

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of The Study

The visual production of the body in media is a powerful instructional instrument that shapes how the public perceives and consumes identity in the modern social environment. Far from being a simple biological reality, physical appearance serves as a complex set of visual indicators that reflect social status, gender roles, and racial identity. The image of a person, particularly a movie star, serves as a place where social norms are both maintained and challenged in a society where visual culture dominates. The public utilizes appearance to create a social image that assigns people to pre-existing gender standards. When a particular set of physical characteristics is frequently shown in the media as the ideal, it settles into a regulatory framework that the general public believes to be natural.

The construction of beauty standards in society is not a natural occurrence but a socially engineered phenomenon that dictates how individuals, particularly women, are expected to perform their identity. Beauty standards are formed through the continuous repetition of idealized images in media, which then congeal into a societal norm. In a global context, this standard has long been dominated by Eurocentric Beauty, a framework that prioritizes specific physical traits such as fair skin, straight or wavy hair (fine texture), narrow facial features, and a slender willowy silhouette. This standard was historically established through colonial narratives and reinforced by the global mass

media, creating a hierarchy where Eurocentric features are equated with purity, innocence, and the ideal femininity of princess.

The dominant force behind both the development and maintenance of this Eurocentric visual canon has been Disney. The "Disney Princess" brand was based on Snow White (1937), Cinderella (1950), and Sleeping Beauty (1959), according to official historical archives from Disney D23 (The Official Disney Fan Club). The perfected European fairy-tale style was specifically intended to be represented by these figures. The company famously described Snow White as having "skin white as snow," setting the standard for the Disney female lead.

From her 1989 animation to her 2023 live-action appearance, Ariel's image serves as a standard inside the framework of *The Little Mermaid*. The 1989 version performs a traditional, prescribed femininity that fits with the classical Disney body, whereas the 2023 version challenges these standards by presenting a physical image that connects with various racial and cultural markers, such as natural dark skin tone and hair textures. The main settings for this study are the official first release theatrical and promotional posters from five different years: 1989, 2000, 2008, 2019, and 2023. A poster serves as a concentrated location where the gendered image of the character is fixed into a definitive "citation" of beauty standards because it is a static medium. This study uses Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) Visual Semiotics framework to evaluate this moving image and interpret the grammar of visual design, specifically the portrayal of face features, skin tone, hair texture in these posters. According to Stuart Hall (1997), physical differences are assigned meaning through representational practices that fix stereotypes, creating a "racialized regime" of beauty. Therefore, shifting Ariel's physical appearance across these

decades fundamentally changes how the established standard is maintained or deconstructed in the modern time.



Figure 1 Chronological comparison of Ariel's Physical Appearance across Official Posters (1989, 2000, 2008, 2019, 2023)

These visual regulatory frames have been established in large part by Disney, a global cultural leader. Characterized by Eurocentric features, thin proportions, and perfect stylized hair, the "Disney Princess" image has served as a global benchmark for classic femininity for more than thirty years. A strict expectation of how a female protagonist should represent her gender through her physical attributes has been established by this visual canon that is deeply embedded in the public perception. This long-standing visual hierarchy has been unexpectedly shaken by Disney's recent move to live-action remakes. The Little Mermaid's 2023 adaptation, which attempted to tear down a visual identity that was more than thirty years, is the most controversial example of this shift.

Through these posters, Ariel's image changed, exposing a subtle representational journey. The 2000 (Return to the Sea) and 2008 (Ariel's Beginning) posters, which mostly preserved the animation status quo while making minor adjustments to modern digital coloring techniques, came after the initial 1989 poster, which established the Eurocentric standard. The controversy began as early as July 3, 2019, when after it was officially announced that Halle Bailey will play the part, even though the movie wasn't released until 2023. According to a report by Variety (2019) article headlined "Halle Bailey Cast as Ariel in Disney's Live-Action 'The Little Mermaid'," the casting announcement sparked quick and conflicting responses worldwide. This announcement triggered the #NotMyAriel campaign, a documented digital phenomenon that trended globally on platforms such as X and Instagram. Data from social media monitoring tools indicate that the hashtag #NotMyAriel has been used in over 100,000 posts on X (formerly Twitter) and has generated tens of thousands of tags on Instagram since its inception. In these digital spaces, the hashtag often accompanies "hate speech". The backlash was rooted in a strong nostalgic attachment to the original 1989 animation, where a segment of the audience utilized the hashtag to reject Bailey's image as an invalid performance of the character based on her physical appearances.



Figure 2 Image of Halle Bailey the main lead of The Little Mermaid as “Ariel”

When it was first shown at the D23 Expo on September 9, 2022, and subsequently published on the Disney Official YouTube Channel (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0-wPm99PF9U>), the video titled "The Little Mermaid | Official Teaser Trailer" immediately became a site of ideological conflict. Within the first 48 hours of its premiere, it experienced a massive surge of digital disapproval. This digital resistance resulted in a phenomenon of coordinated public dissatisfaction. As documented in the official teaser's comment section (see Figure 3), this disapproval was visibly marked by a massive wave of negative and sarcastic remarks from the audience. This phenomenon was a direct assault on the "image" of Ariel, which fell below the audience's rooted expectations, rather than a simple criticism of the film's quality because it had not yet been experienced.

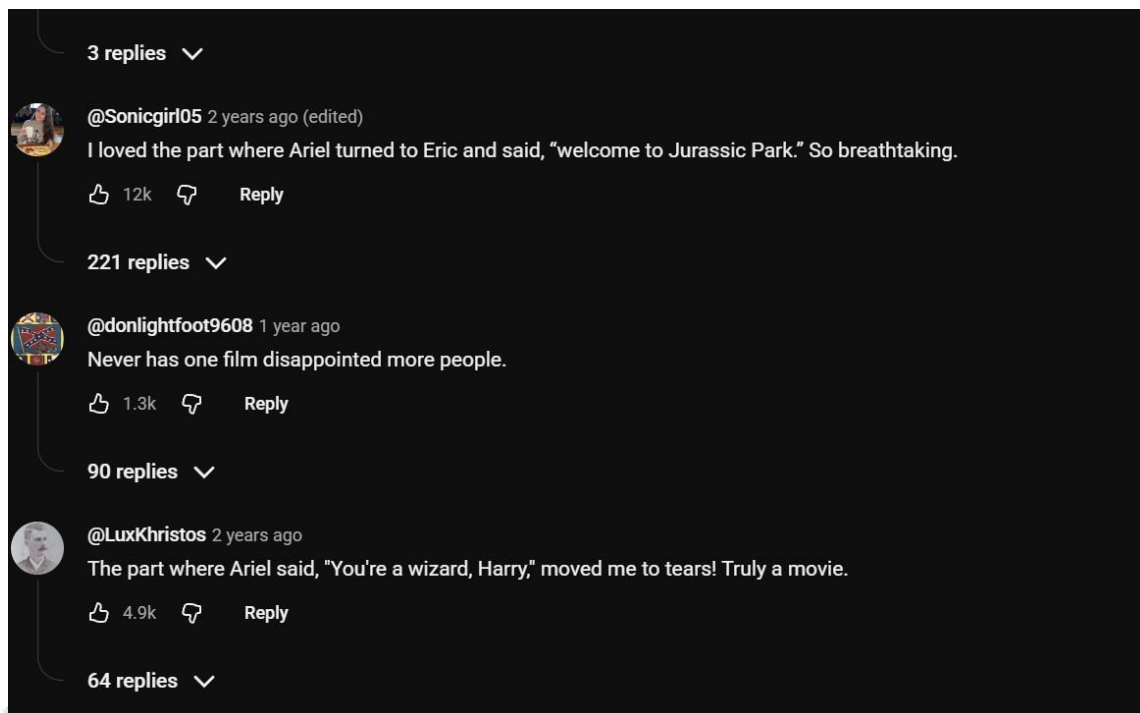


Figure 3. The Youtube comment section in Disney Official Channel “The Little Mermaid Official Trailer”

A deep fracture in the audience's collective memory is shown by this widespread dissatisfaction. Maurice Halbwachs (1950) famously argued that "the individual calls associations to mind by relying on the frameworks of social memory". The 1989 Ariel's light skin and straight hair remained as the character's "social memory" or foundation for many years. A societal resistance to accept a new visual "act" that differs from the conventional image is demonstrated by the #NotMyAriel campaign that followed.

The selection of Halle Bailey was based on her unique personality and artistic spirit, despite the strong international criticism. Rob Marshall, the director, gave a thorough explanation of this decision in an interview with The Academy's A.frame (2023) and on the Disney D23 Podcast (2023). Marshall made it clear that Bailey's unique blend of spirit, heart, youth, and innocence and also that extraordinary voice was the reason she was chosen following an in-depth examination. Marshall confirmed that the casting was

based on the actress's natural personality rather than a racial quota, emphasizing that they were searching for an actress who might represent the "fire" of Ariel's rebellious attitude.

Due to the directors' different cinematic ideologies, this directing style caused a great deal of ideological conflict. The "Disney Renaissance" framework, which placed a premium on the revival of traditional fairy-tale motifs and a perfected Eurocentric fantasy aesthetic, guided the 1989 animation, which was directed by Ron Clements and John Musker. Ariel's physical appearances were intended to serve as a static representation of femininity in the 20th century. On the other hand, Rob Marshall's 2023 course shows a turn toward "Hyper-naturalism" and an ideological dedication to diversity. By preserving Halle Bailey's natural hair texture, particularly her locs, and blending them into Ariel's personality, Marshall aimed to establish the character in a organic setting. This shift in directorial intent represents a conflict between "Standard Preservation" and "Progressive Deconstruction," where the new director's desire to update the character's physical appearance clashes with the original creators' vision.

This conflict emphasizes how important it is to consider identity from the perspective of representation. Stuart Hall (1997) argues that meaning is socially constructed and can be renegotiated. To protect its visual supremacy, this dominant regime historically utilized Edward Said's (1978) practice of 'Othering' to position non-Western features as the subordinate. Ariel's physical transformation from the "canonical" animation to the "naturalistic" live-action, according to this viewpoint, basically modifies the story of her representation.

Several previous studies have attempted to analyze the shifting representations within the Disney princess franchise, providing a foundational landscape for this research. Wardah and Kusuma (2022), for instance, conducted a semiotic analysis of women's representation in *Raya and The Last Dragon*, focusing on how visual signs in animated films reflect the evolution of female leads toward independence and strength. Their research highlights how Disney has begun to move away from traditional passivity, yet it remains centered on animated characters whose physical attributes are designed within a fictional, non-human context.

Building on the evolution of live-action adaptations, Wang (2025) provides a thematic study that examines how "empowered princesshood" is re-imagined in recent remakes to align with fourth-wave feminism. Although Wang's work emphasizes narrative themes above a technical analysis of the character's physical "grammar," it is important to understand the ideological move toward more forceful female protagonists. This broader historical perspective is complemented by Adamou (2022), who analyzes the journeys of Disney princesses through the lens of gender representation, arguing that these characters serve as mirrors for shifting societal expectations of womanhood over several decades.

However, Disney's visual canon saw a more drastic shift with the 2023 remake of *The Little Mermaid*. Gammon and Phan (2025) investigate the intense digital backlash against this film, specifically focusing on the continuity of racism and "white skin preference" in markets like Vietnam. Their study reveals how the audience's attachment to the original 1989 image creates a resistance to any physical deconstruction of the character. Similarly, Myisha et al. (2024) explore the representation of diversity in the

film, arguing that the casting of Halle Bailey serves as a direct challenge to racial stereotypes that carry on within Disney's narrative framework for nearly a century.

By analyzing these studies, a significant research gap becomes clear. While scholars have discussed the sociological reception of the audience, the thematic rise of feminism, and the general narrative shift toward diversity, there is a lack of research that specifically synthesizes a meticulous Visual Grammar analysis of physical appearance such as hair texture (locs), skin tone, and facial features with Stuart Hall's Theory of Representation and the concept of a "racialized regime". Most existing research focuses on "why" the audience reacts or "what" the story says, whereas this study investigates "how" the technical construction of the visual image on promotional posters serves as a visual act that deconstructs a thirty-four-year Eurocentric hegemony.

Therefore, by analyzing Ariel's physical appearance as a socially produced and relational construct, this study fills this gap. This study uses Hall's theory as the primary lens, alongside Visual Semiotics (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) to analyze how the 2023 film's recurrence of visual indicators functions to redefine representation and deconstruct fixed beauty standards. Ariel's image is positioned as a complex cultural text that challenges the "canonical" memory of the past by redefining representation for the current situation through this careful research.

1.2 Research Questions

The research will be answering the two following questions:

1. How does Ariel's physical appearance shift across the official posters from 1989, 2000, 2008, 2019, and 2023?

1.3 Purpose of The Study

1. To analyze how the shifting of Ariel's physical appearance across the official posters (1989-2023)

1.4 Limitations of The Study

This study focuses on the visual analysis of Ariel's physical appearance (image) across first release official theatrical and promotional posters of *The Little Mermaid*, spanning from the 1989 animation to the 2023 live-action adaptation, including the versions released in 2000, 2008, and 2019. The scope of this research focuses on specific visual elements, namely hair, facial features (eyes, nose, mouth, and face shape), skin tone to analyze their shifting representation relation to the racialized regime and othering.

1.5 Significance of The Study

Practically, this study provides an understanding of how modern media redefines classic characters to fit contemporary social values. Theoretically, this research contributes to the field of English Literature and Cultural Studies, specifically in applying Stuart Hall's Theory of Representation, to visual media analysis.

1.6 State of The Art

There is still a big knowledge gap regarding the technical-visual construction of the 'Other' and Eurocentric beauty standards on promotional media, considering the fact that current study on Disney princess representation has given us a basic understanding of how these characters change over time. The 2023 version of Ariel and the larger context of Disney's portrayal have been the focus of recent studies. Myisha et al. (2024) explore the representation of diversity in *The Little Mermaid* (2023) and how the film

challenges traditional racial stereotypes within Disney's narrative through a qualitative analysis of the movie's content. This is complemented by Gammon and Phan (2025), who investigate the racialized backlash and digital hate content against the film in specific cultural contexts, such as Vietnam, highlighting the continuity of racism and "white skin preference." Furthermore, Wang (2025) provides a thematic study of Disney's live-action remakes, focusing on how "empowered princesshood" is re-imagined against the rise of fourth-wave feminism. On a broader scale, Adamou (2022) analyzes the journey of Disney princesses and their gender representation over time, while Wardah and Kusuma (2022) utilize semiotic analysis to understand women's representation in *Raya and The Last Dragon*, focusing on the shift toward more independent female leads.

These previous studies have extensively discussed the sociological "why" regarding audience backlash, the thematic evolution of feminism in remakes, and the general narrative representation of diversity. However, this research positions itself in the middle of these discourses by focusing on the technical-visual construction of the image itself. While Myisha et al. (2024) and Wang (2025) analyze the movie's narrative themes or inclusivity, and Gammon and Phan (2025) focus on the sociological aspect of racism, this study analyzes how the physical shift is constructed through "Visual Grammar" as defined by Kress and van Leeuwen, applying Stuart Hall's Theory of Representation as the primary lens.. By analyzing specific visual indicators such as hair texture (locs), skin tone, and facial features on official posters spanning thirty-four years (1989–2023), this thesis demonstrates that Ariel's physical transformation is not merely a casting choice but a deconstruction of the the racialized regime of representation. This act directly deconstructs the Eurocentric hegemony that has been maintained by Disney for thirty four

years. Because it provides an objective, technical-semiotic perspective among the subjective discussions around race and cultural identity in modern media, this study is therefore academically valuable.

