'Money may not be able to buy love, but here in Japan, it can certainly buy the appearance of love—and appearance, as the dapper Ishii Yuichi insists, is everything. As a man whose business involves becoming other people, Yuichi would know. The handsome and charming 36-year-old is on call to be your best friend, your husband, your father, or even a mourner at your funeral'* (Morin, November 7, 2017). The article is about a company offering professional actors to impersonate one's new boyfriend at a family dinner where one does not want to show up alone or the loving father one's child never had. Such practices stress on converting love or, better said, expressions of love or roles of the beloved into a service that now becomes purchasable.

In view of these facts, I consider the current socio-economic context as thriving as one can be for the development of diverse forms of commodification one has never witnessed before. Therefore, it appears to be appropriate for a closer inspection of what the past and present generations have learnt in the past twenty-eight years of Disney animated films about human bodies and commodification.

### **The Galatea Effect: Walt Disney Corporation and the Making of the Female Body**

On 2006's Christmas Eve, Peggy Orenstein wrote *'What's Wrong With Cinderella?'*, an article discussing the so-called 'princess effect' - the princess culture promoted by the Disney corporation by means of a whole artillery of consumer products which allow any little girl to *'live out the princess fantasy'*: *'There are now more than 25,000 Disney Princess items. "Princess", as some Disney execs call it, is not only the fastest-growing brand the company has ever created; they say it is on its way to becoming the largest girls' franchise on the planet'*. Orenstein takes into account the possibility of her being retrograde, still influenced by a second wave feminism and that girls' disposition for the princess-like femininity might not exclude demonstrating strong character features such as agency, courage or ambition. But she also argues that adopting traditional feminine roles which valorise a non-antagonistic attitude, ethics of care and outer looks may lead to depression. On June 24, 2016, associate professor of advertising and media studies, Rebecca Hains, explains for *The Washington Post* that the Disney Princess brand promotes beauty as the most valuable trait of a girl along with a submissive attitude and the 'Prince on a White

Horse' salvation. Hains is not convinced by the so-called new wave independent princesses as Elsa or Merida and calls on a study in *Child Development* lead by Sarah Coyne. Findings prove to be startling for girls' parents: (1) engagement with the princess culture nurtures stereotypically feminine behaviour; (2) involvement with the princess culture increased in time for girls with lower body image; (3) no sign of positive influence in terms of pro-social behaviour. Results confirm, however, a positive impact on boys interacting with the princess culture because it compensates for the roughness of boy culture. Also, the girls' perception of own body image suffered no alterations during the study, but the authors signalled that this offers no guarantee that bodily perception will not be influenced over time. The research also revealed that discussing the media with parents enhanced stereotypically feminine behaviour.

Journalistic and personal interest in the influence of princess culture upon young girls of both Peggy Orenstein and Rebecca Hains resulted in books on the subject. Peggy Orenstein published *"Cinderella Ate My Daughter: Dispatches from the Front Lines of the New Girlie-Girl Culture"* (2012) and Rebecca Hains, *"The Princess Problem: Guiding Our Girls through the Princess-Obsessed Years"*. Hence, Disney's launching of consumer products' lines constructed around the princess culture in 2001 soon reverberated in a wave of worried parents, journalistic inquiries and of course in scientific articles on the subject. For example, in her article *"Beauty and the Belles: Discourses of Feminism and Femininity in Disneyland"*, Craven (2002) argues that Disney's animated film and musical dilutes feminist ideology into clichés of popular romance. Moreover, advertisements focus on Beast and the rose whilst Belle is promoted as a subject of *'learning, moral instruction and sexual desire'* (Craven, 2002, 139). The author also identifies the strangeness of the Disney culture, which defines itself as a family entertainment corporation: the motherless narrative, the absence of pregnancies and babies, the recurrence of glass coffins and dead femininity. England, Descartes and Collier-Meek (2011) group the nine Disney Princess movies into early (1937 - 1959), middle (1989 - 1998) and recent productions (starting in 2009) for the sake of analysing what modifications displays of gender roles suffer over time. Johnson (2015) particularly discusses the three eras of Disney Princesses and their relationship with body image, gender roles and perception of love, all in a broader discourse of media influence in individuals' grasp on the world, on their own body, on their on gender roles and on the romantic ideal (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008; Herbozo, Tantleff-Dunn, Gokee-Larose & Thompson, 2004). In early Disney productions, singing and dancing beauties with silky hair and contoured

lips are the icing on the cake of femininity. The middle era of Disney animated film introduces a female body, which conserves the grace of the first era, but also demonstrates functionality. This instrumentality of the body refers on the one hand to the burlesque, sexualised power of femininity that is able to attract men, and on the other hand to a rather athletic side of the body which can be used in various situations: *'Ariel acts more as a lifeguard by saving Prince Eric's life. Jasmine can pole-vault over buildings in a single leap and Pocahontas displays athleticism by running cross country and jumping through waterfalls. Mulan fights alongside men during war and ends up saving the country of China'* (Johnson, 2015, p. 12 about Do Rozario 2004).

***'Then let them anatomize Regan; see what breeds about her heart'*<sup>2</sup>. Princess body parts, commoditized by the wicked witches**

In the first volume of his famous work *'Capital. A Critique of Political Economy'*, specifically in the section called *'Section 4: The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof'*, Karl Marx (1867; 2010, 46) simplifies a commodity's definition to its very core: 'a value in use'. Moreover, judging by its features, a commodity possesses the power of satisfying human desires. In the case of Disney's *Little Mermaid* (1989) and *Tangled* (2010), both the body features taken into account for the present discussion, that is Ariel's voice and Rapunzel's hair, respond to certain human longings. And what is more, a quick leap of memory might bring to mind that both beginnings of the animated movies seem to stress the manner in which Ariel's voice and Rapunzel's hair respond to social needs. In the little mermaid's case, Sebastian has arranged a whole celebration, somewhat of a debutante ball, a formal 'debut' meant to announce the coming out into society of King Triton's youngest daughter and the main female character of the plot, Ariel. One's coming out into society equates to showing off what it is to be considered one's 'greatest gift', in Ariel's case, her voice. To King Triton's pride and satisfaction, Ariel is placed at the very centre of this celebration in order to display her natural endowment in front of the whole kingdom of mermen. However, light-headed as any regular Disney princess, Ariel fails to show up at her own celebration, event which arouses the wrath of King Triton.

By the same token, the golden flower Rapunzel's mother, the queen, consumed when she was pregnant, also possesses the power of responding to people's wants and needs. Moreover, the

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<sup>2</sup> King Lear's line in William Shakespeare, *King Lear. Regele Lear*, trans. Mihnea Gheorghiu (Târgoviște: Editura Pandora), 150.



story itself reveals the properties the golden flower is endowed with, that is healing wounds and sicknesses. When Rapunzel's mother, the queen, fell ill, she was given a potion made of this flower to regain her good health. As she was pregnant at the time, Rapunzel, then just a baby in her mother's womb, inherited the plant's curative and nourishing characteristics. In addition, once Rapunzel grows into a young woman, both her and mother Gothel use her hair for much more mundane purposes such as cleaning around the house and doing the usual chores or taking mother Gothel up the tower. In this respect, Rapunzel's hair seems to be iron-strong as it can sustain the weight of another adult. Then, it is not inopportune to further infer that Rapunzel's hair can also be understood as a commodity in Marx's understanding of the term as it represents a 'value in use' and fulfils certain human necessities. And what is more, this is the very reason for which mother Gothel, the negative character of Disney's *Tangled*, decides to kidnap and imprison Rapunzel. It is the healing, therefore rejuvenating powers of her hair and her burning desire to remain young that fuel all her actions. Once mother Gothel discovers Rapunzel's hair holds the same properties as the golden flower, she first tries to cut a strand of it, but soon becomes aware that once the hair is removed from her owner, it no longer possesses its special characteristics.

On this account, there are significant differences between the two features I am presently discussing. Ariel's voice maintains its qualities even when it is taken from her rightful owner. Ursula takes the appearance of Vanessa, uses Ariel's voice to enchant the heart of Prince Eric and prevent him from falling in love with the little mermaid before the appointed time elapses. Therefore, one might infer that Ariel's voice is a commodity itself in the sense that even if it is detached from its possessor, it still represents 'a value in use' and it serves the purposes and desires of the sea witch, Ursula. At the same time, its value derives from its effect on Prince Eric. In this respect, I believe it is theoretically sound to state that Ariel's voice behaves exactly as an object, which demonstrates its usefulness and value to the individual who is employing it.

As I have previously stated, this is not the case of Rapunzel's hair as it does not display its healing and juvenescent properties unless it is attached to the princess's head. In consequence, Rapunzel can be considered the very source of this spectacular power which is able to alter the physical state of individuals. Following this logic, her hair only fulfils an instrumental purpose as it is the medium through which the curative forces manifest, precisely like water is a conductor for electricity, however it is far from being its generator. Consequently, mother Gothel finds herself necessitated to seize Rapunzel altogether for fulfilling her wish of remaining physically young

despite her old age. From this point on, Rapunzel is confined without her knowing and willingness to giving up all the joys of a regular life and commit to a remote existence, all this for satisfying the longing for eternal youth and beauty of an old woman: '*Gothel had found her new magic flower, but this time she was determined to keep it hidden*'. Rapunzel is brought up in a tower, positioned in the depth of the forest, and is told repeatedly that under no circumstance should she leave for the outside world is a truly dangerous place due to the malevolent nature of mankind. On these lines, I find it appropriate to conclude that this Disney princess is herself metamorphosed into a commodity, existing solely for serving the old woman's unsettling craving for imperishable beauty and youth with her rejuvenating abilities. What is even more disquieting in how Disney media trust portrayals a gendered identity born at the intersection of femininity and childhood, later on girlhood, is that not only is Rapunzel exploited for her healing force, but the victim role is constructed as such that she is also unaware not only of the nature of her imprisonment, but also of her very powers.

On closer inspection, Ariel's voice is only a means for Ursula to enchant Prince Eric so that he does not fall in love with the little mermaid until the sands run out, therefore granting her full control over Ariel's soul. To that end, the implications in Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (1989) go even much further because Ariel herself, as a being, becomes the object of trade. On the background of her father's attachment to her, Ariel represents Ursula's advantage and her one-way ticket to political power, that is ruling over the seas, on the throne of King Triton. At this point of the discussion, I come to Pateman's argument (Van Niekerk, Anton and Liezl van Zyl, 1995, 347) concerning reproductive labour as '*integral part of a woman's identity*'. On the same lines, Ariel's voice and Rapunzel's hair are vital to their identity, moreover, they represent their very strength. The voice is to Ariel and the hair is to Rapunzel their inner power manifested by means of a bodily part as is a tendon to Achilles and hair to Samson. Hence, Ursula's act not only of dispossessing Ariel of her voice, but, what is more, using it to charm her beloved may qualify as one of the most intimate of abuses. On the other hand, mother Gothel's egoistic actions do not seem to strip Rapunzel of any of her powers, except, of course, the possibility of growing up with her real family and tasting the joys of a life in freedom. But this is only because her hair does not carry its rejuvenating powers if it is cut off from its owner.

I now return to what Nancy Scheper-Hughes (2002, 62) affirms about contemporary markets, mainly that they translate anything and everything into monetary value, therefore, open

to financial operations such as buying, selling, trading and stealing. Nothing is left untouched. Not even Disney princesses. Rapunzel is stolen and reduced to only one instrumentality, except of course the daily chores, and that is satisfying the insatiable lust for beauty and youth of an old woman. On the other hand, Ariel is beguiled to trade her distinctive characteristic, that one core of individuality, which is then used by Ursula to go against her and bring the little mermaid to her heel for the sake of power over the mermen's kingdom. On these lines, Ursula's final discourse proves itself revealing: '*[Ursula]: (Now very large.) You pitiful, insignificant, fool! (...) Ursula: Now I am the ruler of all the ocean! The waves obey my every whim! The sea and all its spoils bow to my power! (She wreaks havoc, creates a whirlpool and raises some shipwrecks)*'. In this regard, van Niekerk, Anton and Liezl van Zyl fall back upon Martin Buber's social existentialist philosophy regarding the relationship established between a person and a thing and the one among people. Consequently, a material object is a means, it fulfils an instrumental function whilst another being is meant to be a purpose per se and not something that is used to reach some other end. Another argument for the commodification of the two young princesses, Ariel and Rapunzel, consists of the fact that they are both treated as instrumental for other ends, those of gaining political power or of maintaining eternal beauty and youth.

While Ariel's voice is Nature's making, Rapunzel's gift is of heavenly origin: '*And it starts with the sun. Now, once upon a time, a single drop of sunlight dropped from the Heavens, and from this small drop of Sun, grew a magic golden flower*'<sup>3</sup>. At a first glance, none of the bodily features analysed in the present article correspond to Marx's understanding of the concept of '*commodity*' in terms of genesis. Nor Ariel's voice, nor Rapunzel's hair represent the result of human labour. One is Nature's doing while the other is an echo of the wonder-working. Nonetheless, Marx himself mentions that it is the work of men to process the raw material to customize it according to their needs and desires. Ariel's singing voice may be Nature's inheritance, but she refines it each time she sings. Moreover, Ursula, the wicked sea witch, puts her magic skills at work to appropriate it. It is not to be forgotten that Ariel signs a sort of contract which is meant to seal the bargain. On these lines, Ariel receives in exchange a brand-new pair of human legs, admittedly for a limited period of time: three days. As the wicked accustom, each bargain comes with a condition: Ariel is allowed to keep her now human shape only if the prince falls in love with her until the sunset of the third day. More by token, the matter of Ariel's legs is one of

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<sup>3</sup> *Tangled*. Directed by Nathan Greno, Byron Howard. Walt Disney Animation Studios & Walt Disney Pictures, 2010

great interest for the present article, that is for exploring the applications of Marx's concept of 'commodity' in Walt Disney's animated films.

As she was born mermaid, one can talk about Ariel's legs as an acquired bodily feature, which makes them particularly interesting for the subject of matter. Past all doubt, they have value in the human world as in their absence there is no walking, no running, no dancing and movement is certainly saddled. From Ariel's point of view, they are even more valuable as they are lacking. Ariel's song 'Part of Your World' eloquently advances this point of view: *'I wanna be where the people are,/I wanna see, I wanna see them dancing,/ Walking around on those - what do you call 'em? Oh - feet!' ; 'Flippin' your fins, you don't get too far / Legs are required for jumping, dancing / Strolling along down a - what's that word again? / Street'*<sup>4</sup>. For her, a pair of legs is what it takes to enter the fascinating realm of humans. Moreover, it is precisely what she needs not only to be part of the human world she desperately desires, but also to attain the love of her beloved Prince Eric. Legs are a natural part of the human body, but as Ariel is born a mermaid, Ursula's magic is needed in order to turn Ariel's fishtail into a pair of human legs. Therefore, one could conclude that a work of transformation is needed in order to create Ariel's legs. It is indeed not human labour, but witchcraft. Nevertheless, it is still something that comes as natural and is transformed through the use of particular skills into something else that serves the desires of an individual, in this case, Ariel.

The healing and rejuvenating forces, which dwell at first in the golden flower, grown out of a drop of sunlight, and then in Rapunzel's hair, also must undergo a process in order to respond to the necessities of mankind. For example, in the scene where the ill queen consumes the golden flower, she is presented with a bowl from which she drinks. It is then clear to the viewers that the plant has underwent a process of metamorphosis intended to make it possible to be ingested by the human body. On the same lines, mother Gothel sings to the golden flower and later on to the princess's hair to awake its curative forces: *'Flower, gleam and glow/ Let your power shine/ Make the clock reverse/ Bring back what once was mine/ Heal what has been hurt/ Change the fates' design/ Save what has been lost/ Bring back what once was mine'*. There can be intervention in the making of time and in fate's design, however, an enchantment is necessary to blur the lines between the two realms, the humanly one and the heavenly. Moreover, no matter the restrictive conditions

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<sup>4</sup> *The Little Mermaid*. Directed by Ron Clements and John Musker. Walt Disney Pictures, Silver Screen Partners IV, Walt Disney Feature Animation, 1989

in which Rapunzel develops, mother Gothel puts time and effort in bringing up the princess and fulfilling the role as a mother. On these lines, Gothel combs the girl's hair and sleeps in the same tower with her. Even if the negative character does so in order to gain access to the rejuvenating properties of Rapunzel's hair, it still is labour. Therefore, it is by the force of human labour, as Marx would put it, that this healing force is put into use in the interest of humanity. This interest can be one of devotion as in the case of the pregnant queen or one of self-aggrandizement such as that of mother Gothel.

Whether it is financial privilege as it is nowadays, the romantic ideal or altering the state of what appears as definitive such as the shape one was born into in the case of Ariel, the one issue which makes all experiences involving trading one's body or one's bodily parts for something else relevant is ethics. And the one trait that makes such a trade honourable or shady from a deontological point of view is whether it represents a matter of exploitation or choice. It may seem ridiculous to inquire whether, in Disney's narrative, Ariel is truly giving her permission for the exchange to be carried out as she even signs a contract to do so. However, Ursula stirs a finger or, better said, a tentacle or two in the process of decision-making. Hence, when Ariel thinks about the fact that becoming a human means not getting to spend any more time with King Triton and her sisters, the sea-witch mentions the perks of deciding to be human, that is being together with her beloved, Prince Eric. As any negative figure in history, Ursula also weighs in and uses Ariel's voice to impersonate a woman called Vanessa and enchant Prince Eric so that he doesn't fall in love with Ariel in the three days she has available until she turns back into a mermaid and belongs to Ursula. Therefore, Ariel gives her consent for the exchange to be done, but the conditions upon which she had agreed are modified along the game, making her part of the bargain more difficult to fulfil. Ariel, however, is at least faced with a decision, even if she is influenced by her emotional state and by Ursula's deceitful willingness. Rapunzel, on the other hand, is totally oblivious regarding her family origin, the nature of her relationship with mother Gothel, the true reason of her imprisonment and the powers she possesses. If one is willing to go further, she might not be even aware of that the properties her hair demonstrates are not common to people in general as her interactions with humanity are limited to her step mother and a chameleon.

According to Prokopijevic's logic (1990 apud. Niekerk and Liezl van Zyl, 1995), in both prostitution and surrogacy as in most transactions the contemporary society is based on, the use of the body is performed in lack of any emotional foundation. Supposedly, there is no affective

attachment involved in the physical service which is performed, and the only remaining purpose is the financial reward. As it had already been stated earlier in the text of the present article, in Ariel's case, for instance, there is no financial reward in terms of receiving money or other financial benefits, but there is a material reward: her long-desired legs. However, the emotional roots of her whole endeavour are far from being refutable as her love for Prince Eric and her passion for the world of humans are precisely the motivations fuelling her request to the sea witch. On the same lines of Anderson's argumentation that the immorality of surrogacy results from the fact that it represents a commodification of women's reproductive labour (Anderson 1990 apud. Niekerk and Liezl van Zyl, 1995, 346), one could infer that Ursula commodifies Ariel's emotional labour, that which is necessary to perform a gesture of sacrifice. In the case of Rapunzel, I can only suppose that she has somehow grown fond of the one woman who brought her up, especially as she proves to be completely opaque to her selfish intentions. But as she is not aware that her hair is the one maintaining the good looks and eternal youth of mother Gothel, I cannot take into consideration that her actions could be fuelled by an emotional attachment. Then again, both the negative characters are fully conscious of their end of the bargain, that is of the material and symbolical benefits of making use of the princesses' bodily parts.

In *The Little Mermaid* (1989), the overtones of bodily commodification are carried forward into a sexualised register. Once Ariel agrees to give up her voice, she remains with no other means of communication left except her very body. In other words, by giving up her power, the Disney princess is reduced to her body and is impelled to use it in order to make Prince Eric fall in love with her. Ursula clearly argues that men don't enjoy women who express themselves and highlight the importance of using body language and physical appearance to obtain men's attention, therefore suggesting Ariel to take up a sexualised conduct: "*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/ They think a girl who gossips is a bore!/ Yes on land it's much preferred for ladies not to say a word/ And after all dear, what is idle prattle for?/ Come on, they're not all that impressed with conversation/ True gentlemen avoid it when they can/ But they dote and swoon and fawn/ On a lady who's withdrawn/ It's she who holds her tongue who gets a man*"<sup>5</sup>. Hence, refraining one's self is advanced as one of the strongest traits of a woman. The gender role Ariel is educated into

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<sup>5</sup> *The Little Mermaid*. Directed by Ron Clements and John Musker. Walt Disney Pictures, Silver Screen Partners IV, Walt Disney Feature Animation, 1989.

assimilating is consistent with the coordinates of traditional femininity - holding back thoughts and emotions along with guiding one's conduct after what is preferable to men. A woman's best traits are good looks and a sealed mouth. The only addition to the traditional model of femininity refers to using sexualised body language as means of expression for alluring men.

### **Cutting Through Princess. An Open Ending**

The present study is developed within the theoretical framework and rising concerns regarding commodification in terms of definition (Marx, [1867]; 2010) or phenomena such as organ transplant (Nancy Scheper-Hughes, 2002), commercial surrogacy (van Niekerk, Anton and Liezl van Zyl, 1995) and journalistic as well as academic unease related to the Disney princess culture and its effect on young girls (Craven, 2002; England, Descartes and Collier-Meek, 2011; Johnson, 2015; Do Rozario 2004). It is an ideological reading of women's bodies as a site of power and control, and also of opposition and resistance, which can be included on the communist/postcommunist perspectives on gender. The qualitative analysis performed on film narratives and musical lyrics of the animated Disney movies *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and *Tangled* (2010) backs up the idea that the two Disney princesses, Ariel and Rapunzel, represent cases of commodification of the body or of bodily features. The cinematographic narratives disclose the fact that both Ariel and Rapunzel (1) represent 'a value in use' (Marx, [1867]; 2010, 46) for one of their parents and/or for the negative female characters. Ariel's voice is a reason for which King Triton wishes to display her in front of the whole population of mermen. Further on, Ursula turns her into currency for obtaining political power over Triton's kingdom. Due to the fact that once separated from its rightful owner her hair loses all of its power, Rapunzel herself becomes a value in use for mother Gothel. Secondly, the qualitative analysis reveals both bodily features, Ariel's voice and Rapunzel's hair, are endowed with the power of satisfying certain individual or social desires, which makes them valuable to those making use of their special trait. It is the case of the two negative characters, Ursula and Mother Gothel, who, to be noted, both stand for women in their mature or old age, hence, for mature femininity. The two bodily features discussed in this article have their origins in nature or in Divine intervention, as in the case of Rapunzel, however, in order to be used, their state must be altered by means of human labour (Marx, [1867]; 2010, 46). In consequence, Ariel must rehearse to refine her singing, Ursula performs her magic to extract Ariel's voice and contain it into a seashell. On the other hand, mother Gothel sings to Rapunzel or

asks her to sing so that the rejuvenating powers of her hair are no longer latent, but manifest. Both the princesses become the object of stealing or trading along the action of the animated movies, therefore, they bear economic value even though it is not translated into money, but into privilege, in one case, political, in the other, individual. More by token, Ariel and Rapunzel are not once treated by the Disney feminine villains as beings, that is, in Buber's terms (apud. Van Niekerk, Anton and Liezl van Zyl, 1995, 347) as purposes in themselves. Instead, their value is purely instrumental, and all must be done for the situation to remain that way. In addition, there is no emotional involvement in the acts of stealing or trading the Disney princesses, nor in making use of their special traits.

Taking all this into account, the analysis of two Disney animated productions, *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and *Tangled* (2010), reveals gullibility as being the core personality trait of femininity and particularly of the social identity of a young girl with royal origins. In this respect, Ariel fails to see through Ursula's "Oscar" discourse, which also contains several hints regarding the malevolence of the negative character: *'I admit that in the past I've been a nasty/ They weren't kidding when they called me, well, a witch' ; 'And I fortunately know a little magic/ It's a talent that I always have possessed/ And dear lady, please don't laugh/ I use it on behalf/ Of the miserable, the lonely, and depressed'*<sup>6</sup>. Irony is also obvious in mother Gothel's so-called teasing: *'[looking in the mirror with Rapunzel] Mother Gothel: Look in that mirror. I see a strong, confident, beautiful young lady. [Rapunzel smiles] Mother Gothel: Oh look, you're here too'*. Such remarks might be easily interpreted as a sign of infatuation and, going even further, mockery towards the princess. However, Rapunzel does not seem to notice them because she is completely swallowed up by her own goal and desire to obtain permission to leave the tower and visit the outside world. Ariel follows the same goal-oriented logic which makes her oblivious of whatever is truly happening around her at the time.

I then arrive to another conclusion regarding how Disney illustrates young femininity, that is, unable to detach itself from its personal view of reality and accurately estimate the true motives of others. As plain as it can be put, the intra-gender interactional dynamics in Disney animation movies suggests on the one hand that mature, even elderly women have no other purpose to life

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<sup>6</sup> *The Little Mermaid*. Directed by Ron Clements and John Musker. Walt Disney Pictures, Silver Screen Partners IV, Walt Disney Feature Animation, 1989.



than attaining the looks they once had (Mother Gothel) or political power from ruling men (Ursula) and on the other hand that they can only obtain it by means of manipulating innocent young royal daughters. Furthermore, for young girls watching Disney animation movies, this might give salience to an intergenerational conflict between young and mature or elderly women. In terms of intersectional identity, young femininity is assimilated to gullibility. Concurrently, time brings devilry to the table when it comes to mature or elderly women. Moreover, this false-heartedness is intent upon young girls and stops at no costs whatsoever in fulfilling one's egoistic goals of beauty and power. Inspired by Bell (1995), Do Rozario (2004) interprets Ursula's character as the first in a long series of Disney *femmes fatales*, who overturn the patriarchal establishment of society and leave its figures of authority helpless bystanders of the one-woman show: "*Despite their exalted status, they cannot protect their daughters. Aurora's father, King Stefan, even hands his daughter to three little fairies for protection and King Triton, despite his superior physique and magical trident, is helpless to break the deal Ariel made with Ursula and can only offer himself as forfeit, leaving his daughter completely unprotected. Kings are powerless, almost irrelevant, when faced with the femme fatale*" (Do Rozario, 2004, p. 43).

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