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Cinderella's Princely Ever After: Post-Feminist "Cinderella" Adaptations for Young Audiences

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This paper focuses on three film adaptations of “Cinderella” that appeared in the late 1990s and early 2000s: *Ever After: A Cinderella Story* (1998), *A Cinderella Story* (2004), and *Another Cinderella Story* (2008). A close reading of the details of the movies, particularly the presentation of the Cinderella characters, the relationships between women, and the role that men play, reveals problematic ideologies about gender and power. All these films are postfeminist adaptations of the Cinderella story that have a veneer of girl power and independence, but actually suggest that most females are not trustworthy and that true power lies with the masculine.

Keywords: Cinderella, postfeminism, children’s film adaptations

Perrault’s version of “Cinderella”, published in 1697, is one of the most easily recognised fairy tales because its key elements continue to be those most identified with the story: the beautiful heroine orphaned and living in a state of domestic oppression at the hands of other women; the social event she is forbidden from attending requiring her consequent transformation; and, of course, the trophy husband that results from her attendance (not to mention pumpkins and glass slippers).¹ Revisions of the story often turn on the interpretations of these characteristics. In part, Perrault’s version is widely known because of the Disney animated film that uses it as the core text. Given that

¹ Christine Jones in *Mother Goose Refigured: A Critical Translation of Charles Perrault’s Fairy Tales* (2016) argues that much of the ideology of our passive, cultural Cinderella story comes from faulty translations. In her own, new translation, she footnotes key differences. While fascinating, it does not change the received story pop culture is familiar with, which is arguably based more on Disney than Perrault.

Perrault's story was written in the seventeenth century and that the film was released in 1950, one might expect problematic gender depictions; similarly, one might expect that more recent adaptations have kept up with the times, becoming more feminist in their outlooks. Yet many, many film adaptations have, in fact, followed the Disney version, and I would like to focus on several from the late 1990s and early 2000s.

It would be reasonable to assume that social changes wrought by the successive waves of feminist movements, particularly third-wave feminism with its emphasis on Girl Power,² would be reflected in live-action Cinderella adaptation updates, if you will, that remove the story from its indistinct fairy-tale setting and locate it in a definite and recognisable place and time, be it France in 1517 or the San Fernando Valley in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Within a decade, four big budget Cinderella updates appeared: *Ever After: A Cinderella Story* (1998),³ *A Cinderella Story* (2004), *Ella Enchanted* (2004),⁴ and *Another Cinderella Story* (2008).⁵ Perhaps surprisingly, all depict problematic gender politics⁶ that, in some ways, are even more regressive than older versions of the story, even Perrault's.

All of these films feature a spunky, bright (and beautiful) heroine with dreams of her own, who is definitely *not* looking for a prince to make her life complete. In addition, all these films prominently feature stepmothers and stepsisters whose singular focus in life seems to be to make the heroines' lives a misery. Excepting helper characters, all other women showcase a line-up of the worst traits commonly ascribed to women: vanity, self-delusion, heartlessness, and gold-digging. Furthermore, the movies all indicate that masculinity is what is important, not just through the Prince character but also through Cinderella's relationship with her missing father and through various male characters who play enabling "Fairy Godmothers." This approach to storytelling leads a thoughtful viewer to wonder what exactly these films are saying to their young audiences about being female. Clearly, the professed, feminist, girl-power stance of these films needs to be interrogated in light of their stereotyped messages about the importance of men in women's lives and women's relationships with each other. Close examination shows the

² In the 1990s, third-wave feminists introduced the idea of a reclamation of all things girly that had been "tossed out with sexism during the Second Wave" (Setianto and Win 2020: 574). Girl Power was empowerment, but of a playful variety that rejected shrillness and emphasised individuality.

³ With its PG-13 rating and cast of adult characters, *Ever After* probably has an older target audience than the other films; however, as far as structure and ideology are concerned, it falls right in line with the others. It also explicitly identifies itself as an adaptation of the Cinderella story, so one assumes the film would be thought of as an appropriate film for young female audiences.

⁴ This film is an almost unrecognisable adaptation of Gail Carson Levine's novel, *Ella Enchanted* (1997), and as it is a fantasy film it will not be part of this discussion; however, it exhibits the same postfeminist sensibility as the realistic films.

⁵ There is a third entry in this series that has almost identical characteristics and ideologies to the first two and is also directed by Damon Sanstefano: 2011's *A Cinderella Story: Once Upon a Song*.

⁶ *Another Cinderella Story*, in particular, offers opportunity for analysis of its racial commentary; the Cinderella character is Latinx (and forced to work as a household servant) while the stepfamily and Prince are white. The best friend of Cinderella appears to be of mixed ethnicity (her sister's boyfriend's cousins who come to clean are obviously Asian) and the Prince's best friend (who works as a Godmother character of sorts) is African American.

movies' rejection of patriarchal values is as ephemeral a costume as the girls' ball gowns; they do not offer any deep or thoughtful critique or comment on the Cinderella story. Each version of the story evidences the postfeminist mindset pervasive in media at the time.

Rosalind Gill theorises that postfeminist sensibility can be used to analyse popular culture; a key tenet of postfeminism in narrative is that it allows a viewer to see female agency but presents it within the confines of unquestioned patriarchal norms (Banet-Weiser et al. 2020). Susan Douglas, in *Enlightened Sexism*, further explains the 1990s in the US as a time when “women’s liberation [was] a *fait accompli*”, a time in which girls were encouraged “to claim their sassy selves” (2010: 5, 55). Girl Power could be seen everywhere, from the Spice Girls pop stars to the rise of women’s soccer. Girls and young women were positioned as “intrepid, choice-making agents” (Banet-Weiser 2018: 153). Some thinkers were so concerned about this new sort of female and what seemed like “a radical gesture in terms of disrupting gender relations” (153) that there was a fear that boys and men would fall behind – as seen in books with sensational titles like *The Myth of Male Power: Why Men are the Disposable Sex* (Farrell 1993), *The Decline of Males: The First Look at the Unexpected New World for Men and Women* (Tiger 1999), and *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Policies Are Harming Our Young Men* (Sommers 2000). Douglas’s ideas are built from cultural and media analysis and observation: “Enlightened Sexism is feminist in its outward appearance, but sexist in its intent” (2010: 10). Douglas uses Angela McRobbie and Rosalind Gill’s discussions of postfeminism as her starting point. McRobbie writes that postfeminist thought “invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account in order to suggest that equality is achieved... that [feminism] is no longer needed, a spent force” (2004a: 4). McRobbie points out that postfeminist thinking can be found across society (in the institutions of work and education, for instance), but that “through a complex array of machinations, elements of contemporary popular culture are perniciously effective in regard to the undoing of feminism” (2004a: 4). The postfeminist narratives of these films for young people are particularly distressing, as they feature a “resistance to interrogating structural gender inequalities” partnered with a replication of patriarchal norms (Banet-Weiser 2018: 153). In what follows, I will focus primarily on the realistic films *Ever After, A Cinderella Story*, and *Another Cinderella Story*. As old media does not disappear as the new comes in,⁷ the “neoconservative values” put forward by these films to their young, primarily female audiences continue to be troubling (McRobbie 2004a: 4).

Cinderella’s body and mind

At its core, a Cinderella story is about transformation – rags to riches, domestic drudge to princess. The protagonist’s transformation is made visible to others through

⁷ Some more recent adaptations include *Cinderella* (2015), a live-action Disney film directed by Kenneth Branagh, and *Cinderella* (2021), an Amazon original film featuring a multi-ethnic cast and a Cinderella who desires to succeed as a businesswoman.

her clothing and status, but she is exceptionally beautiful from the start. Cinderella's remarkable beauty makes her plight all the more pathetic: "Cinderella looked a thousand times more beautiful in her shabby clothes than her sisters, no matter how magnificent their clothes were" (Perrault 2001: 450). Each film presents the audience with a Cinderella character who fits well within the beauty standard: thin, yet curvy; light-skinned, and able bodied. They are all active, literally: Sam, from *A Cinderella Story*, is a tomboy; Mary, from *Another Cinderella Story*, is a dancer; and Danielle, from *Ever After*, is a hard-working farm girl. All three are presented as traditionally attractive, if boyish (until the pre-ball transformation, of course). Their sexuality is, indeed, downplayed, but each is notably marked by a feature typically signifying sexual attractiveness: Sam, played by Hillary Duff, is blonde and curvy; Danielle, played by Drew Barrymore, is also shapely with a comely face; and Mary, played by Selena Gomez, is lithe with a full head of brunette hair. Thus, physical beauty is demonstrated to be a key value marker for a woman. In these stories, her beauty is part of a common film trope – The Cool Girl. This character type presents a young woman "who is paradoxically living a masculine lifestyle but exists at the pinnacle of femininity when it comes to her external appearance" (Turner 2020). The Cool Girl's beauty (or hotness, since Cool Girls are usually highly sexualised) is effortless and, more importantly, unnoticed by the girl herself. The Cool Girl is simply an example of a postfeminist character type – the girl who chooses to embrace all things masculine, yet remains desirable, and therefore does not challenge patriarchal norms.

Sam, Mary, and Danielle's desirability and underlying femininity are clearly demonstrated by the transformations that take place for the ball (or high school dances). Each of the heroines is dressed for her event by someone else – having little to no say in her post-transformation appearance. The Helper characters surrounding Cinderella recognise both her beauty and her potential for using it, leaving the girls amazed at their appearance while seeming strangely lacking in self-knowledge and passive when they were previously self-aware go-getters. However, the story demands conspicuous and highly gendered costumes as part of the transformation. Ironically, each Cinderella character needs the fabulous, hyper-feminine dress and makeup to attract the attention of the Prince, but she cannot be seen as too interested in it. So, while the films go to great lengths to demonstrate that these girls are not just pretty faces (and bodies), in the end, it is primarily these faces and bodies that allow them to succeed, demonstrating the common postfeminist idea that a woman's appearance and body can be "a site of liberation" (Banet-Weiser 2018: 153).

A second characteristic of this trope is the Cool Girl's attitude of "chill". She is not like other girls and may even repudiate typically feminine things in favour of more masculine pursuits and characteristics (Wang 2021).⁸ A chill girl is "no-drama, no bullsh*t" and does not challenge the males around her or make them uncomfortable by

⁸ Romance genre critic Radway identifies romance novel protagonists as often having ambivalence about the "female gender by associating the heroine's personality or activities with traits and behaviours usually identified with the masculine" (1984: 123).

being emotional or by having any interests outside the ones they share – like sports or cars (Davidson 2015). Mary loves to dance (presented in this film as a gender-neutral activity), but she also skateboards. Danielle is physically powerful from all her outdoor work (she literally carries the Prince at one point), but is also quick-witted and has a strong sense of social justice. Sam is shown to have an admirable work ethic, but she is also shown hitting baseballs shot from a pitching machine for fun while her male best friend cringes. When Sam articulates for the audience that she is behind “in the hair and makeup department” because she was raised by a father, this shortcoming is presented as a sign of her virtue. Put simply, masculine qualities have more value than feminine ones. These Cinderellas wear their tomboy associations proudly, and the movies juxtapose these girls with the more traditionally feminine stepsisters. Further, these modern Cinderellas (as in the Grimms’ version of the story) are not averse to a little payback. Sam’s stepfamily ends up working in her diner (a court-appointed punishment, so it is not really her doing, wink) under Godmother Rhonda’s watchful eye; in *Ever After*, the worse of the two stepsisters and the stepmother are last seen working in the castle’s laundry. As they attack each other, they fall into a vat of fabric dye. The scene immediately prior makes it clear that this job was Danielle’s idea. After all, kindness and compassion (chill, if you will) can only extend just so far where rival females are concerned. In these films, there is only one girl who is worthy of attention and admiration; thus, in their focus on individualism, the films conform to the postfeminist sensibility.

Critic Amie Doughty, in her book-length study of folktale revisions for children, goes so far as to say of *A Cinderella Story* that it has a “very strong feminist message” (2006: 124). I strongly disagree. There can be no doubt that the heroines of these stories do not exhibit the stereotypical passive Cinderella personality, and so they may have the surface veneer of feminism. Speaking about Cinderella films, in general, Justin Platt writes that “current film adaptations further recast Cinderella and her story to reflect changing roles of young women for an American audience” (2007: 32). Each girl has a talent of her own: Sam is academically gifted and dreams of attending Princeton, Mary wants to be a professional dancer, and Danielle is politically aware and works to relieve the plight of the oppressed. Each also has a reason for her subservient position and is self-aware of the choices that have placed her there: Sam, who narrates her own story, explains that she is dependent on her father’s money (managed by the wicked stepmother) to attend college. Mary’s mother was a dancer for pop singer Dominique Blatt, the stepmother figure who takes Mary in after her mother’s death. Each “Cinderella” accepts her lot in life as temporary and approaches it with a sense of humour, trying to subvert the stepfamilies at every turn. In addition, both Sam and Mary have all the necessities for a girl of her time – cell phones, computers, and MP3 players; neither sits in metaphoric ashes – although both are assigned domestic work of cleaning and cooking. Even Danielle, who seems the worst off, has her father’s books and still lives on the farm where she had a happy childhood. On some level, they are accepting of the status quo or, if you prefer, exhibit that cool girl chill; they are not “uptight, superficial, or annoying” (Turner 2020). Each film is relentlessly focused on the exceptional female

and none challenges or questions existing patriarchal norms or presents the concept of sisterhood as a potentially positive force.

Perrault's Cinderella has a "gentleness and goodness [that] were without parallel" (2001: 449–450). In some ways, the two characteristics of kindness and assertiveness are at odds for each character throughout the films. Mary, in particular, is quick with a verbal riposte, with the stepfamily taking the brunt of her commentary (for instance, observing she will need a flamethrower to clean Dominique's bedroom). Danielle effectively presents philosophical arguments on the spur of the moment and is a fan of Sir Thomas More. Sam's relationship with her Prince character is initially established through writing and the analysis of his thoughts. Despite these girls' willingness to break rules (sneaking out to the ball), the oppressed state they live in, and the fact they have talents and life goals, each is also shown to be concerned with the wellbeing of others, or at least of certain others. For Sam and Mary, that is friends and co-workers. For Danielle, it is her fellow servants, in particular, and the peasantry, in general. *Ever After's* plot really kicks off when Danielle disguises herself as a courtier to reclaim a servant who has been sold to pay off her stepmother's debts. As Susan Douglas writes, the most important thing a girl can be after being "hot" is "nice" (2010: 241). These Cinderellas' kindness, coupled with their great beauty (evident to everyone except themselves), sets them apart from the other females in the films who are conniving and self-serving.

Stepping up the steps

With regard to the stepsisters, a pattern emerges; one is sexualised and vicious, while the other is dim and mainly imitates her mother and sister. She may even show kindness to Cinderella on the sly (and also be mistreated by her own mother and sister).⁹ This presentation of the stepsisters is in keeping with Perrault: "the second daughter, however, was not as malicious as her elder sister" (2001: 450).¹⁰ Each film spends a great deal of time showing all three of these female characters in a poor light as they plot against the Cinderella character while also insulting and backstabbing one another. Repeatedly, their plans backfire or demonstrate to the audience how dim-witted and unpleasant they truly are. The girls from *A Cinderella Story* attend a Halloween dance in a two-headed bunny costume, while the girls from *Another Cinderella Story* humiliate themselves by performing ineptly at the Prince's dance contest (although they and their mother think they have done quite well). The audience can see that these girls are not cool or chill (although one of them may be hot), and as they actively seek attention from the men, they do not deserve it. These films wink, for lack of a better word, at the audience, scorning the idea that these characters could ever really be competition for

⁹ Olive from *Ella Enchanted* is the most extreme example of this; her dimwittedness is a frequent source of comedy for both her family and the audience.

¹⁰ There is a further commonality among visual representations of the stepsisters. The cruel one is skinny, while the kinder one is heavy. This can be seen in the 1950 Disney film, *Ella Enchanted*, and *Ever After*, where Jacqueline's weight is used as an excuse to humiliate her. This is not the case in the *Cinderella Story* entries, perhaps because of the modern settings.

Cinderella. At stories' end for the two modern films, all four stepsisters are punished equally, regardless of their role in Cinderella's persecution. *Ever After* ends with the older sister, who had been aggressively pursuing the prince, doing ignominious work in the palace laundry alongside her mother. The younger sister is spared punishment.

Because the Prince is a finite resource, all female characters are placed in competition. Because the stepsisters in the films in the *Cinderella Story* series are more comic relief than anything else, there is another female character who serves as actual competition for Cinderella – a competitor who is deeply invested in “judging, dissing, and competing with other girls, especially over guys” (Douglas 2010: 6). The stepsisters are her dupes, and it is she who masterminds plans to keep Cinderella and the Prince apart. These characters resemble the mean girls described in books from the period like *Queen Bees and Wanna-bees* (2002) and *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls* (2002); girls who knowingly and cruelly inflict damage on other girls and practise “relational aggression” (McRobbie 2004b: 257). Shelby, from *A Cinderella Story*, is the head cheerleader and the ex-girlfriend of Austin (the Prince). She is shown being vicious in an off-handed way to her fellow students, but particularly so to Sam's male best friend, Carter. Nadia, from *Another Cinderella Story*, is also an ex-girlfriend of the Prince, J.P., and is a talented dancer (of traditional ballet). She arranges for Mary to see her in J. P.'s bedroom one night in order to break up their burgeoning romance. Unlike the obviously unappealing stepsisters, these girls are stereotypically attractive (blond and athletic in both cases). Superficially, these rivals appear to be active competition for the Prince's approbation (unlike the stepsisters); however, they, too, lack the Cool Girl characteristics, and are too stereotypically feminine to actually win the Prince.

These girls offer up the worst caricatures of the female gender; they are egotistical, emotional, and fixated on their own beauty. One must be concerned when problematic beliefs about the feminine are being reinforced through repetition. But these films go even further; in an escalation of nastiness, each film provides a scene that has no parallel in the Perrault story – one of utter social humiliation orchestrated by the stepfamily and/or the foil character. All the ridiculousness of the stepsisters' appearances and previous missteps seems to be forgotten as they collude with others to devastate Cinderella and reveal her humble position in order to boost their own social standing. At the ball, Danielle is revealed by her stepmother to be a commoner; the wings Leonardo Di Vinci has made as part of her transformation are torn, and she runs off humiliated in front of the entire French court. The cheerleaders in *A Cinderella Story*, with the aid of the stepsisters, perform a skit (loosely based on “The Frog Prince”) that reveals the star football player Austin's obsession with “Diner Girl” instead of with someone more worthy in the high school social standings. Finally, the stepsisters of *Another Cinderella Story* arrange for the entire school to view a home video of an eleven-year-old Mary singing and dancing in her room to one of J.P.'s songs. Unlike other incidents of mistreatment, these moments are not played for laughs. Here the viewer clearly sees women trying to police the Cinderella characters to keep them in their social place. Over the years, many have commented that Cinderella is not a rags-to-riches story, but rather

a riches-to-rags-to-riches story. This is one of the key differences here: Mary, Sam, and Danielle really do not have the social status (or its modern-day equivalent) to pursue these men and these dreams. Here, perhaps, is where the movies let their audience know that, despite the trappings of contemporary realism, they really *are* fantasy. Early in the nineteenth century, Mrs. Trimmer (never a fan of fantasy) complained that fairy tales depicted "some of the worst passions that can enter into the human breast [...] such as envy, jealousy, a dislike to mothers-in-law and half-sisters, vanity, a love of dress, etc., etc." (quoted in Whalley 1981: 145). The stepfamilies in these films are no different.

However, the worst perpetrator of injustice and stereotyped bad female behaviour is found in the stepmother figure: Perrault's stepmother is "the haughtiest and proudest woman in the world", and her daughters have the "same temperament" (2001: 449). The appearance of these adult women is of utmost importance when considering how feminist these films might or might not be. In many ways, the films indicate that the stepmothers consider themselves competition for Cinderella, furthering the idea that men are a limited resource always to be fought over.¹¹ All three of the older women are supposed to be attractive in culturally stereotypical ways, although the viewer can clearly see this is not the case. The disconnect is amazing: Angelica Huston in *Ever After* is richly dressed and impeccably mannered, but she is all angles and sharpness. Similarly, Dominique Blatt (played by comedian Jane Lynch, known for her over-the-top characters) from *Another Cinderella Story* is thin, youth-obsessed while obviously not youthful, and dressed in ridiculous clothing. More than once we are shown some shocking undergarment of hers (a hot-pink bustier, a leopard print bra). The greatest caricature is Fiona (Jennifer Coolidge) from *A Cinderella Story*. The blond actress has what appear to be collagen-injected lips and pronounced sexual characteristics – large breasts and hips – emphasised via tight-fitting and youthful clothing. Finally, her makeup is also exaggerated – practically garish, in fact. The films set up all three characters for ridicule; most young audience members would be left with nothing but scorn for the stepmothers' desperate attempts at staying girlish.

Their personalities are similarly unattractive. In these three films, the mistreatment of the Cinderella character is so excessive it is frequently played for laughs from the audience. The extreme nature of the girls' mistreatment assures audiences that such things do not *really* happen so they need not be too concerned. While Sam is forced to work in the diner, Mary as a maid, and Danielle as a household servant, their plights are often more reflective of the stepmothers' desire for control than anything else. For instance, to prevent Mary from going to the school's Black and White Ball, Dominique says she must clean the house. Mary responds, "I've cleaned every room in this house". Dominique replies, "NOT...my bedroom". This, evidently, is something she has never had to do before. The camera then shows two golden double doors that open into a very large room. Clothes are strewn on every surface. On her way out, Domifreak, as Mary calls her, slips, and then reminds her to get rid of those fish sticks as "they've been there

¹¹ Here there are shades of the fairytale, Snow White, wherein the stepmother is driven to attempted murder in order to remain "the fairest of them all".

since Lent”. There is no parallel scene in Perrault’s story; Cinderella is simply described as doing all the hardest work in the house. No particular job is assigned to her out of cruelty or spite.

As females are the primary agents of suffering, all three films seem inclined to agree that women just naturally cannot get along – especially older and younger women. The films “[rest] crucially on ageism, on severing young women from their elders” (Douglas 2010: 11). In the contemporary versions, the stepmothers mock their own daughters on occasion in addition to their mistreatment of Cinderella. In *Ever After*, the stepmother is relentless in her criticism and denigration of the younger daughter Jaqueline. In contrast, in Perrault’s story, the stepmother “could not abide the young girl, whose good qualities made her own daughters appear all the more detestable” (2001: 450). Bruno Bettelheim has explored the psychodynamics of the oedipal tensions between the older female and the younger one in his classic, *The Uses of Enchantment* (1989). Each stepmother character exerts her power to undercut Cinderella’s future and maintain her own dominant position. In *Another Cinderella Story*, Dominique appears to be simply jealous of Mary’s youth, talent, and appearance (she herself is an aging pop star); she is in direct competition for the Prince’s attention, as he is a popular performer, and she would like to record a duet to bolster her career. She goes out of her way to verbally humiliate Mary, telling her she is “nobody, not pretty, not successful”. Dominique also lies to the admission committee at the Manhattan Academy of Dance to destroy Mary’s opportunity to audition – in essence, she is another aging woman who sees youth as a threat. Similarly, Fiona (ironically) tells Sam, “You’re not very pretty and you’re not very bright”. She also destroys Sam’s admission letter to Princeton. In both cases, the stepmothers cut off their Cinderella’s opportunity for escape from her circumstances and seek to keep her under their direct control. Through their “repudiation of feminism, feminist politics and values”, the films demonstrate to audiences that no (or few) females are trustworthy, since true power lies with the masculine.

Male magical transformations

Of course, the Perrault story features a powerful female who aids Cinderella – the Fairy Godmother.¹² Speaking of fairy godmothers, Marcia Lieberman has written, “They are not human beings, they are asexual and many of them are old. They are not examples of powerful women with whom children can identify as role models” (1987: 196). However, I tend to think they actually represent female power used for good – an empathetic, powerful female character to further feminist ideals of sisterhood and an ethos of care (Gilligan 1986). They may be old, but Fairy Godmothers demonstrate to readers that not *all* women are the enemy, and it is possible to exercise power without cruelty. Regardless of this tradition, all these films divide the Helper role among multiple

¹² While in the Grimm story it is the spirit of the dead mother who helps Cinderella, the dead mothers in these films barely register. Both Danielle and Mary knew their mothers, and Danielle borrows her name, but neither woman seems to have played an important role in the girls’ emotional lives. Sam’s mother does not get a single mention.

characters. *A Cinderella Story* features an African American diner manager, Rhonda, and a male friend, Carter; in *Another Cinderella Story*, Mary has Tami, a best friend of ambiguous ethnicity, and J.P.'s manager, Dustin. Danielle of *Ever After* has her male best friend, Gustav, and none other than Leonardo da Vinci. In the end, four of the six fairy godmother roles go to males. The two female Fairy Godmothers are doubly disadvantaged – being both female and dark skinned – yet they willingly sacrifice their time, talents, and possessions for (the white) Cinderella's future. For instance, Tami, while she has made Mary's dress, also has to wheel and deal to get her to the ball, hiring her sister's boyfriend's cousins to come and do the cleaning for Mary. Rhonda gives up a dress she was saving for her own wedding to allow Sam to attend the ball. She also tells Fiona, the stepmother, that she will quit her job (her livelihood) at the diner and take all the customers with her if Sam is not treated better. To further underscore how little power Rhonda, in particular, has, a host of support characters are found in the other diner employees and loyal customers. Alone, not one of these characters can enact Cinderella's transformation and attendance at the ball; they require support. Both Tami and Rhonda are clear about their disdain toward the stepfamily and show it via catty remarks and mockery. Female competition and antagonism, in general, are normalised as viewers see that good females have scant power in the world.

The shifting of the Fairy Godmother roles to male characters helps to confirm how important masculine power is. Carter, Sam's best friend of *Another Cinderella Story*, shares his helper role with Rhonda and the diner crew. In addition, he also functions as comic relief with a subplot of his own, pursuing both an acting career and the unattainable mean girl, Shelby. Yet, he is present at almost all the key moments: he encourages Sam to attend the ball, drives her there and back (rather than a glass slipper, she drops her cell phone), escorts her away from the scene of her public humiliation, and is with her at the big game when the Prince finally makes his declaration of love. Dustin, J.P.'s manager, the romantic interest of Tami, is the other helper to Mary. He is tellingly dressed as Cupid at the Black & White Ball. He encourages J.P. to pursue Cinderella (whose glass slipper is in the form of a dropped MP3 player) and along with Tami convinces her to attend the climatic dance contest (which he emcees). The plot twist here is that there is a brief romance between Mary and J.P., which ends because of a misunderstanding (arranged by the stepsisters and Nadia).¹³ As Dustin acts as advisor to both Cinderella and the Prince characters, he is uniquely suited to bring them back together, and Tami's importance decreases over the course of the film. Finally, *Ever After* features two males in the helper role – childhood friend and apprentice painter, Gustav, and Leonardo da Vinci. The film opens and closes on a painting of Danielle done by da Vinci – a testament to the truth of the tale and an invocation of a respected historical (male) figure to lend gravitas to what might otherwise be mistaken for just an old wives' tale. Like Dustin, da Vinci is an advisor to both Cinderella and the Prince, and it is he who supplies the Prince

¹³ This separation due to misunderstanding is a plot staple of adult romances as detailed by Radway.

with the shoe she leaves behind after her public humiliation during the ball. That would be the same ball that da Vinci helps to dress her for by creating fairy wings and (one assumes) the glittery face makeup she wears. Superficially, while these films seem to be offering not only strong role models to young women through the Cinderella character, they are also acknowledging men as capable of care-taking, and so venture outside the masculine stereotype by offering a supportive male character. However, examining the details of the films in more depth demonstrates that women have little power, and it is males who not only understand what is best for the girls but who have the power to create that future; while each may share some characteristics beyond a typical male type, they still have and exercise power¹⁴ over others. Further, these fairy godfathers¹⁴ aid Cinderella as she “travel[s] from father to beloved” (Rothschild 2013: 136).

Father figures

Unlike in Perrault’s story, fathers play central roles in two of the three films. The exception is *Another Cinderella Story*, in which Mary’s father is never mentioned (and her mother only provides backstory). However, this lack of substance is more than made up for in the other two films, wherein the fathers, despite their deaths, have enormous power over their daughters. Whereas Perrault’s story presents a weak father who is “totally under the control of his wife”, in these films, the male characters are not faulted at all, not even for marrying these women as their second wives (2001: 450). *A Cinderella Story* begins with father/daughter bonding and, in voiceover, Sam refers to herself as “my dad’s best friend”. Sam’s father is responsible for the dream she pursues throughout the film. As a child she asks where princesses go to college; he remarks Princeton – the same place the princes do. Attaining admission to Princeton (Prince Town) becomes Sam’s be all and end all. She first meets the Prince, Austin, anonymously in an online group for Princeton hopefuls. One of her biggest complaints against stepmother Fiona is that she has made over her father’s diner, named “Hal’s”, in her own image, replacing the more masculine, sporty decor with pink kitsch. After Fiona has faked a rejection letter from Princeton and Sam has been humiliated by the stepsisters and cheerleaders, Sam comforts herself by going through her father’s things. Sam’s father actually manages to come to her rescue from beyond the grave as he had hidden his will in the fairy-tale book the two used to read together. The fact that he hid this official document from his wife, indicating his lack of trust, and that he leaves everything to his daughter are evidence of their bond. However, no one questions why he would marry a woman who he obviously expects to be duplicitous or that he puts the onus on his daughter to confront this woman after his death. Fiona and her daughters lose everything and, as legal restitution, are reduced to Sam’s former position as “Diner Girls” in the restored Hal’s establishment. As emotional reimbursement, one of the final scenes features them squabbling as they scrub the floor under Rhonda’s watchful eye.

¹⁴ There is further Freudian commentary possible about fairy godfathers and wands and the source of patriarchal power which I shall forego.

Danielle's story, too, begins with a focus on her relationship with her father: "Once upon a time, there lived a young girl who loved her father very much" (*Ever After*). Their emotional and intimate interactions continue after he has married the Baroness. He is shown tucking the young Danielle into bed; she says, "you're a husband now". He tellingly replies, "I am a father first and forever". Thus, the Stepmother's jealousy is given direct cause; both characters kneel by him as he is dying, and his final gesture is to say, "I love you", turning his eyes from his wife to his child as he does so. As an adult, Danielle works to maintain the lands of her father in honour of his memory despite her mistreatment (which, in keeping the PG-13 rating, includes being lashed). Both Sam and Danielle articulate (in passing) that Fiona and the Baroness should have been mother figures and that they would have liked to be loved by them; however, given the primacy of the masculine (particularly of the fathers) in their emotional lives and the overwhelming evidence that women are innately corrupt and incapable of having a positive relationship (even with their own daughters), the films clearly show that one can only have positive relationships with men. The patriarchy knows what is best for its daughters.

Someday the Prince will arrive

At the start of their stories, these heroines are decidedly *not* yearning for romance, much less marriage. However, as with other princess films, at some point the focus changes "from independence to romance" (Rothschild 2013: 152). In a parallel with the adult romance genre, the Prince is introduced early in the film, and the emotional relationship between heroine and hero builds over the course of the film. Once the girls become involved with their various Prince Charming figures, each Cinderella has something important she can teach her young man. Sam's in-crowd kid Austin has to learn to choose his own path, rather than let his father dictate his life choices. J.P., the pop superstar who wants to be a normal high school senior, has to rediscover his love of dance. Finally, Prince Henry, the heir to France, needs to be taught by Danielle that with privilege come obligations. Thus, the young women appear to be in a position of wisdom and power in their various relationships. There is much to admire in these modern, self-aware young Cinderellas, although they all exhibit elements of the film trope of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl (MPDG). Much like the Cool Girl trope discussed earlier, the MPDG is not like other girls. While she is conventionally attractive (even though she rejects fashion and cosmetics), she is not conventional in any other way; she is usually described as fun, quirky, child-like, and/or whimsical. In the narrative, her primary aim is "to teach and transform" the "brooding soulful young" male protagonist (Schwyzer 2013). Generally, the MPDG is a helper character and has no independent goals of her own. While none of these Cinderellas is quite that extreme, by introducing the Prince and his problems and having the Cinderella character work to solve them for him, the films force Mary, Sam, and Danielle to function in this way – helping "mopey, sad white men self-actualize" (Rabin 2014). Thus, they share the spotlight of the story's focus, confirming their lack of importance.

In keeping with the MPDG cliché (and patriarchal ideology in general), the Prince is shown to have considerably more power both in the world at large and in the relationship. In two of the three films, the young woman is only able to fulfil her dreams through the Prince character. In the third, *A Cinderella Story*, the father provides the means to the Happily Ever After, but Austin still has the power of rejection. Once his mystery girl is identified, publicly, as Diner Girl he chooses not to accept her. All three Princes have a great deal of social capital: Austin is captain of the high school football team, J.P. is a pop superstar, and Prince Henry of France is an actual Prince, if a disgruntled one. Early on, J.P. walks into and takes over a dance class from an adult woman (who happily lets him); ever confident, he later volunteers to show Mary some moves for her audition. The two modern stories each present a scene where young women literally line up in front of the Prince for the opportunity to prove that they are the mysterious Cinderella character and thereby gain access to him. These “tests” are parallel to the shoe search of the traditional tale, as Austin and JP are in possession of a cell phone and MP3 player respectively. Mary’s stepsisters try to pass themselves off by stealing her playlist and using it to identify themselves as the mystery girl; Sam’s sisters try to play a similar trick with regard to her phone. Prince Henry, who is set to marry a Princess of Spain, makes a deal with his father to find a local bride, and is aggressively pursued by the Baroness and stepsister Marguerite. All these details underscore the concept that males are a scarce and powerful resource that puts females at odds with each other and that should be captured by any means necessary, be it fair or foul.

A Cinderella Story is the outlier; Sam can go to Princeton with or without Austin, and at the movie’s end her voiceover points out she is only a freshman, so whether or not her Happily Ever After will feature Austin she does not know. However, in the other films, the Cinderella’s dreams cannot be made reality without the Prince’s intervention. After her public outing as a commoner, Danielle is sold by her stepmother to a neighbour who has been menacing her for some time. When he becomes sexually aggressive, she rescues herself, leaving him bleeding, and strides away from his home. The Prince, in the meantime, has been convinced by da Vinci that the heroine’s origins do not matter. Because she sees him for who he truly is, she is his true bride. He rides into the courtyard, only to realise that once again (as with the gypsies earlier) she has executed her own escape. In this way, Danielle is not a traditional passive female; she is a class warrior, but her dreams of social equality and change cannot happen until she ascends to the Prince’s level. Only through him can she do anything significant. The historical setting of the film can be blamed for this power structure; however, the film is happy enough to include other historical unlikelihoods. Mary’s future happiness is even more clearly due to her relationship with the Prince and his place in the world. After the helpers, Dustin and Tami, coax her into attending his dance contest, J.P. cajoles her onto stage to show off her abilities. He then engages her in a one-on-one competition to encourage increasingly complex moves. She wins the contest and thus will dance on J.P.’s big comeback tour. More importantly, J.P. has secretly contacted the Manhattan Academy of Dance; there is a representative in attendance and Mary’s performance

is used as her audition (Dominique had prevented her acceptance previously). In addition to winning the contest, Mary wins a full scholarship, so she will be free of any dependence on Dominique. In both cases, the girls' dreams would hardly be achievable on their own. They need the Princely power to reach their Happily Ever Afters. Thus, in some ways, the Cinderella characters can be seen as active and on an equal footing with the Prince; and yet, looking at the bigger picture, it becomes apparent that this is a typically superficial sort of equality and feminism. Taken together, the male helpers, the fathers, and the Princes all demonstrate very clearly that men are the important and powerful people in the world.

Conclusion

Closely examining the details of these three films shows them all to be clear examples of postfeminist thought, which Susan Douglas calls more dangerous than a Backlash (as described by Susan Faludi in *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* [1991]) because it is more subtle (2010: 11). This subtlety comes in the way the films disguise and erase "how much still remains to be done for girls and women; images that make sexism seem fine, even fun, and insist that feminism is now utterly pointless – even bad for you" (6). In modern versions of the Cinderella story, especially those given modern settings, we might expect outdated and/or inaccurate information on gender norms and romantic relationships to be replaced, making these films fit contemporary ideas and audiences. However, that has only happened on a superficial level. What is insidious is that the underlying ideologies are not particularly progressive and in fact rehash clichés about girls and the feminine: we see the worst of girls' culture, in which antagonistic female relationships are accepted without question, the Cool Girl and/or a Manic Pixie Dream Girl is viewed as being the best sort of female, and where the majority of power, both magical and mundane, is concentrated in the masculine. While there are good women, notably Tami and Rhonda, they lack real power and are overwhelmed by the negative women in screen time. The preponderance of destructive images of females and the camera's focus on them cannot be ignored, nor can we overlook the fact that Cinderella needs a Prince to have a happy ending.

A Cinderella Story, *Another Cinderella Story*, and *Ever After* are all film adaptations of Perrault's story published in 1697. Geoffrey Wagner, in his touchstone work *The Novel and the Cinema* (1975), writes that there are three levels of adaptation of a classic text.¹⁵ The one farthest from the source is one of analogy. Here the source material simply serves as inspiration or as a starting place. The film is something entirely new, grounded firmly in the time and place of its creation and reflecting those ideals rather than those of the original. These films all recreate key narrative moments from the classic story but leave the audience with very different take-aways. Perrault explicitly offered two poetic

¹⁵ The three categories Wagner theorised are transposition, commentary, and analogy. Transposition is as direct a copy from literature to film as possible, while a commentary adaptation will follow the original work, but have purposefully altered elements. An analogy style adaptation only uses the text as a starting place.

morals following his tale. The first advises that “the real fairy gift is graciousness” rather than beauty (2001: 453). However, this does not come across as truthful in any of the films (or in Perrault’s story, for that matter). While all three Cinderella characters are kind, that is not what wins the day, and their kindness is limited to those who are kind to them. Perrault’s second moral is rather more cynical in its conclusion that even if a woman has everything necessary to succeed, she might be unable to without a fairy godmother (or father) to help her out. When stated baldly, this is not acceptable to a modern audience; however, it does, indeed, seem to be the implicit suggestion in these films. The Cinderellas do not succeed just by virtue of their spunk and girl power; they need the help of someone with real-world power, and in these stories that is men. What is most disturbing is how these films seem even *more* anti-female than Perrault’s famous story, leaving the 1697 tale looking comparatively progressive about gender.

Writing about her own experience of trying to fit herself into a type, feminist author Laurie Penny says, “Stories matter. Stories are how we make sense of the world, which doesn’t mean that those stories can’t be stupid and simplistic and full of lies. Stories can exaggerate and offend and they always, always matter” (2013). She goes on to discuss how the stories she consumed as a child and then as a young woman influenced her perception of herself. So, while one can simply look at *A Cinderella Story*, *Another Cinderella Story*, and *Ever After* as fine examples of postfeminist thought from decades ago, I believe audience needs to be taken into consideration, and as the audience for these films is young females, the ideology is particularly troubling. The fact is that old media continues to circulate among new, and when searching, say, a streaming platform, these films will appear alongside newer ones, the animated Disney film, and a whole host of others.¹⁶ Will consuming these films *damage* a child? Perhaps not, but their ideological messages are problematic, as the audience is shown outdated messages about women, girls, and power, and they may be taken as facts about the way the world works, especially if they are repeated across stories and other consumed media. Laurie Penny, born in 1986, chose to shape her life around the fact that she, as a female, thought she could not be a lead character, and the best she could hope for was to play a supporting role in a man’s story. As I write in 2023, I have been reading about the “Pick-me Girl”, the newest, concerning variation on a theme: she “tends to bring other girls down to establish her superiority over them to gain male validation. She values what the boys around her do because that’s what patriarchal structures have told her is valuable, so she views generally feminine activities as frivolous and distasteful” (Phoebe 2023). Clearly, our world is neither postfeminist nor postpatriarchal. Young people

¹⁶ Juxtaposing these films with newer adaptations, such as Amazon’s 2021 *Cinderella*, would be an interesting exercise, demonstrating where society has shifted and where it perhaps has not. For instance, the newer film features a Cinderella who rejects the Prince in order to pursue her dreams (but do not worry, he chooses to accompany her and the Kingdom goes to his very capable younger sister). Additionally, the stepsisters are unpleasant, but not wicked (the aspect of social humiliation is gone), and the stepmother is given motivation for her actions. Finally, Cinderella’s mother plays a meaningful role through a brooch talisman that was once hers. This is not to say the film is unproblematic; the “Fabulous Godmother” is played as an over-the-top gay man, so Cinderella’s transformation is still dependent on a male.

shape themselves based on what surrounds them. Cinderella adaptations, in particular, need to be interrogated in light of contemporary, feminist thought.¹⁷ They should not get a pass because they are based on a traditional story or because they are "light" fare for the young. Susan Douglas writes that there is (probably) not a cabal of men hiding somewhere trying to undermine the place of the feminine in the world: "What we see and hear from the media comes from the most noble intentions of certain writers and producers to offer girls and women strong role models" (2010: 12). Penny writes that the "failure of narrative is imposed off the page, too" (2013). Good intentions are not enough, and neither are superficial nods to girl power and the spunky girl heroine of postfeminism.

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¹⁷ Actually, I would argue, all media we consume needs to be examined with a critical eye. Understanding does not preclude enjoyment.

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Pepeljuginu prinčevsko zauvijek: postfeminističke adaptacije „Pepeljuge“ za mladu publiku

Rad je usredotočen na tri filmske adaptacije „Pepeljuge“ koje su se pojavile krajem 1990-ih i početkom 2000-ih: *Ever After: A Cinderella Story* (1998), *A Cinderella Story* (2004) i *Another Cinderella Story* (2008). Pomnom analizom filmova, a naročito Pepeljuginu lika, odnosa između žena i uloge koju igraju muškarci, uočavaju se problematične ideologije o rodovima i moći. Odabrani su filmovi postfeminističke adaptacije priče o Pepeljugi koji liku djevojke prividno pridaju moć i neovisnost, a zapravo daju naslutiti da se većini žena ne može vjerovati i da prava moć pripada muškarcima.

Ključne riječi: Pepeljuga, postfeminizam, dječje filmske adaptacije