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Flatness and Depth: Classic Disney's Medieval Vision

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Flatness and Depth: Classic Disney's Medieval Vision

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The architecture of film has acted, from the beginning of this [twentieth] century, as a laboratory . . . for the exploration of the built world.¹

Since a castle is its corporate logo, we should hardly be surprised that castles, as well as other elements of medieval architecture, figure prominently in a host of classic-era Disney films. While there are very many examples to which we might point, these elements show up in numerous cartoons, such as the Oswald the Lucky Rabbit's *Oh, What a Knight* (1928) and Mickey Mouse's *Ye Olden Days* (1933), *Giant Land* (1933), and *Brave Little Tailor* (1938); they become emblematic of goals and values in such animated features as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), and *The Sword in the Stone* (1963); and they form the historical and cultural backdrop for various live-action adventures, such as *The Story of Robin Hood and His Merrie Men* (1952) and *The Sword and the Rose* (1953). Walt Disney himself is partly responsible for this prominence, since, as various commentators have noted, he much valued European art and culture, favored classic European fairy tales and legends as source materials, and required his animators to familiarize themselves with European art traditions.² But the castle's role as spatial representation, and as part of a larger spatial aesthetic at work in Disney's animated films, has been overshadowed by a critical tendency to view the company's various efforts, and indeed the Disney brand, mainly in a cultural light, often leading to assessments of his works as modern plunderings or abasements of older and highly valued forms. Yet that confrontation of the old and new, particularly the new art of animation with medieval imagery like the castle, can tell us much about the trajectory of Disney animation that largely escapes those culture-centric commentaries. This essay tries to connect the aesthetic with the cultural by exploring some of those architectural features—and, more generally, the spaces—of classic Disney animation, as they feature in a variety of cartoons and in more ambitious works such as *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty*. All of these films provide us with a lens for better seeing how Disney animation, even as it valued and sought to depict an older, medieval world, was engaged throughout its golden era of the 1930s-1950s in a productive dialogue with the space that has become emblematic of something very different, of modernism itself, including that of the architectural modern.

In his own efforts at exploring the links between architecture and the filmic imaginary, Anthony Vidler has shown how cinema and architecture generally tracked each other in developing a new sense of space in the twentieth century. Responding to modernism's interrogation of older notions of space, the arts, as Stephen Kern has chronicled, in the early twentieth century increasingly came to view space in a new way, as "a form of understanding and not an objective reality."³ Film, with its mobile camera eye, its rapid and creative spatial juxtapositions via editing and montage, and its ability to link extreme close-up views with extreme long shots, readily aligned with this view. Thus, the early Soviet filmmaker and theorist Sergei Eisenstein described how, in his films, space and time were constantly being created rather than simply recorded through the "process of arranging images in the feelings and mind of the spectator."⁴ Describing the architectural response to this same new sensibility, Vidler notes a shift in the built structure from "being understood as a passive container of objects and bodies," to an expressive construct "charged with all the dimensions of a relative, moving, dynamic entity"—an entity that, like film, embodied the notion that "the relationship between a viewer and a work of art was based on a shifting 'point of view.'"⁵

¹ Anthony Vidler, *Warped Space: Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 99.

² Among other accounts, Robin Allan's *Walt Disney and Europe* offers probably the best overview of Disney's relationship to and appreciation for European culture. In any study of Disney animation, Allan argues, "the cultural heritage of Europe . . . cannot be overemphasized," as Disney consistently "made use of graphic European traditions," drew on "the individual talents of artists who were either European themselves or influenced by the great illustrative tradition of Europe," and insisted on a fidelity to European art and architecture throughout his animated films. See *Walt Disney and Europe* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 16, 260.

³ Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 134.

⁴ Sergei Eisenstein, *The Film Sense*, trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970), 17.

⁵ Vidler, *Warped Space*, 3.

In light of cinema and modernist architecture's kindred efforts at this new sort of "confrontation with the real," it is hardly surprising that, as Vidler suggests, "the architecture of film" has frequently functioned "as a laboratory . . . for the exploration of the built world," fashioning imaginary spaces that only much later "architecture might be seen to catch up with."⁶ In few instances is this "laboratory" effect more evident, I would suggest, than in films that prioritize what we might think of as a *designed* world, such as the animated film. For in such works every structure must be conceived, drawn, and presented with a mind to how characters inhabit or relate to that space, how that space, in turn, inhabits and relates to the larger constructed film world, and how we should relate to it as viewers, through our own point of view.

What makes classic-era Disney animation especially pertinent for this sort of investigation, though, is the relative complexity of that relationship between its structures and the larger animated world. For Walt Disney, more so than any other figure involved in early film animation, was concerned with developing the possibilities of the form not only by endowing his characters with personality—as has often been chronicled—but also by giving special emphasis to the *world* of those characters. Thus we find the castles and elaborately constructed spaces of films like *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty* doing more than just evoking a suitably medieval, fairy-tale setting, or, as often seems the case in earlier cartoon efforts like *Oh, What a Knight*, *Ye Olden Days*, *Giant Land*, and *Brave Little Tailor*, offering the occasion for brief, historically-grounded gags, as when Oswald must calculate how to cross a crocodile-infested moat in *Oh, What a Knight*. Rather, in these films the castle especially becomes a key structuring element for the narrative; a model for the central character's troubled relationship to his world—or more generally, space—which can by turns become inviting or frightening; and even what we might think of as a site of technological confrontation, as new techniques of animation combine with traditional imagery (like castles) to stylistically dramatize a collision between old and new, or more precisely, a collision between the old world and the modern realm that is fairly common to the modernist vision. That collision has become one of the hallmarks of classic Disney animation, allowing it to mix even a highly stylized imagery—as is especially the case with a film like *Sleeping Beauty*—with the elaborate realistic illusion of depth that would become a classic Disney hallmark.

Before examining the animated castle as a case study for such telling spatial design, we need to consider the historical context on which Disney animators would have drawn, and which might have colored their audience's point of view. In short, what was the historical nature of these structures and how did they traditionally function *as architecture*, as part of a lived world? On one level, the medieval castle functions very much within the older tradition Vidler describes, as a structure designed to serve as a "container of objects and bodies," that is, one conceived around strong structural lines that contain and lines that exclude, often resulting in its depiction as what he terms a "passive" image, or in terms of early animation, as a flat structure set in a vaguely allusive landscape. Such simple depictions are fairly common in early animation, providing settings not only for the various Disney cartoons noted above, but also for a variety of efforts from other studios, such as Van Beuren's *Cinderella Blues* (1931), Columbia's *What a Knight* (1932), Walter Lantz's *A Wet Knight* (1932), Terrytoons' *Robin Hood* (1933) and *An Arrow Escape* (1936), Ub Iwerks' *The King's Tailor* (1934), and others. In most such works, the medieval architecture is little more than a flat backdrop, providing a rationale for the cartoon characters to joust, duel with broadswords, or engage in other exciting period actions.

We might see this fairly commonplace representation in relation to one of the dominant historical understandings of such structures, what Robert Liddiard terms their "military interpretation."⁷ As he explains, this traditional perspective sees castles as structures that reflect "a concern to deter the more aggressive forms of local violence," with their high walls, rounded towers, concentric structures, gatehouses, and various forms of water defense serving as exclusionary features, typically linked to theories about

⁶ Ibid., 111, 99.

⁷ Robert Liddiard, *Castles in Context: Power, Symbolism, and Landscape, 1066 to 1500* (Oxford: Windgather Press, 2005), 5.

medieval society that have “stressed its violence” and the need for protection against such violence.⁸ One result of this view, as Charles Coulson observes, is a broad—and at times not very accurate—coloring of modern “ideas of medieval society, aristocratic culture, faith, and strife, permeating them all with images of dungeons, battering-rams, and boiling oil”⁹—images easily located in many of the cartoons cited above.

Reaching for a more comprehensive assessment, or what Coulson terms a “mosaic picture,”¹⁰ other, more recent studies have approached the castle differently, framing it in both aesthetic and ideological terms. As Liddiard summarizes, such studies have tended to focus on “the aesthetic appeal” of the structure and its surroundings; on its psychological function as an imposing “residence built in a martial style,”¹¹ sending signals of both power and protection to those living in its shadow; and on its spatial inscription of social structure through its careful regulation of how guests—or visitors of various political stripe—would enter and move through its precincts. These are, of course, complex cultural concerns that move consideration of the castle beyond the notion of a “passive container,” pointing instead to how its aesthetics correlated to its lived, social functions, its place within what Vidler terms a “dynamic,” relational context that forecasts more modern architectural concepts and concerns.

Of course, these differing views are not mutually exclusive, and we can easily find a variety of visions of the castle making their way into Disney’s animated films even during the studio’s early period. *Oh, What a Knight*, *Ye Olden Days*, and *Giant Land*, for example, all rely heavily upon a stereotypically military interpretation of the castle, one probably already familiar to moviegoers in the 1920s and 1930s, thanks to a variety of literary and cinematic influences.¹² In each case, the castle is presented as an imposing structure, a major physical—and cultural—obstacle facing the small, anthropomorphic protagonists involved in their respective narratives: Oswald the Rabbit in the first cartoon and Mickey Mouse in the later two. Each narrative’s initiating event is typically the physically difficult entry into the depicted “fortress”—usually involving crossing a moat and scaling a wall—followed by, in two of these films, the hero’s daring rescue from that structure of an imprisoned princess (foreshadowing the sort of activity that would mark Disney’s later and more ambitious “princess” feature films). Adding to that martial framing is a duel that, in each case, forms a necessary and exciting step in accomplishing the rescue and exiting the fortress castle.

While hardly complicated or even surprising in narrative structure, these films, like many other early Disney cartoons, gained an additional complexity through their function within a conventional *cinematic* register. For they not only evoke a traditional cultural view of the castle, but also situate their views as parodic, as a cartoon’s humorous commentary on current feature films’ depictions of the Medieval world—and thus on rather clichéd or “flat” conceptions of that world. Of course, parody was fairly common in early animation, with Disney already having worked in this mode with two of his first Mickey Mouse efforts: *Gallop’in’ Gaucho* (1928) had fashioned the mouse’s character after the dashing central figure of Douglas Fairbanks’ recent hit film *The Gaucho* (1927), while *Steamboat Willie* (1928) broadly evoked Buster Keaton’s comedy *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (1928). For their iconography, characters, and plot elements, both *Oh, What a Knight* and *Ye Olden Days* drew from a variety of such popular live-action spectacles, such as Douglas Fairbanks’ most successful film *Robin Hood* (1922), its sequel *Richard the Lion-Hearted* (1923), and John Barrymore’s *The Beloved Rogue* (1927), with *Robin Hood*—the top-grossing film of 1922—a most obvious influence in shaping a popular (cinematic) view of the medieval world. That film’s introductory title card, pointing to the “imperishable record” of the period’s “stately castles whose turrets pierced the sky,” its repeated emphasis on the castle’s imposing moat and walls, which Fairbanks scales on several occasions, and its vigorous duels, especially the climactic tower

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁹ Charles L. H. Coulson, *Castles in Medieval Society: Fortresses in England, France, and Ireland in the Central Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹¹ Liddiard, *Castles in Context*, 10.

¹² Among those popular influences we might especially point to the novels of Sir Walter Scott, the 1913 film adaptation of his *Ivanhoe*, and various film versions of the Robin Hood legend, such as those produced in 1908, 1912, and 1922.

confrontation between the hulking Sir Guy of Gisbourne and Robin Hood, wherein the latter momentarily hesitates in their fight to embrace the fearful Maid Marian, all find imitations in these two cartoons. In *Ob, What a Knight* especially Oswald sends up Fairbanks' mixture of romance and sword play when he allows his *shadow* to battle his husky opponent in the tower while he exits, in mid-fight, to kiss his own beloved—multiple times. Such scenes clearly depend on their live-action originals for shape, set design, and even characterization. In fact, even given their normal energetic nature, it is difficult to see Mickey and Oswald's bounding about these massive traditional structures outside of the context of Fairbanks' robust modern American and archetypal movie hero of the period. His adventurous figure was one whose "glorious spectacles of physical daring,"¹³ as Jennifer M. Bean styles them, readily embodied a modern American "fantasy of eternal childhood, endless energy, and relentless physicality"¹⁴—but a fantasy, of both character and vision, rendered rather transparent and even silly when seen from a different point of view, that offered by these animated imitators.

Moving away from that parodic mode, the later Mickey Mouse cartoon *Brave Little Tailor* (1938) offers a rather different, non-military interpretation of castle and culture. While initially depicted as the center of local society, the castle is also shown as just part of a complex and thriving medieval village, full of shops, taverns, and winding streets. Moreover, it apparently offers no protection against a predatory giant roaming the countryside; its high wall is simply the only structure large enough to hang a life-sized poster, warning the populace about the giant's recent appearance. And here there are no Fairbanks-like heroes or knights willing to challenge this menace, although some of the parodic treatment of such figures remains. Mickey, the eponymous character, is readily welcomed into the castle simply because he was overheard boasting that he "killed seven with one blow"—although the seven were *flies*, not giants—but in the current emergency he is immediately appointed "Royal High Killer of the Giant" with a promise, from the start, of the hand of the princess Minnie should he defeat the giant. When Mickey succeeds in his improbable mission, the area surrounding the castle—a structure that now occupies a place in the background, not prominent, just one more feature of this complex world—has been transformed into a giant-sized but, more importantly, *giant-powered* amusement park where the townsfolk cavort, anticipating not only the trajectory of the entire Disney empire, but also a new relationship to the real—as reality becomes a ride or even audioanimatronic experience—that Disney was just beginning to explore.

While *Ye Olden Days* was just a few years removed from the Oswald *Ob, What a Knight* and partly a remake of that work, *Brave Little Tailor* appeared at a kind of stylistic crossroads for Disney animation—one that might give reason to its more complex treatment of foreground and background, of castle and town. At that time the studio was experimenting with a different approach to animated reality. In 1937 it had just introduced its Academy-award-winning multiplane camera,¹⁵ a device that altered the way Disney animators were asked to think about space and depict it, and one that would prove central to the styling of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, as well as subsequent Disney features. While the multiplane device was not used in *Brave Little Tailor*, most likely because of the cost that device entailed, a more complex approach to space, foregrounded by its shifting depiction of the castle and its precincts, seems very much in line with a broad stylistic shift that was just starting to mark Disney animation in this period and that would figure into the company's increasingly complex presentation of other medieval worlds.

¹³ Jennifer M. Bean, "1924: Movies and Play," in *American Cinema of the 1920s: Themes and Variations*, ed. Lucy Fisher (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 126.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹⁵ Disney's original multiplane camera was a fourteen-foot-high device that not only allowed for combining four or five layers of animation, but could separately light and move four of those layers, producing shots that effectively mimicked live-action tracking and panning shots, while also reproducing a sense of parallax—an effect previously missing from practically all animated films. For an extended discussion of the creation and use of the multiplane camera, see J. P. Telotte, *Animating Space: From Mickey to Wall-E* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 131-39.

While not the first film to use that multiplane camera,¹⁶ *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* would, thanks to its more ambitious, feature-length status, integrate its spatial aesthetic into its narrative in a most prominent and effective way. It opens, we might recall, with a traditional establishing shot, showing a castle on a promontory, dominating what seems to be a surrounding village on lower ground, and through a series of dissolves, each one shifting our point of view, as if we were slowly moving through this animated space, it allows us to enter the castle, finding in a darkened room the Queen, the focus of that sense of domination, carrying out the periodic inquisition of her magic mirror. This forbidding scene, with its suggestion of a dark world of secrets, fortified against intrusion, presents us with one view of what lies behind the introductory image of the castle's façade. But it gives way to a sequence that frames the castle somewhat differently, as easily accessible, almost domestic, and open to possibility. Fittingly, it is the introduction of Snow White herself, which depicts her in a happy moment, as she sings while washing the garden steps, interacting with the birds that flutter around the garden area, and wishing at her "wishing well." A cutaway then links interior and exterior spaces, as it introduces the Prince who, from outside the castle, hears her singing, and despite the castle's dark presence, easily mounts the short wall beyond the well and approaches her. This entire sequence is organized around the work of the multiplane camera, which helps suture the internal and external scenes by framing Snow White among flowers and vines (rather than protective structures, as is the Queen), by anticipating the slow movement of the Prince toward Snow White by various other framing effects of trees and a trellis, by suddenly placing both of their faces in a kind of "iris" shot produced by looking up from the bottom of the well as both look down (as if the well had "heard" and granted her wish for someone to love), and by showing him similarly surrounded by flowers and vines as she retreats back inside a castle room, from the balcony of which, at a safe distance, she shyly watches her new suitor. Even though a tracking shot discovers that the Queen has witnessed part of this scene, as she suddenly draws her drapes, shutting off the outside world, the multiplane effects have quickly and effectively brought the Prince and Snow White together, demonstrated how open and connected the spaces of this world are, and, in the process, established two different possibilities for the castle: underscoring the fortress-like world of the Queen, while also suggesting a possibility of openness, as well as a hope for change or escape from that enclosed world.

Thereafter, much of the narrative centers on these different spatial possibilities, both within the forest where much of the action occurs and in the castle images that again become both a site of menace and a sign of eventual salvation. When Snow White runs into the forest to escape the Huntsman, it too becomes a dark, enclosing, and menacing space, with tree branches, roots, and vines seeming to clutch at her or trip her up, with the *natural* world turned into an animate extension, conceived in great depth, of the menace that has been visually associated with castle and Queen. Yet after Snow White becomes exhausted and falls asleep in the forest, another multiplane scene brings hope, when she awakes and comes upon the Dwarfs' cottage, effectively embowered in a forest opening, its depth suggesting shelter rather than menace, while the surrounding flowers and trees recall the earlier, hopeful garden scene. In subsequently moving into the cottage, Snow White is followed by the forest animals she has befriended, she opens the windows to let light in, and she brings in flowers—which, we should note, she is associated with in almost every scene—thereby again linking inside and outside, turning a "passive," even ominous space into one that is newly aestheticized and alive with possibilities, as she surmises that the inhabitants might be children who need a mother—a social role she might fill.

It is in the film's final presentations of two castles, though, that we can most clearly see this working out of different approaches to space and to the social world, with the castles visually suggesting opposite narrative possibilities. When the narrative cuts back to the Queen's castle, it is now presented as a black silhouette, its very darkness dissolving any sense of depth and underscoring its threatening aspect, and the following scene within the Queen's chamber only builds the sense of enclosure, as well as the barely disguised violence that marks this world. The Queen, in her dark room, inspects a box that, she discovers, holds not Snow White's heart but that of a pig. Learning she has been tricked by the Huntsman, she then descends deep into the

¹⁶ The multiplane camera had previously been employed on the 1937 Silly Symphony cartoon *The Old Mill*, which won an Academy Award for Best Animated Short Subject.

castle, a depth marked by winding stone stairs, scurrying rats, spider webs, dark shadows, and barred windows. And after crafting her apple of “sleeping death,” she descends even further, through a trapdoor, into the dungeons, and beyond that to a dark stream running deep beneath the castle. The overall effect of these dark boxes within boxes—an effect underscored by the vision of a skeleton reaching out from a dungeon cell, in a futile attempt to reach from one space into another—is to build an atmosphere of foreboding, danger, and entrapment, underscoring the sense of “violence” that, as Liddiard notes, was commonly associated with such structures.¹⁷ And yet the film’s final image, as the Prince awakens Snow White and they travel to his own castle, offers a revision of that common sensibility. For in contrast to the Queen’s dark castle, last seen in long shot, flattened out in shadow and silhouette, this final image, done with the multiplane camera, offers Snow White and the Prince in the foreground as they move toward his castle in the deep background, its pink-topped turrets and golden walls gleaming in the sun, promising a very different future, one wherein, as the turning page of an illuminated manuscript assures us, they will live “happily ever after”—“happily” because fear and violence have been dispelled, and a new sort of castle, aestheticized, open, and welcoming, awaits them.

Certainly, a similar sentiment marks the majority of other Disney fairy tale films, but especially *Sleeping Beauty*, which shares *Snow White*’s medieval setting and offers a similarly comparative treatment of its own two key castles. In fact, *Sleeping Beauty* seems more pointedly anchored in an authentic medieval look, thanks to the Disney artists’ special research at the Metropolitan Museum of Arts’ medieval collection and their resulting efforts at imitating the famous unicorn tapestries there, as well as the inspiration of the Limbourg brothers’ illuminated manuscript *Tres Riches Heures*.¹⁸ Art Director/Color Stylist Eyvind Earle has described the elaborate look he developed for the film, noting that in creating the design scheme he was “leaning a little in the direction of all the medieval arts.”¹⁹ The film’s primary castle, that of King Stefan, clearly recalls the richly colored and ornately designed structures depicted in *Tres Riches Heures*, a look that sets this structure in stark contrast to the dark, forbidding, and indeed crumbling castle inhabited by the evil fairy Maleficent and her half-animal servants, the “forces of evil,” as she terms them. If the former structure suggests the vitality, richness, and indeed openness of medieval culture—in fact, the narrative begins on a festive note, with a “great holiday” having been “proclaimed throughout the kingdom” in honor of the birth of Princess Aurora—the other, perched precariously atop one of the “Forbidden Mountains,” surrounded by gloom, its only entry a guarded, gargoyle-adorned bridge over a deep canyon, points to the culture’s other potential, for repression, violence, and enclosure.

That sense of openness is particularly emphasized in the introduction to King Stefan’s castle, which is seen with crowds converging from various angles to the castle grounds. The general flatness characteristic of the illuminated manuscript inspiration gives way to one of the strengths of the multiplane camera, its ability to use its five levels and shifting planes to depict action at various levels in the frame and simultaneous movement in multiple directions—recalling some forms of Eisensteinian montage. Thus we see plumed knights on horseback ride at angles to colorfully dressed townsfolk, who in turn pass in front of soldiers, as well as the stylized square and rounded trees surrounding the castle.²⁰ In fact, the walls and turrets in the

¹⁷ The original but abandoned concepts for *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* included far more scenes within the castle’s dark interiors, and especially in the dungeon where, as would happen in *Sleeping Beauty*, the Prince would be imprisoned and where, we assume from the various other chained skeletons around him, he will be either tortured or left to die a lingering death. While still extant in sketch form, apparently no footage was completed of these scenes. See the bonus chapter “Abandoned Concepts,” *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, directed by David Hand (1937; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2001), DVD.

¹⁸ Michael Berrier, *Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation in its Gold Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 556-7.

¹⁹ Quoted in Berrier, *Hollywood Cartoons*, 557.

²⁰ We might note that this same joyous parade into the castle marks another, far more recent Princess film, Disney’s *Frozen*. While not set in Medieval times, *Frozen*’s story centers on the kingdom of Arendelle and its centerpiece castle, a structure closed to outsiders since the deaths of the king and queen, but opened up to the populace and representatives of the surrounding towns when Princess Elsa comes of age and prepares to accept the role of Queen. Appropriately, this film concludes with Elsa’s sister Anna noting that she “likes the gates [of the castle] open,” and Elsa decreeing that

background of several shots seem to function almost as stands for watching this colorful parade—as if the castle had become a kind of open-air arena—and to anticipate the following scene in the cavernous great hall where everyone gathers to see the new Princess, to present and view gifts to the child, and to celebrate her future, including her anticipated betrothal to the boy Prince Philip of the neighboring kingdom. Yet the climax of that scene heralds a shift in the narrative—and in visual design—when Maleficent enters the hall, casting a pall over it and the festivities. As she places a curse on Aurora, she also effectively transforms the castle from an open, brightly-colored, and inviting realm to a kind of green-tinged fortress, as armed soldiers rush forth and try to seize Maleficent, as doors and gates are shut, as King Stefan then has bonfires built on the castle grounds to burn the kingdom’s spinning wheels, and as fear descends on the people. Appropriately, this shift is marked by the disappearance of the multiplane shots in favor of a flat manuscript page, with time and space becoming a function of its words that simply note, “Many sad and lonely years passed by for King Stefan and his people.”

More to the point, it seems that Maleficent’s plan—as is implied by her name and her numerous stunted and horned minions—is to refashion this world after her own castle in the Forbidden Mountains. As in *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty* offers several elaborate tracking shots through Maleficent’s castle from its heights to its depths, as she descends to her dungeon where she has imprisoned the now-grown Prince Philip, whom she mocks by describing him as “the destined hero of a charming fairy tale come true,” while envisioning what his hopeless aging in the cell might be like. It is a scene then paralleled by Maleficent’s leading Aurora through the dark passages of Stefan’s castle to a tower room where she induces the Princess to prick her finger and fall into a “sleeping death.” The darkness that then descends on the kingdom, recalling the world of the Forbidden Mountains, and the “forest of thorns” Maleficent places around Stefan’s castle, reinforcing its “fortress” effect and making sure that no one might rescue Aurora, only complete the pattern, assuring that both castles here now stand for a world of violence, dominance, and closure—the “military” version of such structures, and indeed as Vidler describes, a very literal “container of . . . bodies” as all inside are put to sleep.

With Prince Philip’s escape and defeat of Maleficent, though, Stefan’s castle undergoes another visual transformation. Shown as a dark structure in the deep background, surrounded by the foreboding forest of thorns, the image slowly dissolves into a misty vision of a bright castle, aestheticized once more, with the thorn bushes disappearing to reveal the rounded and squared trees and carefully manicured grounds of the castle, followed by the courtyards, passages, and finally Aurora’s room, all slowly lit by a rising sun. The subsequent images of an awakening populace, all once more gathered to celebrate Aurora’s sixteenth birthday—and possible marriage to Philip—again emphasize the depth and openness of this world, especially in the climactic shot wherein Aurora and Philip seem to dance right out of the castle on a cloud, once more suggesting that the ability to move beyond a world of violence and closure, to, as a final book page again offers, “live happily ever after,” is tied to realizing a new sense of space, a new sort of world, one that is, as Vidler puts it, “relative, moving, dynamic,” not bound within a structural box.

Within the world of classic Disney animation, that sort of happy achievement was consistently tied to a certain visual style, one that emphasized depth of field, layering, movement, and constant visual surprise, and that, for several decades, was best served by Disney’s multiplane camera. For with that tool, the Disney animators could fashion not simply a more realistic vision of the world, but a more dynamic and alive one: a world of complex and convincing movements, of more intricate and natural juxtapositions, effectively allowing the fundamentally flat world of traditional cartooning to approach the style of live-action cinema, while, perhaps paradoxically, embedding the fantastic imagination within a stronger sense of the real—and of real possibility. That sense is, very simply, one of the keys to the appeal of these narratives, if also one of the reasons commentators, protesting a social *unreality*, have criticized them. In giving depth to even the stylistically flat realm of medieval decoration, *Sleeping Beauty* especially suggests a new possibility for that medieval world. In the instances seen here, the castle might be presented as a flat and imposing object on a

“We’ll never close them again.” See *Frozen*, directed by Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee (Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2014), DVD.

hill, an icon of violence, power, and domination, but also as one component in a complex and evolving culture, part of a tapestry of images suggesting a new depth in that flatness, and with it the possibility of new relationships, both personal and social. Not simply a fairy tale icon, suggesting an impossible wish fulfillment or nostalgic regression, the castle becomes in such classic Disney animation a kind of utopian structure that can model larger and better relationships, to others and to the world.

As a final gloss on such imagery, we might briefly consider a more recent Disney animated effort at mining the medieval world, *Brave* (2012), produced by Disney's Pixar Animation division. Despite its rougher look and the more problematic trajectory its characters face, it is, as most critics quickly noted, another in the long line of Disney princess movies and, in fact, one with many of the predictable elements of such films²¹: a princess, a witch who casts a spell, a kingdom in turmoil, and princes—three in this case—from whom the Princess Merida must select a suitor. And like the other feature films discussed here, it also has two castles, one that of Merida's family, the clan Dunbroch, which is hosting a meeting of the clans to select her betrothed, and the other that of Mor'du, a great bear transformed from a man—long-ago a king himself and leader of the local clans. The Dunbroch castle is an imposing yet welcoming structure, with all of the customary castle elements, including turrets, winding stairways, a great hall, and guardhouse with portcullis. Surrounding it, after the fashion of *Sleeping Beauty*, are all the elements of a thriving medieval society, as a great festival, a kind of highland games, is being staged to celebrate the match in the making. Since this film was done in 3-D and computer animation, all of these elements come to life in much the fashion that we noted with the multiplane scenes in the earlier films—in fact, with even more variation in angle, height, and panoramic perspective, repeatedly suggesting both the depth and openness of this seemingly primitive world.²² However, when Merida stumbles upon Mor'du's castle, she finds something different: another dark silhouette, foreboding ruins situated on a promontory. And after falling into the ruined castle's lower reaches—emblematic of her own fall into using witchcraft to sway her mother—she finds evidence that Mor'du was once a man, that he had over-reached, and that his kingdom, like the recently united clans her father leads, had fallen into discord and decay. Treated much like the depiction of Maleficent's castle in *Sleeping Beauty*, this vision shows the dark side to all of the comic violence and boasting of battle accomplishments that the various clan members rehearse at the start of the film, while also reminding us of how fragile even the seemingly stoutest of human structures—or communities—might be.

These two castles represent, very simply, alternate versions and, more importantly, alternate directions for society. Insofar as these people remain bound in the past—as is Merida's father, who is obsessed with Mor'du, the bear that took his leg, and her mother, who insists on following the old protocols of betrothal that effectively imprison (or box up) her daughter—they risk repeating the past, falling into the pattern of Mor'du and his destroyed kingdom. But in opening up the castle to the other clans, moving out of its boundaries, as Merida does when she explores the surrounding world in all its wonders, and in challenging a preordained fate, they might avoid that future. In fact, this is the point Merida forcefully and convincingly makes to the assembled clans at her father's castle, as she recounts the story of the old, fallen kingdom, noting in a way that should resound for most of our medieval tales, “legends are lessons; they ring with truths.”

And this is the point too that we might draw out of Disney's use of the castle, here and in the earlier films we have discussed. Not simply a backdrop to action or a fortification, a set of boxes or containers within which a human drama is played out and human futures locked up, the castle too, especially in its pointed doubling in all of the feature films, “rings with truths.” As Merida observes, it provides us with lessons from the past, an image in which we can glimpse the dynamics of a society in the midst of change and begin to imagine its

²¹ Lili Loofbourow convincingly argues that *Brave* is, in fact, a very self-conscious attempt at exploring and sending up the “Princess movie,” while also interrogating its various romanticized trappings. See “Not Just Another Princess Movie,” *The New Inquiry*, 12 July 2012, <http://www.thenewinquiry.com/essays/>.

²² We should note that the multiplane effects are a central feature of the RenderMan software that has been used in animating all of the Pixar films.

future. Moreover, in the Disney context, that castle imagery has consistently worked in parallel to the potential for change in animation, for during Disney's classic period the art moved beyond its own two-dimensional nature, providing viewers with dynamic compositions and complex worlds in which people might well have lived. In addressing other such historic and emblematic spaces Vidler describes them in similar fashion, suggesting that we see them as "neither simple illustrations or fully analyzed examples, they seem to hover in a deliberately maintained state of half-reality, now glimpsed clearly, now lost in a cloud of metaphor."²³ It is precisely on that "cloud of metaphor" that Disney, in its classical period—and quite literally at the end of *Sleeping Beauty* when its castle appears to sit atop a cloud—as well as in a recent effort like *Brave*, chose to build its animated castles.

But we, too, need to see these structures and the world they evoke more "clearly." Disney's various castles and medieval villages are not simply the stuff of fairy tales. Rather more than a simple appropriation of a nostalgic or largely martial imagery—and more too than just a highly iconic corporate logo—Disney's use of the castle especially tracks closely and tellingly with the animation aesthetic the studio was developing as part of its founder's desire to draw something more out of this newly-emerging modern art form of animation. As we see, *both* subject and style acknowledge the potential, in various ways, for the old to give way to the new, in this instance acknowledging a medievalism that beneficially reaches into the modern world, a medievalism that is very much on the move.

²³ Vidler, *Warped Space*, 66.