Disney Princess Panopticism: The Creation of Girlhood Femininity

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Abstract
This paper explores the role of Disney princesses in creating femininity in girl children. It examines the three oldest, longest enduring Disney princess movies from the pre-Renaissance era: Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937), Cinderella (1950), and Sleeping Beauty (1959). It applies Michel Foucault’s theory of Panopticism and Sandra Lee Bartky’s theory of feminine discipline to how girls learn what is acceptable and what is unacceptable in terms of feminine appearance and behavior. Based on these theories, I argue that femininity is not a natural, inherent condition of girls, but rather a social construction enforced by Disney culture. I also connect this social construction to Bartky’s understanding of femininity as a perpetuation of female subjugation under patriarchy and hold that Disney princesses not only serve to teach girls about femininity, but also reinforce girls as lesser subjects in society.

Keywords: panopticism, feminine discipline, disney princesses, femininity, girlhood

Introduction
Michel Foucault and Sandra Lee Bartky represent postmodern theorists during the late twentieth century. In his work, “Panopticism,” Foucault explores the concepts of power and discipline, examining how they interact in a modern society. He believes that power and discipline are universal; however, he does not differentiate their effect on men and women. Bartky begins her analysis of Panopticism from this point, expanding upon Foucault’s theory as she focuses specifically on the operation of discipline on adult femininity in her piece, “Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power.” Whereas Foucault focuses on an undifferentiated, though implied, male version of how self-discipline works, Bartky discusses how women self-discipline, particularly in regard to how women discipline themselves into enacting a specific version of femininity. This paper explores shared concepts between Foucault and Bartky, including fear of the Other and femininity as a social construct and connects these ideas to the Disney princesses, arguing that they create femininity in girls. In this argument, I utilize three princess movies—Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937), Cinderella (1950), and Sleeping Beauty (1959)—from the pre-Renaissance era of Disney, spanning from 1937 to 1959, as they are the oldest Disney princess movies and remain popular today.
Power and Discipline in Fear of the Other: Foucault’s Plague

Both Foucault and Bartky begin with the foundation of fear of the Other in their analyses of power and discipline. Whereas Foucault explicitly discusses the Other via his concept of the plague, Bartky centers on conformity, thereby indirectly addressing the Other. The Other plays directly into the creation of a norm, such as femininity as I will later discuss, which is why it is necessary to understand Othering to understand the status quo.

Foucault (2008) presents a modern society in which a plague breaks loose, causing panic amongst the citizens (p. 1-2). While the plague is lethal, in this modern society it is not scary because of its capacity to kill but rather because it represents regular people becoming the undesirable Other. People who formerly held power and agency lose it once infected, as they become different from the mainstream. The only people in society with power are people who conform to social standards and blend in with everyone else. Therefore, a characteristic of power in Foucault’s modern society is invisibility. Standing out is dangerous as it marks somebody as different, which equates them as Other. In order to prevent catching the plague—becoming Other—people in modern society give up their collective power to one overarching system, as “there was also a political dream of the plague...not laws transgressed, but the penetration of regulation into even the smallest details of everyday life through the mediation of the complete hierarchy that assured the capillary functioning of power” (Foucault, 2008, p. 3). In other words, citizens exchange their individual freedom for safety. People allow this power system into their homes, letting it watch their every move, to escape the plague. In this way, society not only actively avoids the Other, but cowers from its difference as well. When people feel safer while a government watches them than when they have rights and privacy, they live in a culture of fear, precisely, fear of difference.

Bartky’s Normative Femininity: Acceptable Feminine Bodies

While Foucault uses the plague as his means of describing the Other, Bartky (2013) uses the requirements society places upon women’s bodies as her means of describing normative femininity. As previously mentioned, Bartky addresses society’s expectations of women, as opposed to directly mentioning the Other. However, the mere presence of a “norm” implies the existence of an “Other.” It is possible, then, to extrapolate from Bartky’s three tenets of ideal femininity which elements of femininity are unacceptable. Her first aspect of feminine discipline is the shape and size of women’s bodies. She holds that the desired figure of a woman is “taut, small-breasted, narrow-hipped, and of a slimness bordering on emaciation” (Bartky, 2013, p. 449). The vast majority of women do not naturally have such figures, which forces them to diet if they wish to gain approval from society (Bartky, 2013, p. 449). However, dieting turns women’s bodies into battlegrounds, causing women to see themselves as separate entities from their bodies, which become their enemies. Everyone needs to eat in order to survive, yet dieting demands eating less, or
eliminating certain foods. Normal body functioning goes against dieting, leaving women loathing their bodies (Bartky, 2013, p. 449). In addition to dieting, women exercise in certain ways to sculpt an acceptable figure. While there is a gray area between physical fitness and conforming to beauty standards, women engage in exercises that reshape their bodies, such as workouts that lessen areas of fat, as opposed to exercise that builds strength or stamina (Bartky, 2013, p. 450). The end goal in a woman’s diet or exercise regime is to appear smaller: Society applauds tiny women, those who do not take up space.

**Restricted Body Language**

Bartky (2013) builds upon this idea in her analysis of women’s body language and disposition, the second stage of feminine discipline. She describes a woman’s field of movement as “not a field in which her bodily intentionality can be freely realized but an enclosure in which she feels herself positioned and by which she is confined” (2013, p. 450). This enclosure produces tense posture and body language, such as keeping the limbs close to the body at all times, hand-holding, and keeping the feet together or pointed inwards, resulting in women shrinking themselves (p. 450). In this shrinking is an implied apology to men for female existence, signaling female inferiority to male dominance. Female subordination also manifests in women’s expected lack of eye contact, as “the female gaze is trained to abandon its claim to the sovereign status of seer” (2013, p. 451) with eyes always focused on the ground. Society rejects boldness in women, instead preferring modesty. However, women must not only be demure, but pleasant as well. The ideal woman learns to smile often, demonstrating a welcoming, kind, respectful demeanor (p. 451). Femininity, then, requires women to behave in contradictory ways. While women need to present a reserved appearance, men must also have the option of accessing them at any given time.

**Feminine Personal Appearance**

Bartky’s last element of feminine discipline is makeup application and personal upkeep. She starts by looking at the overall female body, saying, “A woman’s skin must be soft, supple, hairless, and smooth; ideally, it should betray no sign of wear, experience, age, or deep thought” (Bartky, 2013, p. 452). In order to achieve these nearly impossible standards, women resort to many different skin care and hair removal products, learning how to handle these devices while grievously paying attention to personal appearance several times per day (p. 452). Media frames makeup as “an aesthetic activity in which a woman can express her individuality. In reality...making-up the face is, in fact, a highly stylized activity that gives little rein to self-expression” (2013, p. 453). Contrary to media’s presentation of makeup as a creative outlet, society accepts only a certain type of makeup application, limiting the level of self-expression women utilize (p. 453). Furthermore, society expects women to wear makeup on a daily basis, censuring those who do not. In this way, a specific palette of makeup, usually ‘natural’ colors meant only to enhance existing features, equals femininity. If makeup, something that women add to their appearances,
defines femininity, then femininity is not an inherent quality, but instead something women put on and later remove, much like a costume.

**Foucault’s Plague as Non-Normative Femininity**

Disney princesses put the plague and feminine discipline into conversation, giving real world context for the Other in girlhood. I hold that parents give up both their and their daughters’ agency to Disney in Foucault’s modern society. Parents, in fear that their daughters may grow into abnormal women, presenting other versions of femininity than the socially approved one, embrace Disney princess movies, making their daughters watch them. The plague in this scenario is non-normative femininity, which I define as any behavior that Snow White, Aurora, and Cinderella would not act out. This includes behaviors that categorize girls as “tomboys,” such as preferring pants to dresses, or toy trucks to dollhouses. The power transfer from parents to Disney reflects parental desire for their daughters’ invisibility in society: If their daughters blend in, drawing no attention to themselves by poor or aberrant behavior, the girls escape the plague. As the vast majority of parents hand over their control to Disney, showing princess movies to girls is a mark of mainstream society, and, therefore, also a mark of invisibility. Due to the collective release of parental control to Disney princesses, the reigning femininity—the socially acceptable femininity—is Disney princess femininity. When parents allow Disney princesses to invade their homes, the likelihood of girls enacting non-Disney princess femininity diminishes. As the likelihood diminishes, so, too, diminishes the possibility of a society including varied femininities, keeping princess femininity dominant.

**Disney Princesses’ Feminine Discipline**

Once parents give up their teaching control to Disney, Bartky’s feminine discipline emerges, as girls not only accept Disney princesses as standard, but also learn what society expects from girls in terms of beauty. Snow White, Aurora, and Cinderella physically embody what society believes constitutes feminine beauty. All three princesses are slim, though they have round busts and slightly curvy hips. They do not have muscle or excess fat anywhere on their bodies. Girls see that the princess body is the desired body shape, and although many have slim figures as children, once they hit adolescence and their bodies change, many diet and exercise to achieve the ideal princess body. In her article, “How the Media Keeps Us Hung Up on Body Image,” Shari Graydon argues that, “the more time we spend immersed in...media, the more likely we are to obsess about our appearance or develop disordered eating behaviour” (2008, p. 19). While girls perhaps move on from regularly watching Disney princess movies as they enter adolescence, the lasting effects of girls’ consumption of the movies in their childhood are profound. Furthermore, a study from the Canadian Medical Association Journal finds that “close to one in three pre-adolescent girls is trying to lose weight and one in ten shows symptoms of an eating disorder” (Graydon, 2008, p. 19). In addition to the physical mass of their bodies, all of the princesses exhibit similar body language, standing straight up and typically keeping their limbs close to their bodies, minus the occasional formal dance scene with their princes, in which the princes guide their movements. While girls learn
posture from these princesses, they also learn to limit their movement, thus appearing smaller.

In terms of demeanor, all three princesses are first and foremost pleasing. They always smile and act kindly towards others, even the villains. For example, Cinderella respects her evil Stepmother, regardless of how poorly the Stepmother treats her. Snow White embraces Grumpy’s rude nature and finds it charming, and though Aurora only speaks in two scenes, in those scenes she respects her guardians, the fairies, and treats every animal well. From these relationships, girls understand that society expects tolerance of poor treatment as well as kindness in all girls.

Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora also have beautiful faces with exaggerated features that further exemplify Bartky’s feminine discipline, as the princesses set unrealistic physical standards for girls. I define “beautiful” in regards to the princesses in the following way: heart-shaped faces with clear porcelain skin, red lips, nearly non-existent noses, large dewy eyes with massive, disproportionate eyelashes, and cheeks that blush permanently. The first thing girls hear about Snow White is the Mirror’s description of her: “Lips red as the rose. Hair black as ebony. Skin white as snow” (Cottrell, 1937). A choir portrays Aurora in a similar light, singing, “One gift, beauty rare / Full of sunshine in her hair / Lips that shame the red red rose” (Geronimi, 1959). Though Cinderella lacks a specific description of her beauty, the narrator’s voice still claims that she is “a sunset in a frame” (Geronimi, 1950). All of these accounts occur within the first few minutes of each movie, leading the princess’s introduction with beauty, moments that teach girls that society prioritizes women’s physical appearance above everything else. Furthermore, due to the similar appearance of these three princesses, girls see what society proclaims as attractive and measure themselves accordingly. Cinderella, Snow White, and Aurora are unattainably beautiful, yet there are no scenes of them applying makeup, implying that their features are natural, not enhanced by products. This suggestion prompts girls to use makeup as well as hair and skin products in attempts to mimic similar appearances, though never quite meeting the princesses’ standards, keeping them in an exploitative, capitalist cycle of constantly buying more products to attain unattainable results. Ultimately, though the princesses present girls with the ideal version of femininity that society then expects girls to emulate, girls remain in a failing sequence of coming up short in regard to princess femininity.

Femininity as a Social Construct

The second element that Foucault and Bartky share is the idea of femininity as a social construct. Foucault explores discipline in a socially constructed order, and Bartky then modifies and expands upon said discipline to explain female inferiority as propagated by socially constructed femininity.

History of Foucault’s Panopticon

Foucault builds his argument around Jeremy Bentham’s idea of a prison, known as the Panopticon. The Panopticon has a central tower surrounded by an outer ring-shaped building. The tower has large windows that look out at the ring,
while the ring building has two sets of windows—one on the inside, facing the tower, and one on the outside, letting in the sunlight. The ring building also splits into cells, separating its inmates. Supervisors, the people with power, live in the tower while prisoners, those without power, live in the ring building. The supervisors watch the prisoners in the ring through the windows of their own building, as the sunlight from the outer windows of the ring illuminates the prisoners (Foucault, 2008, p. 5). Foucault (2008) holds that “Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected [the prisoners when in a dungeon]. Visibility is a trap” (p. 5). Visibility snares the prisoner, as a supervisor has the capability to always watch him. The end result of the Panopticon is a society where power functions without challenge because the prisoner upholds it on his own. There is always the potential of supervisors watching, and in case they are, the prisoner must always behave correctly, thus self-policing his actions. As long as the structure of the Panopticon itself stands, discipline lives within the prisoner (Foucault, 2008, p. 6), and he then becomes oppressed and oppressor: He acknowledges his oppression by submitting to the system’s ideals, yet in his acknowledgement, he reinforces the power of the system.

**Intersection of Disney Princesses and Panopticism: Disney Guard Tower**

Disney creates and continues multiple Panopticons in girls’ lives regarding femininity. The first, original Panopticon is one that situates the Disney princess franchise, specifically Aurora, Cinderella, and Snow White, as the supervisors in the guard tower, while girls are prisoners in the outer ring. The roles are slightly reversed: the girls watch the princesses instead of being watched, and through observation the princesses dictate what femininity should look like to a captive audience of young girls, who then learn what society expects in female behavior. After continually living in the princess Panopticon, girls police their own behavior, illustrating Foucault’s concept of self-discipline, as they understand the expectations of society and give into them, which appeases everyone through their internalization of princess femininity. Girls act as oppressed and oppressor in the princess Panopticon, as princess femininity oppresses them, preventing creative self-expression, with any attempt on their part to fight against it merely reinforcing princess femininity as the reigning power structure.

**Maternal Guard Tower**

The princess Panopticon is a relatively new phenomenon, beginning with *Snow White* in 1937 and lasting through generations of girls, though in this princess femininity framework, it is the oldest established Panopticon; once the first generation of girls grows up after watching *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and becomes mothers, they create the next Panopticon I see constructed, the maternal Panopticon. Girls’ mothers behave as the guard tower, while girls themselves remain in the outer ring. While many mothers joke that they have eyes in the back of their heads, it is true that parents, especially mothers, constantly watch their young children, especially young daughters. Similar to my understanding of the princess Panopticon, I suggest that mothers learn femininity through Foucault’s principle of self-discipline: As mothers
once occupied the outer ring of the princess Panopticon in their own childhoods, they learned the princess femininity that society demands of girls and women and enacted it. Mothers also internalized said expectations of femininity; however, self-policing their own behavior to the point where the princess Panopticon becomes obsolete as they take on the power structure itself by following its rules at all times to avoid punishment from the Disney supervisors. When these girls mature into women and have daughters, due to their internalization of princess femininity, they begin policing their daughters’ behavior, thus placing them in both the princess Panopticon, where the daughters learn social expectations of femininity, as well as in the maternal Panopticon, where mothers reinforce princess femininity in their daughters at all times. Girls face twice the level of discipline regarding princess femininity, therefore severely limiting their behaving any other way. Due to the double Panopticon structure, princess femininity is widespread, appearing in girl children and adult women alike, thus normalizing it. While it appears natural because of its reach, since all girls live in the same society in the same double Panopticon, there is nothing natural about princess femininity because girls learn it through punishment and discipline. It is entirely socially constructed.

Bartky’s Femininity as Oppression

In her analysis of Foucault’s “Panopticon” regarding femininity, Bartky (2013) claims that society not only creates femininity but also does so for the purpose of oppressing women. She scoffs at the idea that the aforementioned practices in which women engage (i.e. dieting and exercising, minimizing body language, and applying makeup) are a result of sexual difference (p. 453). Bartky holds that these “disciplinary practices...are part of the process by which the ideal body of femininity—and hence the feminine body-subject—is constructed; in doing this, they produce a ‘practiced and subjected’ body; that is, a body on which an inferior status has been inscribed” (2013 p. 453). Makeup and body-sculpting perpetuate the idea that women’s natural bodies are wrong, as women must paint their faces and reshape their bodies in order for society to consider them socially acceptable. Furthermore, Bartky returns to Foucault’s original Panopticon, claiming that women partake in beautifying disciplines because “[i]n contemporary patriarchal culture, a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgment” (Bartky, 2013, p. 454). Women police their actions and appearance to please the male guard tower they internalize, and as everyone in the U.S. lives in a patriarchy, all women have such an internalized male guard tower, resulting in a pervasive enactment of princess femininity, again causing femininity to appear inherent, though society creates it. However, Bartky pushes beyond compulsory, disciplined femininity, believing it is a symptom of a much greater system of oppression, that of female subjugation, which “aims at turning women into the docile and compliant companions of men” (2013, p. 456). If women, due to their internalized male gaze, focus on creating the ideal, impossible appearance, women’s self-esteem drops, making it easier for men to control them and to keep them in a second-class status. Femininity exists to lower women’s sense of
self-worth, keeping them compliant in a male agenda and reluctant to fight back, thus maintaining patriarchy.

**Role of Disney Princesses in Upholding Patriarchy**

Cinderella, Aurora, and Snow White are characters that reflect women’s perceived inferior status, teaching girls that they are less than men, which subsequently reinforces patriarchy. While they come from decades in which women had less freedom, girls still watch all three movies today, suggesting that the values they present still ring true. *Cinderella* (1950) exemplifies the idea of female subjugation, as in the first few minutes of the movie, the narrator states, “Cinderella was abused, humiliated and finally forced to become a servant in her own house. And yet through it all Cinderella remained ever gentle and kind for with each dawn she found new hope that someday her dreams of happiness would come true” (Geronimi, 1950). Though Cinderella becomes a servant to her Stepmother and not to a man, girls learn not only to tolerate abuse but also to embrace it. Scenes such as this one contribute to a culture that makes it much easier for men and boys to abuse women and girls, emotionally and physically, as girls learn not to fight back, but instead, to act benevolently towards the abuser. The same passage also illuminates the stripping of ambition and hard work from girls, as Cinderella merely “hope[s]” that one day she will be happy, as opposed to changing her situation, leaving the hard work to her Fairy Godmother. Lack of ambition in girls helps assure that men occupy top positions later in life, such as heads of companies, while many girls mature into secretaries, bolstering patriarchal dominance.

*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) also reflect the concept of men as the sole leaders in society, as Snow White and Aurora are respectively dead and asleep for the vast majority of each movie, not partaking in any action and leaving any rescue up to the princes. The dwarfs and the prince in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* are the ones who ultimately punish the queen and awaken Snow White. While Snow White lies dead, the dwarfs run after the wicked queen and chase her off a cliff to her death. The unnamed prince also plays the hero, as he enters for a few minutes to kiss and revive Snow White, while she takes no part in her own saving. The theme of female helplessness continues over two decades later in *Sleeping Beauty*, when Prince Phillip acts as the rescuer while Aurora sleeps. The stage direction of the movie script indicates how valiant he is, with statements including, “Phillip courageously starts towards [the dragon]... Phillip throws the sword at the dragon, which is hit deadly and collapses” (Geronimi, 1959). Conversely, Aurora is only awake for two scenes of the movie, so while the title honors her, the movie centers on Phillip’s heroism and courage. Though *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Sleeping Beauty* lack the narration that *Cinderella* (1950) has, the plot of each movie implies that men are the principal, important figures while women are passive figureheads who are present only to highlight male achievement. When girls see princesses that do nothing, while princes act as saviors, they learn that girls and women come second to boys and men, who take charge and make change while the princesses lie around, their lives suspended.
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**Internalized Misogyny**

Finally, I interpret *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) as a movie that implants the first seeds of internalized misogyny in girls. When the dwarfs first discover Snow White in their cottage, several remark on her beauty, while Grumpy jeers: “Angel, hah! She’s a female! And all females is poison! They’re full of wicked wiles!” (Geronimi, 1937). Young girls know two things about women from this scene: that men value women for their beauty, and that all women are evil. This knowledge marks the beginning of the fixation on physical appearance later in life, which Bartky explores, because Snow White gains the dwarfs’ approval for her looks, as well as the internalization of the male gaze, contributing to the low self-esteem with which many women struggle. Both *Cinderella* (1950) and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) do not exhibit the same disparaging language in regard to women. I suggest, however, that the gender makeup of the characters creates this discrepancy: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is the only one of the three movies in which there are more men than women. In contrast, the princes in *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty* comprise the lone main, human, male characters in female-dominated casts. The male-dominated atmosphere of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* allows for insidious comments to be unremarkable. A world populated mainly by men exaggerates patriarchal power dynamics in which men rule and in which they marginalize women, thus making sexist behavior appear normal. Ultimately, between passivity, lack of ambition, the focus on beauty, and misogynistic statements, I argue that these three princess movies not only create and enforce femininity in young girls but also create and enforce female subservience through said femininity.

**Conclusions**

When I apply Foucault and Bartky’s ideas to Disney princesses, I see Aurora, Cinderella, and Snow White creating and perpetuating femininity in girls. Foucault and Bartky begin their arguments discussing the fear of the Other and expectations of conformity. Foucault focuses on the plague, which terrifies people to the extent that they willingly give up their rights to an overarching power structure in order to feel safe; Bartky focuses on feminine discipline, examining the body policing practices of women (such as dieting and exercising, shrinking their body language, and applying makeup) and how women must succumb to them so as to match society’s definition of femininity. When utilizing Disney princesses, I view the plague as non-princess—non-mainstream—femininity, so parents give up their control to Disney, the overarching power structure, in attempts to normalize their daughters’ behavior. Snow White, Aurora, and Cinderella also reflect Bartky’s feminine discipline through their body shape, body language, and natural features, leading girls to alter their bodies to achieve unattainable beauty. Foucault and Bartky claim that femininity is a social construct, as Foucault dissects Bentham’s Panopticon to describe discipline and power and Bartky expands upon Foucault’s analysis, applying it to women as she explains female inferiority. The Panopticon sets supervisors across from prisoners, watching the prisoners to police their behavior. Eventually, the prisoners uphold the power structure, for while the supervisors may not always watch them, there is always
the possibility for watching, and thus the possibility for punishment. This results in prisoners monitoring their behavior, internalizing the supervisors’ discipline. Girls live in a double Panopticon structure, in both the princess Panopticon where they enact princess femininity with Disney as the guard tower and in the maternal Panopticon, where mothers reinforce princess femininity due to their own internalization of it from their time in the princess Panopticon as girls, ultimately creating princess femininity as the widespread femininity in society. Bartky claims that women engage in feminine discipline because they internalize a male gaze, a male guard tower in the Panopticon, which dictates female behavior. This guard tower aims at turning women into second-class citizens compared to men, keeping society patriarchal. I also hold that the three princess movies promote patriarchal values, as characters most value the princesses’ beauty, expect their kindness in the face of abuse, instill passivity in regard to ambition and action, and promote misogyny. The Disney princesses Cinderella, Aurora, and Snow White produce princess femininity in girls, which is not natural, but learned behavior, and do so to keep women and girls in subservient positions in society, ultimately perpetuating a patriarchal culture.
References


