Writer's Note

In the 7th grade, I underwent the metamorphosis from Episcopalian schoolgirl in saddle oxfords and plaid to leather wearing, pink-haired punk.

From that point onward, I swung from stereotype to stereotype, searching for an identity. It wasn't until later on that I realized that these were surrogate identities--artificial--they didn't show me how to live my life, how to believe in myself as well as those around me, or move forward--only how to dress and, seemingly by extension, act.

This was when I became interested in the effects of appearance on an individual and on the social context he/she inhabits. How is it that short hair and bars of metal in my face make me feel strong, while the same physical attributes make others feel uncomfortable, even disdainful?

The trend of bodily ornamentation in order to alter the perception of an individual is historically common as a means of categorizing different kinds of people or designating allegiance.

Interestingly, I believe that the alterations I made to my appearance, though unintentional, mimicked this phenomenon. In order to distinguish myself from my peers, I needed to reject the standards that classified them as a unit in order to delineate my own individuality.

Today, I still struggle with the implications of my dress and external appearance. I find it distinctly unsettling that I communicate, and likewise, others interpret, elements of my ethical code, personality, and other beliefs by messages I send inadvertently. If I am drawn to an article of clothing, there comes an immediate need to analyze what this garment will say about me. If it coincides with the Grunge movement's aesthetic does it mean that I'm nihilistic and cynical? Does it imply that I'm involved with drug culture? If I imitate the trends I observe in the Oxbow community does it insinuate that I'm artistic and unique, or does it mean that I'm attempting to conform to a certain set of standards in order to communicate something (that may or may not be true) about myself?

In this paper, I decided to analyze the relationship between appearance and its perception.

Possibly the greatest benefit to and deficit of human nature is the immediate and nearly imperceptible compulsion to distinguish a friend from an enemy. In the first moments of acquaintance with an individual, multiple judgments are made in rapid succession, allowing one to instantaneously determine another's potential as threat, mate, or confidant. These evaluations are solely engendered by the silent messages communicated by facial features, which, in accordance to facial symmetry, sexual dimorphism, and youthfulness (Scheib, Gangestad, & Thornhill, 1999) shape our initial perceptions of an individual's character (Dion, Berscheid, Walster 1972).

Filmmakers and other purveyors of media, specifically animators, utilize this instinctual predisposition as a means of delineating characters' roles and dynamics. This phenomenon is most accurately illustrated by Disney's prototypical "Princess" films, which rely on standardized plot lines and one-dimensional characterization. Through the utilization of visual imagery, including character design and color palette, Disney animators exploit man's intrinsic expectation of how good and evil are personified in order to ostensibly characterize two major archetypes: the Hero and the Damsel.

In each of the three classic Disney films, *Snow White, Cinderella,* and *Sleeping Beauty,* the Hero plays the part of the rescuer and the suitor, roles conveyed by two interdependent elements of his appearance: masculinity and attractiveness. In order to give the Hero an air of proactivity and capability, production designers purposefully emphasize physical attributes associated with masculinity, which immediately summon assumptions of action, protection, and virility. The characteristically masculine square jaw, prominent brows, and V-shaped abdomen all indicate the presence of high testosterone levels, and thus, potential immunocompetence (that is, the immune system competent enough to survive and be remanifested genetically). These physical features make an individual attractive to the opposite sex (e.g., Grammer and Thornhill 1994). The Hero's broad shoulders communicate the upper body strength required to fight off competitors for his mate. This indicates not only his genetic superiority, but also the ability to protect his offspring (Little, Jones, DeBruine, Feinberg 2008).

The three princes in each movie are also young and able, evidenced by their clean-shaven faces and lithe physiologies. These attributes help the viewer perceive the Hero as capable; on a primitive level, the viewer recognizes the Hero's ability to protect and defend without the hindrance of age. Additionally, each prince has excellent facial symmetry. Humans naturally shy from those with facial aberrations because deviations from perfect facial symmetry can be indicative of imperfect development and therefore defective genes (Zebrowitz, Fellous, Mignault, & Andreoletti, 2003; Zebrowitz & Rhodes, 2004). Thus, attractiveness, determined by the ways that optimal genetics benefit a woman's offspring, may be achieved (Little, Jones, DeBruine, Feinberg 2008), facial symmetry being one of them. By designing a character with symmetrical facial features, animators enact the power of the "attractiveness halo," the glow of positivity that surrounds those considered to be beautiful or handsome. This phenomenon maintains that attractive people are judged in a more affirming manner (Zebrowitz, Montepare), epitomized by Johann Lavater, a Swiss monk, who wrote, "The morally best are the most beautiful, the morally worst, the most deformed" (Rumsey, Harcourt 6).

Filmmakers manipulate Lavater's mantra to immediately direct the audience's favor to a character without having to reveal any substantive information. Without knowing anything about the princes--in the case of *Snow White* and *Cinderella*, not even his name--the viewer still cheers him on in all his endeavors, dubbing him a fit mate and admirable prize for the Damsel. The princes aren't to be seen as people, rather as nameless, glorified entities, negating the need to

develop their characters and explain their circumstances, as they already possess our trust. We know the happy ending, but not the men responsible for it.

The Damsel is constructed similarly to the Hero. Both have emphases on attractiveness and sexual dimorphism. The Damsel is found to be attractive, and by extension, likable, because of her facial symmetry and characteristic feminine qualities. The hourglass shape of her body indicates her physical fitness as well as her capacity to bear children. While the Hero has a certain youthfulness, the Damsel is portrayed as juvenile, illustrated with quintessential "babyish" features. These include large, doe eyes; small noses with narrow bridges; round faces; plump, colored lips; and a lower vertical placement of features, to create a higher forehead and a shorter chinm (Keating, 2002; Montepare & Zebrowitz, 1998; Zebrowitz, 1997). The large eyes indicate her skin has yet to lose its elasticity to age and does not hood her eyes. The Damsel's round face and full lips contrast to the thin and gaunt face of an elder. Baby-faced individuals elicit sympathy because they are associated with child-like traits, such as naivety, submission, and weakness, but also warmth and honesty (Montepare & Zebrowitz, 1998). Naturally, the Disney princesses fall immaculately into this mold, forever viewed as sweet young women who become unexpected victims of fate. Conjure the image of kind, obedient Sleeping Beauty locked in her tower, of benevolent, industrious Cinderella imprisoned as a servant by her wicked stepmother. Moviegoers automatically empathize with these women, whom they assume to be passive and ingenuous by their paradigmatic characteristics.

In an era when the power of media alters our perceptions to become more and more commensurate with its unassuming propaganda, the need for vigilance concerning its effect grows greater. However, if the story sells, what exactly is the problem? By turning a blind eye to the stereotypes we allow our children to consume and accept through these films, we are not only perpetuating, but also indirectly encouraging the generalization of human beings by the sole basis of looks. Without realizing it, we are enabling the next generation to bully that weird looking kid on the swing set, to not share their cookies with that boy with the strange skin condition. We are allowing children--who become adolescents and teenagers and adults--to devalue human life on the pretense of superficiality.

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