

SYMPOSIUM

Enchanted Bodies: The Disney Beauty Standard Through the Ages

November 22, 2024

3:15–7:15 p.m.

Online via Zoom*



*pre-registration required
(link on last page)



Lisa **Buchegger**
(University of Graz, Austria)

Jens **Kjeldgaard-Christiansen**
(Aarhus University, Denmark)

Amy M. **Davis**
(University of Hull, UK)

Lilija **Makala**
(University of Graz, Austria)

In celebration of The Walt Disney Studio's 101st anniversary—since its founding on October 16, 1923—this symposium, “Enchanted Bodies: The Disney Beauty Standard Through the Ages,” is part of the seminar “The Beauty Myth: Corporeality and Cultural Ideals in Disney Films.” This event invites scholars and students to examine how Disney animations have shaped and reflected evolving beauty standards over the decades through the lenses of perception, episteme, aesthetics, and politics.

The discussion will track how beauty is portrayed in Disney films, from classic princesses like Snow White and Cinderella, whose delicate, symmetrical features established early aesthetic norms, to contemporary characters such as Moana, Mirabel, or Asha, who present a wider array of beauty ideals. Panelists will explore how these evolving depictions both reflect and influence cultural values around race, body type, and gender, addressing how perception of physical appearance often aligns with moral judgments in these narratives. A significant focus will be on the dichotomy between heroes and villains, whose contrasting physical traits reinforce traditional beauty and moral standards, while revealing the political undertones of representation.

By analyzing changes in animation style, character design, and storytelling, the symposium will highlight Disney's role in upholding and challenging societal norms. Topics will include the impact of Disney's beauty standards on children's self-esteem, the intersection of race and beauty in character design, and how recent films are shifting the episteme of beauty. The symposium aims to deepen our understanding of how animated media shapes cultural perceptions of beauty, morality, and identity.

Symposium Agenda:

3:15–3:30 p.m. CET

WELCOME ADDRESS

**Stefan Brandt
Lisa Buchegger**

3:30–4:15 p.m. CET

SESSION ONE

**Lisa Buchegger (University of Graz, Austria),
“Evil at First Sight? The Physical Evolution of Disney Villains”**

Chair and Moderation: Saptarshi Mallick

Abstract: This presentation will focus on Disney's iconic villains – characters who largely stray away from traditional beauty ideals as Disney films long employed a correlation between appearance and personality (good is beautiful, evil is ugly). It will show that these mischief-makers are ‘othered’ by depicting them as ugly, repulsive, over-the-top, and grotesque, signaling viewers at first glance who they are not supposed to side with. I will discuss that this ‘Othering’ of the villains can be achieved through using angular shapes and dark colors to make the antagonists unappealing, examine the depiction of female villains as power-hungry *femmes fatales*, and demonstrate the process of racializing or queering antagonists. Finally, I will also discuss the ‘villain in disguise,’ who can be found in several postmodern Disney productions and is no longer recognizable at first sight; deconstructing Disney's own established stereotypes and signaling audiences that (im)morality is not something that is naturally linked to appearance.

Bio sketch: Lisa Buchegger is currently a PhD student (English and American Studies) at the University of Graz, working as a pre-doc assistant at the Department of American Studies. Her main research interests are (American) film studies, children's entertainment (e.g., animation, fairy tales), as well as gender and minority studies. Her bachelor's thesis had the title “‘It's Good to be Bad’ – The Performance of Villainy in Disney's *Frozen* and *Zootopia*,” and her master's thesis, entitled “‘The Fairest One of All’: Appearance and Body Images in Disney's Feature Films,” tackled beauty ideals through the lens of Disney productions and came out, in a revised and enhanced version, in the form of a book in 2023. For her PhD project, she is working on the construction of villains in American film and television.

4:15–4:30 p.m. CET

SHORT BREAK

4:30–5:15 p.m. CET

SESSION TWO

**Jens Kjeldgaard-Christiansen (Aarhus University, Denmark),
“Linguistic Representation in Disney: Heroes, Villains, and Accents”**

Chair and Moderation: Jonatan Horvat

Abstract: Rosina Lippi-Green’s (1997, 2012) classic quantitative study of linguistic representation in animated Disney films of the 20th century found these films to be discriminatory. Her main and most publicized finding was that characters who spoke varieties of American English tended to be morally good, while characters with a foreign accent were often evil and untrustworthy. We investigate the degree to which her results also describe 273 characters from Disney’s successful “Revival Era,” starting with *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) and ending with *Encanto* (2021). We find, among other significant developments, that the foreign-accented characters in these more recent films are distinctively good. Also examined are other relationships between characters’ language, moral standing, gender, and age. Notably, female and younger characters tend to speak Standard American English, and they tend to be more moral than male and older characters. The presentation ends by discussing some possible causes of the main developments.

Bio sketch: Jens Kjeldgaard-Christiansen is a teaching associate professor in the Department of English at Aarhus University, Denmark. His research examines the heroes and villains of American popular culture from an interdisciplinary perspective. His work appears in journals such as *The Journal of Popular Culture*, *Poetics Today*, and *Games and Culture*. For more information about Jens Kjeldgaard-Christiansen’s research interests and publications, visit his university profile: <https://pure.au.dk/portal/en/persons/jkc%40cc.au.dk>.

5:15–5:30 p.m. CET

SHORT BREAK

5:30–6:15 p.m. CET

SESSION THREE

**Amy M. Davis (University of Hull, UK),
“Minnie as a Style Icon: How Beauty is understood in Disney’s Non-Human Characters”**

Chair and Moderation: Daniela Sattler

Abstract: Minnie Mouse is often described these days as a “style icon” in both her various shows and in the advertisement surrounding them and their related merchandise. Associated by so many with large polka dots and bows, Minnie’s femininity is often emphasized in classical, traditional, and highly stylized ways. In examining what makes Minnie a beautiful, stylish character, greater insight can be gained into how Disney’s depictions of Femininity have evolved over the decades, to include why it’s so important that Minnie has become (arguably) Disney’s most stylish/fashionable character. Examples of her various appearances in Golden Era Disney shorts (both with Mickey and in her own series), as well as more recent appearances in features and series including *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse* (2006–2013), *Minnie’s Bow-Toons* (2011–2013), *Mickey and Minnie Wish Upon a Christmas* (2021), *Minnie’s Bow-Toons: Party Palace Pals* (2021–22), *Mickey Mouse Fun House* (2021–2023), and *Minnie’s Bow-Toons: Camp Minnie* (2023).

Bio sketch: Dr. Amy M. Davis is a lecturer in Film Studies at the University of Hull, where she teaches (amongst other things) American Animation History and Disney Studies. Her publications include *Good Girls & Wicked Witches* (2007), *Handsome Heroes & Vile Villains* (2013), and *Discussing Disney* (2020), and her papers include “The Dark Prince and Dream Women: Walt Disney and Mid-Twentieth Century American Feminism” (*Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television*, 2005), “Making it Disney’s Snow White” (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs: New Perspectives on Production, Reception, Legacy*, 2021), and “On ‘Love Experts’, Evil Princes, Gullible Princesses, and Frozen” (*The Oxford Handbook of Children’s Film*, 2022). She is currently writing up two academic papers for publication next year, and her most recent published article, a journalistic piece called “Disney at 100”, was published in the July 2023 edition of the *Children’s Media Yearbook*.

6:15–6:30 p.m. CET

SHORT BREAK

6:30–7:15 p.m. CET

SESSION FOUR

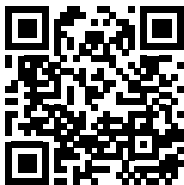
**Lilii Makala (University of Graz, Austria),
“The Dark Heart of Disney: Gothic Features with an Unusual Twist in Maleficent (2014)”**

Chair and Moderation: Lisa Buchegger

Abstract: When thinking of Disney, common associations include fairytale worlds, colorful fireworks, and cheerful characters. However, tragic backstories, eerie locations, and monstrous figures are also deeply ingrained in the Disney universe. Even the magical castle in the Disney logo, which appears each time we start a Disney film, has a bloodcurdling backstory filled with madness, death, and mystery. In other words, countless dark elements lie beneath Disney’s bright surface. In my presentation, I will focus on the gothic features of *Maleficent* (2014, dir. by Robert Stromberg). Starring Angelina Jolie in the title role, this fantasy film reimagines the classic fairytale of *Sleeping Beauty* from the perspective of *Maleficent*, one of Disney’s most iconic villains. From eerie moors to monstrous figures, *Maleficent* can be seen as iconically gothic. However, the film also intertwines gothic elements with an unusual twist, which I will explore in detail.

Bio sketch: Lilii Makala, Ph.D., M.A., was born in Ukraine. From 2017 to 2024, she studied English and American literature and culture at the University of Graz, Austria. In 2019, she earned a master’s degree (M.A.) with a thesis on subtle horror in the works of Stephen King. In 2024, she completed her doctoral degree (Ph.D.) with a dissertation on the gothic representation of war in American fiction. Lilii has also taught several courses at the University of Graz, including “Introduction to Literary Studies,” a literary studies seminar (“The King of Horror or the Servant of Profit: Stephen King’s Role in the American Literary Canon”), and a cultural studies seminar (“In War We Trust? The Representation of War in American Film and Literature”). Her main areas of interest include horror and gothic themes, both in fiction and film.

REGISTRATION



ORGANIZATION

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with a Focus on (Trans)Nationality and Space,
Department of American Studies, University of Graz

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Perception: Episteme, Aesthetics, Politics

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und (historische, ästhetische, moralische und politische) Bildung, Universität Graz © 2024

Bild: Stefan Brandt | Grafik/Design: Sandra Posch, Universität Graz



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