

Holly Cao

Professor Jasper

Hollywood 1960s to Present

May 1, 2019

“Fixing” Disney: The Remake of *Beauty and The Beast*

During the past century, the world witnessed the entertainment conglomerate Disney come to its power. In recent years, something that really attracts the attention of the public is the live remakes of its classical animation from the Disney Renaissance in the last century. Disney’s animations such as Cinderella, The Lion King, and Aladdin shapes the core of today’s culture since people in the society all grew up with the stories and moralities within the animations. These animated stories never seemed to be exploited by the entertainment industry since their emergence, and the logic and morals of the stories continue to be explored by mainstream culture.

When developing remakes, Disney needed to take into consideration the social reactions of the stories because the original films are still being widely discussed and criticized. In Chris Rojek’s essay “Disney Culture” written in 1993, he points out that Disney produces this beguiling effect in presenting the world as all happy and safe to make it kid-friendly, but by doing so, the studio ignores some distorted morals in the stories that they present to the world. His point is exemplified in *Beauty and the Beast* (Trousdale, Wise, 1991), where the troubling relationship between Gaston and his sidekick LeFou is never called into attention since LeFou is a character designed for comedic purpose achieved through him being physically and psychologically abused. In one scene, Gaston grabs LeFou by the shirt and throws him into a pile

of snow in front of Belle's house, ordering him not to come out until Maurice and Belle gets back.

Through fleshing out the story arch of the side characters, the live remake in 2016 by Bill Condon becomes more objective and complex in its moral reasonings, and as a result, the film becomes more politically conscious and has less featuring of physical violence. The remake attempts to address issues such as bullying issue between Gaston and LeFou, starting with paying more attention to the side characters' story arcs to address those moral issues. During the villagers' invasion of the castle in the remake, LeFou switched side to fight against Gaston as a fightback of Gaston sacrificing LeFou for his own benefit again. There are a lot of other issues in the side characters that are ignored in the original animation that the remake needed to make amends of, contributing to almost an hour of lengthening of the remake in comparison to its original in methods that I will discuss below.

Another example of abusive friendships in the original is between Lumiere and Cogsworth, although this issue is being handled in a different way. The chemistry between the two characters come from their many quarrels and disagreements, but in the end, they always make the right decisions. In the original film, Lumiere makes the superior decisions (such as treating Belle with dinner against their master's discretion), and Cogsworth is being pushed around by him, shoving and burning him for a comical effect. Cogsworth serves as the character who insists on the rules and objects other characters' ideas, which adds to the playfulness of the other characters. while his objection is being ignored. In the remake, Cogsworth's objections become a legitimate concern that the two friends eventually make amends for, and he no longer endures the physical suffering to offer comedy. There is more screen time for their conversations

and the sweet moment at the end of the film when they make amends with each other and rejoice the fact that they can live together as humans again.

One of the biggest changes in the live remake of *Beauty and the Beast*, in comparison to its original, is a different source of comic relief. A typical source of comedy in animations, especially in the pre-social-justice-in-film era of the late last century is what is called in animation the “squash and stretch” of the characters, which means their physical suffering. A live remake would restrict this tendency since the physical impact would come off easily as more violent than comical. Alternatively, jokes are carefully crafted in a rhetorical way in the live remake of *Beauty and the Beast* to win laughs. For example, the original film goes that after the song “there might be something there that wasn't there before”, Chip asks “What's there mama?” and Mrs. Potts responds with “ I'll tell you when you're older.” In the live remake, a new joke from Chip is added after one second of pause: “Okay, I'm older.”, he says. The newly added jokes keep the tone of the film lightheartedness without the expense of any innocent characters.

At the same time, some comical but gory moments are cut from the film, such as Cogsworth being buried and burned in one of the dishes in the number “Be My Guest”. Instead, the entertainment of the musical numbers come from the spectacle of the elaborate costuming, brilliantly choreographed gestures, and the complex movements and staging of the characters. This number in the remake is one of the highlights of the fantastical musical space in the film, especially in comparison with the same number in the original in which the set design is quite simplistic, and the number almost only serves the functional purpose of getting Belle and the audience surprised that the dishwares can all sing, dance and be friendly to Belle. There is almost no transformation of the background from the quite normal-looking court dining table until the

climax. In the remake, when Belle first enters the dining room, the long table is immediately transformed into a stage, with Plumette holding a mirror which makes a spotlight on the “host” Lumiere by reflecting light from the window. Instead of the coarse motions of dishes crashing into things and almost spilling in the original, the remake makes everything flows smoother mechanically in a way with minimum disruptions. For example, the spinning chandelier brings Lumiere up and spins him around, which allows him to jump on his next space of performance. There are a few reasons why this scene is so much more elaborate in the remake. Firstly, because the standard of CGI nowadays amongst the blockbusters is very high, that staying the same level of elaboration of the old animation is not socially acceptable. Secondly, the fancy and smooth look keeps people dazzled and entertained, so there would be less need for physically abusive comedy. Thirdly, the elaboration of the number gives the servants a chance to lament their glorious past and adds on to the stakes of the Beast not being able to be a human again. The camera focuses on the servants’ sorrowful moments in the remake, emphasizing on how they are dedicated to their jobs, giving them more time and space to express their escapism and nostalgia of the prosperous French court where they come from, for the purpose of resolving another moral issue: Before the musical number in the original film, the resistance of Cogsworth suggested by the servants that the servants are terrified of the master, and they are only violating the master’s command in the hopes that treating Belle well can eventually lead to their master stop being an angry Beast. In the live remake, Mrs. Potts dismisses Belle’s concern that the master tells them not to serve her dinner, and says that “People say a lot of things in anger. It is our choice whether or not to listen.” Later when Mrs. Potts walks Belle back to her room, Belle inquires her that “Why are you all so kind to me? Surely you are just as trapped here as I am.” In response, Mrs.

Pots reassures her that the Beast is actually not that scary. This way, the servants' initiatives of helping out the Beast come from their own will of going back to being humans again, instead of being bound by the fears of and orders from their master.

A similar topic of obedience of the followers to their leader is addressed in the remake in the relationship between Gaston and the townspeople. In the original, the townspeople follow Gaston out of obsessive admiration, helping him propose to Belle and taking his words like order, which is a default conclusion because that is how the townspeople are characterized without further justifications for any alternatives. The obsessions go pretty far, to the extent that they would risk their lives to go to the castle to fight for him. This would only make sense in the idealistic fairytale, but in reality, it is hard for a leader to have such a power over its people since Gaston is presented as a mean and dislikable character whose followers cannot be justified with his charisma but only with threatening and abuse. In the live action, Gaston is only able to rally the townspeople after showing them the Beast through the magical mirror to argue that the Beast can be of great threat to the town that they must defend. This detail shows a more democratic political scene of the town, which is a contemporary political norm amongst the film's contemporary audience with less moral corruption in their society.

The remake added more parallelism between Gaston and the Beast in the attempt to justify Gaston's violence as an unfortunate consequence of his backstory. The backstory of the two characters together makes up the film's argument about violence. In the remake, there is an added scene where Gaston loses his mind over Maurice not letting him marry Belle, which matches with the scenes where the Beast struggles to control his temper after Belle refuses to have dinner with him. Both Gaston and the Beast started off as grumpy and rude, both due to

external events in their pasts as the remake explains. Gaston's violence comes from war, whereas the Beast's violence comes from his father. "Think happy thoughts. You're in the war! Blood...dead people...widows...", LeFou comforts Gaston when he cannot hold his temper upon Maurice standing up against him to protect Belle. For the Beast, there is an added touch in the remake where we see the young prince singing a song in his mother's death bed, but he is soon pulled away by his father who is yelling at him. The silly and innocent moments of the two characters juxtaposed with their bad-tempered image, making the audience separate the characters from violence itself. In a sense, Gaston and the Beast's fate are alternatives of each other. Both of them are victims of violence that result in their lack of kindness. At the end of the film, as nearly all of the rose petals fall, the end of the Beast's chance of being a human again is near, and the castle starts to crumble which is what kills Gaston. In a symbolic way, Gaston's death means the Beast's sacrifice for his love for Belle, and Gaston's love for Belle at the same time. In the remake, Gaston is portrayed as no less of a lover than the Beast. He persists despite him being hindered by his confusion that why is he not seen by Belle and her father not worthy of her. After Belle rejects his dinner plan, Gaston contemplates that "It is the ones that are hard to get that are always the sweetest pray...she hasn't made a fool of herself just to gain my favor". Just like the Beast, he also takes on the suffering of the lack of love, with social pressure instead of being transformed in an animal, which interestingly enough both comes down to the matter of dignity, which they both uphold with patients in their internal struggles with their pasts.

The remake also corrects the film's approach on love from the original where love comes off as an award to obtain instead of something that happens naturally. The new view on women of the main male characters also shifts towards political correctness. In the original film, all the

servants in the castle work together to help the Beast win Belle's admiration. A lot of credit of what makes the union goes to the servants, who devised the idea that the Beast should give Belle a special gift: the library. The live action emphasizes that if it is meant to be, they do not need help from anyone else. The chat between Belle and the Beast naturally leads up to him bringing her to the library and bestowing it to her. When Belle and the Beast finally hit it off in the live action, the servants sing "Well who would have thought, who indeed, that they came together on their own." The Beast's natural charm and humor of taking what he has for granted and plays on the fact that beneath the fierce look of the Beast is not only a handsome prince but also a spoiled child, which is comically witty without the laughs as any characters' expense. Gaston's proposal to Belle also comes out naturally through the progression of the conversation that they have in her house, instead of in the original film where he rallies the whole town to make a grand gesture, using his power in the attempt of getting what he wants.

While the Beast is made tamer in the remake and surrendering of love, Gaston is as well. The new interpretation of violence as a consequence instead of a source of conflict that must exist in a story leaves space for more vulnerability on the part of Gaston as well as the Beast on their uncertainty and frustration on their hardships of winning Belle's favor. In the remake when Belle first discovers that the Beast is actually kind of sweet, Dan Stevens's performance shows the Beast's uncertainty which is an emotion that is considered in the original but not translated as well in the animation. The remake also shows Gaston's vulnerable side after his failed proposal to Belle in the scene in the bar. In the original film, Gaston is furious about being humiliated by Belle in front of the crowd that helps him propose. In the live remake, however, Gaston gets into a state of depression, feeling defeated about the rejection. The vulnerability of the two seemingly

aggressive characters makes them more sympathetic and understandable, presenting a situation where they each has his own reasoning.

In the layering of character dimensions, the film presents more moral complexity. The complex reasoning of the remake suit the shifting audience demography from young children to adult audience who watch the remake out of nostalgia for their childhood. The remake presents moral dilemmas which make its value transcend from a children's fairytale. One morally complex moment happens after the accident in the woods where Belle and the Beast battled against the wolves in a classic hero-saves-the-beauty situation. There is an added close up shot in the remake of Belle reflecting upon the situation while the Beast is left injured in the background. This shot suggests that Belle could have run away back to the village, and the injured Beast would be left in the woods to be eaten by the wolves, but Belle decides to bring him back to the palace instead. This choice that Belle has can also be deducted from the original animation, but it is not shown on screen, giving the audience no chance to reflect upon how Belle comes to the decision that she would sacrifice freedom to save someone else's life, even that of a bad guy.

While the remake makes amends for moral issues ignored in the original film, it also goes further into the moral topics already in the film that was previously not particularly so noticeably problematic, and use them as part of their marketing strategy. The main actress Emma Watson who plays Belle has previously established her image as the intellectual feminist in the entertainment-political scene with various women's rights campaigns, her English Literature degree at Harvard, and in Harry Potter as the book-smart Hermione. The journey of the actress lends itself to the persona of Belle in the live remake. The scene in the woods reminds the

audience of many scenes in Harry Potter, where Hermine stands to fight the evil creatures in the dark. Emma Watson had been very outspoken about the feminist nature of Beauty and the Beast. In her interview with MTV, Emma Watson says that this movie is empowering to girls in that it encourages them to want more than the small village life, as Belle empowers other girls in the village. Another marketing tool focuses on the character LeFou, who is supposedly implied to be the first gay character in a Disney classic. While these topics seem legitimate, they receive a lot of backlash of the characters. In the article “The Storied, International Folk History of Beauty and The Beast”, author James Deutsch talks about how one gay activist express that the new image of LeFou promotes negative stereotyping since the name means “the madman”, and others also feel misrepresented. There is also a lot of criticism from feminists saying that despite its marketing, a lot of details in the film still shows gender inequality.

To achieve the political and moral correctness in a film, perhaps starting something from scratch instead of “fixing” films already produced in the past is the only way to go. After all, old stories from the past will always have the remnants of issues revolutionized by people who come afterward. At the same time, there is something powerful about the attempts of correcting the mistakes of the past, partly due to the luxury of having comparisons, and partly because the remake borrows the fame from the original to make a greater social impact. The challenge of the remake is how to make it uniquely separated from the original film and how much it should resonate with the original. This perhaps is a fine balance that will never be achieved.

Bibliography:

Deutsch, James. "The Storied, International Folk History of Beauty and The Beast."

Smithsonian.com, Smithsonian Institution, 15 Mar. 2017,

www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/storied-international-folk-history-beauty-and-beast-180962502/.

International, MTV. "Emma Watson Reveals Feminist Message In Beauty And The Beast | MTV

Movies." *YouTube*. 08 Mar. 2017. *YouTube*. 06 May 2019

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X0jdOSLfnqg>

Rojek, Chris. (1993). *Disney Culture*. Leisure Studies - LEIS STUD.

12.121-135.10.1080/02614369300390111.