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“FAIREST OF THEM ALL”: EXPLOITATION IN *SNOW WHITE AND THE HUNTSMAN* (2012) AND *SNOW WHITE* (2025)

Abstract

As one of the most famous fairy tales collected by the Brothers Grimm, “Snow White” continues to provide inspiration for contemporary authors across genres and media. In 2012, Rupert Sanders’s *Snow White and the Huntsman* pitted the protagonist against her evil stepmother who drains the life out of young women to preserve her own beauty. Most recently, Marc Webb’s live-action *Disney’s Snow White* revolves around the princess’s fight against an exploitative queen who uses her subjects to gain military power and monetary profit. This paper aims to determine how both adaptations of the fairy tale delineate different types of biopolitical exploitations. After establishing the Foucauldian theoretical context of docility, which results in both overt violence and in discursive domination, the paper will turn to *Snow White and the Huntsman* and situate it within the fairy tale trope of a beauty contest. In *Ravenna*, the evil queen in this film, this trope converges with the biopower she has over her subjects, resulting in murders of women whose essence she steals. The violence of *Snow White* (2025) lies in the Evil Queen’s reign: the once thriving kingdom becomes grim as she discursively turns people docile and self-centred. The paper will thus show that both movies cast light on how the villains use biopolitical strategies—one a woman ready to kill others to preserve her status

in the (patriarchal) society, and the other a ruler who sacrifices the wellbeing of her people for her own gain.

Keywords: biopolitics, exploitation, violence, *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012), *Snow White* (2025)

1. Introduction

As one of the most famous fairy tales, "Snow White" has preoccupied authors' imaginations for centuries. It is a tale of maturation, initiation into adulthood, and of relationships within a family. Yet in adapting fairy tales, authors always imbue them with their own interpretations and relevant, contemporary themes, turning them, as Katherine Whitehurst argues, into "a rich space to explore Western contemporary culture, values, and gender norms" ("The Aged Woman" 390). One such movie is the 2012 blockbuster action-adventure movie *Snow White and the Huntsman*, directed by Rupert Sanders and starring Kristen Stewart as Snow White, Chris Hemsworth as the Huntsman, Charlize Theron as the Queen, and Sam Claflin as William, Snow White's childhood friend. Informed by the "cult of youth specifically targeted [at] women" and representing age "as linked to loss: of power, beauty and sexuality" (Whelehan 79), the movie imagines the Queen as being a very old, powerful woman who maintains her youthful appearance by stealing the life essence of young girls. *Snow White and the Huntsman* has been a relatively popular topic in academia, especially the character of Ravenna, the usurper Queen who seeks to eat Snow White's heart and thus gain youthful immortality (see Schubart 2019; Whitehurst 2018 and 2020; D'Amore 2017), and this paper will rely on many of those works to connect their findings with a new, biopolitical reading of the film.

The second film this paper tackles is *Disney's Snow White* (2025), shortened to *Snow White*, a live-action retelling of Disney's own globally acclaimed 1937 animated feature. It is directed by Marc Webb and features Rachel Zegler as Snow White, Gal Gadot as the Queen, and Andrew Burnap as Jonathan, a forest bandit fulfilling the role of Snow White's love interest. This film has not yet had the time to become a subject of academic papers, but controversies about the pro-Palestinian Latina Snow White and an Israeli Queen, as well as the CGI dwarfs, have placed it in the spotlight—a negative one (Waxman). With the recency of the film, this paper is not only timely, but it also wishes to draw the attention to the issues dealt with in the movie. To this end, the aim of this paper

is to show how generational rivalry and consequent violence between women in “Snow White” retellings is driven by the biopolitics of the patriarchal system and to examine how the newest cinematic version of the film thematizes biopolitical and economic exploitation of people. The first section examines the way women in the traditional Grimms’ version of “Snow White” are discursively pitted against each other by the patriarchy. Turning to *Snow White and the Huntsman*, the paper traces these same occurrences, furthered by the film’s discourse about aged women. Additionally, it showcases the Queen’s biopolitical use of women’s bodies. Finally, the paper investigates how *Snow White* (2025) thematizes generational rivalry between women while drawing more attention to the tyrannical exploitation of the kingdom’s subjects in general.

2. Snow White vs. the (Evil) Queen: The Grimm Violence of the Beauty Contest

Like many other fairy tales, “Snow White” centres on the theme of female rivalry (Warner 238), which is typically provoked by their competition for male attention. The beautiful Queen is threatened by her young (step)daughter and seeks to eliminate her to preserve her status as the fairest of them all.¹ The beauty contest, ubiquitous in tales about sisters or (step)mothers (Lieberman 385), pits the women against one another whereby the male character decides on the winner. Recognizing the origin of this preoccupation is key: it stems from an indoctrination into the patriarchal worldview, which can be explained through a biopolitical framework.

According to Michel Foucault, biopolitics relies on the thesis that the goal of the dominant power is to seize “things, time, bodies, and ultimately life [of its subjects] itself; it culminated in the privilege to seize hold of life in order to suppress it” (*History of Sexuality* 136). The subjects are positioned as “docile bodies” and they are to be “subjected, used, transformed and improved” (Foucault, *Discipline* 136) in accordance with the wishes of the powers-that-be. In line with this, patriarchal ideology places much emphasis on the regulation of women’s bodies. Angela King, approaching Foucault from a feminist perspec-

¹ In the Grimms’ fairy tales, the mother figure is often presented as negative and, in this manifestation, she frequently “wants to use her power to prevent the child’s development towards independence as manifested in marriage” (Lundell 32). To avoid upsetting the sensibilities of the time, the Grimms replaced many of the wicked mothers from the original edition with the wicked step-mothers, in an effort to preserve the sanctity of family (Zipes, “Introduction” xxxvii), as well as to draw a clean line between good, sexless mothers and evil, sexual stepmothers, because “there is no way to remain both ‘good’ and sexual” (Lundell 35) as a woman within a patriarchal society.

tive, notes that women are taught to enhance their physical appearance—their apparel, make-up, skin, body shape—to fit in and be appealing (to men), which “cements woman’s status as body, confirming her role as primarily decorative” (36). As a genre, the fairy tale, “with its emphasis on beauty, adjectival descriptors, and morality, imposes a whole set of normative values upon women” (Jorgensen, “The Most Beautiful of All” 56). Beauty is therefore posed as the ultimate criterion for a woman’s success in life, and it also becomes, as Jarrín argues, “a biopolitical regime that people feel compelled to follow” and through which they perceive themselves and the achievement of their goals (4).

To fulfil their role in a patriarchal society, women’s bodies are, regulated to conform to expectations, and their minds are, crucially, also imbued with patriarchal discourse. In fiction, this discourse is often promoted through male characters. Interestingly, Snow White’s father, the King, does not feature prominently in “Snow White,” and the prince only gets a marginal mention at the culmination of the narrative.² In spite of this, “the male figure still tends to control the dynamics of the relationship between the Queen and Snow White” (Santos, “Evil is in the Eye of the Beholder” 128). To begin with, the first Queen, Snow White’s biological mother, wishes for a child: “If only I had a child as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as the wood of the window frame!” (Grimm and Grimm 170). In line with the discursive absorption of ideology, Snow White’s mother can be said to have internalized the ideals and expectations of femininity, and thus wished for a child assembled of the “beauty and purity of white, the transformative powers of red or gold, the ritual—and sexual—death of black” (Bacchilega 33; cf. da Silva). The colours may point to Western racial ideas of white-skinned beauty. Toborg Lundell argues that the queen’s wish for this beautiful child may be seen as “a projection of a patriarchal wish to have at hand a replacement for the aging wife, when her beauty and youth are gone” (36). This means that the mother actively participates in the system, willingly providing her own replacement. The opening of the story, then, establishes beauty standards as an essential part of the biopolitical system that values women primarily for their bodies.

Another instance showing the presence of the King/patriarchy is the symbol of the mirror, “the patriarchal voice of judgment that rules the Queen’s—

² Originally, it was the father who saved Snow White, with the prince being added only later. Because of this, the beauty contest is placed “in a more specific context, namely that mother and daughter are, in fact, vying for the affection of the husband/father” (Lundell 36).

and every woman's—self-evaluation" (Gilbert and Gubar 37–38).³ The mirror is an object that confines the women's self-evaluation "to the pre-established restrictions of the socio-cultural prefigurative" (Santos, "Evil is in the Eye of the Beholder" 132–33). Similarly, when the Queen believes herself to be the most beautiful in the land, "[t]he source of her confidence is not in herself, but in the mirror" (Le Guernic 114). It is only when she hears the mirror speak to the contrary that she "became pale with envy, and from that hour onward, she hated Snow White" (Grimm and Grimm 171). Women are made dependant on the rulings of (male) outsiders, and manipulated into rivalry with other women (Santos, "It's Not All about Snow White" 47), whose bodies, according to male judgement, are not past their prime.

Namely, as King suggests, women are discursively prohibited from showing signs of aging (35). For Jorgensen, the youthful beauty demanded of women—both in fairy tales and in real life—can be related to fertility ("The Most Beautiful of All" 47–48) because once a woman loses her beauty/youth, and with it her reproductive function, she no longer has a place within the patriarchal system, and, as Santos argues, is "replaced by the younger more fertile woman" (Santos, "It's Not All about Snow White" 44). This is especially relevant for the "Snow White" fairy tale, as the major motif is the heroine replacing the Queen, although not of their own volition, but under the pressures of society. In Foucauldian terms, her body has been defined by and "imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to vary" (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 139). The text never implies that the Queen has biological children of her own and her unused potential makes her evil because "she has not fulfilled this predetermined female biological role and is thus marked by the phallogocentric coding of the female body by the male" (Santos, "Evil is in the Eye of the Beholder" 132). While the Queen is young and beautiful, her reproductive potential remains a valuable, available repository; but when she loses her grasp on the triad of youth, beauty, and fertility, she becomes worthless.

³ Other authors have proposed different readings of the mirror. For example, Bruno Bettelheim links the mirror to Snow White and her drive to be more beautiful than her mother (207); Shuli Barzilai sees it as an embodiment of Snow White's mother's fears about becoming separated from her daughter (529).

To preserve her status, the Queen sets out to kill her rival by tasking the huntsman to commit the crime: "Take the child out into the forest to a spot far from here. Then stab her to death and bring me back her lungs and liver as proof of your deed. After that I'll cook them with salt and eat them" (Grimm and Grimm 171). The fairy tale represents her as powerful, but only because she has been made so by the King (Le Guernic 115). Consequently, she can easily be replaced. Moreover, her wickedness proves that in fairy tales, the women "who have power or seek it, are nearly always portrayed as repulsive" (Lieberman 393), which solidifies the desired passivity of women within and outside of the narrative. Touched by Snow White's beauty, the huntsman disobeys (Grimm and Grimm 171), evidencing yet again that beauty is the biggest marker of a women's value. In the words of Gilbert and Gubar, the Queen's request is set to fail from the start, as she has "foolishly asked her patriarchal master [this time the huntsman] to act for her in doing the subversive deed she wants to do in part to retain power over him and in part to steal his power from him" (39). As is well-known, with her plan foiled, she is presented with animal organs that she ingests (Grimm and Grimm 172). While this scene is perhaps recalling primitive customs centring on the consumption of organs seen as "the absorption of the power and soul of the victim" (Girardot 290), it also echoes biopolitical use, objectification, and segmentation of (what she presumes to be) a human body.

Moreover, because the Queen is using her sovereign powers to kill her subjects, she is applying Achille Mbembe's necropolitics and necropower: the inversion of Foucault's biopower, centred not on discursively moulding people's lives, but on dictating "who is able to live and who must die" (66). After finding out she has been fooled by the huntsman, the Queen tries to kill Snow White with tightly drawn stay laces, a poisoned comb, and a poisoned apple (Grimm and Grimm 174–76). The dwarfs save Snow White the first two times, but she ultimately succumbs to the appeal of the apple. It is significant that the Queen is, in her violent efforts to eliminate Snow White, ironically, only heightening the girl's status as a passive, admirable object: "precisely the eternally beautiful, inanimate *objet d'art* patriarchal aesthetics want a girl to be" (Gilbert and Gubar 40). Postmortem, Snow White is exhibited in the glass case, almost like a monument to the demanded yet unattainable, desired but dangerous female beauty. The Prince stumbles upon this sight and, smitten by the mute, passive, princess beauty, he bargains for it as if she/it were a transferrable object:

So he asked the dwarfs to sell him the coffin with the dead Little Snow White inside. But they wouldn't accept all the gold in the world for it. Then he pleaded with them to give Little Snow White to him as a gift because he couldn't live without gazing upon her, and he would honor her and hold her in high regard as his most beloved in the world. Well, the dwarfs took pity on him and gave him the coffin, and the prince had it carried to his castle. (Grimm and Grimm 177)

As other fairy tales, “Snow White” ends happily. On the one hand, the Queen meets a brutal death—a punishment she receives not only for her many murder attempts, but also for succumbing to the dreaded fate of aging. On the other hand, Snow White is revived and married to a man who wants to buy her and has picked her because of her physical assets that define the biopolitical position of women in patriarchy. While the young woman replaces the old, the (older) men remain in power, in part because younger women are more easily influenced and controlled (Whitehurst “The Aged Woman” 389). It appears that ultimately, Snow White remains confined within the system, married to a prince who values her primarily for her beauty and thus represents the patriarchal system that looms over the narrative (Le Guernic 115; Lundell 38). Snow White is doomed to perpetuate the same ideals that have almost killed her: rejoicing in her youth and beauty, yet always in danger of being replaced by an even younger, more beautiful woman (Gilbert and Gubar 42).

3. The Beauty Contest and Human Harvesting: *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012)

Rupert Sanders's *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012) is situated among other retellings that offer “alternate and multiple perspectives on the same fairy tale but still seemingly centred on the feminine question of beauty and social worth” (Santos, “It's Not All about Snow White” 47). The film both subverts and exposes the patriarchal milieu that demands and values beauty in women, and, through the actions of Ravenna, Snow White's stepmother, it also brings the biopolitics of human exploitation to the forefront.

As has been explained, from a biopolitical standpoint, the value of the female body depends on its usefulness as represented through beauty and youth. Not aligning with the norm, therefore, it threatens women's existence. As Angela King has observed, “[w]oman's historical association with the body has resulted

in her being judged by and valued for her appearance more than man, often above all else, and has also engendered the fear and dread of otherness" (36). Ravenna embodies this fear of otherness by being anxious about aging. Her statement that "[w]hen a woman stays young and beautiful forever, the world is hers" (*SWH* 00:08:07) illustrates the fact that only a certain type of woman has, for a certain time, a place within patriarchal society. To gain and retain power, Ravenna knows she must conform to the social discourse that "beauty produces value because it promises to make bodies circulate within the existing aesthetic hierarchy—it continuously generates an illusion of upward mobility among those who are recognized as beautiful and renders everyone's position within the body politic as permanently precarious, a single misstep away from social exclusion" (Jarrín 17). Seeking reassurance of her own beauty, Ravenna impatiently turns to the mirror. In this version, the mirror transforms into a shrouded humanoid figure that speaks in a male voice. Yet again, the new Queen seems to have "internalized the King's rules: his voice resides now in her own mirror, her own mind" (Gilbert and Gubar 38). Praising Ravenna for conquering another kingdom, the mirror asks: "Is there no end to your power and beauty?" (*SWH* 00:12:50–00:12:55). This aptly illustrates Jarrín's assertions: social power and beauty are related and exist within a hierarchy. Moreover, beautification is a continual process: "This aesthetic hierarchy is highly mobile, because beautification practices promise to revalue those whose bodies are deemed lower in the aesthetic hierarchy, even if it seems like a Sisyphean task, repeated endlessly" (Jarrín 4). Ravenna has been on an upwardly mobile path, but this also implies that her status must be constantly reconfirmed, as it is perpetually precarious and potentially endangered by a rival or by her own loss of beauty.

This discursive colonisation of Ravenna's mind is complemented by her being figured as an unnecessary and undesirable presence. She is unnatural in that by holding onto her youthful beauty, she is shown as a member of "the old generation blocking the way for the young" (Schubart 198). In the fantasy-scape of the movie, this is further underlined when her magic literally poisons the life of the land, with nature deteriorating and people turning against one another (*SWH* 00:13:46–00:13:50). The movie "cast[s] her as parasitic" and, with the goal being Ravenna's elimination on account of being old and death-like, it engenders the patriarchal notion "of female capital as rooted in youth, beauty, and reproduction" (Whitehurst, "Genre and Female Aging" 17).

Female bodies are further commodified through Ravenna's attempts to preserve her beauty. Namely, she sees her (female) subjects as resources and both controls and dispenses of their lives at will. To stay youthful, she sucks the essence out of other women by rapidly aging them or even killing them in the process. The audience is first introduced to this concept when Ravenna's brother, Finn, tells her: "I have something for what ails you" (*SWH* 00:20:47). The "something" given to Ravenna is a young girl who is to be her next victim. This objectification is an example of the commodification of human life (Sharp 304) present in Ravenna's rejuvenating process and the power she has over the victims' lives and deaths. Youth and beauty have been established as commodities available primarily to those in power (Wohlmann 237; Sharp 307). Significantly, there is a sect of women who stand up against this type of exploitation and willingly disfigure and scar their own faces. Hence, they are safe from Ravenna, who only wants to steal the essence of beautiful women. These women, willingly othered, attempt to live outside of the reach of the biopolitical power that watches over women's "performances of the body, with attention to the processes of life" (*The History of Sexuality* 139) because it has a vested interest in their wellbeing.

Unlike the fairy tale, the film grants the audiences an insight into Ravenna's character and thus a reason for her behaviour: when she was a child, men attacked her village. Her mother placed a spell on her with the objective of keeping her young and beautiful, at the price of feeding off of others: "Your beauty is all that can save you, Ravenna. This spell will make your beauty your power and protection. By fairest blood it is done" (*SWH* 01:01:24–01:01:36). The spell, while exploitative, is "given to her as protection, because her mother knew that beauty was the only way that women could wield power over men, by means of seduction, in the patriarchal narrative of the history of human civilization" (D'Amore 395). Therefore, Ravenna's mother's parting words—"Avenge us"—entreat the young girl to avenge her murdered family or, potentially, avenge "the cruelty of a system that determines a woman's value in terms of beauty and youth" (Wohlmann 232). Ravenna's quest for power is centred on her wish not to be exploited again, since her "body has been used as a currency of war" (D'Amore 394), evidencing the objectification and commodification of women's bodies within the narrative. Ironically, in her violent destruction of kingdoms in general and kings in particular, she "uses the tools of the patriarchy to protect herself and her brother and, in her mind, to wreak havoc on men who destroy women, thus believing. . . that she is saving womankind" (D'Amore 387). While

her efforts to change the patriarchal view of women are unsuccessful, as one's individual use of "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde 22), her experience and objective cast light on the system based on the use of female bodies.

Moreover, in the character of Snow White, the narrative attempts to subvert these same ideas. For one, Snow White's birth is not primarily driven by the mother's (or the patriarchy's) desire for external beauty. Walking in the garden in the opening scenes of the movie, Snow White's mother sees a rose that has persevered through the winter and, pricking her hand on it, wishes: "If only I had a child as white as snow, lips as red as blood, hair as black as a raven's wings and all with the strength of that rose" (*SWH* 00:01:27–00:01:39). The child's colouring is now explicitly connected to strength, an internal and stereotypically masculine characteristic, rather than to beauty and implied sexuality that would objectify Snow White. The movie further establishes that the young princess is admired for her defiant spirit as well as for her external beauty, and her mother praises the beauty of her heart (*SWH* 00:01:52–00:02:46). Her inner goodness apparently has magical influence as well, as is visible in scenes where her presence has a healing power and the natural and magical worlds hail her as a saviour. In the words of a dwarf, "She is life itself" (*SWH* 01:17:19–01:17:21), directly opposing Ravenna's draining powers. Beauty is no longer Snow White's "only power," as it is in the traditional tale (Whitehurst, "The Aged Woman" 390). Instead, the character gets emancipated, in line with how the "audiences continue to expect fairy tales to reflect current cultural norms including feminism, gender politics, and shifting values" (Ortiz and Rucki 101).

However, as Snow White matures, her life-giving powers are sidelined in favour of her taking up a sword and, contradictorily, killing her way to Ravenna. While seeking to free her kingdom from the usurper and to avenge her father, she is relying on violence, similarly to Ravenna—yet she is rewarded for it, while the older woman is punished. It could be said that the reason for this is that Ravenna is working for her own profit, while Snow White wants to bring prosperity back to her ravaged land. Nevertheless, in the context of this paper, Snow White's punishment of Ravenna can be read through the biopolitical lens as yet again confirming the age-based discrimination of women in a patriarchal society. Snow White ultimately killing Ravenna further unsettles the ostensibly feminist objective of the narrative. Despite the links that connect the two women, that is, childhood trauma, their powers over life (Schubart 197; White-

hurst, “Genre and Female Aging” 17), the film cuts off any “possibility for intergenerational solidarity” (Wohlmann 227). Snow White, in proclaiming “I’m everything you’re not!” (SWH 01:56:26–01:56:27) continues the tradition of the younger generation expelling the older; in both rejecting and killing Ravenna, she is complicit in the exploitative system that makes no room for aged women (Whitehurst, “The Aged Woman” 401). The narrative culminates when Snow White’s beauty, youth, and purity conquer the aged monster (D’Amore 395).⁴ In all this, the film actually “heightens the ageism found in the tale” (Whitehurst, “Genre and Female Aging” 17) and drives home the idea that women must be rivals.

Finally, the movie’s ending does not destabilize the patriarchal system of the diegetic reality. Namely, Snow White remains unmarried at the close of the narrative. Looking at this in isolation, it could be said that she is “free to construct her own happily-ever-after, without riding with any prince into any sunset” (Ortiz and Rucki 103). Therefore, she avoids the fate of the traditional fairy tale heroine, who, after getting married, “derives her status from her husband, and her personal identity is thus snuffed out” (Lieberman 394). Although unmarried in the last scene, Snow White is, after getting crowned, looking around the church with an unsettled expression, calming down and smiling only when she sees the Huntsman (02:00:15–02:01:24). Whereas earlier versions of “Snow White” illustrate the woman’s power as being achievable only through marriage to a powerful man (Le Guernic 122), this Snow White chooses a commoner, which ostensibly defies the traditional expectations of power dynamics. However, the signals of the potential continuation of their budding romance may also indicate the fact that Snow White can only enjoy her coronation once she gets reassurance from a male character. Furthermore, the movie attempting to subvert the traditional narrative about Snow White is bracketed by the Huntsman. It is he who both begins Snow White’s story (narrating at the opening of the film) and “visually closes” it by appearing in the last scene. The narrative is thus framed with a male figure and suggests both his male authority and that “the vicious cycle of the dictate of youth and beauty will continue” (Wohlmann 249). Given

⁴ According to D’Amore, the assertion that *Snow White and the Huntsman* promotes the importance of inner beauty over external beauty is problematic. D’Amore approaches Ravenna as a rape victim and contends the film’s allegedly positive message in light of the causal link between Ravenna having been sexually exploited, therefore being unpure, therefore being evil. With Snow White being “everything Ravenna is not,” the movie seems to propagate that sexual purity is what manifests as real beauty (395).

the diegetic reality of the film, this is even more obvious. Namely, the Huntsman is a widower in his late twenties (played by a 28-year-old Hemsworth), while Snow White is eighteen years old (played by a 22-year-old Stewart). The young princess is replacing not only Ravenna, but the Huntsman's late wife, doubling the theme of generational rivalry between women and perpetuating the circle of youth and beauty taking precedence in the struggle for male affection. Given Snow White's long gaze at the magic mirror after Ravenna's death (*SWH* 01:59:35–01:59:50), the lives of women are still surveyed by and subjected to the biopolitics of a patriarchal system.

With this in mind, it is important to observe how the sequel, *The Huntsman: Winter's War* (2016), reframes the storyline. In it, it is revealed that Snow White has ended up marrying William, her childhood friend and a Duke's son, whereas the Huntsman's wife has turned out to be alive after all. The film thus abandons the aspect of Snow White replacing another woman but backtracks to the expected marital outcome both in terms of her marrying a man from her own social class, as well as getting married at all, which, according to Marie-Louise von Franz, represents a restoration of social order within a fairy tale (51). The Huntsman's rekindled romance with his own wife contributes to the confirmation of the desired familial structure. Except for these characters, *The Huntsman: Winter's War* also further deals with Ravenna, revealing more of her back story and then resurrecting her with the help of magic. While this may seem to go against the successful elimination of an older female rival, as established and completed in the first movie, Ravenna merely replicates her previous function. It is revealed that she is so indoctrinated in the dominant discourse that she kills her own niece for fear of the latter growing up to be the most beautiful girl in the land. Furthermore, after her resurrection, her main goal is yet again killing Snow White and eating her heart. Significantly, her resurrection via the mirror places her in a liminal position between life and death but also merges her identity with the symbol of the mirror. She is thus integrated into the symbolic instrument of patriarchy. Ravenna is killed a second time, but, as the narrator says of fairy tales: "none ever truly end" (*HWW* 01:50:12–01:50:15). In an end-credit scene, a fragment of the mirror, in the form of a bird, reaches Snow White, hinting at the possibility of another sequel. It seems that, just like fairy tales, the story of female generational rivalry instigated by the patriarchy would never truly end.

4. New Gazes into the Mirror: The Violent Exploitation in *Snow White* (2025)

Painted in wide strokes, it could be said that the versions of “Snow White” generally deal with the generational rivalry as analysed above. However, “[e]ach historical epoch and each community altered the original folk tales according to its needs as they were handed down over the centuries” (Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell* 8). Political commentary is “intrinsic to traditional folktales” (Wright 98): the variety of poor, distressed, or otherwise marginalized figures found in Grimms’ fairy tales “usually defeat the wicked witches, dangerous creatures, and ruthless monarchs representing the wealthy and powerful in the real world” (Campbell xxv). Since tales gather meaning with every retelling and “develop an interaction between the traditional texts and a contemporary environment” (Joosen 238), contemporary versions of fairy tales also serve as a venue for exposing the real-life issues of the actual world.

For example, Disney’s 1937 *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* contains “a decidedly American flavor” (Wright 107), with the 1930s American democracy and overtones of socialism, which Walt Disney favoured, shown in the cooperation of Snow White, animals, and dwarfs. On top of that, “Snow White” was chosen for this adaptation because Disney deemed it spoke to the American tastes of the time, but also offered global appeal: “romance with an attractive heroine and hero; menace from an evil villainess; comedy and heart with the dwarfs; a happy ending to a timeless folklore story familiar to audiences around the world” (Thomas 65). In making it into a sentimental love story, Disney “saccharinized” elements of the traditional story (Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell* 128), and introduced changes to the text. In the words of Walt Disney himself: “We have put in certain twists to make it more logical, more convincing, and easy to swallow” (qtd. in Davis 100). Disney’s version has proven to be so influential that it is, for many, the first and greatest touchstone with “Snow White,” as well as the primary basis of adaptations. For instance, the key motif—the true love’s kiss—is a Disney invention that “tend[s] to be systematically repeated in subsequent adaptations of the tale” (Le Juez 375). As a retelling of both *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and of the Grimms’ “Snow White,” *Disney’s Snow White* (2025) introduces changes to comment on different social issues.

In the contemporary world riddled with conflicts and wars, the newest Disney movie continues the trend of fairy tales “express[ing] desires for self-transformation and hopes of a fairer world” (Le Juez 378). However, it is worth noting

that "[i]nstead of offering messages of revolutionary hope, fairy-tale fantasy has been used increasingly by the culture industry to compensate for, but not to offer remedies from, social injustices and lack of individual autonomy" (Teverson 133). Disney movies are undoubtedly influential, constructing the audience's identities, instilling values into and educating whole generations (Osuna-Acedo et al. 1302; Sturtevant 79). Researching Disney thus offers valuable insights into the contemporary society. However, in approaching Disney, it is crucial to keep in mind its corporate nature. Often, the utopian movies with messages of moral values, the importance of community, and a just society are in stark contrast with the real behaviour of Disney towards its workers, customers, and themes it deals with.

To begin with, Disney profits "from subcontracting practices that exploit human labor in developing countries for the manufacture of products bearing Disney's licenced trademarks" (Tracy 374–75). The disempowerment of the workers (Trifonas 1115) does not align with the proposed equality and justice for all. Similarly, even when treating its consumers, Disney's first instinct is to mind its profit. Recently, the corporation was faced with a lawsuit following the death of Kanokporn Tangsuan, who died from an allergic reaction she suffered at a Disney World restaurant. Initially, Disney tried to dodge the trial, asserting that Tangsuan's husband accepted Disney's terms and conditions when creating an account on the Disney+ streaming service, including a clause that states disputes will be handled via arbitration. Revealingly, Disney's reasoning was the significantly lower cost of settling a dispute outside of court (Treisman). It is evident that Disney is, first and foremost, a corporation trying to earn money.

When speaking about Disney's fairy tale films, it is important to note that the very fact of adapting and retelling the nostalgic fairy tale films contributes to Disney's continued relevance, as well as their monetary profit (Anjirbag 346–47; Trifonas 1114). In the twenty-first century, the interest in fairy tales, both in new animated adaptations and live-action retellings, coincides with the observation that diversity itself is a profitable selling point (Yoshinaga 200). This has resulted in animated movies featuring BIPOC in title roles, such as *The Princess and the Frog* (2009, dir. by John Musker and Ron Clements), *Moana* (2016, dir. by John Musker and Ron Clements), and *Coco* (2017, dir. by Lee Unkrich). In live-action, early examples of diverse castings leaned towards tokenism, in that BIPOC were mere side characters and therefore barely visible. For example, in *Beauty and the Beast* (2017, dir. by Bill Condon), they were mostly featured "as an-

thropomorphized furniture, essentially obscuring their bodies in the otherwise whitewashed world” (Anjirbag 356). The next step towards positive diversity was taken with adaptations casting BIPOC as protagonists: in narratives that already feature BIPOC protagonists, such as *Mulan* (2020, dir. by Niki Caro), as well as in movies where their races were changed, like in *The Little Mermaid* (2023, dir. by Rob Marshall) and *Disney’s Snow White* (2025).

Yet, contradictorily to the efforts to diversify their movies, Disney has taken several culturally insensitive steps. For example, after the success of *Coco*, the corporation has tried to trademark the expression “Día de los Muertos” (Bacchilega and Green 48) although it is the name of a public holiday. Scholars have observed that Disney movies steeped in indigenous cultures approach those cultures in an insensitive way. As has been said, Disney’s utopian world and neat happy endings proposing a just world clash with the realities of Disney’s own modus operandi, based on (cultural) exploitation of their workers and people represented in the films. For example, two groups worked on the story of *Moana*: “(largely) non-Native Disney story team members employed as the film’s artistic managers and professionals who enjoyed relatively high occupational status and job stability; and, on the other hand, Pacific Islander cultural workers hired as short-term, contingent labor” (Yoshinaga 191). According to Ida Yoshinaga, the exploitation in *Moana* is twofold: indigenous knowledge is appropriated without a proper compensation, and then distilled into a Westernized fairy tale, robbing it of depth and nuance present in the folklore (202). Conversely, Disney’s aim at location authenticity in *Mulan* (2020) resulted in a tone-deaf film set erected “in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, in close proximity to detention camps for Uighur Muslims,” which sparked outrage among the human rights activists (Ochab). Evidently, Disney’s efforts to include diverse cultures, characters, and locations are driven by profit, simultaneously oblivious to or ignoring the human rights issues related to the production of the very movies that are supposed to offer representation and fight for the rights of the disenfranchised.

The diversification of Disney movies is only starting to counteract the normativity of Whiteness, ossified, as Michelle Anya Anjirbag claims, through the long history of the corporation’s movies (356). Yet, this new approach is not without fault. On the one hand, as race is pushed into the background, colour-blind casting presents a threat of being revisionist and “obfuscating legitimate issues,” both historical and current (Richardson 103). On the other hand,

with Disney's staggering power of "shaping public memory, national identity, gender roles, and childhood values" (Giroux 10), representation of BIPOC in mainstream media may lead to greater inclusion and diversity in the real world as well. Fairy tales invite the audience to imagine a reality different from the current state of affairs; importantly, this reality should seem like a real possibility, figuring as a call to action and inciting change (Bacchilega and Greenhill 159). When Halle Bailey was first announced as the star of *The Little Mermaid* (2023, dir. by Rob Marshall), she faced racist backlash for not looking like the 1989 animated version of the character. Yet, after the release of the first trailer, the reactions from the opposing camp were sensational. Numerous reaction videos were posted on social media, where young children were ecstatic and impressed by a fairy tale protagonist that looks like them ("Little Mermaid: Halle Bailey"). Similarly, Rachel Zegler, of Colombian descent, has been facing a racist backlash ever since being cast as Snow White. It seems that, despite the efforts of Disney's new movie, goodness, beauty, and Whiteness are still tightly intertwined (BakerSperry and Grauerholz 719).⁵ Nevertheless, and at the peril of marginalising racial issues under the guise of colour-blindness, the movie's approach to biopolitical conception of beauty differs from its predecessors.

Unlike the previously discussed versions, this narrative avoids praising Snow White's external beauty and therefore casts the beauty contest in a different light.⁶ Where the necessity of beauty has previously been discursively ingrained into all major characters, now the only person obsessed with external beauty is the Queen, while Snow White's development is not limited to her beauty and the consequent marriage with the Prince. First of all, the new movie foregoes any descriptors in the introduction of Snow White: her mother does not list the colour specifications like in the traditional fairy tale, nor does the mirror do it,

⁵ However, this is not the only controversy surrounding this movie and contributing to the 2.2 rating on IMDb ("Snow White (2025)") and a 39% score on Rotten Tomatoes ("Disney's Snow White"). Both Zegler and Gadot are outspoken about the Israel-Hamas war, with Zegler being pro-Palestinian, and Gadot, formerly serving in the Israel Defense Forces, advocating for Israel. Finally, famous actor Peter Dinklage's comments on the backwardness of featuring people with dwarfism in roles of "seven dwarfs living in a cave together" contributed to Disney turning to CGI for these characters, while at the same time actors with dwarfism lamented the lost job opportunities (Waxman).

⁶ This paper is not making any claims about the physical appearances of Kristen Stewart, Charlize Theron, Rachel Zegler, or Gal Gadot. Online debates about who is "the fairest" between the two women in each Snow White-Queen pairing surrounded both movies. Pitting women against each other and comparing them is a signal of patriarchal discourse in itself. The focus of the 2025 movie being on inner beauty does not imply an opinion that Zegler is less physically beautiful than Gadot.

like it did in the 1937 movie (SWSD 00:03:23–00:03:31). Instead, her name is explained through her being born during a snowstorm (SW 00:01:30–00:01:36). In this way, the female character is no longer segmented into desirable, stereotypical characteristics such as beauty and sexuality. Next, in the original Disney version, Snow White is introduced through the “Wishing Well” song, where she expresses a desire for a beloved man to find her (SWSD 00:04:32–00:04:52), obviously “already understand[ing] that her main purpose is to secure a husband” (Ortiz and Rucki 102). Unlike her predecessor, the new Snow White is invited to make a wish about who she wants to be some day: someone fearless, fair, brave, and true (SW 00:03:21–00:04:13). With a similar point, she later sings about being “someone no one needs to save” (SW 00:19:24–00:19:28). The movie is evidently distancing itself from the tradition of passive heroines saved by men who only value them for their external features.

With the approach to the character changed, the conflict between Snow White and the Queen is also readjusted. In the 1937 version, the Queen’s wrath is instigated by Snow White’s “maidenly beauty and her budding romance with the Prince” (Wright 103). Now it arises when the Queen sees Snow White freeing Jonathan, a bandit who has tried to steal from the royal kitchens. She turns to the mirror, who says: “But wait, a lovely maiden I now behold awakened to the world” (SW 00:20:19–00:20:26). It is obvious that Snow White’s agency in freeing Jonathan from an unjust punishment is what has made her lovely—the fairest of all. The mirror, up until now a famous mouthpiece of patriarchy, takes a different approach.⁷ Still speaking in a male voice and still pronouncing Snow White the fairest, it stands against the Queen’s idea of beauty. Showing its disagreement, it calls the Queen envious (SW 01:18:35–01:18:44) and ultimately insists that her beauty is only surface level, whereas “for Snow White, beauty comes from deep within” (SW 01:36:07–01:36:17). Zipes notes that the number of “Snow White” retellings is caused by a fascination with questions such as “what constitutes our notions of beauty” (Zipes, *The Enchanted Screen* 119), and this Disney movie unequivocally states that true beauty is one of the heart. Throughout the movie, the Queen does not understand this. For her, beauty is what sustains her magical powers (SW 00:05:47–00:05:52). Like the previous incarnations of the Queen, she must remain the most beautiful to retain her

⁷ In the 1937 version, the Queen calls the mirror a slave (SWSD 00:02:31–00:02:34), which is ironic if we take the mirror as a symbol of the patriarchy, whose slave is actually the Queen.

power. Again, beauty is shown to be "something precarious and relational" (Jarín 77).

As both Snow White's family and the mirror are supportive of Snow White's inner growth and beauty, the narrative lacks an explicit patriarchal framework. Instead of dealing with the female generational rivalry underlined in other retellings, 2012's *Snow White* foregrounds the exploitation of common people at the hands of a power-hungry tyrant. This is what the Queen uses her beauty/powers for: applying biopolitical notions of controlling "others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines" (Foucault, *Discipline* 138), she has turned her citizens into soldiers "loyal only to her" (SW 00:07:21–00:07:23). Inciting distrust and quarrel among the populace, she ensures that they will not unite and rise up against her. They have been turned into docile bodies to be governed in accordance to her wishes, which are largely based on stealing the kingdom's wealth. As in the previous retelling, with its "entire community . . . threatened" and the conflict extending "beyond the private sphere into the public" (Whitehurst, "The Aged Woman" 393), the villain Snow White needs to vanquish does not endanger only her life. With people removed from their jobs to join the military, the land falls into disrepair. Many are driven into the woods and live by stealing from the rich. In the forest, Snow White meets Jonathan's troupe of bandits, who fit into the traditional framework of the story. Namely, in some other earlier versions of the story, the role of the dwarfs was occupied by a variety of characters: mythical creatures such as giants and fairies, assassins (Bacchilega 29) or robbers; in general, "others who are outside the normal social realm" (Girardot 290). In line with the fairy tale's objective to criticise the existing social order, these marginalized figures are positioned as positive characters helping the protagonist fight the injustices she—and her people—are facing. Jonathan and his group, of course, join Snow White's endeavours.⁸ It is also indicative that the story's opening and closing are narrated by Dopey, a dwarf who manages to find his own voice over the course of the film, whereas he has been too scared to speak up before. Casting this un-

⁸ With the forest bandit Jonathan being the love interest, the movie also steps away from the rigid structure of a Prince Charming sweeping Snow White away to rule in his own kingdom. Like the attempt made in *Snow White and the Huntsman*, this instance frees the characters from the bounds of class expectations.

derdog character in the role of the narrator shows the movie's overarching goal of speaking up and out for the common people.

Yet, unlike the militarized, vigilance feminism of *Snow White and the Huntsman*, which demanded “social equality between men and women by reappropriating the tactics of a traditionally violent masculinity for feminine ends” (D’Amore 390), Disney’s *Snow White* refuses to kill the Queen when presented with the opportunity. To the queen, this confirms her opinions that “ambitious girls must be vicious girls” (SW 00:38:56–00:38:59) and that *Snow White* will never be fit to rule. Furthermore, she pronounces that “All is fair when you wear the crown” (SW 00:39:06–00:39:10), saying that her high status, prestige, and riches allow her the freedom to exploit others. Conversely, *Snow White* continually insists on cooperation, kindness, and sharing as the tools with which people can overcome any obstacle. The movie underlines this theme from the very start, when the forest animals work together to open the storybook that narrates the story of *Snow White*. Moreover, the protagonist emphasises the sense of community. After the dwarfs are struck by how quickly she has remembered their names, she explains: “My mother always taught me that it was important to learn a name” (SW 00:36:07–00:36:09). This notion later saves her life, as she calls each soldier holding her captive by name, showing that she remembers them and cares for them. Reminding them of the times when the land was bountiful and not exploited by military endeavours and plunder, she stays their hands. It is their names and histories that make the soldiers revolt against the Queen. In other words, *Snow White* treats them as proper, named subjects (Butler 30) and not as docile objects, enabling them to make their own decisions rather than blindly following the biopolitical plans of the Queen.

Ultimately, the Queen’s demise is caused by her own actions: as the Queen furiously breaks the mirror after learning that *Snow White*’s goodness will always make her more beautiful. Her own body cracks and dissipates, being sucked into the mirror, which is then reassembled into its former form. While the mirror’s survival has previously been ironic and signified the continuation of the patriarchal system (Zipes, *The Enchanted Screen* 116), the mirror is now freed of negative connotations. Hence, its survival is justified. After this affirmation of the victory of inner beauty over outer beauty, the film wraps up in a typical Disney happy ending, with an added comment on the previously explained biopolitical exploitation. Namely, people prosper in the kingdom “governed by a virtuous queen who believed that the true beauty of her land was not to be

measured in gems or jewels, but in its people" (*SW* 01:37:56–01:38:12). Thereby, the movie confirms that Snow White is truly a desirable ruler—the fairest of them all.

4. Conclusion

Traditionally, Snow White represents the quintessential image of a passive princess valued for her beauty so long promoted to young girls all around the world. The story can be understood as being based on the patriarchal biopolitical discourse as Snow White is desirable because of the youth, beauty, sexuality, and fecundity she symbolises. In the Grimm version, she is a direct replacement for her biological mother and later persecuted by the Queen who sees that her own position in the society has been endangered. Snow White's whole existence is framed by her beauty and the objectification by male characters. By marrying the prince, Snow White seems doomed to repeat the Queen's story, demonstrating that, perhaps, the two women's destinies are not so different after all.

Yet these characters continue to change throughout the years. Since the Disney 1937 classic, Snow White has become the beautiful and kind housewife. Cinematic versions from 2012 and 2025 have taken it upon themselves to reframe this image of Snow White. With these changes, *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012) and *Disney's Snow White* (2025) have also modulated the conflicts the protagonists face. Kirsten Stewart's Snow White becomes a warrior princess imbued with magical powers over life. In turn, she clashes with an old witch Ravenna, who holds onto her youthful beauty by draining life from younger girls. The movie draws attention to the evident, continued existence of the conflict between women. For women to survive in a patriarchal society, where they are valued for their external markers and biological potential, they must fight each other to succeed. Ravenna's inexcusable actions are rooted in the patriarchal discourse telling her this is the only way she can survive. Moreover, her preoccupation with external beauty is never explicitly challenged by the equally beautiful princess (as established by the narrative), who gains popularity at least in part due to her looks. Finally, Ravenna's murder by a younger rival, Snow White, signals the triumphant conclusion to the narrative yet simultaneously underlines that the world they live in has not changed. Youth, beauty, and the potential to cultivate life remain the desired characteristics, in accordance with the patriarchal biopolitical discourse about the use and purpose of women's bodies.

While the emancipation of *Snow White and the Huntsman* takes the form of her being a warrior whose romance does not conclude with a wedding, *Snow White* (2025) retains the Disneyesque happy ending, but uses the Snow White figure to cast light on different social issues: exploitation of people as resources. Here, the Queen is the only one insisting on external beauty as a criterion of social worth. Rachel Zegler's Snow White is repeatedly described as having her beauty stem from the beauty of her heart: from her being fearless, fair, brave, and true. In that, the film idealistically distances itself from the patriarchal biopolitics. The main issue that arises is the Queen's exploitation of people. They are her literal subjects as well as docile bodies she can move around and dispose of as she wishes: she forces villagers into the military and instigates distrust between them, turning neighbour against neighbour. Snow White, in turn, recognizes this issue and reminds people of their own autonomy, as well as the values they hold dear. While a similar issue occurs in *Snow White and the Huntsman*, it is not discussed at length. The movies also approach the solution differently. While Stewart's Snow White kills Ravenna, in the 2025 film the resolution comes not from Snow White's violent expulsion of the Queen, but from the unification of people with a common cause. The movie's condemnation of the exploitative Queen is ironic in light of the real-life actions of the Disney corporation. In terms of the movie, it seems like the themes of social justice are included for the sake of representation and relatability that attract viewers. At the same time, the movie, or Disney in general, does not work to eliminate the problems it exposes but simply preserves the status quo. Overall, the value of representation in mainstream media, through which people identify with racial, gender, or economic issues, is necessarily dampened by the hypocrisy of the real state of affairs. While they are not without their faults, both *Snow White and the Huntsman* and *Disney's Snow White* are worthy of academic attention on account of their inspired iterations of characters who continue to grow and gain meaning with every new piece of media they appear in—the (not so) dichotomous Snow White and the (Evil?) Queen.

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„NAJLJEPŠA OD SVIH“: IZRABLJIVANJE U *SNJEGULJICI I LOVCU* (2012.) I *SNJEGULJICI* (2025.)

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Kao jedna od najpoznatijih bajki braće Grimm, „Snjeguljica“ je izvor nepresušne inspiracije za suvremene autore u različitim žanrovima i medijima. U filmu *Snjeguljica i Lovac* (2012.) Ruperta Sandersa, protagonistica se bori protiv svoje zle pomajke koja crpi životnu silu iz djevojaka kako bi očuvala vlastitu ljepotu. Nedavni film Marca Webba, *Snjeguljica* (2025.), u prvi plan stavlja princezinu borbu protiv izrabljivačke kraljice koja se služi svojim podanicima kako bi ostvarila vojnu premoć i novčani profit. Ovaj rad utvrdit će kako te dvije adaptacije „Snjeguljice“ obrađuju različite vrste biopolitičkog izrabljivanja. Nakon što se opiše teoretski kontekst Foucaultovog koncepta docilnosti, koja rezultira i izravnim tjelesnim nasiljem i diskurzivnim podčinjavanjem, rad će se okrenuti *Snjeguljici i lovcu* te film promotriti sa stajališta motiva ženskog natjecanja u ljepoti, čestog u bajkama. Ravenna, zla kraljica u tom filmu, ujedinjuje taj motiv s konceptom biomoći kojom ubija žene i krade njihovu životnu silu. U *Snjeguljici* (2025.) nasilje je sadržano u vladavini zle kraljice: kraljevstvo u kojem je nekoć vladalo blagostanje propada dok ona diskurzivno pretvara ljude u docilne subjekte te ih razjedinjuje. Rad će, dakle, analizirati kako ovi filmovi prikazuju korištenje biopolitičkih strategija – u jednom je vladarica spremna ubiti druge kako bi zadržala svoj status u (patrijarhalnom) društvu, a u drugom kraljica žrtvuje blagostanje svojih podanika radi vlastite dobiti.

Ključne riječi: biopolitika, izrabljivanje, nasilje, *Snjeguljica i lovac* (2012.), *Snjeguljica* (2025.)