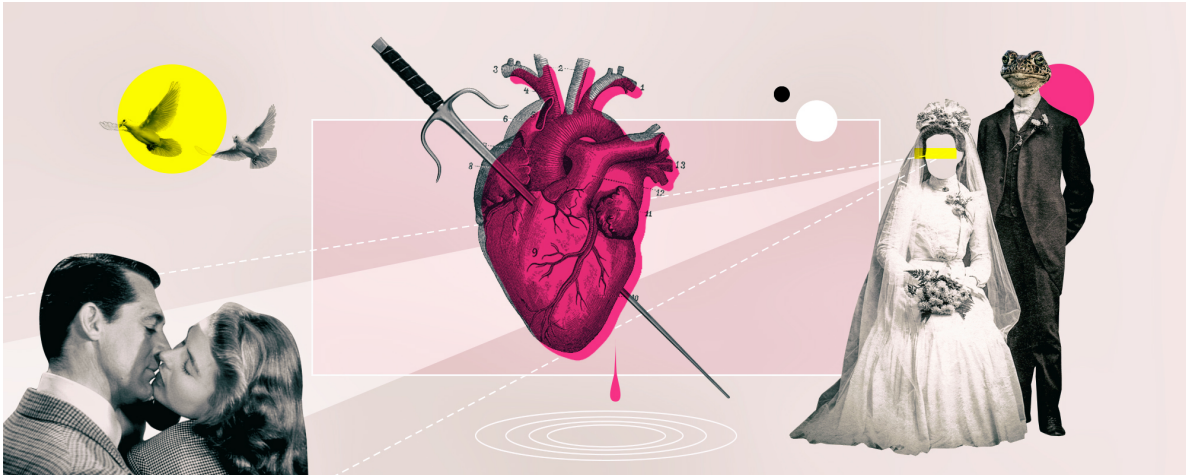


Ugly sisters and toads. Disney love and feminist agency

Brigitte Vasallo



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If there's one thing that interests me about critical thought on love, it is femicide and the long history of violence in our love lives. We know that femicides are associated with the gender construct, with warlike and possessive masculinity, with the objectification of our lives, in the conquest of our body as a battlefield in a long list of other battlefields. But it is also associated with our dependent construction of love, on both an emotional and material level, in our building of subjectivity, and it calls for the collectivisation of lines of flight. Violence is due to those who cause it but we must come together to create gaps to escape it. So, the goal of this article is to champion feminist self-defence and shared responsibility in this self-defence, based on the idea that 'I' do not end at the limits of my skin, but that 'I' expand to encompass all of us women. So, relationship violence is the stone that I throw into the pond, to see how far the ripples reach.

There is one statement—which is almost an aphorism—that I think we can all agree on. Romantic love kills. Nevertheless, we continue to reproduce it because, when we are in love, we're quite certain that ours won't kill us, and because when we make it public, and hence validate it, we're quite certain that we are not validating love that kills but rather that beautiful love that we say will save us. And it's here that the first traps lie: firstly, believing that what we have to put a stop to is the feeling rather than its formulation and, secondly, believing that romantic love is not that beautiful thing we are experiencing. Because if romantic love is one thing, it is that it is beautiful.

We can begin sorting the wheat from the chaff by doing a little rough 'n' ready archaeology

into the term. Romanticism was a cultural and political movement that reached its apex in the 19th century, a century of such robust health that it has been with us for some 200 years now and is still going strong. We in Europe had just been through Napoleon (something easier said than done) and an Enlightenment that became as tiresome as only it could be and, in one of those dramatic swings so typical of the continent, Romanticism went to the other extreme (formally at least, because it was not actually so different in substance). So it was that we entered into a phase of almost affected sentimental exaltation, of I-I-I, me-me-me, of dramas, traumas and never-ending pea-soups. Try a bit of Wagner's *Tannhäuser* and come back to me on this one.

Obviously, love lay at the heart of all of this, but it couldn't be any serene sort of love, because that was simply not Gothic enough. Love as a challenge, as doom, love that could conquer all and that was, at the very same time, impossible. The more impossible, the better, in fact. There's Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliette* from a few centuries earlier, anchored in Europe's collective imaginary as a great love story, and we all know how long that lasted and how it ended up. In our home-grown Catalan literature, this time bang in the middle of Romanticism, which was branded the *Renaixença* here, we have the wonderful Àngel Guimerà, whose *Mar i Cel* (Sea and Sky) tells the tale of the doomed love between Blanca and Saïd, a Christian noblewoman and a Muslim pirate, set against the backdrop of the expulsion of the Moriscos from Spain, whose love would outlive death, and all that: sea and sky always meet each other on the horizon, natch.

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All this exaltation of love as something difficult, as a sacrifice, as the be all and end all, has taken root. Deep roots. Combined with the social construct of women as caregivers, and the construction of subjectivity, too, it has produced a dangerous cocktail of confusion between love and violence and between love and the personal acceptance of violence because love can overcome everything. In fact, to be completely accurate, the origin of this cocktail, picking up the lead left by Gloria Steinem, lies in the confusion between love and romance, love and fairy tales, and even love and courtship.

So, when we talk of romantic love, we're not talking about the details: we're not talking about candlelit dinners, sunsets and gazing spellbound into each other's eyes. This is something we should do more often, or we should maybe realise that we do this with many more people and many more things than just our partner. We gaze spellbound at feminism, at demonstrations that move us, we have dinners with girlfriends that are more than equals to those we have with those we regard as our 'loves', as if we didn't regard our girlfriends as such, and we look at sunsets in our own company, sometimes missing the presence of someone meaningful, as if we ourselves weren't meaningful enough.

When I add the Disney love layer, I'm adding the paradigm of romantic children's tales, which Disney films continue to convey today. If we continue to tell ourselves these tales, it's because they contain conveyable information that is socially accepted and, as such, made invisible and normalised. We have spoken a great deal about the prince, due, I'm afraid, to the difficulty we have in analysing the horizontal lines without becoming trapped in verticality, in the relationship with the primary power he would represent. However, Disney tales contain important threads in the complexity of our construct of love that stretch beyond the strict analysis of just the couple.

Let's take a closer look: the protagonist of the tales, Cinderella, for example, is a pretty, good girl, two adjectives that go together to form a romantic maxim that is also exemplified in the words of the (Romantic) poet Keats, "beauty is truth". There is a series of moral values associated with physical beauty or, rather, we have an unconscious (and systemic) understanding that goodness has an impact on people's external aspect: but note that these are external aspects and beauties that are completely normalised by standards that have been established by capitalism around the business of fashion and cosmetics and transfixed with an extremely patriarchal, racist, ableist and class-conscious gaze, at the very least. And a heterocentric one, obviously. But all this is a footnote, because it's not really what this article is about. This good-and-pretty girl is surrounded by other ugly and bad (again associated) women... the stepmothers, the stepsisters... women who are part of an 'artificial' family, a 'bad' family that is not one of just blood relations. There's enough for another article there, too, but let's not get distracted.

These women surrounding her hate her, make her life impossible, and throughout the tale it is made clear that our leading lady, Cinderella, is better than them. Better. Note the first stamp of feminine confrontation. Prettier, sweeter, more caring, more innocent, cleaner, and however many gender commandments more. And the whole story is about how Cinderella gets what she deserves. She deserves it because she is deserving, sorry about the tautology but I'm getting all worked up here. And when will this superiority over the other women be revealed? Drumroll please, maestro... When someone with all the benefits of gender and class, someone more powerful, a lord and master, to put it bluntly, chooses her. I mention class privilege because it's not the boy next door, and obviously not the tomboy next door. Gender and class privilege. So, he chooses her and she accepts this choice, because the possibility of her not doing so is never even raised. Acceptance is a given, by default. Just imagine if the prince rolled up and Cinderella was all, "dude, no way, you're soooo dullsville"... Not a chance, I'm afraid, as we women, us Cinderellas, would never let lurve® slip through our fingers. So that's that. Cinderella wins and the other women lose. Woohoo!!

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This is exactly how romantic love kills. It kills because it confronts us, because it isolates us, it kills because it puts lurve®, i.e. our partner, above everything else. And when violence comes along, you tell me how we get over that, how you take on board the fact that what should have been the best thing ever to happen to you, that which gives you value and self-esteem, turns out to be a steaming pile of shit. How do we do it? Because, sisters, we've all been there.

There are a lot of erroneous assumptions about Disney love that protect it, even amongst feminists. One of them is that Disney love is not true love, but something else. Obviously, what each of us feels when we fall in love is (duh!) love! So, we reason, Disney love is what the others feel: we point it out (in others) and sit back, pleased with ourselves. Let's break this down a little, shall we? When we talk of 'Disney' or romantic love, we're referring to the construct, not the feeling. We feel what we feel, and we feel what we can feel. This is how we construct love, and what's dangerous is how we construct it. Additionally, what we feel is also a construct. Let me give a well-worn but still very useful example. If we think of going for a night-time walk in a cemetery alone, we feel scared, and if we actually did so we'd probably be scared to death. However, there has never actually been any recorded case (in all history!) of the dead rising from the grave to kill anyone, nor of dead rapists raping anyone after they've died, or anything of the sort. And we can be pretty sure that really bad-ass baddies don't hang around in cemeteries at night, because there's nothing to do there. They're probably one of the safest places on earth. The fear we feel, then, is a socially-constructed fear.

Falling in love is something that we feel, obviously, but it's also something that we construct. There's an entire series of rituals involved in falling in love, and we take them on board without hesitation, because falling in love is a gender commandment, because being a woman is being in love, as bad as that may sound. I know the theory by heart but I also look at on-the-ground realities and the scant periods of time in our lives we spend outside of partner relationships, and how we regard such periods as gaps between relationships. To fall in love and make others do so, we create myths, we create narratives of predestination, we resignify the memories of our lives so that we end up there, in that love, in that relationship.

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And doing all this doesn't mean that what we feel is not real. It doesn't even mean that it's 'bad'. But, just like we now understand that gender is a construct, but not as a result any less real, falling in love should be seen in much the same way, as should its performativity, too.

Something else we assume about falling in love and that (for me) directly contradicts

feminist thought is the lack of agency in falling in love. The inevitability, that when you fall in love there's nothing you can do about it, it's an extremely dangerous notion. Our desire, which belongs to us, becomes a desire for reciprocity, a desire to be desired, in an exercise of self-objectification that has nothing to do with the body, but with the looks we receive, with the need to receive a look of reciprocated desire. In a way, we surrender our desire without even deciding to do so: it is born surrendered. Desire is completed with reciprocity... and that's how we lose it. Desiring and wanting to be desired are two different things that need to be distinguished from one another. Predestination is also bound to this tale of the inevitable: the other and I are fated to be together, and what can you do against fate? This logic sits oddly with a de-essentialising movement such as feminism, which has struggled so hard to free our lives from the clutches of predestination.

And, last but by no means least, true love, love-love, is unique. No Cinderella has had three husbands and two girlfriends. The tale ends when you find Love with a capital 'L'. That's it. How do we square this idea that is so very deep-rooted in our very beings with the reality of our long and ever-changing love lives? Easy: by denying everything apart from our current love. Countless songs sing of this, of the very specific specificity felt by me and you, as if no one else had felt anything like it ever before. Goodness me, such intensité. But let's get serious for a minute: without going public, let's answer ourselves in private, in silence. Let's leave aside our current loves, those of us who have one, because we know we can't be objective about that, but, casting a beady eye over our previous loves, don't you think that each one appeared to be Love at the time, and it was the breakup that made us change our minds and regard them as not true love, because it turned out they were only temporary rather than everlasting?

Bearing all of this in mind, it's no surprise that we are fairly defenceless against falling in love. But we still need to address the key issue, what for me lies at the heart of the matter: the horizontal confrontation, and when I say horizontal I'm thinking of Cinderella and the ugly sisters and us when we are in love and our girlfriends, just as I think of us when we are in love and our partner's exes. I've written before that our partner's ex holds vital information... and if only I had learned this earlier, but the system doesn't allow us to see it. The system of confrontation, which tells us that all the other women envy us and desire our prince or our princess, teaches us that we are natural competitors and that catching the attention of that particular person will show that we are better. Maybe we don't go through life thinking we are better (maybe, I say), but we've all had the feeling that we are not the chosen ones and thinking that we are worse. It all forms part of this complex mess.

Confrontation is stopped step by step, seeking alliances, stopping the blows and not turning the other cheek, protecting ourselves without attacking, which are two very different things

A wheel is a wheel and, as such, infinite. If we put a stop to the confrontation, if we at least leave space for doing so, a great part of all of this would change. But stopping it would

make us change the way in which we situate ourselves in loves, because the self-esteem we invest in this has a lot to do with being better/worse than the rest. Because we live in a hierarchical world in which only that which is better is valid, in a world that constantly demands that we stand out, that we individualise ourselves. If we were to stop this, then breaking up with someone wouldn't be such a terrible disaster, wouldn't be shameful, but would be just another—natural—step on the multiple roads of life. If we stopped this, we wouldn't speak of being alone when we don't have a partner, because, in fact we wouldn't be. Because our girlfriends also wouldn't prioritise their partners above the others they care for, because we could make a network, become a swarm. If we stopped this, we'd go and talk with our partner's exes to see how things went with them, and they'd tell us honestly because neither their pride nor their self-esteem would be damaged when they did so. If we stopped this, I'm convinced we'd be opening up gaps, all of us together, to help us escape from violence when violence comes. We've lost too many sisters along the way to think that it doesn't matter, that it's a footnote in history.

We don't only fail to stop this horizontal confrontation when it comes to our loves, but we're also constantly promoting these complex relations. Every time we show off our partner we're sending a clear message to everyone else: this is happiness, this is what a successful woman is like, without this we are nothing, not even us, feminists, empowered sisters, everything else we say we are. We can break with all the gender commandments but not this one: we can't, we don't know how, we don't dare. The system is that powerful.

The gender construct is based on all of this, on us falling in love. This is nothing new that I'm saying here, but maybe we're now seeing the final consequences of all of this.

To conclude, and dot all those Is and cross all those Ts, I'd like to take a look at the issue of monogamy. In other works, I've tried to show that monogamy is a system for distributing links and is not about quantity, about having a number of different partners, but about the weight of this construct compared with other links. In what we call polyamory, which is, for me, a form of monogamy in that it continues to stress the importance of the partner, there is a lot of talk about terms such as compersion, a neologism meaning one's joy at the happiness of another. I can't help noting the petty-mindedness of a society that lacks a word for defining this. In this polyamorous subworld there is even the syndrome of the good polyamorous woman, kind of a formal update to the myth of the good wife. Putting a stop to horizontal confrontation goes hand-in-hand with understanding one's own limits and knowing how to protect them, if what we want is to put an end to violence. Like all those systemic issues we are fighting against, it can't be changed individually or immediately. Confrontation is stopped step by step, seeking alliances, stopping the blows and not turning the other cheek, protecting ourselves without attacking, which are two very different things. Giving ourselves agency in our own lives, over intimacy in our lives too, over the intimacy of our desires and our loves, forgetting all about skies and seas and returning to dry land to turn Love, finally, into love, without capitals, an emotion that does us good and that doesn't make us, collectively, either dependent or suffering, either violent or violated. Between us all, opening up gaps to escape and opening up spaces to welcome us when we need to escape. At both a material and emotional level.

I've never swallowed all that guff about waving a magic wand to do away with the hell we're living in: I'm of the intersectional school and I believe that analysis gives us tools to help understand reality, but is not actually reality itself. Nevertheless, I am convinced, I truly believe deep-down (whatever that may mean) that if we put more effort into stopping the confrontations between us, being would never be the same again. It would be better, more liveable, less violent.

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Brigitte Vasallo is a writer, teacher and anti-racist, feminist and LGBTI activist. She is recognized for her critique of gender Islamophobia, the denunciation of *purplewashing*, as well as for her investigations regarding polyamory in affective relationships. She teaches courses and seminars on sexual affective diversity and applied intersectionality at the universities of Barcelona, Girona and the Balearic Islands. She is professor at the Master's Degree of Gender and Communication of the Universitat Autònoma in Barcelona.