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# Identifying a queer aesthetic in amateur video manipulations of Disney content as part of a utopian visualisation of lesbian desires

Abstract: In traditional applications of queer theory onto the cinematic medium, reading the subtext as a spectator becomes the main way in which queerness can be uncovered within past texts that might at first glance be considered part of the heteronormative sphere. However, I intend to upend this notion by foregrounding the work being done by online video editors to reformulate one of the more traditional culture makers – Disney – through a re-contextualisation of their animated canon to create an exploration of lesbian desire. By analysing the aesthetic concerns of these videos, freely available on YouTube, from their jagged editing seams to their wide-ranging narrative paths, a link will emerge between amateur fan content and the queer spectator as an active participant rather than a passive watcher. I will take this link to its inevitable conclusion, that digital bodies severed from their original context prove fertile grounds for the next steps in the intersection of queer theory and fan studies.

Keywords: media studies; fan studies; queer desire; Disney; amateur content.

In Henry Jenkins' seminal text on fan studies, he states that "fans are poachers who get to keep what they take and use their plundered goods as the foundations of the construction of an alternative cultural community" (2013: 233). It is this anarchic vision of fandom that has informed the study of the specific aesthetics found in fan-created content. In the specific case of fan edited videos, known as fan vids, Katharina Freund identifies this plundering as part of a shift in focus of "cult and genre television shows on to elements the editors (known as vidders) find more interesting" (2018: 207). Often times the areas of more interest pull out queer intent within the subtext of a single piece of media, but as Freund outlines, the intertextual limits of fan vids is expansive and can make use of the most tenuous of links between various media products (2018). The expansive nature of fan vids invites aesthetics often defined by their queer, amateur, and digital

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sensibilities in ways that avoid conventional definitions of media content. It is the specific case of lesbian Disney fan vids I intend to explore within this essay. By literally cutting and pasting 2D animated Disney princesses from one film to another, these fan vids mark themselves as distinct from fan vids that only compile media clips set to music to re-contextualise what already exists in the subtext.

These fan vids, primarily posted on YouTube, edit or; as it is often phrased in the community, manipulate existing images of Disney princesses to express an inherent queerness in the content, not just in the original narratives but in the bodies of the characters themselves, bringing them into contact where previously they existed separately in their heteronormative spheres. The narrative and technical structures displayed by these fan vids – though clearly indebted to a long history of fan vidding within the community (Freund 2018; Lothian 2009; Morrissey 2018; Russo 2009, 2018) – reflects a new movement in how queer theory can be expressed outside of academia in an era where the lines between consumer and producer are increasingly blurred. By moving outside of sanctioned spheres of theorising the queer experience, these fan vids raise many questions including; how radical such creative endeavours can be in a late-capitalist sphere? What are the moral implications of the problematically entangled aesthetics of the queer and the amateur? And how can one coherently identify aesthetic choices made by a community of content creators constantly in flux?

To explore these questions, I have selected fan vids that illustrate a range of narrative structures, from those that bear a similarity to their source material to those that construct a bleaker end for their heroines. Due to the limitless capacity of both fandom content and the Internet itself, it would be impossible to address every type of even this relatively niche fan vid form, but by analysing those that limit themselves to the crossover of two Disney 2D animated films – with the occasional third source when necessary – the answers to the questions I have posed will be able to be more clearly concluded. Such a methodology does not come without issue, but I have attempted to – within the limits set out above – represent a variety of fan vids in terms of both narrative formula and the diversity of the characters used. Amongst the five fan vids I will go on to consider, three of them feature characters of colour as romantic leads, and as mentioned, not all follow the normative formula established by their chosen characters' original story. They are also all freely available on YouTube. Though

a platform argued by some fans to be lacking in community (Morrissey 2018), the accessibility of the platform – not requiring an account to view content, linking directly to related videos allowing an unbroken stream of fan content, placing all videos on equal standing (another fan vid is as likely to be recommended to you after watching one as a trailer for an official Disney property is), and allowing a level of anonymity for the creators – has proved significant in facilitating a by all appearances thriving community of lesbian Disney fan vidders.

## From passive spectators to active creators

In one of the more well known scenes from *The Little Mermaid* (Ron Clements & John Musker, 1989), Ariel (Jodi Benson); the titular red-haired mermaid, swims up to a boat at sea where a party is taking place. It is this scene where she sets eyes on her true love for the first time. However, instead of seeing the dashing and masculine Prince Erik (Christopher Daniel Burnes), Princess Aurora (Mary Costa) from another Disney classic; *Sleeping Beauty* (Clyde Geronimi, 1959), stands superimposed amongst the dancing sailors. This is not the moment of heterosexual realisation from the original film, but rather the beginning of an exploration of lesbian desires which marks the opening of most of these Disney fan vids. Freely available on YouTube, *The Princess and the Mermaid (Ariel/Aurora)* tells the story of lesbian love between two Princesses drawn out of their self-contained original narratives. Disney's original intentions of reinforcing conservative and heteronormative standards are reworked to serve a radical and queer re-contextualisation of heterosexual content by making use of widely available editing technologies. There is an established tradition of femslash – the widely used term for the pairing of female characters – being understood within fan studies as partaking in "critical and activist responses to the mainstream media industry" (Russo 2018: 156). Marginalised within both the fan community as a derivative of slash – the pairing of male characters – and fan studies itself due, according to Julie Levin Russo, to "the presumed synchronicity between its participants (primarily queer women) and its content (queer relationships between women)" (2018: 156) as opposed to the contrast between slash content's presumed majority female consumers/producers and male characters. Femslash through its separation from the more documented slash subsection of fandom has the ability to more readily adopt their own cinematic language through repeated motifs and

an unsaid understanding in the queer intention of the pieces even if there is a misalignment of the narrative sutures. That this is a language widely understood amongst those who count themselves a part of the queer Disney fan vidding community is proved by *The Princess and the Mermaid* having over 400,000 views. Yet before considering the aesthetic choices made in within these fan vids, I want to establish their relation to recent work on queer cinema theory. In particular, three main branches that are distinguished in the way they draw queerness from the text. The intention with such a comparison is not to divorce these fan vids from their fannish origins. Instead, it is to indicate a shared queer desire to not only spectate and theorise over; in this case lesbian, subtext, but to actively participate and remake those same narratives in ways that allows the direct expression of a lesbian experience through the femslash lens.

The first branch is laid out by Alexander Doty who positions himself in relation to *Cahiers du Cinéma*'s category 'e' films that can be "'obliquely' examined by queer-positioned readers for textual signs that complicate or resist the coherent presentation of conventional straight ideology" (Doty 2004: 23). The use of textual signs perceived only from specific angles then puts the onus of interpretation on the spectator. Although for Doty any text has the ability to be read as queer, he also gives examples of oblique readings that include interpretations supported by the queerness – whether known at the time or not – of the director, thus positioning a possible use of oblique readings to uncover the radical potential of the work and reclaim it under the queer banner, sometimes many years after its first circulation. Some of this impulse to reclaim retroactively can be seen in videos like *The Princess and the Mermaid*, considering that Howard Ashman; one of the main lyricists, was a gay man. Ariel's desire to live in the human world can then be read *obliquely* as queer. The lyrics of "Part of Your World" where Ariel sings "Up where they walk, up where they run, up where they stay all day in the sun / Wandering free, wish I could be, part of that world", take on the narrative of a queer longing for the kind of acceptance afforded to heterosexuality. Yet where this kind of reading is usually limited to more professional academic spheres which consider these outside contexts, *The Princess and the Mermaid* expands the queer narrative further by manipulating queer subtext into queer text.

But what of queer narratives present in works that do not "complicate or resist" (Doty 2004: 23) heteronormative identity? This forms the second

branch, an identification of the role queerness plays in what Meredith Li-Vollmer and Mark LaPointe identify as "powerful messages regarding the goodness of order, obedience, and normalcy versus the evilness of chaos, transgression, and deviance" (2003: 90). The notion of queer as something to be overcome, or as a transgression to be corrected, has a storied history in cinema and casts a shadow over approaches to queer theory that have attempted to reveal and challenge these kinds of moral coding as part of a radical reclamation. The alignment of queer with evil is a common issue raised in critical analysis of Disney's 2D animated films (Li-Vollmer and LaPointe 2003), with many of their villains attributed with a camp – if not outright queer – sensibility. Yet the fan vids I looked at eschew away from villainous queer subtext to instead consider the capacity for femslash narratives amongst Disney's heroines; defying any need for an established subtext that has been previously identified by scholars. Jack Halberstam argues this positioning of queer as the negative other is informed by how heteronormativity is aligned with the morally good and queerness with anti-capitalist defiance (2011: 89). Part of this anti-capitalist intention can be seen in how fan vids, and more broadly fan content, often garner the stereotype of being amateur, as opposed to the Disney – or which ever company the content is owned by – approved professional content. When exploring how creators participate on YouTube, Eggo Müller expresses the fear that "the new 'uneducated' participants neglect professional standards of craftsmanship, aesthetic quality and ethic norms" (2009: 127). The presence of content that is more queer/amateur is positioned as an affront to professional standards, it questions the necessity of those same standards in a free-form space such as the Internet and challenges "established hierarchies based on traditional notions of aesthetic norms and standards" (Müller 2009: 129). In the same ways that dominant ideologies encourage a movement from amateur aesthetics to professional ones as part of a naturalised progression, they are also encouraging a subsuming of anything non-normative into a heteronormative and capitalist form. To return then to Halberstam, he finds a freedom in the above alignments of queer with amateur, and amateur with anti-captialism. His main argument in *The Queer Art of Failure* is that failing can be viewed as a positive – and queer – outcome, as it is a way to continue to exist outside of the capitalist ideologies that define success (2011).

However, existence outside the mainstream also means limited access to forms of representation. Ika Willis is suspicious of the supposed radical

nature of remaining at the margins, for her queer readings are "not only not 'resistant' but not even an intervention into a text (or into the cultural context within which that text is read): it is simply an 'actualisation' of a 'latent' property of the text itself" (2006: 154). This is the third branch of queer theory and closest to the ideological thrust of queer fan content in the digital sphere. Queer narratives are not simply read or experienced, they are made in a way that overtakes the heteronormative original reading. In spite of Willis' insistence on an anti-resistant approach and identifying resistant readings as "wrongly suggesting the texts are inherently or originally heterosexual" (2006: 154), she is still interested foremost with the idea that queer fan content can be "a deliberate, politically loaded, practice of re-contextualization"(2006: 156). In ways that will be explored in this essay, lesbian Disney fan vids work with both sides of the discourse; "critical and activist responses to the mainstream media industry" (Russo 2018: 156) versus fantasies of desire, embodying a vision of queer ideas that don't "line up tidily with each other" (Willis 2006: 157) – sometimes literally within the aesthetics of the content itself. Indeed, Willis' statement on the re-contextualising aesthetics of queer fan content as an actualisation rather than just a reading (2006: 154) bolsters the notion that fan vid creators are the inevitable development from passive queer spectator who only interprets to active producer (Freund 2018: 207) who is untethered from the original subtext of queer villains and heterosexual heroines.

Freund provides an expansion on this actualisation in the case of fan vids, identifying that "vidders take a position of mastery over the text and become more than spectators: they are editors and creators of meaning themselves by making new texts of their own" (2018: 209). And although it is important to be aware of what Russo sees as the failed techno-utopia of fan content due to the commercialisation of online platforms (2018: 159), the widespread availability of media production tools and free to upload platforms such as YouTube has had a noticeable impact on fan vidding practises (Morrissey 2018: 55). The ease of production of and access to these fan vids allowing them to stand as a defined amateur alternative to the heteronormative mainstream of Disney content. In addition, Katherine Morrissey argues that fan vids "present a distinctly female gaze and feminised aesthetic codes" (2018: 56) that aligns them with the aforementioned femslash community's historic marginalisation (Russo 2018). This double marginalisation of both content and form insists upon the need to reject

passivity. Instead of drawing out what is present – lesbian content that is already minimal even when subtextual – femslash fans and fan vidders specifically fill in the gaps with their own narratives and experiences.

The desire to create in the face of marginalisation is then a shared experience amongst fan creators and queer media creators – a fact bolstered by the significant proportion of fan creators who identify as queer. Mark Duffett is somewhat hesitant to mark out fans as an Other, arguing it only serves to further ostracise their communities by analysing the aesthetics they engage in (2013: 66). But without marking out their differences – especially for femslash fans who are further marginalised within already marginal spaces like fan communities – fans' readings and re-contextualisations would remain unnoticed. This dismissal can be connected to the long-term marginalisation of groups like women and queer people despite their proven history in media spaces and as consumers of content. It is a marginalisation Kristina Busse is cognizant of when she notes that "the widespread embrace of the white middle-class heterosexual male geek in popular culture redefines but does not erase boundaries of exclusion" (2015: 111), identifying that even as nerd culture is becoming more acceptable, fan communities remain valuable spaces to marginalised groups who face a continued rejection from mainstream spaces. Of similar value is the specific aesthetic choices that "require at least an understanding of the text, if not the fannish context, to become comprehensible" (Busse 2009: 104), allowing a community of understanding founded on shared fan vidding practices.

It is possible now to begin to understand how lesbian Disney fan vids combine queer theory's ability to read the queerness of a text with a fannish impulse to insert their own desires into the narrative. All of which feeds into the aesthetic choices made by these content creators. In particular, there is an amateur approach to the videos that is made all the more apparent when working against the professionalism of a corporation like Disney, whose "trademarked innocence operates on a systematic sanitisation of violence, sexuality, and of political struggle concomitant with an erasure or repression of difference" (Bell, Haas & Sells 1995: 7). Similar to Halberstam's vision of "heteronormative common sense" in direct opposition to anything queer (2011: 89), this firm control; which often manifests on YouTube as copyright strikes, becomes all the more significant when considering the double marginalisation of queer female content creators

in terms of both gender and sexuality. Russo identifies that "genres [of fan vids] that enjoy legal and corporate sanction are disproportionately produced by men, whereas creative works that explore relationships between characters and 'expand the universe' are the near-exclusive preserve of women" (2009: 128). Female fans are aligned with the creation of space in which they can insert their "unauthorised and non-normative appropriations of copyrighted media sources" (2009: 127) and in turn face risk of punishment or censorship from the media sources themselves, in ways that their male counterparts may not.

## Seams, welds and other unruly aesthetics

The marginalised viewpoint cultivated by these fan vids due to their alignment with femslash and a "distinctly melodramatic form" (Morrissey 2018: 56) can also be seen in the specificities of the editing style. As mentioned, another common term for these fan vids due to way they cut and paste content is 'manips', this shortened form of 'manipulation' can be understood through the lens of both fan studies and amateur/professional discourses. The term draws attention to what Jenkins sees in fan spaces as "textual poaching" (2013). In the specific case of fan vids, Alexis Lothian further expands on this idea as fans' ability to work with "mashups, vids, and similar arts of juxtaposition [to] challenge the idea that creative legitimacy relies on original ideas that belong only to those who initiate them" (2009: 133), particularly when the original owners cannot see – or refuse to see – the queer possibilities of their characters. Russo links this idea of forcibly shared creative legitimacy to the amateur issue by placing the fan vidder as someone who "provok[es] antagonism over the limits of participation" (2009: 125), while Freund's list of possible reasons fan vidders are attracted to the form include "making political statements about representation of women [and] speaking back to the creators" (2018: 209). To be amateur becomes an active choice in the face of the professionalism of the official content they *poach* from, creating an active creator of queer content rather than a passive interpretor of it.

Fan vids can then be approached as a radical project in the way they defy professional and thus heterosexual expectations. The moments in Disney 2D animated fan vids where the sight-lines between romantic interests do not – to use Willis' term for the experience of being a queer reader – "line up tidily with each other" (2006: 157) become moments of queer

denial of what is expected from their romance. This is seen in *"Kamikaze" Esmeralda x Cinderella*, when Cinderella (Ilene Woods) must hold hands with Esmeralda (Demi Moore) through the proxy of the prince from her film's hand. The creator overlays the prince's hand onto Esmeralda's body, cutting between Cinderella and Esmeralda's faces to further reinforce the hand's separation from the original source. The scene is de-contextualised from its heterosexual source and used in service of lesbian desires. In these moments, the fantasy of lesbian contact within a Disney sphere must be completed by the viewer themselves; similar to queer theory readings, their mind must smooth over the ragged edges of the editing to form a fully coherent story. These unruly aspects to the lesbian Disney fan vid's aesthetics; where heterosexual fulfilment becomes moments to explore lesbian longing, only further reinforce the connection between fan studies, the amateur form, and queer theory.

On the fan studies side, Jenkins identifies that fan vids in general are a "careful welding of words and images to comment on the series' [or in this case the films'] narrative" (2013: 225). The use of "welding" is notable as it captures the aesthetic look of these fan vids as described above. The line created when characters who never interacted in canon are brought into the same sphere as each other is more pronounced; welding images that may at first seem completely separate from each other. Anne Jamison similarly notes how fan content "lets its seams show in ways other works that also build from sources and predecessors may be at pains to hide" (2013: 14). The sequel to *Mulan* (Bancroft & Cook 1998) might draw from the designs of its predecessor but is also authentically new and separate. Meanwhile *Mulan & Ariel // The Destiny // Disney Crossover*, a love story between Mulan (Ming-Na Wen) and Ariel, exposes its seams in its displacement of Ariel from her original narrative, the two distinct styles of animation; Chinese influenced and western animation, contrasted with each other. The seams also become literal in the moments Ariel's superimposition into Mulan's world is marked by a pixelated edge to her body, forming what could be seen as electronic stitches and showing that welding is not just informed by the cinematic notion of a cut from one scene to another but the more fluid cutting and pasting of bodies from one cinematic sphere to another. The use of the terms seams and welding then indicates a more technical approach to fan content, emphasising the fans' position as content creators, or at least recyclers of content to expose new viewpoints.

But it is a return to queer theory that opens up the question of the moral implications of fan vidders approach to inserting their queer desires into content that for all intents and purposes stands as a bastion of heterosexual conservatism. As touched upon briefly before, these fan vidders do not focus on the more obviously queer villains of the films they choose to edit. Instead, they rework Disney's classic narrative formula that establishes heteronormativity as "rooted in a logic of achievement, fulfillment, and success(ion)" (Halberstam 2011: 94), twisting it into a world accommodating of queer desires. Russo echoes, perhaps unintentionally, this new queer form of success(ion) within the Disney fan vids when she identifies fan vids generally as a "queer form of reproduction that mates supposedly incompatible parents ('original' media source and 'original' creativity) to spawn hybrid offspring" (2009: 126). Though in the case of lesbian Disney fan vids it is the hybridisation of two different Disney sources, the impulse appears the same, it is a desire for success(ion) rather than the embrace of failure Halberstam argues for (2011). This impetus is illustrated in all the lesbian Disney fan vids that do have happy endings, such as *The Princess and the Mermaid* which ends in a classic Disney marriage; a symbol of heterosexual "achievement, fulfillment, and success(ion)" (2011: 94) reformulated to serve lesbian desires.

## Queer heroines versus heteronormative villains

A return to the classic, normally heterosexual formula does however indicate that even when constructing a utopian queer space, lesbian Disney fan vids cannot help but rely on the original context, making them "an unofficial and transient space in which the work simultaneously reproduces and undermines the structures that enable it" (Lothian 2009: 135-6). Multiple fan vids I looked at, including *"Kamikaze"* and *Disney Crossover – Esmeralda and Pocahontas*, draw on the narrative of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Trousdale 1996). In both, Esmeralda remains a love interest as she does in the film, but the place of Quasimodo (Tom Hulce) is taken by another Disney princess. The outsider narrative of Quasimodo due to physical disability is replaced, somewhat problematically, by marginalisation due to lesbian desire. The link between the two becomes clearer when considered in tandem with the fact that more negatively stereotypical queer figures "left a lasting legacy, as they not only told straight people what to think about gay people but also gay people what to think about themselves"

(Davies 2016: 13). Even in a supposedly utopian space, queer content makers are haunted by past media representations of queer figures as failures or dangerous outsiders and must navigate them accordingly. The reversed narrative of queerness as success(ion) extends to the villain of the fan vids – within both portrayed by Frollo (Tony Jay) – who becomes an enforcer of the heteronormative sphere by standing against the lesbian love that is trying to flourish. Thus, even though the context can be manipulated to express different forms of desire from the Disney model, it still operates within its broader narrative conventions.

This reliance on original narratives while also manipulating their intent is consistent with Jenkins' use of the term "heteroglossia"; understood as when "writers [and video makers] … hope to activate certain pre-existing meanings while suppressing, albeit imperfectly, others" (2013: 224). The idea of imperfect suppression can be seen in the narrative – and inevitably aesthetic – choice that many fan vids make to forgo speech. The choice speaks to the tension between the Disney heroines' narratives as "fairy-tale templates of passivity and victimage" and their bodies as "portraits of strength, discipline, and control" (Bell 1995: 112). By removing the voices that play the parts of passivity only the body is left in the narrative, a firm force that reveals the performance of womanhood and in turn works in "anti-capitalist logics of being and acting and knowing" (Halberstam 2011: 20-21). A logic revealed through its exposure of the formulaic ways these heroines' bodies are constructed and how that formula is disturbed by their manipulation towards foregrounding lesbian desires. Additionally, the personalities of Disney's female characters are brought into the videos largely intact. As Amy Davies notes of the so-called Eisner Era of Disney films that encompasses most of the late eighties onwards, the female protagonists "show their integrity through their actions, rather than through their inaction. Furthermore, the level of action and independence demonstrated by their heroines grew exponentially with each film" (2006: 171). For example, Esmeralda's forthright nature in the original text makes her in the new context of the aforementioned fan vids the instigator of the lesbian romance, and her acceptance of her outsider identity becomes an acceptance of her lesbian desires. The manipulation required in terms of the personalities of these characters is actually quite minimal, and might suggest why queer content creators were attracted to such characters in the first place. As Davies also notes of this era of Disney heroines; "their

independence, strength of will, determination to engineer their own fates, and *insistence on being true to themselves* are unquestionably their strongest traits" (2006: 176) [emphasis mine]. The common factor of truth to one's self among these heroines who appear again and again in these fan vids reveals a desire within their creators to, as Russo puts it, "delve into things that we [femslash fans] experience directly – sexually, romantically, or politically" (2018: 157). Disney's films; though purported to be in the heteronormative sphere, actually resound with queer children with their abundance of narratives about being true to oneself, and fan spaces in turn provide these same queer adults with the tools to make what they experienced within the text into the dominant viewpoint.

This re-contextualisation of Disney heroines' traits is not limited to the Eisner Era however. In *The Princess and the Mermaid*, Aurora's reluctance around her prince; which in the original text is part of her personality as a demure signifier of womanhood and chasteness that is informed by Disney's "carefully encoded and constructed aesthetic of eroticism [manifested] ultimately into (an)aesthetic asexuality" (Bell 1995: 113), is removed from its original context and juxtaposed with Ariel's fretful expression to create a new meaning, one of heterosexuality forced upon the pair in the form of an interloper (Fig. 1 & 2). It is Ariel's association with strong expression of self as a product of the Eisner Era that allows Aurora to escape the passive space she previously occupied in her film as part of a more


Fig 1. Aurora is entrapped by heteronormativity in her cinematic sphere.


Fig 2. Ariel's expression serves to re-contextualise this heteronormativity as dangerous.

regressive era of Disney princesses. She literally leaves the space of her film to enter Ariel's within the fan vid, and all her moments of distress and forced heterosexuality occur while she is still within her own cinematic world. This form of retroactive re-reading and re-editing is made easier by the animated nature of its subjects for "as cultural artefacts, their meanings are not fixed, but invite a diagnosis of the encoded possibilities of multitextual iconographies" (Bell 1995: 109). Encoded possibilities that invite something more radical when combined, rather than existing as separate texts.

Even though the narratives that play out in these fan vids do not require knowledge of their source material due to their narrative simplicity, extra knowledge is what helps viewers access the "multitextual iconographies" (Bell 1995: 109) that give the fan vids a radical edge by claiming Disney heroines for a lesbian space. Additionally, as Davies notes, "the significance of Disney's animated films is that, by and large, they did not disappear" (2006: 18). Their cultural osmosis into popular memory makes them ideal material for re-contextualisation despite the purported control Disney tries to wield over their images. The widespread knowledge of Disney narratives and characters is proved by the high number of views many of these fan vids accrue, suggesting an interconnected community around properties near inescapable globally, let alone in English-speaking countries. *"Kamikaze"* has the highest number of views of the fan vids I investigated,

at over 1.1 million. Its creator; TheNight130, appears well known in the community with 185 000 subscribers and other fan vidders, including merbunny (creator of *The Princess and the Mermaid*), thanking them in their fan vid's description for access to technologies that aid the process of manipulating the 2D animation. The exchanging of editing techniques and tricks reinforces the notion there is a unified aesthetic to be found amongst these fan vids born of the strong community ties proved by the consistent negotiation of authorship between fan vidders; where the credit of different elements to produce the fan vid can be seen as part of more general ownership of the form amongst multiple authors. This multiplicity would also include Disney itself, forming the foundations vidders can "actively resist and subvert as they work to make meaning in their own ways" (Freund 2018: 221).

## The inherent queerness of the outsider

To illustrate the foundational subtexts present in the original texts, I will focus on the use of two characters; Ariel and Belle (Paige O'Hara), and how their narratives and characterisations are drawn out as something more inherently queer than one might first perceive it. Within queer theory, the inherent queerness of these characters would be discussed only through an academic lens, but, as Morrissey argues, the sometimes detached style of academia forms a barrier against fan vids excess of affect (2018: 58). To truly address the queerness of the material, it is not enough just to write and observe, we must experience it as immediately as possible through a re-editing of the original content. It is this immediacy that these lesbian Disney fan vids provide, pushing past the very edges of the films they use to force new meanings out. As touched upon above, with Ariel's creation "the influence of Ashman and Menken undermin[ed] Disney's sanitisations" (Sells 1995: 183) to create a queer subtext. Previously in queer theory the focus has primarily been on the villain of *The Little Mermaid*; Ursula (Pat Carroll), who embodies the common thread of female Disney villains as "treacherous, sexually potent, and powerful personifications of the terrifying nature of unchecked femininity" (Li-Vollmer & LaPointe 2003: 95). In a word; they are queer. Disney fan vids go some way to reject that notion of villainy equalling queerness, instead the villains of their videos are the heterosexual men and women that serve as obstacles to lesbian love. For Ariel this is often her father, recreating the original narrative of *The Little*

*Mermaid* – star-crossed lovers due to their difference in species and Ariel being held back by her over-protective father – into a story of overcoming homophobia and becoming your authentic queer self. Laura Sells notes that the barrier between the land and water in the original narrative creates a situation where "those who are privileged by the white male system are oblivious to anything outside the system, while those outside the system know about the dominant culture as well as their own marginalised culture" (Sells 1995: 178). For Sells this creates a feminist metaphor, but it is easy to see Ariel's story as one queer viewers would identify with, understanding themselves as different and seeing hope in Ariel's success. It is unsurprising then that the mermaid narrative is found again and again in lesbian Disney fan vids, including ones that don't even involve Ariel, instead manipulating human princesses into mermaids to express their difference from the dominant heterosexual culture.

Though less fantastical than Ariel's difference, Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* (Trousdale & Wise 1991) is similarly marked out as different in ways that are reinforced by her original narrative. As Susan Jeffords notes; "Belle's credential as heroine is early logged in when she is the one of the town's single women not to swoon over Gaston" (1995: 124), and so it is easy to read Belle's disgust with Gaston (Richard White) as a disgust founded on Belle's queerness and a rejection of traditional masculinity. Like Esmeralda's previously mentioned kindness towards the outsider, Belle also falls in love with a monster who – while inescapably masculine coded – does not bear many traditional gender markers that animation uses as a shorthand for enforced heteronormativity. In their struggle against being villainised, queer content creators envision a space where these Disney women who already love outsiders and those cast as monstrous, love instead lesbian figures – who often are associated with the same groups in a negative context.

## The power of queer failure

The final question that is raised from these narrative manipulations is then: what kind of world is Disney asserting and what kind of world are the lesbian Disney fan vids asserting? Although I do argue that these fan vids are more utopian in their egalitarian vision of lesbian desire, particularly when considering that "many fans characterise their entry into fandom as a move from social and cultural isolation – whether as rogue readers,

women in patriarchy or gay men in heteronormative culture – into more active communality with kindred spirits" (Duffett 2013: 224). (A move made all the easier by lesbian Disney fan vids rejection of traditional notions of hierarchies of professionalism – there is an open sharing of techniques amongst community members as mentioned and no obvious hierarchy thanks to YouTube's open access platform; a video with 4000 views can be recommended after one with 400 000 views.) There is still a lingering desire for queerness – for lack of a better word – in the narrative. More than a few fan vids I looked at rejected rather than embraced "success(ion)" (Halberstam 2011: 94) or at least complicated what queer success could be. Despite the celebration of lesbian desire in videos such as *"Kamikaze"* or *ILLUMINATED*, the spectre of forced heteronormativity is the winning force by the end, causing the death of the couple in both videos at the hands of a male figure. This refusal to deny the reality of homophobia and the violence that threatens lesbian desire places such fan vids as part of a two-sided lesbian media history. Andrea Weiss expands on the two sides as the radical "lesbianism [as] an antidote to male power" versus the cultural vision of "lesbian nirvana … kept as far from patriarchal realities as possible" (2004: 45). Despite my own belief in the utopian sentiments these fan vids present, I do not want to dismiss these moments lesbian desire clashes with hetero-patriarchal powers. Nor do I disagree with Russo's argument that "techno-utopias (even feminist ones) began to tarnish … with the increasing commercialisation of digital and online platforms" (2018: 159), though I believe small pockets of content such as these lesbian Disney fan vids remain outside of the growing hold of commercial forces. Instead, I will return to Halberstam's ideas on queer failure, these tragic endings become the "acceptance of the finite, the embrace of the absurd, the silly, and the hopelessly goofy … let us instead revel in and cleave to all of our own inevitable fantastic failures" (2011: 187). Lesbian desire may be unable to succeed in the heteronormative Disney sphere, but both "*Kamikaze*" and *ILLUMINATED* end with an idyllic afterlife where the couples reunite, finding freedom in the failure of life.

Fans have always "compensated for deficiencies and gaps in the marketplace" (Coppa 2006: 42), and will continue to do so. Indeed, Disney has shown no signs of embracing the queer in their narratives. And if they did, the question would become whether the aesthetics of lesbian Disney fan vids would remain the same? In some ways it is the very amateur aesthetic,

one of untidy edits and failures in narrative connections that brings the queerness of the images to the surface – a quality that a corporation like Disney would never be able to replicate. At the same time, to force a radical intention on these fan vids risks commodifying them in exactly the way Morrissey warns against when considering their place in academia (2018). As Duffett definitively states; "rather than getting political for the sake of it, fans are usually more interested in modifying the text in ways that extends their pleasure" (2013: 187). So where is the line between queer pleasure and queer politics? Theorists like Halberstam would likely argue the two are mixed. From there it would be easy to extrapolate the fact it would be a political step as well as a pleasurable one for queer audiences if Disney did create a canonically queer princess. As it is, there remains a "relative powerlessness of the consumer in relation to powerful institutions of cultural production and circulation" (Duffett 2013: 279), and an end goal of being subsumed by Disney would result in a loss of power that lesbian Disney fan vids hold as paratexts that are both separate to and intertwined with the source material. Their amateur nature remains a reminder that the utopian sphere Disney has tried to monopolise is easy to co-opt for the voices of outsiders.

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