Under the sea

Ariel Avissar
Tel Aviv University (Israel) ✉ ⓘ

Video URL: https://vimeo.com/866227972

ᴱᴺᴳ **Abstract.** This video applies a deformative logic to images taken from Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (1989), connecting them intextextually with the film *Under the skin* (2013), which provides the music for the piece. It thus highlights and accentuates the violent, rageful gender dynamics of *The Little Mermaid*, reimagining it as a nightmarish scene of body horror and female subjugation.
Keywords: body horror; deformative criticism; Disney; parenthood.

ᴱˢ Bajo el mar

Resumen. Este vídeo aplica una lógica deformativa a imágenes tomadas de *La sirenita* (1989) de Disney, conectándolas intertextualmente con la película *Under the skin* (2013), que proporciona la música a la pieza. De este modo, resalta y acentúa la dinámica de género violenta y furiosa de *La sirenita*, reimaginándola como una escena de pesadilla de horror corporal y subyugación femenina.
Palabras clave: crítica deformativa; Disney; horror corporal; paternidad.

Summary. 1. Written statement. 2. References.

1. Written statement

This short deformative video came out of a series of videographic experimentations with *The Little Mermaid* (John Musker and Ron Clements, 1989), exploring personal themes of childhood memories and parenthood.

For this video, I primarily focused on the scene in which King Triton, Ariel's father, discovers her transgressions against his wishes, having acted on her attraction to the human world. A deformative handling of the scene transformed the characters into disembodied silhouettes, heightening the father's rage-filled punishment of his transgressive daughter and the violence already present in the original scene. While Triton's violence is not directly inflicted on Ariel's body, the other clips intercut into this scene are: the forceful removal of her voice from her body, and her transformation into a human, her flesh violently torn in half. In the context of the narrative, of course, these acts are in fact carried out by Ursula the Sea Witch and follow Ariel's express consent, as she knowingly enters into a devil's bargain with Ursula; however, their inclusion within the scene of Ariel's argument with her father makes it seem as though they are in fact further forms of punishment enacted on her by the vengeful patriarchy, as represented by her father, the rageful Sea King. Once removed from its narrative context, the scene plays out as an abstract performance of the violence and oppression that underlie patriarchal power dynamics as dictated by the gendered politics of rage; as described by Audre Lorde (1997), in a passage I find particularly relevant here:

> For women raised to fear, too often anger threatens annihilation. In the male construct of brute force, we were taught that our lives depended upon the good will of patriarchal power. The anger of others was to be avoided at all costs because there was nothing to be learned from it but pain, a judgment that we had been bad girls, come up lacking, not done what we were supposed to do. And if we accept our powerlessness, then of course any anger can destroy us (Lorde, 1997, p. 283).

In reworking these images, I found myself drawn to an entirely different film – though perhaps not all that different, after all: *Under the skin* (Jonathan Glazer, 2013). In tone, genre, and target audience,

these two films could hardly be more different: one is an animated Disney musical fantasy, the other – an R-rated, art-house work of abstract science-fiction. And yet, upon closer inspection, some striking similarities come to the fore, as both films explore disembodiment and portray acts of rageful revenge directed against a transgressive female Other who is fascinated with the world of Man, a female Other who physically, and painfully, alters her body to conform to an idealized model of desired femininity. Overlayed against a mix of two tracks taken from the score of *Under the skin*, the deformative manipulation of the images reimagines *The Little Mermaid* as a harrowing, nightmarish scene of body horror and female subjugation, one perhaps closer to Hans Christian Andersen's original, more violent story (Andersen, 1846) than to its drastically toned-down Disney adaptation. Though the images are heavily deformed and detached from their original narrative context, the result seems to tap into, and perhaps reveal, both the animated film's inherent gender problematic and the darker, visceral horrors of Andersen's story.

Perhaps in part wishing to counteract the dark and pessimistic tone of the video, I will end with the following quote from Najwa Zebian (2016), which relates, in more ways than one, to *The Little Mermaid* and to its voiceless, rageless protagonist, Ariel: «To the ocean in you, don't be afraid to rage. To the silence in you, don't be afraid to break».

2. References

Andersen, Hans Christian (1976[1846]). The Little Mermaid. *Eighty fairy-tales*. Skandinavisk Bogforlag.

Lorde, Audre (1997 [1981]). The uses of anger. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, *25*(1/2), 278-285. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40005441

Musker, John & Clements, Ron (Directors) (1989). *The Little Mermaid* [Film]. Walt Disney Pictures

Zebian, Najwa (2016). *Mind platter*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.