

## **The School of the Art Institute of Chicago's Feminist Group's Perspective on the French film *Donkeyskin***

In screening the 1971 French film *Donkeyskin* by director Jacques Demy starring Catherine Deneuve as Peau d'Ane for the School of the Art Institute of Chicago's (SAIC) Feminist Group, my intention was to deconstruct the differences between these two variants of a #510 tale originated by Perrault; one interpreted by Disney and the other by Demy.

The SAIC feminists were quick to note the similitude between all the classic Disney tales. In discussing *Cinderella* they often mistakenly wove bits of *Snow White* and/or *Sleeping Beauty* into their recollection. They likened Disney's determination to illustrate family values through a template to the practice of the American Girl Corporation. They demonstrated that American Girl stories depict girls whose celebrated and equivalent good nature is merely regurgitated; disguised by regional costumes and customs. The comparison extended to the merchandising of such costumes by both Disney and American Girl. The feminists recalled that as youth donning such costumes they would immediately assume the behavior of the well-behaved corporate characters. The memory inspired a conversation about the prevalence of consumerism throughout their lives and how Disney continues to target girls today. Films that are released directly to DVD coupled with material featured on the Disney channel feed into an adolescent's need for attention expressed through mimicry. Like the classic animated movies sexuality, while not overt, is the unspoken underbelly. Mixed messages regarding romance, desire and sexuality confuse girls about what is and is not appropriate for their stage of life. Within the group, most recalled that such confusion was cause for their disconnection at best and isolation at worst. Disney's choice to depict stories of girls transforming from a virginal girl to a sexual being devoid of desire lacks the original intent of the fairy tale. With the advent of *Cinderella* live action movies, the confusion intensifies as the images on screen are individuals (often dressed in the manner of Brittany Spears) rather than cartoon characters. As girls the feminists recalled that their Barbie dolls, sans genitals, had sex while the Disney animated characters and actors did not even have desire.

In comparing the surrealistic *Donkeyskin* to *Cinderella*, the feminists took issue with Demy whose casting of Deneuve proved to be misleading. A star of some magnitude at the time, Deneuve was clearly well beyond the age of the Maiden as was her co-star the Prince. Demy devised suggestions of delight that merely bordered on desire. Adult's playing children substituted immature behavior for natural desire: skipping through pastures, stuffing one another's faces with sweets, jumping up and down on beds etc. appeared ridiculous; fit for neither child or adults entertainment. This they related to Disney's use of the fairy godmother that pushes Cinderella through transformation without benefit of guidance.

The group compared how Disney and Demy approached the three types of women from radically different perspectives. Disney's template of the pure girl, pear shaped godmother, and stepmother as fem fatale was contrasted with Demy's more traditional

approach of Maiden, Matron and Crone. Overlooking Deneuve's age as the Maiden, the godmother acting as the Matron warns the girl that marriage to her father is both morally and legally wrong and sends her to the woods to escape incestuous pursuit, while the Crone ensures that the Maiden works hard and is not treated as a privileged princess by anyone. The godmother remains sexually vital and seeks the King for herself. All agreed that Demy's film provided the girl with instruction and reasoning.

Also at issue for the feminists was the group of men who encouraged the King to marry his daughter. The King falls in love with the daughter based on her physical attributes presented in a picture with the same passion that the villagers loathe her because of the look and stench of her while wearing the Donkeyskin. Physical attributes become the basis of all judgment.

The Prince's search for his princess in each film is also predicated on a physical attribute. While the Disney Prince's search centers on a shoe, Demy's revolves around a ring. Considerable discussion focused on the self-mutilation females in each version were willing to undergo in order to fit the Prince's need. While the stepmother in *Cinderella* encourages her daughter to slice off parts of their feet, countrywomen in *Donkeyskin* subject their fingers to all manner of torture to lengthen and slenderize their digits in hopes of a crown. These actions are reflective of contemporary women who surgically remove toes in order to purchase trendy and pricey pointy shoes, proving that modern women could learn a lesson and experience a shift in consciousness from tale type #510; sub type A and/or B.