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# Freezing versus wrecking: Reworking the superhero genre in Disney's *Frozen* (2013) and *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012)

## Keywords

*Frozen*
*Wreck-It-Ralph*
Disney
animation
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## Abstract

*Tropes of the superhero genre in Disney's* Frozen *(Buck and Lee, 2013) and* Wreck-It Ralph *(Moore, 2012), and the way they impact on the films' gender constructions will be the focus of this article. Whether it be in popular or critical accounts,* Frozen *has often been referred to as a fairy tale or a Disney 'princess film'. However, with its marginalized protagonist endowed with extraordinary powers (Elsa), I argue that it also borrows from another very popular genre: the superhero film. How does* Frozen *rework this genre? To what extent does this reworking influence its portrayal of femininity? My reading of* Frozen *as a superhero narrative will consist of comparative textual analyses with* Wreck-It Ralph*, which also portrays an outcast with extraordinary abilities (Ralph). I will investigate the potential gendered particularities of the characters'*

*extraordinary abilities. Building on Shahriar Fouladi's concept of superheroes' 'underlying monstrosity', I will pay attention to themes of power, anger and control. Evident in male-centred superhero films such as* The Incredible Hulk *(Leterrier, 2008), I will explore the extent to which these become more problematic when associated with female characters such as Elsa. Focusing on gender through a specific genre-sensitive approach – the superhero genre – and relying on comparative textual analyses will allow me to investigate the extent to which* Frozen *actually presents challenging images of femininity, and aims at opening up new ways of considering this animated feature.*

## Introduction

In June 2014, the YouTube channel How It Should Have Ended uploaded a parody alternate ending to Disney's animated feature *Frozen* (Buck and Lee, 2013). In this version (How It Should Have Ended 2014), a troll warns young Elsa, the protagonist, that her magical powers will 'only grow': she must 'learn to control' them; 'fear' will be her 'enemy'. However, Elsa's parents seem to completely misunderstand him ('So … you're saying to teach her to bundle all her feelings up until she gets this freedom complex?'). Annoyed, the troll ends up taking Elsa to Professor Xavier's school for 'gifted youngsters', aka the X-Men. The video's happy ending shows adult Elsa joyfully singing 'Let It Go' with her friends Storm, Rogue, and Wolverine.

Whether it be in popular or critical accounts, *Frozen* has often been referred to as a fairy tale or a Disney 'princess film'. Adapting it as a superhero film is therefore quite unexpected. Yet, one cannot help but notice that Elsa (voiced by Idina Menzel) does not fit easily into the mould of Disney princesses. Considering her marginalized status within the film and her extraordinary powers – she can create ice and snow – I argue that the superhero genre is a useful framework in order to approach her portrayal. Indeed, as presented in the parody, issues of fear, power and control – that are so central in her characterization – are also at the core of contemporary superhero films. How does *Frozen* rework this genre? Building on this, how are extraordinary femininity and female power constructed in this animated feature?

As Christina Adamou observes, masculinity is the 'structuring norm' of superhero films (2011: 94). Therefore, my study of *Frozen* will include comparisons with Disney's male-centred *Wreck-It Ralph* (Moore 2012), in order to contrast potentially gendered particularities in both films. Focusing on gender through this genre-sensitive approach will allow me to investigate the extent to which *Frozen* may present challenging images of femininity, and aims at opening up new ways of considering this animated feature.

In the first part of this article, I will focus on the tropes of the superhero genre, and how they are used and adapted to the animated medium. I will pay special attention to the way this establishes Elsa's superpowers and the complexity of her character. Shariar Fouladi's concept of superheroes' underlying 'monstrosity' (2011: 161) will help me approach the gendered specificities of these
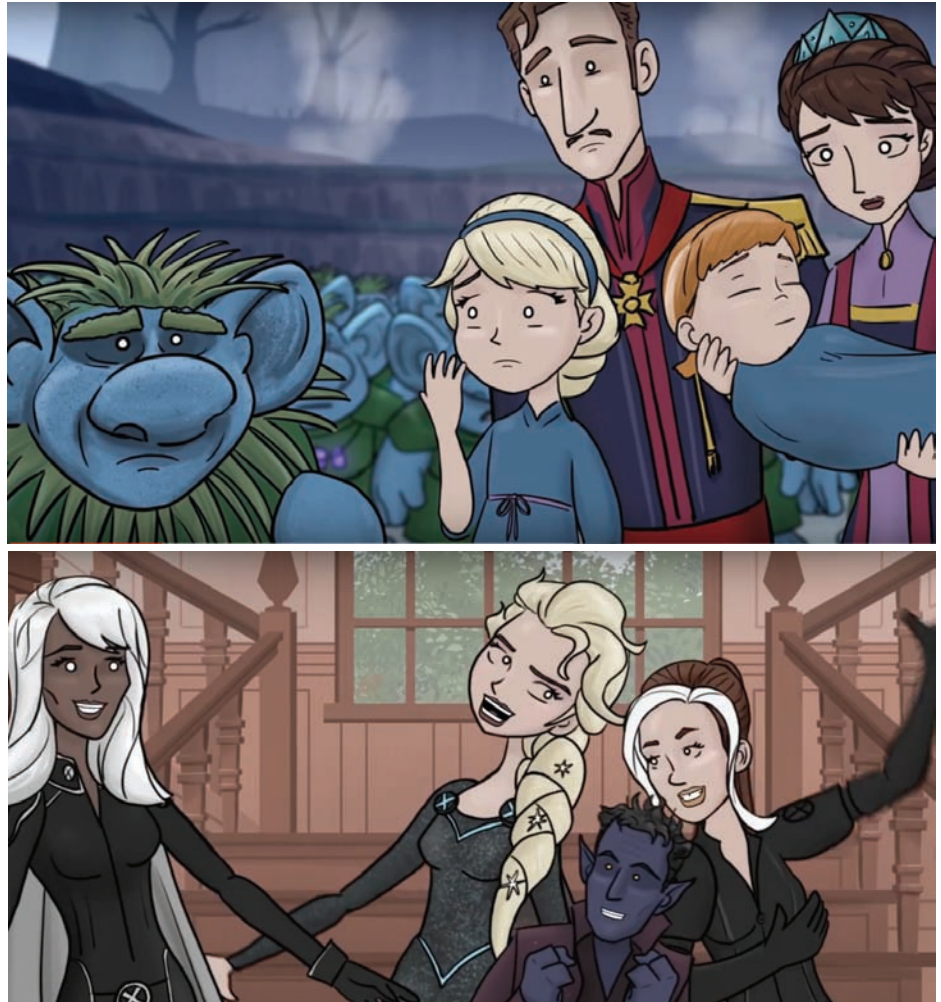
*Figures 1a and 1b: 'How* Frozen *should have ended – reissued' (How It Should Have Ended 2014).*

extraordinary bodies in the second part, concentrating on the potential differences between the portrayals of Ralph from *Wreck-It Ralph* and *Frozen*'s Elsa.

## Superhero tropes and reworking of a genre

Focusing on the medium itself, Scott Bukatman explains that superhero films are hybrids: they occupy 'the intersection of comics' (their source texts) and 'cartoons' (2012: 200). Indeed, they 'depend to a large extent' on computer-generated animation to depict superheroes' bodies (Bukatman 2012: 200). What Bukatman characterizes as the 'plasmatic fantasy' (2012: 19) of cartoons, comics and superheroes, added to the representations of their extraordinary powers, is of particular interest considering *Frozen* and Elsa.

## Testing and exploring superpowers: Spectacle and 'Plasmatic Fantasy'

These extraordinary powers are most memorably showcased during the song 'Let It Go'. This sequence follows from the superhero genre in the way it reveals Elsa's growing mastery of her powers and enthusiasm for it. Justin Schumaker observes that superhero films dedicate a significant amount of time to the protagonists' testing and exploration of their superpowers, foregrounding the 'majesty' and 'delight' these bring (2011: 134). This is the case, for example, of Peter Parker at the beginning of both the original *Spider-Man* (Raimi, 2002) and its subsequent reboot *The Amazing Spider-Man* (Webb, 2012). *Frozen* represents this by relying on the 'plasmatic fantasy' of both the animated medium and the superhero genre. However, while 'plasmatic fantasy' is best illustrated through the superheroes' transforming and malleable body – Sandman in *Spider-Man 3* (Raimi, 2007) or Mister Fantastic from *Fantastic 4* (Story, 2005) – *Frozen* applies it to Elsa's creations, constructing her as a super-animator. In her hands, snow becomes a three-dimensional material taking the shape of small snowflakes, then long arabesques of snow rising up into the sky. Singing 'It's time to see what I can do, to test the limits and break through', she literally animates a snow-man (bringing him to life), and creates a snowy bridge that she turns into elegant icy stairs. Her face lights up as her constructions become more and more elaborate. Her creative flurry climaxes when she designs an impressive castle, which rises before the viewers' eyes: from a self-reflexive  perspective, it feels as if the audience were taken behind the scenes of computer-generated animation. Inside, the snowflake (the foundation of her ice castle) turns into a stage. Moving throughout the frame and projecting sparkling snow all around her, she seems to be dancing, and the walls reflecting the lights around her function as spotlights. Added to the performance of Broadway star Idina Menzel, 'Let It Go' functions as a spectacle of computer-generated animation.

The sequence ends with Elsa on the castle's balcony, looking at the horizon, at the break of dawn. The completed ice castle is revealed for the first time through a long shot: at the top of the
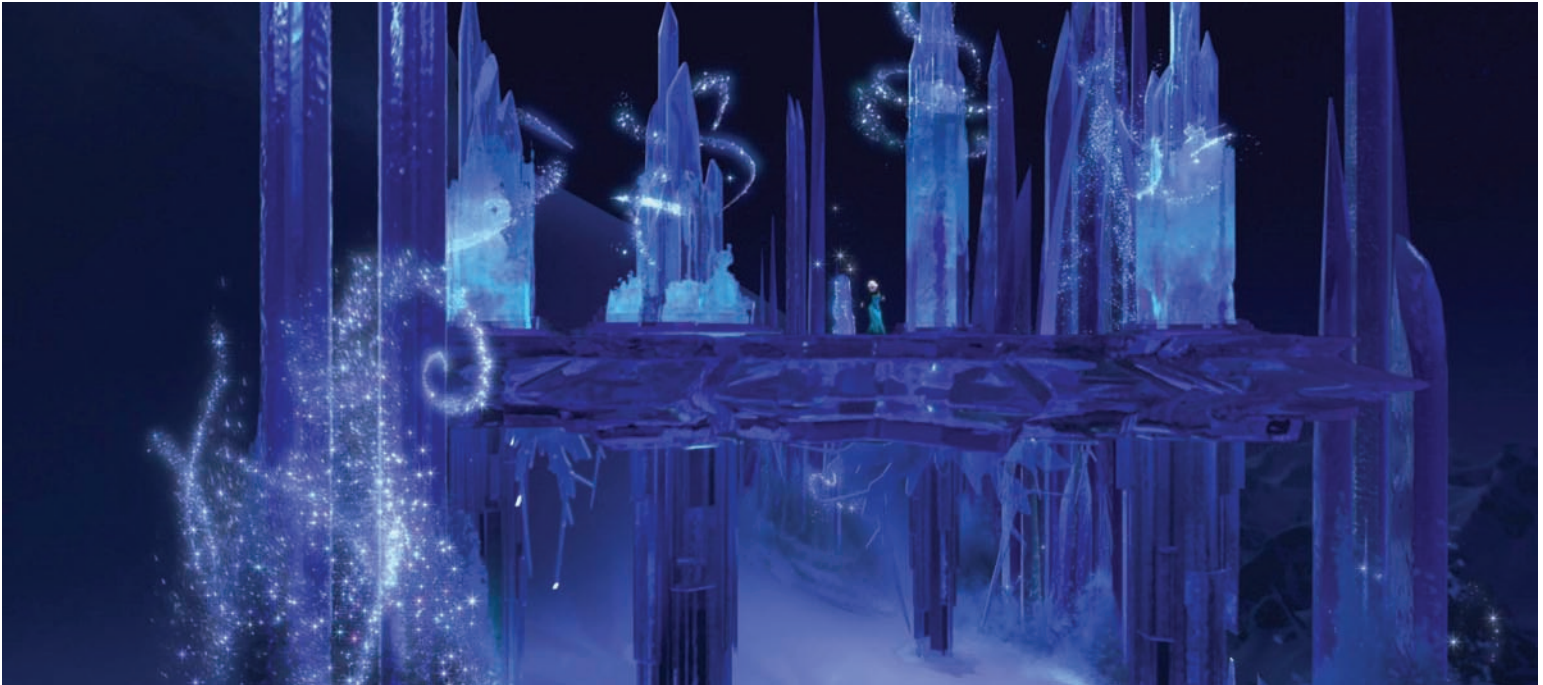
*Figure 2: Elsa as super-animator in* Frozen *(Buck and Lee, 2013). © The Walt Disney Company.*

mountain, it towers the surrounding landscape and is bathed in sunlight. The finale of this spectacular sequence establishes the artistry and scope of Elsa's superpowers, and conveys a sense of her limitless agency.

## Performance and the 'good versus evil' dichotomy

As Frank Haberman emphasizes, spectacle is also 'intrinsic' to the superhero genre (Haberman and Schlegel 2011: 31–32): whether that be the spectacle of superheroes' body and feats, or the theatricality of their appearances and costume. According to Haberman, performativity also

impacts on the dichotomy of good versus evil in contemporary superhero films: it becomes an 'unstable phenomenon' that is 'constantly debated' and reconstructed (Haberman and Schlegel 2011: 31). For instance, in Christopher Nolan's Batman trilogy 'The Dark Knight' is at times perceived as a threat, a criminal and a hero. Even Superman's godlike status is questioned in *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (Snyder, 2016). Haberman explains that this 'moral' evaluation occurs in a public space, in view of a diegetic audience (Haberman and Schlegel 2011: 38). Similarly, Elsa's powers are described as both beautiful and dangerous, as illustrated by the troll chief at the beginning of the film. He conducts the Northern Lights to show a silhouette of an adult Elsa creating magical snowflakes, which turn to sharp spikes and cause human figures to panic and attack her silhouette. This foreshadows the reaction of Arendelle's inhabitants, alternating between fear – calling her a sorceress and a 'monster' – and admiration for her powers.

Constructing good and evil as performances reveals the contingent aspect of these concepts within the superhero genre and the potential ambiguity and/or duality of its protagonists. Elsa follows from this if we consider that the original Snow Queen from Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale was a powerful and formidable female villain, and that Idina Menzel – who voices Elsa – was made famous in her role of the Wicked Witch of the West in the Broadway musical *Wicked* (Schwartz 2003). These extratextual and intertextual elements – added to the contingency of good and evil in the superhero genre – reinforce the complexity of Elsa's character, whose status oscillates between heroine and anti-heroine, or as Catherine Lester points out, 'victim and villain' (2014).

## The underlying monstrosity of superheroes

This uncertainty about the superheroes is conceptualized by Shahriar Fouladi as 'monstrosity', which especially characterizes the underlying danger of their superpowers. Constantly threatening to overflow, they are 'subsequently put under control', to some extent (2011: 176). Indeed, as Fouladi emphasizes, many contemporary superhero films show the protagonists train their bodies and try to master their powers (2011: 176), as in Professor Xavier's school. For example, both the original *X-Men* (Singer, 2000) and its prequel *X-Men: First Class* (Vaughn, 2011) include such training sequences. While Fouladi mainly uses the concept of monstrosity in order to study Superman in the television series *Smallville* (2001–2011), he also applies it to a number of superheroes, regardless of their gender. I will build on this framework in order to observe potential gender differences regarding the construction of the superhero's 'monstrosity'. In order to do so, I will compare *Wreck-it Ralph*'s protagonist with *Frozen*'s Elsa.

## Gendering extraordinary powers and bodies

### *Hypermasculinity, 'Playful Knowingness' and the unruly (angry) male body*

Considering comics' aesthetics, Aaron Taylor reminds us that superheroes' bodies, although supposedly 'unconstrained by verisimilitude', are often contained within a 'very traditional' gender binary (2007: 345, 347). Indeed, hypermasculinity and excessive musculature often characterize contemporary male superheroes in comics (Taylor 2007: 351–52), which is translated on-screen by actors, their costumes, or by computer-generated imagery. This is best illustrated by the male protagonists of box-office hit *The Avengers* (Whedon, 2012). This depiction directly impacts on the nature of their superpowers. Indeed, superhuman strength is a recurrent, and almost exclusively male ability in superhero films, as exemplified by Superman, Thor, Captain America, or The Beast and Colossus from *X-Men*.

However, Adamou notes that in some contemporary superhero films, such as *Hancock* (Berg, 2008), 'aggressiveness' and 'excessive muscularity' become 'source of comedy' (2011: 108): what Lisa Purse terms as 'playful knowingness' (2011a: 103). *Wreck-It Ralph* follows from this. The film focuses on a protagonist (arcade-game villain Ralph) who is endowed with superhuman strength that he sometimes struggles to control. Ralph functions as a parody of hypermuscular and always angry Hulk. His huge body clumsily bumps into ceilings and walls, and he explains, ironically, that he has 'got a little bit of temper', which leads him to break anything that comes to hand. However, his frightening potential is often debunked, as exemplified when he wreaks havoc in the game 'Sugar Rush', covered in gooey green taffy.

Purse argues that superhero films 'permit a particular mode of heroic masculinity […] that brings playful knowingness with a sense of the powerful male body as unruly' and 'potentially dangerous' (2011a: 105–06). She quotes Bruce Banner's (aka the Hulk) 'crisis of control over his body' and 'temperament' as an example (Purse 2011a: 105). However, I argue that male characters ultimately succeed in controlling these monstrous bodies. Banner is seen using and mastering his rage at the end of both *The Incredible Hulk* (Leterrier, 2008) and *The Avengers*, which allows him to perform his superhero duty. Similarly, Ralph, tired of performing the role of the 'bad guy', succeeds in proving his worth as a (super)hero: he uses his wrecking skills in order to save Sugar Rush, destroying harmful *cy-bugs* that threaten the arcade game. In these scenes, he is highly reminiscent of the Hulk, with its angry grimace and shouting, his clenched fists, and gigantic smashing arms, which foregrounds his focused strength and mastered rage. By the end, he has become a real superhero, ready to sacrifice himself.

Having explored superheroes and masculine monstrosity through the character of Ralph can help us approach the potential specificities of superheroines, and *Frozen*'s Elsa. Beforehand, it is

*Figures 3 and 4: Left: Ralph echoes the 'Incredible Hulk' (Moore, 2012); Right:* The Incredible Hulk *(Leterrier, 2008). © The Walt Disney Company.*

useful to consider the concept of postfeminism, a framework that will shed light on these constructions of femininity. Kathlyn Rowe explains that it is a 'sensibility' that has characterized contemporary popular understandings of gender (2011: 27). Taking feminism as a 'fait accompli', it both asserts and undermines its principles (Rowe 2011: 40). In other words, as Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker point out, postfeminism fuses 'empowerment rhetoric with traditionalist identity paradigms' (2007: 18).

### *'Beautiful! Powerful! Dangerous!' containing the superheroine?*

This 'doubleness' of postfeminism (Tasker 2011: 70) stands out when looking at constructions of femininity in the superhero genre. In comics, in which gender binaries are made clear, Taylor stresses that 'voluptuousness is the standard by which superheroines are measured', while it is 'musculature' for superheroes (2007: 353). Following from this, Sabine Lebel observes that, in superhero films, 'although female superheroes' can 'fight alongside their male companions', their tightly fitted superhero outfits 'draw the attention […] to the idealized female form', rather than to

the superpowers (2009: 65). This is typified by the portrayal of Black Widow, one of the few super-heroines who is currently prominently featured in Marvel superhero films. These representations fit into what Marc O'Day categorizes as the contemporary 'action babe', who blends 'apparent strength and skill' with a 'more traditionally feminine' and 'often emphatically sexualized physique' (Purse 2011b: 187).

Admittedly, Elsa is no Black Widow. However, like other superheroines, she is not defined by her muscularity or her physical strength – she is animated as a typically thin and delicate Disney heroine – and her superpower is closely linked to conventional, even sexualized femininity. Indeed, 'Let It Go', which showcases Elsa's growing mastery of her powers, culminates with a makeover. She becomes both subject and object of her creative flurry, shaking her braid loose and fashioning for herself a new low-cut sparkling dress with a revealing slit, and high heeled shoes. Once 'made-over', she is positioned as the eroticized object of the gaze: the camera first shows her naked leg, then tilts up to gradually reveal her whole body. Diane Negra argues that, in post-feminist consumer culture – here replaced by Elsa's powers – the makeover is 'a key ritual of female coming into being' (2009: 123). Sarah Gilligan adds that it 'works to establish the param-eters of acceptable feminine appearance' (2011: 167): in other words, a more sexually attractive look. I would add that, in the superhero genre, donning the superheroine outfit performs a similar function – a kind of 'super' makeover. This is best illustrated by Catwoman, who becomes a superheroine when she dons her black leather costume in *Batman Returns* (Burton, 1992), *Catwoman* (Pitoff, 2004), and *The Dark Knight Rises* (Nolan, 2012). Like Elsa's Snow Queen dress, it connotes both (super)power and traditional – or rather, sexualized – femininity, namely post-feminism's doubleness.

Going back to the narrative itself, Lebel notes that the storylines in superhero films 'tend to contain the […] strengths of the heroines' (2009: 65). In the case of Elsa, this revolves around issues of power and control, which echoes Fouladi's concept of monstrosity. Like other contemporary superheroes, Elsa's powers are mostly driven by extreme emotions, especially fear in the first part of the film. As a child, after accidently hurting her sister Anna, they get out of her control. The older she grows, the stronger they become, and the more frightened she gets, so that she cannot touch anything without turning it into ice. Instead of being trained and subsequently mastered – as it is the case for other male superhero figures like the Hulk or Ralph – her overflowing powers and emotions are first contained and neutralized through patriarchal control, which is illustrated by her father's mantra ('conceal it, don't feel it'), and the gloves he gives her.

However, as soon as she breaks from her poised performance, she starts becoming dangerous. Indeed, like Ralph, it is anger that makes her the most frightening: pushed by Anna's questions at her coronation party, ice shoots from her hand, forming spikes across the floor. While anger is represented as ultimately productive for male superheroes, Purse argues that 'popular cinema is

*Figures 5 and 6: Elsa's makeover in* Frozen *(Buck and Lee, 2013). © The Walt Disney Company.*

struggling to incorporate' female anger 'into its narrative' (2011b: 195). Stella Bruzzi adds that 'female potency' is also often 'actively undermined' when 'it becomes threatening' (Purse 2011b: 187). Indeed, the sense of limitless freedom and agency demonstrated in 'Let It Go', during which Elsa throws away her gloves and embraces her powers, is short-lived. Later on, she is attacked by thugs, and single-handedly defends herself with her newly mastered powers. However, she is stopped as soon as she becomes too threatening – the 'monster' everyone thinks she is. Whereas Elsa is ultimately reintegrated into society, she is also rendered harmless, becoming 'tempered' and using her powers in 'de-fanged' ways, as Su Holmes points out (2014). This may signal what Purse terms as 'the danger of too much female agency' on-screen, or rather, of an entirely autonomous and angry superheroine.

## Conclusion

My analysis has investigated the way *Frozen* reworks the contemporary superhero genre, and the way it impacts on the film's construction of extraordinary femininity through the character of Elsa. It depicts Elsa's empowerment through the mastering of her superpowers, adapting the aesthetic of the superhero genre to the animated medium in order to construct her as a super-animator.

Through performance and spectacle, the film also reveals the contingency of the dichotomy 'good versus evil', bringing some complexity and ambiguity to her portrayal. Nevertheless, combining Fouladi's concept of superheroes' monstrosity with a gender perspective reveals the potential containment of the superheroine. While superheroes' hypermasculinity is gently mocked in *Wreck-It Ralph* – the protagonist of which is represented as a parody of the Hulk – the monstrous, unruly and angry male body ultimately succeeds in performing heroic acts. By contrast, *Frozen* rather straightforwardly adopts superhero and postfeminist tropes of female empowerment through depictions of traditional and sexualized femininity. As for the superheroine's overflowing superpowers and emotions, the film undeniably includes sequences of female agency and freedom, and even anger, which constructs Elsa as creative and impressive, as well as able to efficiently defend herself. Yet, her superpowers are repeatedly contained, and her non-feminine aggressiveness is subsequently neutralized.

Beyond the impasse of binary characterizations – considering *Frozen* as either progressive or regressive – I follow from Sarah Projansky's perspective on contemporary constructions of girlhood in popular culture. She argues that these are characterized by an 'inextricable combination of disruption' and 'containment', and suggests a 'both/and approach' (2007: 68–69). Building on this framework and the superhero angle, I argue that, in *Frozen*, the construction of femininity delivered through the character of Elsa is especially complex: both mighty and objectified, both angry and tempered; in other words, both subversive and conventional. This leaves room for a variety of reinterpretations of this multifaceted character.

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## Suggested citation

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