



**Inland Norway
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Luna

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Master's thesis

“Cultural fusion or confusion?” An Analysis of Disney’s Evolution in Depicting Non-Western Cultures and Promoting Intercultural Competence.

“Kulturell fusjon eller forvirring?» En analyse av Disneys utvikling i fremstillingen av ikke-vestlige kulturer og fremme av interkulturell kompetanse

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Forord

Jeg vil takke veilederen min Matthew Marlingford Williamson, som har hjulpet meg å holde roen, grundige tilbakemeldinger, gode innspill til forbedring. En ekstra takk for at du alltid har klart å finne noe positivt i det jeg har levert - det har vært avgjørende for å holde motivasjonen oppe. Denne oppgaven hadde ikke blitt det samme uten deg!

Takk til familie og venner som har motivert, vist interesse, heiet, hjulpet til med barna slik at jeg skulle få fullført. Det gode støtteapparatet har gjort prosessen litt mindre tung, og jeg setter pris på alt dere har bidratt med.

Sammendrag

Denne masteroppgaven utforsker fremstillingen av «ikke-vestlige» kulturer i Disneys animasjonsfilmer *Aladdin* og *Encanto*. Den undersøker hvordan denne fremstillingen har utviklet seg som svar på kritikk av rasisme og kulturell ufølsomhet. Forskningen drøfter om det har skjedd endringer i representasjonen av kulturelle stereotyper ved å fremme en mer nyansert og respektfull representasjon av kulturelt mangfold. Dette skiftet er avgjørende for deres mulige bruk i klasserommet for å utvikle interkulturell kompetanse. Gjennom en detaljert analyse belyst av teorier som Orientalisme, kulturell hybriditet og Amerikanisering, studerer oppgaven hvordan Disney navigerer mellom forsterkende og utfordrende kulturelle stereotyper. Den diskuterer filmenes effektivitet som pedagogisk verktøy for å fremme interkulturell kompetanse. Funnene tar sikte på å bidra til bredere diskusjoner om medias rolle i å forme og uttrykke kulturelle identiteter, og fremheve viktigheten av mediekunnskap for å anerkjenne og kritisere kompleksiteten til kulturell representasjon i film.

Summary

This master's thesis explores the portrayal of non-Western cultures in Disney's animated films *Aladdin* and *Encanto*, investigating how these depictions have evolved in response to critiques of racism and cultural insensitivity. The research assesses whether these films have transitioned from perpetuating cultural stereotypes to promoting a more nuanced and respectful representation of cultural diversity. The importance of this transformation is fundamental for leveraging their use in fostering intercultural competence within educational environments. Through a detailed analysis utilizing theories of Orientalism, cultural hybridity, and Americanization, the thesis examines how Disney's narratives navigate the delicate balance between reinforcing and challenging cultural stereotypes. It discusses films' effectiveness as educational tools for fostering intercultural competence. The findings aim to contribute to broader discussions on the role of media in shaping and expressing cultural identities, highlighting the importance of media literacy in recognizing and critiquing the complexities of cultural representation in global cinema.

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1 Introduction

The use of films in classrooms serves as both an educational tool and a source of entertainment. Teachers selecting films must carefully consider content appropriateness for different age groups. English-speaking films offer vital insights into various cultures, illustrating language as an expression of cultural and communicative processes (Fenner, 2001, pp. 291-297). The revised English curriculum emphasizes this, advocating for understanding different cultures and developing language skills as a foundation for local and global communication (The Ministry of Education and Research, 2020c). In a similar vein to Norwegian educational policies, which emphasize the value of diversity and the educational benefits of learning from differences to foster mutual respect and tolerance (St. Meld. 20 (2012-2013)), this thesis explores how Disney's *Aladdin* and *Encanto* portray non-Western cultures. These films offer a platform for entertainment and for engaging young audiences in rich cultural narratives that echo the educational goals of broadening understanding and promoting inclusivity among global viewers. By portraying a diverse range of characters and cultural settings, these films contribute to a media landscape that, like Norwegian schools, aims to reflect and respect societal diversity, enhancing the development of global citizens equipped to handle local and international challenges. This objective aligns closely with the role of Disney's animated films, often children's first exposure to narrative media.

The films contain complex social messages shaping their perceptions of moral, gender, and cultural norms. The depiction of these themes has been criticized for perpetuating stereotypes and outdated cultural descriptions (Gray, 2019; Ward, 2002, p. 9), while Disney attempts to inspire a better world through storytelling (The Walt Disney Company, 2015a). These dual perspectives on Disney's content provide a rich area for analysis, particularly in how such narratives could be harnessed or critiqued within educational settings. The relevance of this analysis is underscored by the fact that Disney is actively attempting to address past criticisms through its "Reimagine Tomorrow" initiative, which aims to amplify underrepresented voices and narratives in its media outputs (The Walt Disney Company, 2015b). Striving for inclusivity and broader cultural representation, Disney's narrative strategy has undergone a significant shift. Given the critical role of Disney films in shaping young viewers' understanding of the world, it is imperative to examine whether these films can foster intercultural competence in educational settings.

The relevance of this thesis topic is highlighted by the ongoing and dynamic discussion surrounding media representations and their impact on cultural perceptions. This is especially relevant in today's globalized world, where media reflects and shapes societal norms and values across diverse cultures (Lemish, 2015, p. 5). Disney films, in particular, serve as powerful mediums through which notions of culture, identity, and societal values are both challenged and propagated (Wasko et al., 2003). As these films reach a global audience, they significantly shape how different cultures and identities are perceived and understood. The critical examination of how Disney movies portray non-Western cultures reflects broader societal shifts towards greater cultural awareness and the push for more authentic and respectful representations in mainstream media (Hall, 1997). Furthermore, the thesis aligns with contemporary academic and social discourses that advocate for media literacy and challenge the entertainment industry to transcend traditional narratives and stereotypes (Jenkins, 2007)—involving a critical engagement with how stories are told, who tells them, and their impact on our understanding of the world and each other. Such analysis is crucial for fostering a more inclusive global culture that values diversity and promotes a deeper understanding of the complex layers of human identity. This context underscores the relevance of the research, making it a timely and significant contribution to the fields of cultural studies, media analysis, and education. The thesis engages with critical theoretical frameworks and provides insights into the evolving dynamics of cultural representation in film, offering perspectives for academic audiences and broader societal discussions.

1.1 My purpose

This thesis explores the nuanced portrayals of non-Western cultures in Disney's animated films, focusing on *Aladdin* and *Encanto*. It aims to understand how these films reflect and potentially influence societal views on cultural diversity and identity. By examining the evolution of Disney's narrative strategies and their implications for cultural representation, my dissertation seeks to contribute to broader discussions within media studies and intercultural communication. Moreover, it aims to assess the educational potential of these films in promoting intercultural competence, particularly within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings. The research aligns with the objectives outlined in the revised English curriculum, emphasizing intercultural competence as a crucial educational goal (the Ministry of Education and Research, 2020b). Intended to bridge academic theory and practical application, this work provides insights that could enhance the use of popular media in educational contexts to foster a more inclusive and culturally aware society.

1.2 Research question and delimitation.

This thesis focuses on *Aladdin* and *Encanto* as they present significant examples of Disney's engagement with non-Western cultures within different historical contexts. *Aladdin*, a film from 1992, offers insight into Disney's portrayal of Middle Eastern culture during a time when such representations were often shaped by Orientalist perspectives prevalent in Western media. On the other hand, *Encanto*, released in 2021, showcases the company's more recent attempts to authentically represent the cultural nuances of a specific Latin American community, reflecting advancements in cultural sensitivity and inclusivity. The selection of these films allows for an exploration of the evolution of Disney's narrative approach and artistic choices in depicting non-Western cultures over nearly three decades, highlighting the shifts towards more respectful and diverse cultural portrayals in animation.

In the thesis, the research questions are carefully selected to investigate how Disney films, particularly *Aladdin* and *Encanto*, address and reflect cultural issues and stereotypes and whether these films can serve as educational tools to promote intercultural competence. My research questions are as follows:

- How has Disney addressed racism and negative stereotypes in its newer releases compared to earlier movies?
- How does Disney portray non-Western cultures in films like *Aladdin* and *Encanto*?
- Can Disney movies effectively promote intercultural competence in the classroom?

These questions are relevant as they tap into ongoing debates about the representation of diverse cultures in mainstream media and the educational potential of popular films in shaping viewers' cultural understanding and sensitivity (Lemish, 2015). The choice of Disney films is deliberate due to their global influence and accessibility (Wasko, 2020), which makes them potent tools for cultural education. This inquiry assesses Disney's current representations and explores the broader implications of using mainstream media films as tools for cultural education. It aims to contribute to a more inclusive and culturally aware educational environment as it explores how Disney's evolving portrayal of non-Western cultures in films like *Aladdin* and *Encanto* reflects broader shifts in cultural representation, examining the potential of these films to enhance intercultural competence within educational settings.

Overall, this thesis argues that Disney films, from *Aladdin*'s stereotypical portrayal of Eastern cultures to *Encanto*'s more authentic depiction of Colombian heritage, reflect significant shifts in cultural representation. However, despite their differing approaches, both films offer valuable opportunities for fostering intercultural competence in educational settings. The key

lies not merely in the films' content but in the pedagogical strategies employed: teaching these films with critical awareness and sensitivity is crucial to harnessing their potential as educational tools.

Focusing on *Aladdin* and *Encanto*, specifically regarding their portrayal of non-Western cultures, represents a deliberate scope limitation of the research. It is important to note that this choice to concentrate on these two films does not address the broader spectrum of Disney's filmography or its representations of Western cultures, which also may perpetuate stereotypes or possess educational value. Additionally, while the thesis aims to explore complex cultural narratives, the interpretations provided are inherently influenced by the theoretical frameworks chosen, such as postcolonial theory and theories of hybridity, which might shape the analysis in specific directions. This focused approach allows for a deep dive into the selected films but acknowledges that findings might not be generalizable to all media or even all Disney films. The research questions and their delimitations thus frame a specific yet rich context for exploring cultural representation and education within popular media.

1.3 The structure of the thesis

In the following chapters of this thesis, I will investigate the portrayal of non-Western cultures in selected Disney films and their utility in fostering intercultural competence within educational frameworks. Initially, I will outline the context and motivations underpinning my research questions and the limitations and background. Chapter 2 includes a detailed exploration of the academic groundwork supporting the thesis, including key concepts, examining the revised educational guidelines, and reviewing previous scholarly work concerning media representations in educational settings, focusing on Disney's cinematic productions. The methodology section in Chapter 3 will describe the analytical approach taken in this study, including the tools and frameworks used for film analysis, drawing on insights from scholars such as Moseng et al. (2008). Chapters 4 and 5 present the analysis and discussion of *Aladdin* and *Encanto*. The analysis will specifically assess Disney's depiction of cultural elements, character dynamics, and the narrative roles assigned to characters from diverse backgrounds. At the same time, the discussion connects my findings with existing literature, assessing how these Disney films contribute to or detract from the goals of intercultural education. The discussion will critically engage with the films' capacities to challenge stereotypes and encourage a deeper understanding of cultural diversity. The concluding chapters will synthesize the insights gained throughout the thesis, discussing the implications of these findings for using Disney films as educational tools in the classroom. It

will also outline the limitations encountered during the study and suggest directions for future research. This will ensure a comprehensive understanding of media's potential roles in shaping and enhancing intercultural competence among learners.

1.4 Background

Disney films are widely recognized as suitable for children (Hofmann, 2018); thus, one can assume that they frequently find their way into the classroom. The accessibility of Disney content via platforms like *Disney+* ensures its widespread reach, particularly among Norwegian youth, as indicated by its substantial presence in national viewership statistics (Statistisk Sentralbyrå, 2022). Despite their popularity, these films have been criticized for perpetuating outdated cultural descriptions and stereotypes, leading to significant discourse about their impact on societal and cultural norms (Gray, 2019; Ward, 2002, p. 9). In response, Disney has implemented disclaimers in some of its films, acknowledging the problematic elements while opting to retain the content. This highlights a complex balance between recognizing the need for change and maintaining traditional narratives (Schild, 2020; The Walt Disney Company, 2015b). Historically, from the late 20th century onwards, Disney's approach to cultural representation has evolved. The studio began to focus more on depicting cultural otherness, but these portrayals were often modified to suit Western tastes, potentially diluting the authenticity of the depicted cultures (Di Giovanni, 2003, pp. 207-211, 213). This approach has sparked debates about Disney's influence on cultural standards, with scholars like Brockus (2004) acknowledging Disney's capacity to integrate cultural tales globally, while others such as Giroux and Pollock (2010) criticize the films for sanitizing history and promoting cultural homogeneity.

The presented background provides the contextual framework for the thesis, highlighting the critical debates and shifts in Disney's narrative strategies that shape the portrayal of non-Western cultures. It sets the stage for an in-depth exploration of how films like *Aladdin* and *Encanto* reflect these dynamics and contribute to the discourse on cultural representation in media. This exploration is essential for understanding Disney's dual role in reflecting and shaping cultural perceptions through its influential narratives.

While a substantial body of literature exists on the employment of Disney films for educational purposes, particularly in teaching language and literacy skills, there remains a noticeable gap in research regarding their potential to foster intercultural competence, especially within the Norwegian context. For instance, Reigstad (2022) has extensively

studied the use of Disney films to promote critical literacy in the EFL classroom. However, her focus diverges from the intercultural aspect this thesis aims to explore. Therefore, while acknowledging the existing literature on employing Disney films for educational objectives, I seek to address the relative dearth of research on their role in promoting intercultural understanding and competence, particularly within English didactics in Norway. By focusing on Disney's depictions of non-Western cultures, this research aims to enrich the discourse within English didactics and contribute to a deeper understanding of how popular culture can be leveraged to enhance intercultural learning experiences.

2 Theoretical framework

This chapter provides a framework for analyzing the portrayal of “non-Western” cultures in Disney films, specifically *Aladdin* and *Encanto*. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in how media representations of cultural phenomena affect our perceptions and attitudes toward different cultures. As a powerful media institution, Disney significantly influences how people perceive and understand cultures that differ from theirs. Therefore, this study seeks to understand how Disney’s ideologies shape the representation of “non-Western” cultures in their films and how they attempt to adapt these cultures to fit Western norms. To critically analyze *Aladdin* and *Encanto*, it is essential to consider various theories related to culture and intercultural communication. The first section of the chapter will focus on defining culture and exploring its importance in understanding different societies and their values. The second section will introduce the concept of intercultural competence and Byram’s model of intercultural communicative competence, which provides a framework for analyzing the ability to interact effectively with people from different cultures. The third section focuses on adaptation and cultural appropriation. Understanding the concepts of adaptation and cultural appropriation is crucial when critically analyzing how Disney’s portrayal of “non-Western” cultural phenomena in chosen films shapes their ideological values and impacts cultural representation. Throughout the chapter, I will address several vital theories related to globalization and media representation, including Americanization, Disneyfication, adaptation, Orientalism, and Spivak’s “Can the subaltern speak?”. These theories, along with culture, intercultural competence, and adaptation, will provide the necessary theoretical foundation for analyzing how Disney constructs and portrays the complex power dynamics involved in how different cultures are represented in the media.

2.1 Culture

Defining the concept of culture itself is necessary to understand the cultural politics of Disney films. The following section, therefore, begins by discussing the various definitions of culture and how they apply to this thesis. The “Big C culture” and “Little C culture” theories are introduced as a relevant framework for analyzing how Disney utilizes cultural elements in its films. The section then discusses the concept of Americanization and cultural imperialism, which is crucial in understanding how Disney’s films perpetuate a sense of white supremacy. The theories of Orientalism and subalternity are also explored, emphasizing the need to approach the study critically and consider the perspectives of marginalized communities and individuals. Finally, the concept of media-created reality and Disneyfication is introduced,

highlighting the delicate balance between realistic and unrealistic elements portrayed in the media and the commercialization of cultural manifestations. This section provides a comprehensive overview of the various theoretical frameworks and concepts relevant to analyzing Disney's portrayal of "non-Western" cultures in its films.

To understand the use of Disney movies as a tool for considering intercultural competence, defining "culture" itself is first necessary. Culture is a phrase that has a wide range of connotations, some of which are even contradictory. Eagleton singles out four significant cultural senses that stand out. Culture, according to him, can refer to an entire way of life, a body of creative and intellectual work, a process of spiritual and intellectual growth, or the values, conventions, beliefs, and symbolic practices that men and women live by (Eagleton, 2016, p. 1). The Cambridge Dictionary defines culture as "the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time" (Cambridge University Press, n.d). The fourth sense proposed by Eagleton fits nicely with Cambridge's definition. These definitions illustrate that culture can be defined in multiple ways, depending on the context. However, for this thesis, the definition proposed by Spencer-Oatey (2008) will serve as the foundation:

"Culture is a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures, and behavioral conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do not determine) each member's behaviour and his/her interpretations of the 'meaning' of other people's behaviour" (Spencer-Oatey, 2008, p. 3).

Her definition highlights culture's collective and individual aspects and acknowledges that no "whole" societies are free from conflict or contradiction. In tribal or premodern communities, the concept of culture as a comprehensive way of life is more applicable than in modern societies. However, conflict and contradiction are inherent in all societies, rendering the idea of wholly coherent ones unrealistic. Distinguishing between social and economic practices and symbolic behaviors was likely more challenging in premodern times, with practical and symbolic elements being more closely intertwined than they are today (Eagleton, 2016, p. 7). Understanding the influence of culture on individuals' behavior and interpretations is fundamental in analyzing how Disney portrays "non-Western" cultures in its films. The Council of Europe also points out that culture operates not just in the visible aspects of society, such as language, art, dress, and food, but also in the subconscious area of values and attitudes (Brotto et al., 2012, p. 19).

Munden and Sandhaug (2017) assert that culture is difficult to define precisely due to its ambiguity and complexity (Munden & Sandhaug, 2017, p. 357). Still, Spencer-Oatey's definition addresses these difficulties by including the influence of culture on individual behavior and understanding of others' behavior. By using Spencer-Oatey's definition of culture, the thesis will provide an in-depth analysis of the subtle ways culture shapes our perceptions of other cultures in media and entertainment.

2.1.1 Big C culture and little c culture

The theory of Big C and little c culture is relevant in this thesis as it helps to distinguish between dominant cultural elements represented by Disney and subcultural elements specific to non-Western cultures and analyze how they are portrayed in their films. The theory distinguishes between visible cultural aspects, such as food and art (Big C culture), and beliefs and everyday behaviors, such as communication styles and cultural conventions (little c culture) (Munden & Sandhaug, 2017, p. 357). While foreign language teaching has traditionally focused on Big C cultural aspects (Fantini, 2020, p. 23), popular films like Disney's animated movies utilize both Big C and little c cultural elements in their movies. Further, films have evolved into significant storytellers in contemporary culture. It communicates myths and fairy tales and entertains and educates the audience. Disney, in particular, has a significant audience and a well-known brand name (Ward, 2002, p. 1). However, it is essential to consider how Disney's portrayal of culture reflects their beliefs and values. Giroux and Pollock even claim that Disney "inspires at least as much cultural authority and legitimacy for teaching specific roles, values, and ideals as more traditional sites of learning, such as public schools, religious institutions, and the family" (Giroux & Pollock, 2010, p. 91), which is why exploring their representation of "non-Western" cultures is essential. Stuart Hall (1997) argued that cultural representation is not a simple reflection of reality but a construction influenced by power relations and stereotypes. One of the critical sources of cultural representation in Disney's animated films is through visual imagery and music, where both little c and Big C culture should be represented. Therefore, analyzing the use of these elements in *Aladdin* and *Encanto* can provide insight into Disney's portrayal of "non-Western" cultures.

Overall, the concepts of big C culture and little C culture are relevant to understanding how Disney's ideological values are reflected in its films. By exploring visual imagery and music, this thesis aims to uncover the power relations and stereotypes that influence Disney's representations of culture.

2.1.2 Americanization

Furthermore, the concept of “Americanization” serves as a critical theoretical lens for examining cultural trends and their impact on global attitudes towards these cultures. The theory of Americanization, closely linked to cultural imperialism, provides a framework to investigate how Disney films may perpetuate Western dominance by portraying non-Western cultures through a biased, often simplistic lens. This is crucial for understanding how such portrayals influence viewers’ perceptions and contribute to a broader narrative of cultural superiority.

Setiawati (2008) points out that while Disney aims to introduce global audiences to diverse cultures, its approach can sometimes be perceived as reducing these cultures to caricatures, thus satirizing rather than respecting the original tales and traditions (Setiawati, 2008, p. 81). This aligns with the criticisms of cultural imperialism that suggest American media, including Disney films, often export a version of culture that is heavily influenced by American values and ideologies, overshadowing the authentic narratives of the cultures being represented. Jan Nederveen Pieterse (2019) provides a nuanced understanding of cultural imperialism, often associating it with the criticism of U.S. media exports, which leads to significant cultural influence in foreign nations (Pieterse, 2019). His perspective helps explore how American cultural norms and values are embedded within Disney’s film narratives, shaping perceptions globally. Morris (2008) discusses the Americanization of media to propagate American cultural values and capitalism, focusing on how consumerism is promoted through these media exports (Morris, 2008). This theory is instrumental in examining Disney films’ content and underlying messages, providing insights into how they might serve as vehicles for American cultural values. Tobin (2020) further argues that the propagation of American culture through films and other media can lead to the erosion of indigenous cultures and traditions, a process often referred to as “Americanization” (Tobin, 2020). Lemish (2015) discusses how the United States not only adopts but transforms cultural elements from around the world to suit American “palates,” subsequently re-exporting these redefined cultural products globally through powerful media conglomerates (Lemish, 2015, p. 6). While creating a façade of diversity, this process often fails to genuinely represent the multiplicity of global cultures, sometimes reducing the portrayal of non-white characters to mere tokenism (Lemish, 2015, p. 150). Understanding the influence of Americanization and cultural imperialism on Disney’s narratives is pivotal in assessing whether the company has made significant strides toward more authentic and respectful portrayals of non-Western cultures.

2.1.3 Hybridity

One concept of particular importance for this thesis is Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, as it provides a nuanced lens for examining Disney's portrayal of cultures in films such as *Aladdin* and *Encanto*. Bhabha (1994) describes hybridity as an amalgamation of cultural elements that challenge traditional notions of purity, suggesting that all cultures are inherently hybrid and continuously shaped by global and colonial influences (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 211, 226, 252). Furthermore, Bhabha introduces the idea of a "third space," a unique zone of negotiation and innovation where these hybrid identities can interact freely, leading to new forms of cultural expression that defy straightforward categorization (Bhabha, 1994, p. 276). Applying Bhabha's framework allows a critical examination of how Disney films have evolved in their cultural portrayals. For instance, *Aladdin* has faced criticism for its orientalist depictions, while *Encanto* might be seen as an effort to authentically represent the diverse and hybrid realities of Latin American cultures. This shift suggests a movement towards embracing and representing the complex interplay of cultural influences that Bhabha discusses. The theoretical insights Barker and Jane (2016) provided further enrich the analysis of Disney's portrayals of cultural identities by emphasizing the fluid and constructed nature of gender and cultural categories. Barker and Jane argue that what we often consider as "local" culture is a product of globalized discourses, which shape and are shaped by media representations such as those in Disney films (Barker & Jane, 2016, p. 192) and closely linked with the discussions on hybridity and cultural intermixing seen in Disney's portrayals in movies like *Aladdin* and *Encanto*. Additionally, Kramer (2018) expands on this idea by defining cultural fusion as the potential to blend diverse cultural elements to add depth and enrich the overall context, further illustrating the complexity of cultural exchange in these narratives.

The hybridity theory enhances these films' educational potential in teaching intercultural competence. Using Disney films in the classroom can help explore the dynamics of cultural interactions and transformations, fostering a deeper understanding of cultural diversity among students. This educational approach is supported by Kraidy's (2005) notion that hybrid media texts reflect a variety of historical, economic, and cultural forces, illustrating the complexity of cultural exchange at both local and global levels (Kraidy, 2005, p. 6). Moreover, Pieterse (1995) adds depth to the discussion by highlighting how globalized discourses influence local perceptions of culture, thereby framing Disney's portrayal of non-Western cultures as part of a broader context of global cultural flows (Pieterse, 1995, p. 57). Similarly, Hall (1992)

emphasizes that identities are constructed within and by power dynamics, suggesting that media representations like those in Disney films play a significant role in shaping and expressing cultural identities (Hall, 1992, p. 233). Further, Bhabha's idea that hybridity can lead to the emergence of new cultural positions and identities, challenging students to recognize and navigate the ongoing processes of cultural interaction and transformation (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 28, 164, 193).

Integrating theories from Bhabha, Kraidy, Pieterse, and Hall provides a robust framework for evaluating Disney's film narratives. These narratives offer insights into how they reflect, respond to, and potentially reshape cultural perceptions in a globalized society. Hence, it contributes to academic discourse on media and cultural studies and enriches practical methodologies for education, particularly in fostering intercultural competence through film analysis.

2.1.4 Orientalism and Can the subaltern speak

Moreover, it is imperative to understand the role Western perspectives play in shaping these portrayals. Edward Said's theory of Orientalism (Said, 2003) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's insights on subalternity (Spivak, 2020) offer critical frameworks for analyzing the narratives and character depictions in Disney's cinematic universe. Said's concept of "Orientalism" outlines how the West constructs stereotypical and exotic images of the East, which serve Western interests and perpetuate a sense of cultural superiority (Said, 2003). This theory is vital for dissecting the elements in Disney films that may reinforce outdated or simplistic views of Eastern societies. Similarly, Spivak's exploration of the subaltern voices provides a lens to examine whether individuals from marginalized groups are genuinely represented or if their portrayals are filtered through Western biases, thus failing to give an authentic voice (Spivak, 2020). Spivak argues that Western academic discourse is crafted to advance Western interests, suggesting that media representations within these frameworks likely reflect these biases. Moreover, philosopher Paul Ricoeur's discussion on identity (Ricoeur, 2016) enhances the understanding of how individuals interpret their societal roles. Ricoeur emphasizes the impact of cultural signs and narratives on self-understanding, highlighting the importance of how stories, including those told in Disney films, shape our perceptions of self and others (Ricoeur, 2016). His perspective is crucial for assessing how Disney's narratives may influence viewers' self-perception and understanding of cultural identities.

In addressing how Disney meets criticisms concerning racism and stereotypes, it is essential to scrutinize whether their newer releases have shifted towards more nuanced and respectful representations of non-Western cultures. Applying Said, Spivak, and Ricoeur's theories helps to critically evaluate these portrayals, ensuring that the thesis comprehensively analyzes Disney's approach to cultural representation.

2.1.5 Disneyfication

The concept of "media-created reality" plays a crucial role in understanding how these portrayals influence viewers' perceptions of reality. According to Ytreberg (2008), media does not simply reflect reality but actively constructs it, creating a version of reality influenced by both the creators' intentions and the audience's interpretations (Ytreberg, 2008). This notion is critical in analyzing how Disney's films might skew or shape cultural perceptions through their narratives. Furthermore, Skar (2004) introduces the ideas of "media-created realism" and "media-created fantasy," which help to dissect Disney's cinematic approach. These concepts describe how Disney blends realistic and fantastical elements to craft its unique version of various cultures (Skar, 2004, p. 0), potentially simplifying or misrepresenting them to fit a more palatable or marketable narrative.

Richard Schickel's concept of Disneyfication further deepens the analysis. Schickel (1997) criticizes Disney's process of adapting and simplifying complex original works and cultures into a more uniform and commercially viable format. Disneyfication often reduces rich, diverse cultural narratives into sterilized versions that align with Western preferences and commercial strategies (Schickel, 1997, pp. 223, 291-297). The theory of Disneyfication is pertinent to this thesis as it directly addresses the overarching question of how Disney has responded to past criticisms regarding its cultural representations. By applying Schickel's critique, one can explore the extent to which Disney has continued to sanitize and standardize non-Western cultures for global consumption or whether newer films like *Encanto* signify a shift towards more authentic and respectful portrayals. Understanding the dynamics of Disneyfication and media-created realities can help educators and students critically assess the cultural content within Disney films, fostering greater media literacy and intercultural competence.

2.1.6 Gender roles

Analyzing gender roles within Disney's films, particularly in evolving narratives around race and cultural representation, necessitates a nuanced understanding of gender as a complex and

culturally contingent category. Theories from scholars, including Barker and Jane (2016), argue that gender cannot be understood as a universal cross-cultural category but is instead constructed through varying social dimensions, including class, ethnicity, and age, suggesting a significant departure from any essentialist understanding of “woman” or “man” (Barker & Jane, 2016, p. 192). Their perspective is central for examining how Disney has addressed criticism regarding the portrayal of gender in *Aladdin* and *Encanto*, where characters potentially embody or resist stereotypical gender norms. Furthermore, research indicates that in the media, minority boys are often portrayed in connection with crime or various problems, while minority girls are portrayed as oppressed and vulnerable (Alghasi, 2009; Eide, 2011). This additional layer of media portrayal context is critical in understanding how Disney’s characters may challenge or conform to these pervasive stereotypes. Gayatri Spivak’s (2020) concept of the subaltern’s inability to speak within colonial discourses highlights the challenges marginalized groups, including women in colonial contexts, face in finding a voice. Her theory is particularly relevant for analyzing Disney’s efforts to provide a voice to non-Western characters and cultures in its films, questioning whether these representations genuinely allow these cultures to articulate their identities or merely perpetuate Western narratives (Spivak, 2020). Additionally, the feminist perspective that views gender as a fundamental axis of social organization saturated with power relations (Barker & Jane, 2016, p. 343) provides a critical lens through which to view Disney’s portrayal of male and female characters. This theoretical approach can help assess whether Disney’s newer releases have moved beyond simplistic depictions of gender roles and have begun to address the complex power dynamics that feminism critiques. Finally, the research by England (2011) underscores that children recognize and internalize gender stereotyping in media, shaping their expectations and understanding of gender roles, which further emphasizes the importance of critically assessing how gender is portrayed in these films.

These theories support using Disney films to develop intercultural competence in educational settings. By critically engaging with these films through the lenses of gender construction, postcolonial theory, and hybridity, educators can guide students in exploring how media constructs and conveys cultural and gender identities, fostering a more critical and inclusive approach to understanding media representations.

2.2 Intercultural competence

First, defining what it entails is crucial to explore whether *Aladdin* and *Encanto* can enhance intercultural competence. Understanding and interacting across diverse cultures becomes

critical as the world becomes increasingly globalized. This thesis aims to explore the extent to which Disney's narratives contribute to or hinder the development of such competencies among viewers, providing valuable insights into the educational potential of mainstream media in fostering global cultural understanding. Through the theoretical lens of intercultural competence, the research will critically assess Disney's influence on viewers' perceptions of and interactions with diverse cultures.

Intercultural competence involves more than just acquiring knowledge about other cultures; it also includes the ability to interact effectively and respectfully across cultural boundaries. Bøhn and Dypedahl (2018) describe intercultural competence as the skill to engage appropriately with people from diverse backgrounds, which is essential for avoiding cultural stereotypes and generalizations (Bøhn et al., 2018, p. 158). Barrett et al. (2014) expand on this by defining intercultural competence as the combination of attitudes, knowledge, understanding, and skills that enable positive and constructive relationships with people from different cultural affiliations (M. Barrett et al., 2014, pp. 16-17). The British Council defines intercultural competence as "the ability to understand cultures, including your own, and use this understanding to communicate successfully with people from other cultures" (the British Council, 2019). Their definition aligns with the thesis's aim to investigate Disney's cultural narratives. They emphasize the dynamic nature of intercultural competence, suggesting that it involves continuous learning and engagement with diverse cultures, which can enrich an individual's understanding over time.

Given the scope of this thesis, the definitions provided by Barrett et al. (2014) and the British Council (2019) are particularly suitable. They highlight the practical aspects of intercultural competence, which is crucial for evaluating how films like *Aladdin* and *Encanto* function as tools for cultural education. These theories will contribute to critically assessing whether Disney's film narratives contribute constructively to viewers' intercultural competence or perpetuate simplified and possibly stereotypical portrayals of non-Western cultures.

2.2.1 Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC)

Intercultural communicative competence (ICC) can be developed in three ways: in the classroom, in the field, and through independent learning (Byram, 1997). One aspect of the study is determining if *Aladdin* and *Encanto* can be a basis for building ICC within a classroom setting. Byram et al. (2013) developed the term intercultural communicative competence (ICC) by expanding on and integrating intercultural competence into

communicative competence. This expansion emphasizes the importance of language teaching in facilitating intercultural communication. Byram (1997) identified five savors to understand intercultural competence better: knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

Michael Byram's ICC model provides a foundation for building ICC through a conversational, participatory, and meaningful approach to language learning. The framework emphasizes the importance of establishing and developing relationships to communicate across cultural barriers effectively. While the thesis does not explicitly focus on intercultural communication, the model provides valuable insights into various facets of intercultural competence. Consequently, his model is deemed highly pertinent to the objectives of this study. The five characteristics of Byram's ICC model, including attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interactions, and critical cultural awareness, are essential components that must be maintained to ensure successful communication between individuals from different cultural backgrounds (Dervin & Gross, 2016, p. 56). According to Byram, the cornerstone of ICC is attitudes, which include being curious and open to people with different values, behaviors, and views and putting oneself in other people's shoes (Byram et al., 2001). Knowledge plays a crucial role in understanding not only a specific culture but also one's own and other cultural and social behaviors. Suppose the films present the cultures in the "correct" way, as close to reality as possible. In that case, they can provide a good foundation for knowledge about, understanding, and interest in one's own and other cultures. In addition to attitudes and knowledge, Byram's model includes interpreting and relating skills, enabling comprehension, explanation, and reaction to different cultural perspectives (Byram et al., 2001). Discovery and interaction skills refer to an individual's capacity to learn and engage with diverse cultures. This feature is crucial since *Aladdin* and *Encanto* occur in non-Western countries and are based on cultures and everyday life in the presented regions. Although communication will not happen in reality, the representation of cultures in films allows one to build an image of values, communication patterns, everyday customs, and ways of being. Finally, critical cultural awareness is essential to assess cultural values, including one's own, and how they impact interpersonal interactions. The literature suggests that students must be aware of their values and how they influence their interactions with others (M. D. Barrett et al., 2014). The five savours framework provides a helpful guide for educators to teach intercultural competence in the classroom. Using *Aladdin* and *Encanto* as examples of non-Western cultural phenomena explored through film, this thesis can analyze how these films can promote intercultural competence in classrooms.

By examining the films' portrayals of culture, language, and attitudes towards "otherness," educators can utilize these films to teach students the skills required for successful intercultural communication.

2.2.2 Learning materials

Explaining intercultural competence does not inevitably explain how to teach intercultural competence. The pedagogical practice can be challenging because one of the essential components is attitudes, which can be difficult to teach. Teachers, thus, need to be aware of the teaching material they use to promote intercultural competence in the classroom. Byram and Wagner (2018) noted that textbooks are a frequently used educational resource (Byram & Wagner, 2018). However, Risager (2021) argues that some textbooks portray cultures using multimodal representations that create a focus on differences instead of similarities (Risager, 2021). Furthermore, teaching about cultures in "Western" English-speaking countries has long been customary by emphasizing the typical and sometimes stereotypical behaviors of the language's most dominant group of native speakers (Kramsch, 2013, p. 66). This underscores the need to develop intercultural competence without highlighting cultural differences.

Ultimately, it can have adverse effects on how students perceive other cultures. The relevance of the "us and them" dichotomy in cultural representation is significant to the thesis as it aims to explore how Disney portrays "non-Western" cultures. Fenner (2001) notes that literary texts reveal the culture and provide readers with insight into foreign cultures and their language and form (Fenner, 2001). Although intended for written texts, Fenner's argument can also be applied to films because they expose viewers to near-authentic language and culture, facilitating intercultural communication. Her theory is especially relevant to the thesis as the films *Aladdin* and *Encanto* provide a meeting point of the viewer's culture with the culture portrayed in the films. To enhance understanding of how films function as texts, Bakken (2016) suggests treating films as fictional texts that work in specific ways, sharing many features with literature, such as narration, character, plot, and symbolism, but differing in their material basis: instead of words that tell, films use pictures that show, and instead of a narrative voice, there is a camera that conveys the story. This approach helps prevent the mistaking affection easily provoked by the film's apparent realism, encouraging a critical viewing akin to literature reading (Bakken, 2016, p. 4). Metacognition, a vital component of intercultural competence and critical literacy, requires students and teachers to carefully evaluate their preconceptions (Olin-Scheller & Tengberg, 2017). Incorporating metacognition

into the study of these films may facilitate discussion about portraying “non-Western” cultures in popular media and how media shapes our perceptions of different cultures.

2.3 Film and Adaptation

The relevance of adaptation theory in the master’s thesis that aims to explore the influence of Disney films on non-Western cultural phenomena can be seen through its ability to examine the process of reworking pre-existing cultural texts in adaptations. As Hutcheon and O’Flynn (2013) argued, adaptation is a form of repetition without replication that inevitably changes stories’ political valence and meaning (Hutcheon & O’Flynn, 2013, p. xviii). Consequently, a critical analysis of the adaptations of *Aladdin* and *Encanto* could reveal variations in their narratives and how they convey Disney’s ideological values. Moreover, Hutcheon and O’Flynn claimed that adaptation theory’s concept of transculturation or indigenization across cultures, languages, and history highlights the potential changes that could occur in the meaning and impact of stories. Through cultural selection, stories can adapt to local cultures as they travel (Hutcheon & O’Flynn, 2013, p. 177). Thus, the adaptations of the films might show alterations that reflect cultural differences in the non-Western traditions they represent.

Sanders (2016) differentiated between adaptation and appropriation. The former signals a relationship with an informing source text or original. In contrast, the latter is a wholesale rethinking of the terms of the original (Sanders, 2016, pp. 26-28). This differentiation can help determine whether the films are faithful adaptations of the source text. Moreover, it can also provide insight into how Disney appropriates non-Western cultural phenomena to appeal to the Western audience.

The thesis can use adaptation theory to comprehend the possible modifications in the films’ political valence, narrative structure, character portrayal, and cultural context. The results of the analysis can help establish whether the films’ depiction of non-Western cultural phenomena perpetuates Orientalism, exoticism, or stereotypes. Additionally, exploring how the movies portray intercultural interactions can inform the thesis’s inquiry into whether they can promote intercultural competence in the classroom. By considering adaptation theory, the thesis can provide a nuanced examination of the films in contesting the dominant discourse of Western cultural superiority. Further, adaptation theory provides a crucial framework for analyzing the adaptations of *Aladdin* and *Encanto* and their influence on Disney’s ideological values in presenting “non-Western” cultural phenomena. This theory can help to identify

whether the films are appropriating or adapting the cultural texts and whether they can be used to promote intercultural competence in the classroom.

2.3.1 Cultural appropriation

In a master's thesis that aims to investigate the influence of *Aladdin* and *Encanto* on Disney's ideological values in presenting "non-Western" cultural phenomena and their potential use in promoting intercultural competence in classrooms, Hutcheson's theory of adaptation and transculturation is highly relevant. As Cuddy-Keane (2003) notes, cultural globalization has increased attention to cultural transfers, often involving a change of language and place or period (Cuddy-Keane, 2003, p. 544). However, there is no guarantee that adapters will consider cultural changes that may have occurred over time. In Hollywood, transculturation usually means Americanizing a work (Hutcheon & O'Flynn, 2013, pp. 145-146). In Hollywood films like Disney's, the adaptation involves altering characters' nationalities and de-emphasizing national, regional, or historical specificities (Edelstein, 2001, p. 20). This often means changes in racial and gender politics, with some adaptations purging elements that their particular cultures might find difficult or controversial (Stam, 2005, pp. 42-44). In the case of *Aladdin* and *Encanto*, the films have been criticized for perpetuating stereotypes and cultural appropriation.

Cultural appropriation is a complex topic that can refer to adopting another culture's elements, such as stories, motifs, styles, and designs, by a dominant culture. This idea has been explored by scholars such as Schneider (2003) and Young (2010), who emphasize the importance of sensitivity and respect when incorporating cultural elements into one's work (Schneider, 2003; Young, 2010). Bredin (2008) emphasizes that media and popular communication, like movies, express cultural knowledge and aspects. Thus, the media's representation of a specific culture is crucial in cultural appropriation. People generally expect the media to portray cultures accurately, even though it may not always be accurate. Therefore, when it comes to cultural appropriation, it is crucial to ensure that dominant cultures represent minority cultures fairly and respectfully to avoid causing offense or harm (Bredin, 2008). In the case of Disney's animated films, it is clear that cultural appropriation is a factor to be considered when examining their representation of non-Western cultures. For example, *Aladdin* has been criticized for perpetuating Orientalist stereotypes, such as the idea that the Middle East is a land of exotic splendor and danger (Shaheen, 1993). These criticisms underscore the importance of examining how Disney utilizes non-Western cultural phenomena to understand better the messages these films convey.

Hutcheson's theory of adaptation and transculturation offers a helpful framework for analyzing these films. As Hutcheon and O'Flynn (2013) note, stories evolve through adaptation and are not immutable over time (Hutcheon & O'Flynn, 2013, p. 32). Cultural adaptation involves migration to favorable conditions, with stories traveling to different cultures and media. Adaptations, like evolution, are a transgenerational phenomenon, with the fittest flourishing. According to Nicklas and Lindner, the broader terrain of adaptation studies envisioned by Hutcheson's theory can heuristically be charted by a tripartite division into intermedial, intercultural, and cognitive approaches (Nicklas & Lindner, 2012). Intermedial studies involve transporting content from one form to another without losing its recognizability. In the context of intercultural perspectives in adaptation studies, comparative literature concerns one nation or culture's image of another. This aspect of alterity is not restricted to research of national stereotypes but has been a cornerstone of recent postcolonial studies (Nicklas & Lindner, 2012, p. 3). The connection between adaptation and cultural appropriation derives some of its topicality from postcolonial concerns, such as Orientalism by Said. Regarding cognitive approaches to adaptation studies, they are concerned with the aesthetic and epistemological implications of adaptation concerning the historical, systematic, and theoretical. They must consider the realities of the market and the widespread practice of adaptation as the reigning principle in popular culture and high literature (Nicklas & Lindner, 2012, pp. 3-4).

In examining the influence of *Aladdin* and *Encanto* on Disney's ideological values in presenting non-Western cultural phenomena, it is necessary to consider the principles of cultural appropriation. The films show how cultures can be adopted and used in different contexts. However, it is essential to investigate whether portraying non-Western cultures in these films is accurate and respectful or if they perpetuate stereotypes that could result in adverse outcomes. There is also a potential benefit to using these films in the classroom to promote intercultural competence. Students can learn about different cultures and respectfully appreciate them by analyzing the portrayal of non-Western cultures in these films. In conclusion, the principle of cultural appropriation is essential when examining the influence of *Aladdin* and *Encanto* on Disney's ideals; moreover, analyzing the portrayal of non-Western cultures in these films can potentially help promote intercultural competence.

2.4 Concluding remarks

These frameworks are instrumental in addressing the key aims of this thesis, which are to assess how Disney has addressed racism and negative stereotypes in its newer releases

compared to earlier films, how it portrays non-Western cultures, and whether Disney movies can effectively promote intercultural competence in the classroom. Firstly, the theories of “Big C culture” and “Little C culture” allow for a detailed examination of how Disney films represent visible and subtle cultural elements. This analysis is crucial in understanding the depth and authenticity of the cultural portrayal in Disney films. It helps determine whether these representations reinforce stereotypes or provide a nuanced view of the cultures depicted. Secondly, the concept of Americanization and cultural imperialism is critical in evaluating how Disney’s portrayal of non-Western cultures may perpetuate a sense of Western superiority and cultural dominance. This perspective addresses the first aim of the thesis by highlighting shifts in Disney’s approach from a potentially Eurocentric portrayal to a more inclusive and respectful representation in its recent films. Furthermore, Homi Bhabha’s theory of hybridity provides a lens to explore the complexities and intermingling of cultural identities in Disney narratives, reflecting on how these films have evolved to include more authentic and hybrid cultural realities, potentially contributing to a better understanding of multiculturalism in global media. Additionally, applying theories such as Orientalism and Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” enriches the analysis of how power dynamics and Western perspectives influence the depiction of Eastern and other non-Western societies in Disney films. These theories are pivotal in scrutinizing the portrayal of marginalized communities and assessing whether Disney films provide them with a voice or merely propagate Western narratives. The concept of Disneyfication is also vital as it explores the balance between commercial interests and cultural sensitivity in Disney’s film narratives, providing insights into how cultural elements are simplified or adapted for global audiences. Lastly, integrating Byram’s model of intercultural communicative competence and the broader concept of intercultural competence into the analysis offers a practical approach to assessing the educational potential of *Aladdin* and *Encanto* films. By examining how these films might be used as tools to foster an understanding of and respect for cultural diversity, this framework directly addresses the third aim of the thesis. In conclusion, the selected theoretical frameworks deepen the academic discourse on media and cultural studies and enhance practical methodologies for education. They provide the tools to assess how Disney’s film narratives reflect critically, respond to, and possibly reshape cultural perceptions in a globalized society. Through this comprehensive theoretical lens, the thesis aims to contribute significantly to understanding mainstream media's role in promoting cultural diversity and intercultural competence, aligning closely with the stated aims of the research.

3 Method

This thesis investigates how Disney portrays different aspects of culture in several of its films and whether the films are appropriate as a foundation for working with intercultural competence. The basis of the study will thus be the narrative, semiotic, and rhetorical content of the selected movies. Each film is studied to discover how the cultural views, moral context, and attitudes regarding “us” and “them” are depicted.

3.1 Selecting films

Choosing films for a master’s thesis focused on how Disney portrays non-Western cultures and features human main characters to explore nuanced human cultural interactions entirely is imperative. Out of Disney’s 62 feature films up to today, only a limited number are set in non-Western settings, and an even smaller subgroup of these feature human protagonists. The movies *Aladdin* and *Encanto* present ideal case studies for this research due to their distinct cultural settings, differing production years, and their portrayal of complex cultural narratives. *Aladdin*, released in 1992, is set in the fictional city of Agrabah, inspired by a broader Middle Eastern and South Asian cultural amalgam. It provides a rich tapestry of elements drawn from diverse regions, albeit through a largely orientalist lens. On the other hand, *Encanto* (2021) delves into Colombian culture, providing a narrative deeply embedded in the country’s diverse cultural, familial, and environmental specifics. It offers a temporal frame to evaluate shifts in Disney’s cultural portrayal strategies, reflecting changes in societal attitudes, globalization, and increased sensitivity towards accurate and respectful cultural representation. Disney’s approach to cultural depiction has evolved and has been influenced by increasing global interconnectedness and criticism of cultural appropriation and inaccuracies. The portrayal in *Aladdin*, while commercially successful, has been critiqued for perpetuating harmful stereotypes. In contrast, *Encanto* has been lauded for its depth and authenticity, celebrating Colombian culture without filtering it through a Western gaze. This contrast can illuminate Disney’s evolving narrative and visual strategies in representing non-Western cultures. Both films had significant cultural impacts and receptions in their respective eras, making them valuable for examining how critics from various backgrounds perceive Disney’s cultural narratives. *Aladdin*’s influence can be analyzed in the context of early 90s media, while *Encanto* offers insights into contemporary audience expectations for cultural authenticity and inclusivity. The landscapes of *Encanto* and its detailed character animations provide a stark contrast to the more caricatured and simplified designs seen in *Aladdin*. Technological capabilities can be linked to the potential for a more nuanced cultural portrayal.

As such, selecting *Aladdin* and *Encanto* for a thesis on Disney's portrayal of non-Western cultures is strategically sound. These films represent different cultural contexts and historical production periods and offer a platform to explore significant questions about the evolution of cultural representation in one of the most influential media conglomerates globally.

3.2 Hermeneutics and Phenomenology

In exploring the portrayal of non-Western cultures in Disney films, particularly in *Aladdin* and *Encanto*, this thesis employs hermeneutics as a primary epistemological framework. Hermeneutics, derived from the Greek word “hermeneuein,” meaning to interpret or explain, offers a profound approach to understanding complex texts and media such as films (Sørensen et al., 2010). The hermeneutic approach applied draws on Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, which sees interpretation as a dialogical process. This process does not merely seek to understand a text; it involves an interaction between the interpreter's preconceptions and the text itself, thereby suggesting a dynamic interplay between the researcher's historical context and the text's historical context (Gadamer et al., 2012). Humans are historical beings shaped by tradition and historical contexts, which enable them to interpret themselves and their surroundings. Gadamer emphasizes that certain biases influence this understanding and that the meaning of any text or expression is derived from its context (Kvale et al., 2009, p. 69). Understanding is achieved through a reciprocal process where each part is viewed in relation to the whole it is part of, and conversely, the whole is interpreted through its various parts. This process is known as the hermeneutic circle or spiral (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2008, p. 193). In the context of the film, this hermeneutic approach enables a deeper exploration of the multiple layers of meaning presented through visual imagery, dialogue, and music, each requiring careful interpretation and reflecting Gadamer's notion of the “fusion of horizons” (Gadamer, 2013, p. 304), where a more profound understanding emerges from these interactions. Clifford Geertz's concept of “thick description” in cultural studies underscores the need for a nuanced hermeneutic approach, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the cultural symbols embedded in films (Thagaard, 2018). By applying hermeneutics, the research will interpret Disney's representations holistically, considering the explicit and implicit cultural messages conveyed.

Complementing hermeneutics, phenomenology focuses on individuals' subjective experiences, emphasizing the importance of personal perception in understanding cultural representations (Krogh, 2014). In the context of this thesis, phenomenology will help explore how individual viewers perceive and experience cultural portrayals in *Aladdin* and *Encanto*.

Considering the educational application of these films when teaching intercultural competence is particularly relevant, as it provides insights into how students might personally relate to and interpret these cultural narratives.

The integration of hermeneutics and phenomenology in this thesis also supports its secondary aim: to evaluate whether Disney movies can be practical tools for fostering intercultural competence in educational settings. By understanding these films' deeper cultural narratives and individual interpretations, educators can better assess their potential to teach students about cultural diversity and empathy towards other cultures.

3.3 Research method

The methodology of this thesis is rooted in the principles of qualitative research, aligning with the interpretive nature of cultural analysis. According to Hårstad, Lohndal, and Mæhlum (2017), the method encompasses the practical procedures anticipated to address the research questions posed (Hårstad et al., 2017). The chosen approach is deemed most appropriate for dissecting the intricate portrayals of non-Western cultures in films and assessing their utility in fostering intercultural competence within classrooms. Qualitative research is characterized by its focus on understanding phenomena from the participants' perspectives, which is essential when analyzing cultural representations and audience perceptions (Postholm, 2010). This approach allows a nuanced exploration of how Disney's narratives and characterizations resonate with or diverge from authentic cultural expressions. The complexity of film as a medium, integrating visual, auditory, and narrative elements, necessitates a methodological approach that can engage deeply with both content and context, making qualitative methods particularly suitable (Patton, 2002). Detailed observations and transcriptions of *Aladdin* and *Encanto* serve as the primary data for the study. Observational research is pertinent as it identifies subtle cultural cues and themes that a quantitative approach might overlook (Thagaard, 2018). By systematically analyzing these films, I aim to uncover the layers of cultural messaging embedded within the narratives and their potential impact on viewers' cultural understanding.

The hermeneutic approach is applied to interpret the films' content, drawing on Gadamer's concept of the "fusion of horizons" to explore how personal and cultural biases may influence both the portrayal of cultures in the films and their reception by audiences (Gadamer et al., 2012). This involves a cyclical process of interpreting specific elements of the films (scenes, dialogue, character development) within their broader narrative and cultural context. The

hermeneutic method is well-suited to the task, as it emphasizes understanding texts (or films, in this case) through an iterative process of examining the parts and the whole (Sørensen et al., 2010). Exploring how Disney films can enhance intercultural competence in educational settings involves evaluating the films and their didactic potential, aligning with the phenomenological aspects of qualitative research, which seek to understand phenomena through the lived experiences of individuals, such as the students and educators engaging with these films (Krogh, 2014). The phenomenological perspective will help ascertain the subjective effectiveness of these films as educational tools, gauging their capacity to foster empathy, cultural awareness, and critical thinking among students.

3.4 Film analysis

Film analysis within this thesis is critical for examining how Disney portrays non-Western cultures in *Aladdin* and *Encanto*. As Moseng et al. (2008) suggest, selecting films that engage and intrigue forms the basis for an analytical approach (Moseng et al., 2008). The films were selected based on their relevance to non-Western cultural portrayals and the significant time gap between their releases, providing a comparative perspective on the evolution of Disney's cultural representation. This selection criterion aligns with the methodological approach suggested by Moseng et al. (2008), where the film choice either follows the thematic concern or vice versa, ensuring that the films under study are engaging and pertinent to the research questions (Moseng et al., 2008). Film analysis allows for an in-depth exploration of narrative structures, character development, visual and auditory styles, and thematic elements contributing to cultural representation.

Following the guidance of Bakøy and Moseng (2008), the analysis will dissect the films through several lenses:

- **Narrative Analysis:** This will involve breaking down the films' stories to understand how the narratives are constructed and conveyed. It will focus on core scenes that define the plot and complementary scenes that develop character relationships and backgrounds.
- **Character Analysis:** Understanding how characters represent and transmit cultural values and stereotypes is critical. This part of the analysis will examine character actions and roles within the narrative to assess how they contribute to portraying their respective cultures.

- **Stylistic Elements:** Including camera use, editing, sound, and mise-en-scène. These elements help shape the films' overall aesthetic and influence how cultural narratives are visually and auditorily constructed and received.
- **Thematic Analysis:** Exploring the central themes such as culture, gender roles, and stereotypes. Each theme will be supported by sub-themes from the films' narratives, guiding a deeper understanding of how Disney projects non-Western cultures.

Integrating hermeneutics into film analysis, following the insights of Gadamer (2012), emphasizes understanding films not just as cultural texts but as mediums through which broader societal values and stereotypes are communicated and possibly challenged.

Acknowledging the preconceptions and biases the viewer and the researcher bring to the film-watching experience, the approach adapts accordingly. Hermeneutics provides a framework for interpreting films in a way that seeks to understand the deeper meanings behind their narratives and stylistic choices. Phenomenology complements this by focusing on the experience of the films, considering how they are perceived and interpreted by audiences from various cultural backgrounds. This aspect is crucial when considering the educational utility of these films in promoting intercultural competence. Moseng (2008) further elaborates on the complexity of film interpretation by explaining that understanding a film is not a linear process; instead, it fluctuates between the overarching narrative and the individual roles of its components (Moseng et al., 2008, p. 15). The perspective suggests that viewers bring their cultural backgrounds and personal experiences to their interpretations, which can lead to varied understandings of the same film. Films, therefore, serve as a medium for continuous dialogue and meaning-making, urging viewers to remain open to multiple interpretations and the possibility of gaining new insights upon each viewing (Moseng et al., 2008, p. 111). Therefore, the films were viewed numerous times. Initially, each film was watched to grasp the overall narrative. Subsequently, they were watched again, pausing at particularly interesting scenes for closer analysis, allowing for a deeper examination of key moments within the narrative and enhancing the analytical process.

3.5 Concluding remarks

This chapter outlines the methods used to analyze the portrayal of non-Western cultures in Disney's *Aladdin* and *Encanto*. Through a hermeneutic approach grounded in Gadamer's philosophical insights, the study interprets the films' narratives and visual styles within their cultural and historical contexts, emphasizing an interactive process between the viewer's and the text's backgrounds. This method is complemented by phenomenology, which focuses on

individual viewers' experiences, enriching the understanding of cultural perceptions and receptions. The qualitative methodology is particularly suited for dissecting complex media texts like these films. It allows for a deep, detailed exploration of narrative structures, character development, and thematic elements that communicate cultural narratives. By analyzing these components, the thesis assesses the films' effectiveness as tools for intercultural education, highlighting how they can foster empathy and cultural awareness among viewers.

Analysis and discussion

In the following, I delve into the portrayal of non-Western cultures in *Aladdin* and *Encanto*, exploring the complex interplay of cultural representation and its implications for societal perceptions and media literacy. The analysis focuses on how these films can be utilized within classroom settings to foster intercultural competence, aligning with educational objectives and emphasizing understanding and respecting diverse cultures (. It starts with *Aladdin*, examining its controversial depiction of Arab culture, which has been critiqued for perpetuating stereotypes rooted in Orientalist views, through a detailed critique using the works of scholars such as Edward Said and applying Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutic approach, assessing how the film's portrayal could be approached in educational contexts to discuss and challenge cultural stereotypes. Following, the focus shifts to *Encanto*, which represents a significant departure from traditional portrayals by highlighting Colombian culture through a vibrant narrative that challenges past stereotypes and embraces a more nuanced depiction of family and community dynamics. The section explores how *Encanto* integrates cultural authenticity with magical realism to offer a narrative that resonates globally while honoring its local roots. It discusses its potential as a tool for promoting intercultural understanding in educational settings.

By contrasting these portrayals, I seek to illustrate Disney's evolving approach toward cultural representation, discussing the potential of such narratives to influence viewer perceptions of cultural diversity and identity. This analysis contributes to academic discussions around film and media studies and intercultural communication, offering insights into the power of mainstream media in shaping, challenging, and sometimes reinforcing societal norms and stereotypes. Further, to explore the educational potential of these films, considering their capacity to enhance intercultural competence among learners.

4 Aladdin

In the following chapter, I delve into the film *Aladdin* as a subject of cultural critique and a valuable educational tool within classroom settings. The film, despite its widespread popularity and enchantment, has sparked considerable debate regarding its portrayal of Middle Eastern cultures, often reflecting deep-seated stereotypes and Orientalist narratives. By examining these representations through a critical media literacy lens, I aim to uncover the underlying cultural dynamics and the potential repercussions on audience perceptions and societal norms. The assertion is that *Aladdin* poses challenges due to its controversial cultural

depictions. However, it also presents unique opportunities for developing intercultural competence among students when employed thoughtfully in educational contexts.

The chapter is structured first to analyze the specific elements of *Aladdin* that perpetuate stereotypes and to discuss the broader implications of these portrayals in the context of global media influence. Following this critique, I will explore practical approaches to leveraging *Aladdin* in the classroom to enhance students' understanding of cultural diversity and critical thinking skills, aligned with the LK20 curriculum's emphasis on linguistic and cultural diversity. By integrating theoretical frameworks and pedagogical strategies, I aim to demonstrate how and why *Aladdin* can serve as a springboard for rich discussions and learning experiences that foster a deeper appreciation and critical examination of cultural narratives and stereotypes. Ultimately, this chapter contends that the thoughtful integration of *Aladdin* into educational practices can transform potential biases into powerful teaching moments, thereby equipping students with the tools necessary to navigate and appreciate the complexities of a multicultural world. By conducting a dual analysis and applying pedagogical principles, I aim to highlight the importance of films as cultural artifacts and educational resources that shape and enhance intercultural competence.

Aladdin has received extensive critique for perpetuating deeply ingrained stereotypes that contribute to broader narratives of Orientalism and racial discrimination. This analysis incorporates insights from previous research, particularly the work of scholars like Giroux and Pollock (2010), who note that the film begins with lyrics that negatively frame Arab people, reinforcing stereotypes associated with violence, cruelty, and backwardness. These problematic themes are further extended visually and narratively through the portrayal of Agrabah's citizens and the character design of the antagonist, Jafar. His darker complexion and distinctive features are intentionally coded to signal villainy, illustrating a common cinematic technique that uses color coding and exaggerated racial features to distinguish between "good" and "evil" characters (Woodcock & Baba, 2016). This portrayal perpetuates long-standing orientalist views that frame Eastern societies as exotic, uncivilized, and fundamentally other - an outlook that, as Aldaher (2022) points out, continues to influence public perception and media portrayals significantly. The impact of such representations in *Aladdin* extends beyond mere cinematic expression, feeding into the dynamics of Hollywood power that often distort cultural understandings and support Western hegemonic practices (Beviano, 2013; Theyssen, 2020). The global reach of Disney films means that their representations can either serve to challenge or reinforce damaging stereotypes. The scholarly

critique of *Aladdin* is particularly relevant in this context, as it underscores the crucial need for media literacy and the adoption of more accurate and respectful cultural representations in mainstream media. This analysis will further elaborate on these critiques, exploring the implications of these portrayals in depth.

4.1 Unveiling Stereotypes in Aladdin

Aladdin's portrayal of a stereotypical merchant embodies Orientalism by simplifying and misrepresenting Middle Eastern culture, reflecting Western biases yet hinting at the complexity beneath these caricatures. A key example can be seen in the film's opening scene, when the depiction of a merchant in Agrabah's markets, characterized by exaggerated features and attire, illustrates Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, projecting stereotypes of Middle Eastern people as exotic and untrustworthy. Said criticizes such representations for simplifying and demeaning the East, arguing that the West often portrays Eastern cultures as fundamentally different and inferior (Said, 2003). This adaptation transfers narrative content across media forms and across cultural lines, raising questions about the authenticity and implications of such representations in global cinema. The portrayal serves as a reminder of the dangers of reducing intricate cultures to caricatures and underscores the importance of engaging with the authentic complexities of Middle Eastern societies. Incorporating Gadamer's hermeneutic approach, we see that understanding these portrayals involves a dialogical process that acknowledges the historical contexts and biases of both the filmmakers and the audience (Gadamer et al., 2012). This analytical lens helps us explore how the interplay between the creators' intentions and the viewers' interpretations can deepen our understanding of the film's cultural representations.

Further, the Merchant with his array of items, from plates to a whimsically impossible hybrid of a coffee maker, French fry stockpile, and hookah, the merchant personifies the Western tendency to amalgamate diverse cultural elements into a singular, oversimplified form for entertainment. In this context, Homi Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity offers a critical lens through which to understand these representations. The merchant's blend of diverse cultural elements, while initially serving as a canvas for stereotypes, also introduces the possibility of a "third space." According to Bhabha, this space is where conflicting cultures negotiate and create new, hybrid identities, challenging traditional notions of purity and authenticity (Bhabha, 1994). The negotiation is particularly evident in how these representations critique the process of Americanization. As non-Western narratives are adapted to fit Western preferences, they often lose their cultural authenticity and complexity, highlighting a tension

within this “third space” between commercial appeal and cultural integrity (Schneider, 2003; Setiawati, 2008; Tobin, 2020; Young, 2010). Furthermore, the adaptation of *Aladdin* can be analyzed through the lens of Nicklas and Lindner’s tripartite division in adaptation studies, emphasizing the intercultural and intermedial aspects. The film’s portrayal of a fictional Middle Eastern setting reflects a form of intercultural adaptation where Western perceptions of Eastern cultures are predominant (Nicklas & Lindner, 2012). The merchant’s demonstration, ending in the comedic collapse of his invention and the subsequent fart joke, serves as a metaphor for the dubious and unreliable portrayal of Middle Eastern characters, reinforcing stereotypes of deceitfulness and trickery. While humorous, this scene underscores Said’s critical view (2003), suggesting that such depictions contribute to a Western narrative that often misrepresents and simplifies the complexity of non-Western cultures. Despite these initial impressions, the merchant’s final reveal of the magic lamp shifts the narrative. The transition from deceptive antics to showcasing an item of genuine value challenges the viewer’s expectations and potentially critiques the initial portrayal steeped in Orientalism. This moment symbolizes a nuanced acknowledgment that, beneath the surface of stereotypical representations, there exists a depth and value in Middle Eastern cultures that the dominant narrative often overlooks. *Aladdin*’s depiction exemplifies how media can perpetuate generalized and stereotypical views of non-Western cultures through humor and entertainment, yet hints at the possibility of transcending these limitations by recognizing the inherent value and complexity.

Jafar’s character in *Aladdin* is a textbook example of Orientalist stereotypes, from his exaggerated physical features, like a hooked nose and dark attire, to his embodiment of villainous traits such as deceit and the use of dark magic. These elements not only exoticize but also oversimplify the complex realities of Middle Eastern societies. The stereotyping extends beyond Jafar to other characters in the film, like the merchant, who is characterized by a large turban, exaggerated facial features, and cunning behavior, further perpetuating the portrayal of Middle Eastern individuals as mysterious and deceptive. Such homogenized and negative representations distill the region’s complexity into misleading stereotypes for Western audiences, a practice rooted in Said’s concept of Orientalism, where Eastern characters are depicted through a Western lens, often vilified to fit preconceived notions of otherness (Said, 2003). Furthermore, Jafar’s role as the Sultan’s Vizier places him in a position of proximity to power, and his portrayal exemplifies the Orientalist stereotype of Middle Eastern rulers as greedy and despotic—a theme that runs counter to the diverse and

complex historical realities of Middle Eastern leadership. His portrayal is a clear example of Americanization, where Jafar's evil persona is simplified and reshaped to fit Western perspectives at the expense of authenticity and depth (Lemish, 2015, p. 6). The depiction perpetuates these modifications and reinforces stereotypes of inherent untrustworthiness among Middle Eastern characters. Further, the characterizations contribute to how Western audiences perceive Middle Eastern cultures, aligning reductionist views and reinforcing the stereotype of the cunning Eastern villain with theories of media-created reality that emphasize the media's decisive role in shaping public perceptions (Skar, 2004). Moreover, the role of Disney in cultural portrayal is akin to that of traditional institutions like schools and families, as it plays a crucial part in forming societal values and attitudes (Giroux & Pollock, 2010). This underscores the responsibility of media producers to offer more nuanced and respectful portrayals that honor the diversity and complexity of the cultures they depict. This analysis critically evaluates the media's influence on societal perspectives and highlights the importance of authentic and reverent cultural representation in influential films like *Aladdin*.

Continuing this theme, the depiction of Agrabah exemplifies how diverse cultures are often merged into a Westernized, simplified portrayal. The blending reflects Orientalist stereotypes and cultural appropriation, further illustrating the complexities and challenges of representing cultures authentically in mainstream media. Drawing on Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, the film portrays the Middle East as an enchanting world of mystery and exoticism against a backdrop filled with bustling bazaars, exotic goods, and architectural wonders (Said, 2003). However, this portrayal lacks authentic cultural specificity, indiscriminately blending elements from various regions into a generic "Arab world" backdrop, reinforcing stereotypes of otherness and exoticism. The narrative incorporates Arabic words and geographical references, such as "the finest merchandise, this side of the Jordan River," while including culturally diverse symbols like Jasmine's tiger Rajah and architectural nods to the Taj Mahal. This mix is a prime example of Hollywood's approach to adapting non-Western stories. Such adaptations often involve altering characters' nationalities and diluting cultural specifics to create a more "universally" appealing yet culturally nonspecific setting. This strategy aims to broaden appeal to Western audiences, a practice well-documented in film studies (Edelstein, 2001, p. 20). Commonly, the method includes modifying racial and gender politics, potentially omitting aspects considered problematic by Western standards (Stam, 2005). Consequently, Agrabah's depiction becomes a form of cultural appropriation, presenting a superficial representation of Middle Eastern culture that

feeds into Orientalist fantasies rather than offering a nuanced portrayal. Characters adorned in exaggerated traditional attire and settings populated with exotic animals further perpetuate a distorted image of Eastern cultures, stripping them of their true complexity and diversity and presenting them as mere exotic backdrops for Western-centric storytelling. The portrayal reinforces misleading stereotypes and underscores the media's significant role in shaping cultural perceptions, emphasizing the need for a more critical examination of Middle Eastern representations in entertainment. By blending cultural influences without genuine specificity, the movie contributes to ongoing discussions on cultural appropriation and the importance of respectful and nuanced cultural representation in media. It highlights the need for entertainment to move beyond stereotypical depictions, recognizing and honoring Middle Eastern cultures' wide variety and complexity, urging a more informed and respectful approach in media portrayals.

Aladdin's "Arabian Nights" and Agrabah's depiction reinforce stereotypes, casting Middle Eastern culture in the light of barbarism and severe discipline. The narrator's description of the land as "barbaric" introduces the audience to a narrative that, while mystical and exotic, casts the culture in a light fraught with historical prejudices and notions of savagery. Such depiction of severe punishments for minor infractions is highlighted as a method of cultural representation that perpetuates stereotypes and leans towards a satirical interpretation of the culture rather than a respectful one. This approach often caricatures the complexities of a culture, distorting its genuine nature. Setiawati (2008) notes that such portrayals can entrench misconceptions and contribute to a broader narrative that simplifies and mocks the depicted cultures, thereby underscoring the need for a more nuanced and respectful media representation. The original lyrics, "Where they cut off your ear if they don't like your face," although later altered due to controversy, reflect an intent to portray the culture as arbitrarily violent (Steinberg, 2010, p. 86). Despite changes, the representation remains troubling, simplifying and potentially mocking the complexities of Eastern societies. The depiction of draconian punishment for theft, alongside aggressive confrontations over minor transgressions, reinforces a narrative of a society governed by harsh measures. Using Hans-Georg Gadamer's concept, the interaction shapes Agrabah's depiction and perception, highlighting how cultural representations are not merely reflections of reality but constructed by blending different cultural and historical horizons. This "fusion of horizons" is crucial in understanding how the film's content—shaped by Western filmmakers—interacts with diverse audience interpretations, reinforcing or challenging these Orientalist stereotypes

(Gadamer et al., 2012). Further, it intertwines exoticism with brutality and reinforces stereotypes of the Middle East as fundamentally other and inherently violent. This aligns with Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, where the East is portrayed as radically different from, and inferior to, the West (Said, 2003), and supports Hall's argument that cultural representations shape societal perceptions through dominant power dynamics, often marginalizing and misrepresenting non-Western cultures (Hall, 1997). Through its sensationalization of violence and punishment, the movie illustrates the problematic nature of media representations of non-Western cultures, contributing to a discourse that marginalizes and simplifies, rather than accurately portrays, the richness and diversity of Middle Eastern societies—highlighting the necessity for greater nuance and respectful cultural portrayals in media and representing the complexities of cultures beyond stereotypical depictions.

The magical elements in *Aladdin* further contribute to the exoticization of the Middle Eastern setting, perpetuating Orientalist tropes. *Aladdin*'s narrative masterfully incorporates magical elements, such as a mystical genie within a lamp with the power to grant three wishes, a magical flying carpet that adds whimsy and facilitates the protagonist's journey, and a magical cave of wonders that selects only a "diamond in the rough" to enter. These elements advance the plot and exoticize the Middle Eastern setting, portraying it as a land filled with mystery and supernatural occurrences. Furthermore, the magical motifs exemplify the broader concepts of cultural imperialism and the Americanization of non-Western narratives, as discussed by Pieterse (2019) and Lemish (2015). Pieterse highlights how the global influence of US media exports can lead to cultural imperialism. Meanwhile, Lemish argues that the US absorbs cultural elements globally, adapts them for American audiences, and redistributes them via media conglomerates, amplifying their reach and impact. In the context of *Aladdin*, this process is evident as the film adopts and repackages Middle Eastern tales and motifs, such as Jafar's dark magic symbolized by his snake-headed staff, to fit Western tastes and then broadcasts them to a global audience. This perpetuates Orientalist tropes and contributes to a homogenized, Americanized view of Eastern cultures, reinforcing a simplified and often misleading portrayal of the Middle East. Through its enchanting but stereotypical narrative, *Aladdin* thus becomes a vehicle for cultural imperialism, using its magical elements to both captivate and subtly impose a Westernized interpretation of non-Western myths, aligning with Said's critique of Orientalism.

In conclusion, the portrayal of Middle Eastern culture in Disney's *Aladdin* serves as a significant example of how Western media often adopts and perpetuates Orientalist

stereotypes. These depictions simplify and misrepresent the rich complexities of Middle Eastern societies but also reinforce harmful stereotypes that view these cultures through a lens of exoticism and otherness. The characterizations in *Aladdin*, from the stereotypical merchant to the villainous Jafar, illustrate a clear pattern of cultural reductionism that aligns with Edward Said's critiques of Orientalism, where the East is portrayed as fundamentally different and inferior (Said, 2003). Despite the film's appeal and magical elements that enchant viewers, it underscores the pervasive issue of cultural imperialism, where non-Western narratives are reshaped to satisfy Western tastes, compromising authenticity and respect. As such, *Aladdin* provides a critical case study for examining the implications of cultural representations in media. The analysis underscores the need to critically discuss how media representations, influenced by historical biases and stereotypes, shape our understanding of different cultures. It calls for a move beyond caricature and simplification, advocating for portrayals that recognize and celebrate the complexity and humanity of all cultures, fostering a more informed and respectful global dialogue.

4.2 The idea of ethnic identity as a spectrum

In the previous section, I discussed how *Aladdin* presents an Orientalist depiction of the Middle East, characterized by its simplification and exoticization of Eastern cultures. However, this narrative is complicated by the characters of Princess Jasmine, Aladdin, and Genie, who embody a hybrid identity that melds Eastern and Western cultural elements. The blending challenges the straightforward Orientalist framework and enhances the film's "universal appeal," making it accessible and relatable to a global audience. This analysis will delve deeper into how these characters negotiate their complex cultural identities.

Understanding the dynamic is crucial for assessing the potential of films like *Aladdin* to influence young viewers' perceptions of culture and diversity. Focusing specifically on Princess Jasmine's character exemplifies the nuanced blend of cultural elements designed to appeal to a global audience, where Eastern and Western influences intermingle, creating a character that appeals broadly but also raises concerns about cultural accuracy and stereotyping. Jasmine's design, a turquoise crop top and harem pants, draws from traditional Middle Eastern attire but is adapted to fit a Westernized notion of exotic appeal, aligning with Edward Said's concept of Orientalism that critiques the depiction of Eastern societies through a Western lens (Said, 2003). Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity further illuminates Jasmine's portrayal, describing cultural hybridity as an amalgamation that challenges traditional notions of cultural purity, suggesting that all cultures are inherently hybrid and continuously shaped

by global influences (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 211, 226, 252). The viewpoint frames Jasmine's character as part of a broader dialogue on cultural identity, shaped by globalized discourses, influencing how audiences perceive Middle Eastern cultures (Barker & Jane, 2016, p. 192). Additionally, Richard Schickel's critique of Disneyfication highlights how Disney's character designs often simplify and sanitize cultural complexities to make them marketable globally, a strategy that can be critiqued for potentially engaging in cultural appropriation (Schickel, 1997, pp. 291-297). Such a strategic choice in character design raises significant questions about the implications of such portrayals for cultural representation and the perpetuation of stereotypes. Princess Jasmine's design epitomizes the impact of Disneyfication on cultural representation, presenting a character that both appeals to and raises concerns. Her attire and aesthetic subtly navigate the intersection of cultural representation and artistic beauty, shaping viewer perceptions of Middle Eastern culture. This blending of Eastern and Western influences aims for universal appeal but might inadvertently perpetuate existing stereotypes by Westernizing non-Western characters. Through Gadamer's concept of the "fusion of horizons," Princess Jasmine's portrayal emerges as a negotiation between Disney's Western perspectives and the diverse views of global audiences (Gadamer et al., 2012). The interaction shapes Jasmine's character, particularly in how her attire is received: while seen as exotic by Western viewers, it may be viewed as an oversimplification by those from Middle Eastern backgrounds. Jasmine's portrayal, which reflects and challenges cultural stereotypes, underscores a process of cultural exchange that brings together different viewpoints. This fusion combines visual elements and bridges diverse cultural interpretations, enhancing understanding of Middle Eastern identities. While Jasmine provides a vehicle for exploring cultural elements accessible to Western audiences, the approach raises questions about stereotype perpetuation and cultural appropriation. Through her character, Disney offers a case study of the complexities of representing cultural identity within global entertainment, highlighting the need for critical media engagement and discernment between genuine cultural appreciation and oversimplified depictions that might shape misconceptions about Middle Eastern societies' richness and diversity.

Aladdin offers a compelling study of how Western ideals of individualism and self-determination are interwoven into its characters' narratives, particularly Aladdin, Jasmine, and the Genie. These characters embody themes of autonomy and personal growth that resonate strongly with Western audiences, set against a backdrop that depicts a fictionalized Middle Eastern scenery. This narrative setup provides a rich context for exploring the

interaction between Western aspirations and Eastern cultural motifs. The film crafts a complex portrait of Princess Jasmine and Aladdin, who seek to transcend the social roles prescribed to them. Jasmine's desire to escape the confines of royalty and connect with her people reflects Western values of independence and self-realization. At the same time, her desire to escape might reflect Western values, Eastern audiences may perceive this portrayal differently, whose cultural contexts might offer alternative interpretations of autonomy and social roles (Gadamer et al., 2012). Aladdin's journey from a "street rat" to a prince mirrors the quintessentially "American dream" of upward mobility and self-improvement, though it is infused with elements from Middle Eastern culture. These storylines present a nuanced view that challenges traditional cultural narratives but also risks simplifying the diverse cultural landscape of the Middle East into a single, universal story of personal triumph (Giroux & Pollock, 2010; Said, 2003). However, this portrayal is complex and requires careful analysis. It balances cultural authenticity with the influences of Americanization and Disneyfication processes that can significantly shape how global audiences perceive these representations (Morris, 2008; Pieterse, 2019; Schickel, 1997; Tobin, 2020). The dynamics raise essential questions about cultural appropriation and simplifying complex identities for mainstream entertainment. Thus, *Aladdin* invites audiences to engage critically with its content. It encourages viewers to reflect on how media shapes perceptions of "the Other" and emphasizes the need for a more inclusive and accurately represented media landscape. The film's engagement with themes of individualism, cultural hybridity, and media representation contributes to broader discussions on the role of popular media in navigating and representing cultural complexities. Through its characters and narratives, *Aladdin* challenges viewers to consider the intricacies of identity and representation and the impact of storytelling in shaping our understanding of cultural diversity and otherness.

Genie's role offers an energetic showcase of cultural hybridity through his dialogue, humor, and use of multilingual idioms. His character seamlessly blends Eastern cultural references with Western idioms and celebrity impersonations, creating a complex tapestry of cross-cultural integration. Phrases like "slap me some tassel," "hold on to your turban," and "wake up and smell the hummus" not only add linguistic flair to the film but also underscore the potential for meaningful cultural fusion (Kramer, 2018). This linguistic innovation reflects a nuanced exploration of cultural diversity, though it also navigates the fine line between celebrating multiculturalism and simplifying Eastern narratives to suit Western entertainment paradigms. Genie's portrayal challenges and extends the viewer's understanding of cultural

identity. Gadamer suggests that understanding is an active process of merging different horizons — in this case, the film depicts a culturally hybrid character with the audience's own cultural experiences and preconceptions. The interplay of Genie's dynamic cultural representation and the audience's varied backgrounds encourages viewers to reinterpret and reassess their perceptions of culture and identity (Gadamer et al., 2012).

Expanding upon the concept, the portrayal of Genie, as voiced by Robin Williams, serves as an example of this theory in practice. His character embodies a dynamic intersection of cultures, utilizing a distinctly Western comedic style to engage with a global audience. While enriching the film's appeal, such techniques raise questions about cultural appropriation and the commodification of cultural elements for mass entertainment, echoing Richard Schickel's critique of Disneyfication (Schickel, 1997). As discussed by scholars like Bredin and Young, this process risks presenting a superficial and exoticized view of Eastern cultures, potentially diluting their authentic narratives in favor of broader audience appeal (Bredin, 2008; Young, 2010). Furthermore, Genie's character becomes a symbol for Homi Bhabha's concept of the "third space" - a realm where diverse cultural identities meet, challenge, and transform each other beyond conventional dichotomies (Bhabha, 1994). Integrating Gadamer's hermeneutics, Genie's role can be viewed as comedic relief and embodying the complexities involved in cultural representation and engagement in a postcolonial world. His amalgamation of cultural references mediated through a Western lens prompts us to question the balance between authentic representation and the perpetuation of stereotypes, enriching the dialogue on how media influences cultural perception and interaction (Gadamer et al., 2012). This perspective offers a deeper understanding of Genie's significance in the narrative, not just as comedic relief but as an embodiment of the complexities involved in cultural representation and engagement in a postcolonial world. Genie's character, with his amalgamation of cultural references mediated through a Western lens, prompts us to question the balance between authentic representation and the perpetuation of stereotypes.

In conclusion, exploring *Aladdin* through the characters of Jasmine, Aladdin, and Genie reveals a scenery of cultural representation, straddling the lines between Eastern traditions and Western cinematic norms. While offering a platform for cultural exchange and diversity, the intricate blend also navigates the precarious balance between authentic portrayal and the reinforcement of stereotypes. The character of Genie, in particular, embodies this duality, serving as a conduit for cultural appreciation and potential appropriation. Genie's amalgamation of Eastern and Western influences captures the essence of cultural hybridity

and underscores the challenges inherent in portraying non-Western cultures within a predominantly Western media landscape. This analysis, grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Orientalism, Americanization, Disneyfication, and cultural appropriation, provides a nuanced understanding of how Disney's *Aladdin* contributes to and complicates the discourse on cultural representation. It highlights the need for a critical engagement with media, encouraging viewers to question and reflect upon the complexities of cultural identity and representation in global cinema. As a result, *Aladdin* serves not only as a cultural artifact but also as a point of reflection on the power of storytelling in shaping perceptions of the "Other." The film's legacy, therefore, lies in its ability to foster dialogue and debate on the significance of nuanced character development and the responsibilities of filmmakers in portraying cultures with depth, sensitivity, and respect.

4.3 Gender and Cultural Representation

Building on the exploration of identity through *Aladdin*'s characters, this section shifts to examining traditional gender roles in the film, which mirror prevailing societal norms and expectations. *Aladdin* presents a conventional division between male and female characters, encapsulating broader societal norms and expectations. Men are depicted as active participants in Agrabah's public and economic life, embodying action, decision-making, and authority roles. This portrayal aligns with conventional notions of masculinity, with characters like Aladdin, the Sultan, and Jafar exemplifying traits associated with leadership and independence (Barker & Jane, 2016, p. 374). Their roles underscore masculinity's association with control and public presence, reinforcing male characters as breadwinners and protectors. In contrast, the film's representation of women largely confines them to domestic roles or emphasizes passivity and ornamentation. Princess Jasmine, the narrative's primary female, symbolizes restricted agency and life confined to the private sphere. The depiction of other women in Agrabah further reinforces this dichotomy, portraying them in passive roles or as objects of male desire, thereby underscoring traditional gender stereotypes (Barker & Jane, 2016, p. 399). Applying Gadamer's concept of the "fusion of horizons," we can understand these portrayals as not merely reflections of historical gender roles but as outcomes of the interaction between the filmmakers' intentions and the cultural and historical horizons of the audience. A hermeneutic viewpoint allows us to see how a dialogical process shapes perceptions of gender roles: filmmakers bring their own biases and intentions to the film's narrative, which are then interpreted by audiences through the lens of their own cultural and

historical contexts, which again influences how gender dynamics in *Aladdin* are perceived and critiqued.

Transitioning from examining the film's production and reception, it becomes evident that the portrayal of women encapsulates a narrative deeply entrenched in domesticity and passive existence, echoing Spivak's discussion of the "subaltern." As Spivak elaborates, the term denotes individuals or groups relegated to inferior ranks within society, including women, and speaks to the broader dynamics of power, marginalization, and binary oppositions such as self and other or center and margin (Spivak, 2020). In the context of the film, Princess Jasmine's restricted agency and the passive roles assigned to other female characters in Agrabah mirror this concept of the subaltern, reflecting societal norms that confine women's identities to caregiving, beauty, and dependency, thus perpetuating a limited view of women's value primarily through their domestic utility and appearance. The narrative surrounding Princess Jasmine and the women of Agrabah also intersects with Lemish's (2015) analysis of racial and multicultural inclusion in American media. Despite strides toward more inclusive content, the film's depiction of these characters often adheres to a binary separation between the Western self and the exoticized other, echoing Lemish's point about society's primary division between whites and non-whites. The inclusion of non-white characters, in this case, could be critiqued as tokenistic, offering a plate of diversity without genuinely engaging with or celebrating the complexity of different cultures and identities. Setiawati's (2008) argument further illuminates Disney's challenge in introducing audiences to varying cultures without reducing those cultures to caricatures or satirical representations. The depiction of Agrabah and its citizens, particularly the women, can be seen as a missed opportunity to move beyond stereotypical narratives and offer a more nuanced and respectful engagement with the represented culture. Instead of empowering representations that challenge traditional stereotypes and celebrate autonomy and achievement, the film risks perpetuating a reductive and outdated view of women, culture, and the "other."

However, *Aladdin* also offers moments of resistance and subversion that challenge these conventional gender norms, mainly through Jasmine's character. Her struggle for autonomy and choice represents a critique of the limitations imposed by gendered expectations, providing a counter-narrative to the typical portrayal of passive femininity. This aspect of Jasmine's character aligns with Giroux and Pollock's (2010) observation of Disney narratives that reinforce traditional gender stereotypes and, at times, subvert them by presenting gendered behaviors and expectations as subject to challenge and change. Despite Jasmine's

challenges to conventional gender roles, the film ultimately frames her liberation within the context of male characters, highlighting the persistence of gendered power imbalances in narrative structures. Such portrayal reflects the complex dynamics of gender representation in Disney films, which, as Giroux and Pollock (2010) argue, significantly shape viewers' perceptions of gender roles from a young age, contributing to the socialization process by normalizing certain gendered behaviors and expectations.

The portrayal of women's attire and their objectification perpetuates traditional gender stereotypes and reflects an Orientalist framing that exoticizes non-Western female characters, contributing to a nuanced yet problematic discourse on gender and cultural representation in media. Princess Jasmine's attire, characterized by turquoise harem pants and a matching crop top, starkly deviates from traditional Middle Eastern garments, presenting a Westernized, romanticized interpretation of harem attire. While seemingly designed to convey Jasmine's independence, this representation paradoxically serves to objectify her by emphasizing her physical appeal to the male gaze, thereby prioritizing her sensuality over her character and agency (Barker & Jane, 2016). The hermeneutic perspective allows us to understand how Jasmine's depiction is not merely a reflection of Western fantasies but also an interaction between these fantasies and the diverse, evolving views of global audiences on gender and culture. It highlights the dialogical process of constructing meanings by merging different cultural and historical horizons, influencing how gender dynamics in the film are perceived and critiqued (Gadamer et al., 2012). The representation of Jasmine and her attire emphasizes her physical appeal and subtly enforces the traditional power dynamics in gender relations. This portrayal aligns with Barker and Jane's (2016) feminist perspective, which views gender as a fundamental axis of social organization saturated with power relations, highlighting how media often reinforces traditional gender roles that position women about their desirability to men (Barker & Jane, 2016, p. 343). This trend in the film further aligns with broader media practices of sexualizing female characters. It reflects a specific Orientalist lens that exoticizes and sexualizes Eastern women, catering to Western fantasies (Said, 2003). In analyzing Jasmine's portrayal, it is crucial to consider not just her gender but also how her royal status and cultural backdrop frame her character. Barker and Jane (2016) argue that gender identity is influenced by complex social dimensions such as class, ethnicity, and age, challenging the notion of a universal female experience (Barker & Jane, 2016, p. 192). Adopting this view elucidates why Jasmine's character might simultaneously challenge and conform to certain gender expectations, reflecting a blend of Western and Eastern narrative influences.

Moreover, the depiction of other women in Agrabah, oscillating between veiled figures and those in revealing harem attire, further complicates the narrative, reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes and engaging in the sexualization of Eastern women. Such portrayals perpetuate Orientalist stereotypes and contribute to a “media-created reality” that simplifies and stereotypes non-Western cultures (Skar, 2004). Incorporating insights from England et al. (2011), the portrayal of women in *Aladdin* can be critically analyzed for its impact on societal perceptions of gender roles. Their research underscores that children recognize and internalize gender stereotyping in media, shaping their expectations and understanding of gender roles. The film’s depiction of Jasmine and other female characters reflects changing gender roles and expectations in American society. It highlights the enduring presence of gendered stereotypes and behaviors in Disney’s narratives. The requirement for Jasmine to marry a prince, coupled with her sexualized depiction, underlines the film’s adherence to traditional narratives that objectify women, positioning their value concerning male characters and their desirability. Despite Jasmine’s moments of resistance and subversion against patriarchal constraints, the overarching narrative structure ultimately reinforces her objectification, underlining the persistent gendered power imbalances in media representations.

In conclusion, *Aladdin* presents a complex blend of gender stereotypes and cultural representations that reflect and reinforce broader societal norms and expectations. While it provides a narrative stage for characters like Princess Jasmine to challenge and subvert traditional gender roles, these moments of confrontation are often overshadowed by the prevailing depiction of women as confined to the domestic sphere or as objects of male desire. The representation encapsulates the deeply entrenched social norms of passivity and ornamentation attributed to women. It resonates with Spivak’s (2020) concept of the “subaltern,” highlighting the marginalization and restricted agency of women within the narrative framework of Agrabah. Furthermore, the film’s engagement with racial and multicultural inclusion, as critiqued by Lemish (2015) and Setiawati (2008), underscores the challenges of representing diverse cultures without resorting to caricature or simplification. The portrayal of Agrabah and its inhabitants, especially the women, through an Orientalist lens that exoticizes and sexualizes reflects a broader media practice that simplifies non-Western cultures to fit Western perceptions and fantasies, perpetuating stereotypes and strengthening traditional gender and cultural hierarchies. However, the moments of resistance and critique rooted within the narrative, mainly through Jasmine’s character, offer a glimmer of hope for a more nuanced and unbiased representation of gender and culture in media.

These instances highlight the potential for narratives to challenge and change societal perceptions of gender roles and cultural stereotypes, suggesting a path that embraces complexity, autonomy, and respect for diversity. As such, *Aladdin* serves as a critical case study in the ongoing discourse on gender stereotypes and cultural representation in media, reflecting the tensions between traditional stereotypes and the possibilities for subversion and change. It emphasizes the need for media creators to move beyond reductive portrayals, advocating for narratives that genuinely celebrate diversity, promote gender equality, and provide empowering representations that reflect the complexity and richness of all cultures and identities.

4.4 Aladdin in the Classroom

The previous sections delved into *Aladdin*'s portrayal of stereotypes, the film's fusion of Eastern and Western cultures, and gender roles, highlighting the challenges and nuances embedded in its narrative. In light of the analysis, this section will investigate how *Aladdin*, despite its complexities, might be a valuable tool in educational settings to promote intercultural competence, encouraging students to engage with and dissect these layered representations critically. It delves into *Aladdin*'s capacity to serve as a powerful educational resource within the framework of the LK20 curriculum, which champions linguistic and cultural diversity. The discussion underscores the significance of critically examining cultural representations and stereotypes in media, primarily through Aladdin's portrayal of Middle Eastern culture. It contemplates the profound implications of such portrayals for fostering empathy, understanding, and critical thinking among students, igniting a spark of inspiration for educators and scholars.

The depiction of *Aladdin*'s fictionalized Middle Eastern setting opens the door to rich discussions on the media's portrayal of cultures. Despite its problematic portrayal of Arab culture, *Aladdin* is a valuable educational tool for developing students' intercultural competence. Utilizing Gadamer's hermeneutic approach, educators can guide students to engage critically with the film by merging their historical and cultural perspectives with the representations portrayed in *Aladdin*. His concept involves understanding this process as an active dialogue between the viewer's cultural background and the cultural narratives presented in the film (Gadamer et al., 2012). This dialogical process enables students to critically analyze and question the stereotypes and cultural simplifications depicted, enhancing their ability to appreciate and navigate cultural diversity more thoughtfully. Before watching *Aladdin*, teachers should lay a foundation to improve students' understanding and

lay a groundwork for critical engagement with the film. The established base prepares them for a nuanced viewing experience, enabling them to discern the film's cultural representations. The teacher should provide a contextual background about the Middle East. A brief overview of the region's geography, religions, traditions, and historical milestones can help distinguish real-world cultures from their portrayal in *Aladdin*. Acquiring such knowledge allows students to appreciate the complexity of Middle Eastern societies beyond the film's narrative, thereby addressing the film's shortcomings and promoting a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in accurate and respectful cultural representation.

Exploring the cinematic representation of cultures provides a valuable context for delving deeper into Byram's Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) model. The model's five characteristics - attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interactions, and critical cultural awareness - as highlighted by Dervin and Gross (2016), become crucial for fostering effective communication across cultural boundaries (p.56). Through this lens, *Aladdin* serves as a learning resource, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of the necessary skills for navigating the complexities of intercultural interactions. The film promotes curiosity, empathy, and openness towards different cultures, consistent with Byram's emphasis on attitudes and intercultural competence. With its engaging narrative and diverse character arcs, *Aladdin* allows viewers to explore and understand various cultural perspectives and conflicts, supporting acquiring knowledge and skills in interpreting and relating to other cultures. Additionally, the film motivates viewers to explore and engage with the cultures behind the fictional portrayal, encouraging intercultural discovery and interaction (Byram et al., 2001). Building on Fenner's perspective that films, much like literary texts, are rich in cultural content and provide a window into the intricacies of foreign cultures through language and cultural nuances (Fenner, 2001), we see the significance of cinematic narratives in fostering an understanding of diverse cultural viewpoints. This emphasis on narrative as a tool for cultural insight aligns seamlessly with Byram's framework for cultivating intercultural competencies, highlighting the pivotal role of films in cultural exploration and engagement. Such an approach broadens our cultural understanding and sets the stage for delving into Byram's concept of critical cultural awareness, the most crucial part of the framework in this context. Critical cultural awareness, the last "savoir" of Byram's model, stresses the importance of critically engaging with media portrayals of culture, such as those in *Aladdin*, to differentiate between stereotypes and authentic cultural expressions. Engaging in this manner deepens viewers' comprehension and

attitudes towards diverse cultures, emphasizing the necessity of diversity appreciation and the impact of cultural values on social interactions.

To illustrate, by analyzing the “Arabian Nights” song in the opening scene of *Aladdin*, teachers can provide a practical example of multimodal analysis, allowing students to assess the film through a combination of lyrics, visuals, and context. This method helps demonstrate how different elements work together to convey cultural messages and stereotypes and enhance their skills in critical media literacy. By examining how textual, auditory, and visual elements combine to convey messages, students learn to critique cultural representations effectively, preparing them for thoughtful media consumption. Students can develop a critical lens toward media portrayals by discussing common stereotypes associated with Middle Eastern cultures and their impact on perceptions. These discussions aim to debunk myths and encourage a more empathetic understanding of multiculturalism. Giroux (2011) asserts that media analysis in education deepens understanding of societal power dynamics and identity construction, arguing that films not only reflect but can also challenge societal norms by prompting a reassessment of viewer biases. Similarly, Olin-Scheller and Tengberg (2017) stress the importance of metacognition in media literacy, advocating for a reflective approach to evaluating media’s depiction of cultures. This combined emphasis on critical analysis and self-reflection facilitates a more profound engagement with cultural representations. It sets the stage for more profound scholarly activities that can enhance intercultural competence and critical literacy.

To illustrate, a comparative analysis of *Aladdin* and its origins in *One Thousand and One Nights* provides a concrete method for cultivating critical awareness. Exploring these contrasts enhances understanding of Disney’s adaptation process, revealing the potential Americanization of the narrative and its cultural implications. As Cuddy-Keane (2003) points out, cultural globalization has heightened focus on cultural transfers, often involving changes in language and the adaptation of stories to new locales or time periods, with no assurance that adapters will account for cultural evolutions over time (Cuddy-Keane, 2003, p. 544). The aspect of adaptation challenges *Aladdin*’s authenticity and cultural sensitivity, demonstrating how such global translations can perpetuate rather than mitigate cultural stereotypes. By exploring the changes made to the film, students can navigate the complexities of cultural appropriation and adaptation, engaging with the discussions by Sanders (2016) and Hutcheon and O’Flynn (2013). This augments students’ appreciation for cultural narratives and emphasizes the importance of a nuanced approach to analyzing and understanding cultural

adaptations. By critically engaging with *Aladdin* and similar media, students become adept at navigating the intricacies of cultural representation, moving beyond simple stereotypes to develop a richer appreciation of global cultures. Such an educational approach, rooted in critical media literacy, dialogue, and comparative analysis, fosters an academic environment where critical thinking and cultural understanding thrive. The foundation prepares students to thoughtfully engage with the world's diverse cultural narratives and nurtures their capacity to embody the essence of intercultural competence.

Reinforcing this notion, Barrett and his colleagues (2014) emphasize that a meticulous examination of film portrayals, including character diversity and representation, significantly enhances students' critical literacy and intercultural competence. These insights affirm the vital role of media analysis in achieving a deep understanding of cultural dynamics. Assigning tasks that delve into *Aladdin*'s social, historical, and political backdrop, alongside its portrayal of race and ethnicity, can help students grasp how these representations shape cultural perceptions and reflect American societal norms. This approach aligns with the LK20 curriculum's objectives to develop language skills, cultural knowledge, and critical thinking through English text analysis (The Ministry of Education and Research, 2020a). Engaging students in such analysis sharpen their analytical skills. It fosters a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between media portrayals and societal values, promoting a sophisticated appreciation of cultural diversity and media literacy. Building on this foundation, fostering further dialogue and reflection on personal perceptions and the cultural narratives shaped by media like *Aladdin* is crucial, as these discussions are essential for developing intercultural competence. Drawing upon Spivak's (2020) critique, educators can prompt students to challenge their preconceived notions about "non-Western" cultures and the influence of media portrayals. Structured discussions, reflective journals, or digital forums where students articulate and critically evaluate their biases and assumptions can facilitate an environment that values personal reflection and the deconstruction of stereotypes, pushing the depth of understanding beyond mere recognition of stereotypes toward a critical interrogation of their origins and impacts. To further address the issue of national stereotypes, teachers can engage students in a reflective exercise, as suggested by Clandfield (2008). Pupils are asked to individually compile a list of characteristics they associate with a person from Norway or another country they are familiar with. Subsequently, in pairs, students compare their lists and discuss the extent to which these stereotypes personally describe them, whether they know anyone who fits these stereotypes, and the underlying reasons for their existence. This activity

enriches the critical engagement with stereotypical content. It enhances students' ability to discern and critique media representations, fostering a more sophisticated understanding of intercultural competence through the lens of personal experience and societal reflection. Such insights set the stage for broader discussions, making *Aladdin* an ideal case study for examining complex cultural and gender dynamics.

The film presents a fertile ground for discussions centered around the hybridization of cultures and the portrayal of gender, illuminated by theoretical perspectives that underscore the fluidity and constructed nature of cultural and gender identities. Scholars like Barker and Jane (2016) and Pieterse (2019) advocate for understanding cultural identities as products of globalized discourses, suggesting that what is considered local is continually shaped and reshaped within a global context. This perspective is particularly relevant when analyzing the character of Princess Jasmine, whose design intricately weaves together elements from both Eastern and Western traditions, embodying Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity as an ongoing process of mixing that challenges the notion of pure, homogeneous cultural spheres. Engaging students with *Aladdin* facilitates a critical exploration of media portrayals, enhancing their ability to critically assess how gender roles and cultural identities are constructed within popular narratives. This critical engagement aligns with educational objectives that prioritize the development of media literacy and critical thinking skills, preparing students to navigate the complexities of a media-saturated global landscape more thoughtfully. Moreover, *Aladdin*'s illustration of cultural hybridity offers a dynamic platform to explore how Eastern and Western cultural elements are blended. The interplay highlights the persistent processes of globalization and transculturation, further enriching students' understanding of complex cultural dynamics. Such exploration allows students to witness firsthand the dynamic nature of cultural identity and how cultures interact, blend, and evolve. Students can critically reflect on cultural exchange and appropriation complexities by engaging with the film's representation of Agrabah, a fictional space where Eastern traditions meet Western narrative structures. These discussions benefit from applying Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity as an analytical framework for teachers to understand cultural representations, which provides a backdrop for exploring how different cultural elements blend. Additionally, insights from Barker and Jane (2016) on globalization further enrich this examination, helping students appreciate the complex nature of cultural identities. The deepened awareness seamlessly leads to the significant role of critical cultural awareness in educational settings. The utilization of *Aladdin* in the classroom highlights this essential

component of Byram's model (Byram et al., 2001), stimulating students to undertake thorough analyses of cultural narratives and their broader societal implications. This analytical approach seamlessly transitions into discussions that further enhance students' intercultural competence by examining gender roles and cultural hybridity within the film. Such engagements cultivate critical thinking and encourage students to meticulously evaluate media narratives, broadening their understanding of global cultures. Implementing *Aladdin* into the curriculum supports educational goals to augment critical thinking and communicative proficiency (the Ministry of Education and Research, 2020b), prompting students to navigate and critically assess the complex representations of culture and gender in popular media.

An essential activity to promote this engagement is argumentative writing, wherein students delve into the portrayal of cultural hybridity in *Aladdin*. Students are encouraged to articulate whether the film's blend of Eastern and Western elements enriches or undermines a nuanced understanding of cultural identities. This exercise leverages the globalization and hybridity theories of scholars such as Barker and Jane (2016) and Pieterse (2019), challenging students to critically assess the balance between cultural exchange and appropriation and the power dynamics embedded within hybrid cultural representations. Moreover, the "Leader, Skeptic, Scribe" discussion format by Fuss & Gleason (2016) effectively deepens students' understanding of complex themes like hybridity in media and gender diversity (Fuss & Gleason, 2016, p. 23). In this strategy, students assume Leader, Skeptic, or Scribe roles, each contributing uniquely to the dialogue. The Leader steers the conversation, focusing on critical themes, while the Skeptic questions assumptions, enhancing critical engagement, and the Scribe records vital points for later analysis. This role-based interaction builds specific skills pertinent to each role and fosters a comprehensive understanding through active engagement and critical reflection. Applying the method to media discussions ensures that diverse perspectives are considered, making the dialogue structured and inclusive. This structured approach enriches the learning experience and equips students with the critical skills to analyze complex cultural narratives.

Building on this foundation, roleplay in the classroom, particularly when exploring *Aladdin*, provides a dynamic method to investigate further the intricate themes of gender roles and cultural identities. The interactive technique deepens students' engagement and understanding of the material. Engaging in hands-on activity empowers students to embody the film's characters, enhancing their grasp of the narrative and its underlying messages. Harmer (2015)

highlights the value of roleplay in enabling students to express opinions more freely, as the roles provide a buffer from personal accountability. This aspect is crucial when tackling sensitive issues like gender norms, as it fosters an environment where students feel safe to explore and challenge the portrayals within *Aladdin* without personal bias. To maximize its educational potential, roleplay should focus on specific scenarios that prompt critical thinking and engage students with the film's gender representations (Munden & Sandhaug, 2017). For example, recreating conversations between Aladdin and Jasmine about societal expectations offers insights into character motivations and the impact of societal norms on their decisions. Expanding roleplay to include hypothetical characters from *Aladdin*'s universe allows for a broader examination of gender roles and societal norms, enriching classroom discussions on identity and agency. Such activities bolster students' analytical skills and prompt reflection on the relevance of these norms in real-life contexts. Incorporating roleplay as a method to explore *Aladdin*'s gender dynamics equips students with experiential learning opportunities that foster empathy, critical analysis, and an appreciation for diverse perspectives. This approach aligns with the educational aims of enhancing intercultural competence and gender sensitivity and contributes to the broader goal of fostering inclusivity and critical awareness among students.

While *Aladdin* offers opportunities for fostering Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) within educational settings, its utilization demands careful consideration. One of the primary challenges in using *Aladdin* in the classroom is its portrayal of characters and settings, which can sometimes veer into the realm of stereotype, oversimplification, or exoticize non-Western cultures. As Tobin (2020) highlights, and as further demonstrated by this thesis, *Aladdin* projects an Americanized and exoticized representation of Middle Eastern cultures, potentially distorting students' perceptions and promoting a superficial understanding that reinforces stereotypes rather than authentic cultural insight. The portrayal risks oversimplifying the complexities of global cultures, underlining the importance of discerning between the film's artistic expressions and authentic cultural encounters, a critical distinction noted by Munden and Sandhaug (2017). Furthermore, Giroux and Pollock (2010) argue that Disney films serve as powerful cultural narratives with significant potential to influence educational contexts. They share Hall's (1997) concerns regarding portraying non-Western cultures and perpetuating power dynamics and stereotypes in these films. The issue is further complicated by the adaptation process described by Hutcheon and O'Flynn (2013), who note that as narratives transition across cultural contexts, they frequently undergo

Americanization or Westernization. This process can dilute the complexity and richness of the original cultures they intend to represent, underscoring the challenges of using such adaptations in educational settings. As such, the process can lead to portraying “other” cultures through a lens that prioritizes Western narratives and values, potentially marginalizing the cultures it seeks to celebrate. Educators must be cautious not to present the film’s representations as unproblematic depictions of Middle Eastern cultures but as entry points for critical discussion about how and why certain cultural elements are portrayed. Moreover, the risk of cultural appropriation in *Aladdin*, where aspects of one culture are taken out of context and used for the entertainment or benefit of another, presents a delicate issue to handle. As Bredin (2008) articulated, media and popular communication are pivotal in expressing cultural knowledge and aspects. Consequently, how *Aladdin* represents Middle Eastern culture is not just a matter of artistic choice but also a question of ethical consideration. Therefore, discussions in the classroom should extend beyond surface-level engagements with the film’s aesthetics to include deeper analyses of cultural representation, ownership, and the implications of borrowing cultural elements in media.

These critical examinations should also encompass the portrayal of gender in *Aladdin*, assessing how these representations align with or challenge broader societal norms and expectations. While the film presents opportunities to challenge and subvert traditional gender roles, mainly through the character of Princess Jasmine, it is imperative that teachers also address the film’s reinforcement of gender stereotypes and its implications. The nuanced exploration of gender roles within the film should be framed within the broader discourse of feminism and gender studies, drawing upon the work of scholars like Barker and Jane (2016) and Carby (2007) to unpack the complexities of gender representation and the power dynamics at play. In addressing these challenges, educators must adopt a critical pedagogical approach that encourages students to question and analyze the film’s content thoughtfully. This includes fostering an environment where students feel empowered to express their perspectives, engage with diverse viewpoints, and critically reflect on their cultural biases and assumptions, aligning with Gadamer’s “fusion of horizons.” Educators can navigate the film’s potential pitfalls by situating *Aladdin* within the broader context of intercultural competence frameworks, such as Byram’s model while leveraging its strengths as a pedagogical tool. Ultimately, the goal is to enrich students’ understanding of cultural and gender diversity, promoting a more inclusive, empathetic, and critically aware global citizenry.

Despite *Aladdin*'s stereotypical portrayal of Middle Eastern culture, its popularity offers a critical educational opportunity. Since students are regularly exposed to similar problematic representations across various media forms, it is essential to equip them with the tools to critically analyze and interpret these cultural texts to ensure a deeper, more nuanced understanding of cultural diversity. The film's animated nature, presenting a fictional universe, inherently limits its capacity to offer an authentic cultural depiction, suggesting a cautious approach to its use in classroom discussions on cultural diversity. However, given the film's popularity, dismissing it entirely might overlook a valuable teaching moment. Engaging with *Aladdin* to highlight the discrepancies between cinematic representation and natural cultural practices can significantly enhance critical thinking skills, prompting students to question and analyze media portrayals critically. Educators must adopt a critical pedagogical approach to navigate these challenges effectively. The procedure encompasses acknowledging *Aladdin*'s limitations and using the film as a springboard for deeper exploration and critical dialogue about cultural representation, addressing the reinforcement of stereotypes and fictional representations within the narrative. This method aligns with the educational goals outlined in the LK20 curriculum to enhance students' language skills, cultural knowledge, and critical thinking abilities (the Ministry of Educations and Research, 2020b). Such an approach enhances students' language skills, cultural knowledge, and critical thinking abilities, positioning careful engagement with *Aladdin* as a significant educational tool. When utilized with the requisite critical awareness, the method fosters a profound understanding of intercultural competence among students.

In summary, integrating *Aladdin* into educational settings presents a multifaceted opportunity to enhance intercultural communicative competence among students. By navigating the challenges associated with its portrayal of Middle Eastern culture and gender roles, educators can use *Aladdin* to expose students to the complexities of cultural and gender representations and engage them in critical analysis and thoughtful dialogue. This pedagogical approach underscores the importance of critical media literacy and deepens students' understanding of cultural dynamics, contributing significantly to their development as globally aware and empathetic individuals. Exploring cultural hybridity, mainly through Princess Jasmine's character and Agrabah's setting, provides a practical framework for discussing the blending of Eastern and Western cultural elements, further enriching the conversation around globalization and transculturation in contemporary media. By leveraging *Aladdin*'s problematic elements and educational potential, teachers can transform viewing experiences

into powerful learning moments that foster a deeper appreciation for cultural diversity and critical thinking. This engagement ultimately prepares students to navigate an increasingly interconnected world more thoughtfully, making a compelling case for the strategic use of popular media in educational contexts to cultivate a more inclusive and critically aware generation.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has critically examined the film *Aladdin* as a cultural critique subject and a valuable educational resource. Despite its enchantment and popularity, *Aladdin* presents significant challenges due to its perpetuation of rooted stereotypes and Orientalist narratives. These elements shape audience perceptions in problematic ways yet offer unique opportunities for developing intercultural competence when the film is employed thoughtfully within educational contexts.

The analysis began by exploring the specific elements in *Aladdin* that perpetuate stereotypes, highlighting how these portrayals contribute to broader narratives of Orientalism and racial discrimination. By delving into the film's representation of Middle Eastern cultures as exotic, backward, and often villainous, the chapter illustrated the media's potent influence in shaping and reinforcing cultural stereotypes globally. Following the critique, the discussion transitioned to practical approaches for leveraging *Aladdin* in the classroom. It emphasized the film's potential as a springboard for rich discussions and learning experiences that foster a deeper appreciation and critical examination of cultural narratives. By integrating *Aladdin* into educational practices, educators can transform its biases into powerful teaching moments, equipping students with the tools necessary to navigate and appreciate the complexities of a multicultural world. This dual analysis of both the problematic elements and the pedagogical opportunities underscores the significance of films as both cultural artifacts and educational resources. The thoughtful integration of films like *Aladdin* into classroom discussions can highlight their influence on societal norms and perceptions while fostering an environment conducive to critical reflection and intercultural dialogue. Overall, while *Aladdin* poses challenges due to its controversial cultural depictions, it also holds substantial potential for educational use in developing intercultural competence among students. This chapter contends that, with critical engagement, *Aladdin* can be an effective tool in educational settings, transforming potential biases into enriching discussions that prepare students for a diverse and interconnected world.

5 Encanto

In this chapter, I explore the film *Encanto* as a cultural artifact and an educational resource that challenges traditional media portrayals and enriches classroom discussions on intercultural competence. Released when the demand for nuanced cultural representation has never been higher, *Encanto* distinguishes itself by authentically showcasing Colombian culture, diverging from stereotypical narratives that have long dominated mainstream media. This chapter claims that *Encanto*, with its array of characters, themes, and musical elements, celebrates Colombian heritage, thus essential for developing intercultural competence among students.

The chapter will delve into how *Encanto*'s portrayal of a multi-generational family, each member endowed with unique magical abilities, serves as a metaphor for personal and cultural identity, illustrating the complexities of family dynamics, societal expectations, and individual growth. Through a detailed examination of the film's narrative and aesthetic choices, this chapter will highlight how *Encanto* moves beyond entertainment to function as a catalyst for cultural reflection and discussion in educational settings. Moreover, by integrating Michael Byram's model of ICC, the analysis will demonstrate how *Encanto* can be strategically utilized in the classroom to enhance students' understanding of cultural diversity, empathy, and global interconnectedness. The film's engagement with themes such as identity, community, and resilience offers a fertile ground for educators to foster an educational environment that values and promotes a deep understanding of cultural nuances and intercultural dialogue. Ultimately, this chapter aims to illustrate that *Encanto* is not merely a narrative about a magical family but a profound educational tool that encourages students to engage with, question, and appreciate a more complex view of cultural identity and intercultural relations.

Recent research highlights that *Encanto* has been commended for challenging established gender norms and leadership dynamics within Latino families, presenting a narrative led by strong female characters that diverge from historical stereotypes often associated with socio-economic and migratory contexts (Pratidina et al., 2023). Quintero and Echezabal (2022) further discuss this transformative approach in cinematic depictions and note the film's effective subversion of Colombian and gender stereotypes. Moreover, Feinberg (2022) acknowledges the film's authentic representation of Colombian culture, emphasizing its detailed portrayal of local customs, which enriches the cultural context and boosts its educational potential. This foundation of progressive portrayal and cultural authenticity, as

explored earlier with *Encanto*'s depiction of Latino culture, forms the basis for a deeper analysis in this chapter.

5.1 Redefining Cultural Representation in *Encanto*

In the following analysis, I will delve into the film's progressive portrayal of Latino culture, which has been recognized for deviating significantly from traditional media representations. Here, I will examine how *Encanto* reflects and influences cultural perceptions and the portrayal of complex, multi-dimensional characters in a contemporary setting. The shift observed in *Encanto* is particularly significant when contrasted with Disney's previous narratives, such as those found in *Aladdin*, which notably employed Orientalist tropes. This evolution highlights Disney's growing commitment to accurately and respectfully depict the intricacies of diverse cultures, marking a critical shift towards more authentic cultural representations. Their efforts toward authentic cultural representation stem from several strategic influences, including the changing social and political landscapes in the U.S., shifts in the country's demographics, and the economic imperatives of global market demands. These factors highlight a strategic adaptation rather than a sudden shift in values, reflecting Disney's response to increased demands for diversity and cultural accuracy in media to maintain its global appeal and market relevance. The film offers a tribute to Colombian heritage, achieved through extensive collaboration with cultural consultants and artists (Brown, 2021; The Walt Disney Company, 2015a).

Encanto represents a pivotal moment in Disney's exploration of cultural narratives, serving as a profound tribute to Colombian heritage that subtly shifts the studio's traditional approach to cultural representation within the animated genre. This shift is about celebrating Colombian culture's diversity and how it intricately blends these elements with universal cinematic techniques, an embodiment of Homi Bhabha's hybridity theory. Bhabha describes hybridity as an amalgamation of cultural elements that disrupt traditional notions of purity and identity, suggesting that all cultures are inherently hybrid and continuously shaped by local and global influences (Bhabha, 1994). Through a captivating blend of magical realism, rich storytelling, and a deep respect for the cultural nuances of Colombia, *Encanto* crafts an authentic narrative landscape that highlights its commitment to cultural precision and diversity. The film challenges conventional media representations by integrating hybrid cultural narratives that resonate globally while retaining a strong sense of Colombian identity. This is evident in the meticulous attention to Colombian culture, such as the landscapes, traditions, and setting in a charming, color-rich village in a lush jungle. These elements enhance the portrayal's

authenticity and reflect Colombia's geographical diversity and cultural richness. Moreover, *Encanto* enriches its narrative by seamlessly blending Spanish and English dialogue, which roots the story in its Colombian setting and enhances the realism of its cultural portrayal. This bilingual presentation is a practical application of hybridity, where the interaction of different linguistic elements produces a richer, more inclusive communication form that broadens audience engagement. Additionally, casting voice actors with Colombian or Latin American heritage adds layers of genuineness to the storytelling, further emphasizing the film's hybrid approach by combining authentic cultural expressions with narrative elements that appeal universally. Using Bhabha's hybridity framework, *Encanto* transcends traditional cultural boundaries, illustrating a sophisticated interplay between the local and the global (Bhabha, 1994). This approach underscores how Disney has evolved its method of cultural representation, moving from depicting "exotic" locales to embedding genuine cultural narratives into its films, thus promoting a richer, more inclusive portrayal of global cultures. A standout moment is a poignant scene where Abuela recounts the family's origin story, beautifully narrated through Pedro's heartfelt Spanish song, underscoring the film's cultural depth and authenticity. According to Stuart Hall's (1997) representation theory, media and cultural texts are not merely reflections of reality but active tools that shape and construct cultural meanings and identities. In *Encanto*, his theory elucidates how the film does more than depict Colombian culture; it actively shapes perceptions and understandings of that culture among a global audience. *Encanto* challenges prevailing stereotypes by authentically integrating Colombian traditions, landscapes, and languages and offers a new narrative that contributes to constructing a positive global image of Colombian communities.

The commitment to authentic representation is vividly embodied in the magical "Casita." Serving as more than just a setting, the Casita symbolizes the family's history, heritage, and the strength of their bonds, weaving these elements seamlessly into the fabric of the story. This portrayal aligns with the broader cultural narrative of Latin American societies, where family and community play pivotal roles in individual identity formation and social cohesion. "Casita," as a central element, transcends its role as mere background, becoming a character in its own right that actively interacts with the family's dynamics and growth, reflecting the interconnectedness of personal and communal spaces in Colombian culture. Applying the "Big C culture" and "Little c culture" frameworks enriches the understanding of how *Encanto* navigates the portrayal of cultural elements. "Big C Culture," which encompasses significant, visible cultural artifacts like art, music, and festivals (Munden & Sandhaug, 2017), is

represented through the vibrant depictions of Colombian architecture and community celebrations throughout the film. These elements add color and context and root the narrative in recognizable and authentic cultural practices. On the other hand, “Little c culture,” which deals with the underlying values, everyday behaviors, and social norms (Munden & Sandhaug, 2017), is subtly woven into the storyline through the film’s emphasis on family pride and the interactions within the Madrigal family. The recurring phrase “make your family proud” and the visual motif of family pictures adorning the Madrigal home reinforce the centrality of familial relationships, highlighting how individual identities and community values are shaped through daily interactions and shared experiences. *Encanto* provides a rich, layered portrayal of Colombian culture that moves beyond stereotypical or superficial depictions, which enhances the film’s narrative depth and underscores the importance of understanding culture as a dynamic and multifaceted concept. The nuanced depiction of Colombian traditions and values in *Encanto* invites viewers to appreciate the complexity of cultural identity, promoting a broader understanding of what makes each culture unique and valuable.

Further, *Encanto* thoughtfully acknowledges the diversity within Colombian culture itself, mainly through the representation of Afro-Latino characters like Dolores and Félix, integral to the family and community. Including this aspect significantly acknowledges Latin America’s racial and cultural diversity, moving beyond monolithic portrayals of Latino communities that have historically been marginalized or misrepresented by Western media. Contrary to the prevalent media stereotypes identified by Alghasi (2009) and Eide (2011), where minority boys are often associated with crime and minority girls are depicted as oppressed, *Encanto* presents its Afro-Latino characters, such as Dolores and Félix, in empowering roles that emphasize their agency and integral roles within both their family and community. By thoughtfully representing Afro-Latino characters, *Disney* challenges the single-story narratives that have often dominated depictions of Latin American communities, thereby countering the Orientalist practice of homogenizing diverse cultures into a single, easily digestible image for Western audiences (Said, 2003). Further, the acknowledgment and representation of Afro-Latino characters can be seen as an attempt to give voice to those within Latin American communities who have historically been marginalized or rendered voiceless. Spivak’s (2020) theory underscores the importance of recognizing the diversity within these communities and the necessity of including these diverse voices in narratives to ensure a more nuanced and equitable representation. In contrast to the idea of media-created

reality and the simplistic “Disneyfication” of culture, *Encanto* presents a layered and genuine depiction of Colombian culture. Such an approach surpasses conventional stereotypes, providing viewers with a complex and enriching cultural understanding (Schickel, 1997; Ytreberg, 2008). The film enriches Disney’s narrative repertoire and contributes to a more equitable and accurate representation of non-Western cultures in contemporary media.

As such, *Encanto* represents a milestone in animated storytelling for its celebration of Colombian culture and its successful navigation of complex themes related to identity, family, and community. By integrating cultural authenticity with magical realism, the film transcends traditional animation boundaries, offering a story that is universally relatable and deeply rooted in the specificities of Colombian heritage. Including Afro-Latino characters and the careful attention to linguistic and geographical details further underscores Disney’s commitment to nuanced representation, moving away from monolithic narratives and towards a more inclusive and respectful portrayal of diversity. This film’s impact extends beyond its entertainment value. It contributes to a larger discourse on how cultures are represented in media and challenges audiences worldwide to rethink their perceptions of identity and community. *Encanto*’s success in weaving together the magical with the real, the local with the global, marks a significant step forward in the animation genre, setting a new standard for cultural representation and storytelling excellence. Through its heartfelt narrative, it honors the richness of Colombian culture. It serves as a beacon for future animated films, highlighting the importance of authenticity, diversity, and empathy in crafting stories that resonate with global audiences. By applying Gadamer’s hermeneutics, *Encanto* does more than narrate; it invites audiences into a meaningful exchange where their experiences and cultural understandings are invited to meet and merge with those presented in the film. This process enriches viewers’ appreciation of the film and encourages a reflective engagement with their cultural assumptions and biases. Through its portrayal of Colombian culture and universal themes, *Encanto* exemplifies how animated films can foster a deeper understanding of cultural diversity and the complexities of intercultural interactions, enhancing viewers’ capacity for empathy and global awareness.

5.2 Encanto: A Magical Leap Beyond the Usual Fairy Tale

Encanto emerges as a landmark film, seamlessly integrating the enchanting elements of magic with the vibrant and textured backdrop of the culture in Colombia. This section explores how the film utilizes magical realism as a compelling narrative device and a profound medium to delve into themes of identity, family dynamics, and cultural representation. The film embeds

magic within the Colombian landscape, reflecting its abundant environments and rich traditions. It uses this as a lens to challenge and expand upon traditional cinematic portrayals of Latin America. Through its portrayal of the Madrigal family, each member endowed with unique magical gifts, *Encanto* celebrates the nuances of Colombian culture and addresses broader societal issues, making a significant statement on the power of cultural authenticity and the transformative potential of storytelling.

Magic is a multifaceted narrative device in the film, intricately woven into its expose of Colombian culture, its exploration of family dynamics, and its thematic depth. Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's philosophical insights, it becomes evident that the cultural signs and narratives depicted in *Encanto* play a critical role in shaping these perceptions. Ricoeur (2016) asserts that our understanding of self is deeply influenced by the narratives surrounding us, including cinematic stories. For instance, Isabela's struggle with her "perfect" image and Luisa's burden of always having to be strong are portrayals that challenge and reshape audience perceptions of strength and perfection in a cultural context. By embedding these personal conflicts within a culturally rich narrative, *Encanto* leverages the power of storytelling to reflect and influence the audience's perceptions of self and others, emphasizing the mutable nature of identity as suggested by Ricoeur. Further, Hutcheon and O'Flynn's (2013) concept of adaptation as a form of "repetition without replication" that inevitably changes a story's "political valence and meaning" (p. xviii), *Encanto* can be viewed as an adaptation that brings Colombian culture into the global spotlight while carefully navigating the complexities of cultural representation. The magical gifts of the Madrigal family, from super strength to the ability to heal with food, are imaginative extensions of fundamental cultural values such as resilience, care, and the importance of community. Blending fantastical elements with cultural markers pays homage to the spirit of Colombian communities, known for their tight-knit bonds, celebration of life, and resilience in the face of adversity. This process aligns with transculturation, which emphasizes adapting stories to local cultures as they travel (Hutcheon & O'Flynn, 2013, p. 177). Through the lens of Gadamer's hermeneutics, this portrayal invites a fusion of horizons where the audience's cultural preconceptions meet and meld with the vivid cultural expressions of Colombia portrayed in the film. The interaction enhances the audience's appreciation and encourages an active engagement with their cultural assumptions and biases (Gadamer et al., 2012). The film's magic, thus, is not merely a plot device but a profound means to celebrate and elevate Colombian cultural heritage, presenting it with both wonder and reverence and encouraging a deeper engagement with the complexities of cultural

identity and representation. By embedding Colombian traditions and landscapes within its magical narrative, *Encanto* transculturates the local culture for a global audience, offering a nuanced depiction that moves beyond stereotypical portrayals and engages with the culture's depth. As Kraidy (2005) points out, such hybrid media texts reflect a variety of historical, economic, and cultural dynamics, illustrating the intricate process of cultural exchange at both local and global levels. Through this lens, magic becomes a means to celebrate and amplify the cultural legacy of Colombia, presenting it with a sense of wonder and reverence.

While magic could risk reinforcing exoticized or stereotypical views of Latin American cultures, often portrayed in media as mystical or otherworldly, it navigates this terrain with a nuanced understanding. The film's blending of magical realism with Colombian traditions exemplifies creating a hybrid narrative that celebrates the fusion of different cultural elements to form a unique and compelling story (Barker & Jane, 2016; Bhabha, 1994). The hybridity destabilizes traditional boundaries between cultures, challenging the idea of pure or authentic cultural expressions and presenting culture as a dynamic and evolving construct. Rather than using magic to estrange or exoticize, the film employs it to illuminate the depth and complexity of the Madrigal family's relationships and individual struggles. By avoiding the exoticization and marginalization of Colombian culture, the film challenges Orientalist perspectives that depict non-Western cultures as monolithic or otherworldly. Furthermore, by centering on a family that reflects a range of experiences and identities within the Colombian context, *Encanto* gives voice to perspectives that might otherwise be relegated to the margins, embodying Spivak's call for recognizing the complexity and agency of subaltern identities (Said, 2003; Spivak, 2020). This approach challenges stereotypical representations by grounding the story in relatable emotions and conflicts despite the fantastical setting. The magic does not detach the characters from their cultural reality. Instead, it is used to underscore the universal themes of family, identity, and belonging, making the narrative accessible and resonant for a broad audience.

Perhaps most notably, *Encanto* employs magic as a metaphor for individuality and the pressures of familial expectations. Each character's gift symbolizes their role within the family and the broader community, reflecting real-world dynamics of responsibility, self-worth, and the pursuit of personal identity against the backdrop of collective heritage. For instance, Luisa's super strength represents the burden of always being strong for others, a role many people, irrespective of culture, find themselves in. Her song, "Surface Pressure," poignantly captures this expectation's emotional and physical toll, challenging the stereotype

of the stoic, unflappable provider and revealing the vulnerability beneath. Meanwhile, Mirabel's lack of a magical gift becomes a poignant exploration of feeling inadequate or overlooked within one's family, highlighting the film's themes of self-acceptance and the value of non-tangible qualities. Moreover, magical realism, a genre intrinsically linked to Latin American literature, bridges the fantastical and the real, exploring deeper truths about human nature, societal expectations, and the complexities of familial love. *Encanto*'s use of magical realism acts as a metaphor for the fluid and dynamic nature of cultural identity. This method

challenges binary views of culture and identity, promoting a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of Colombian traditions (Bhabha, 1994). This narrative choice aligns with the film's cultural context and elevates the story, using magic as a lens to explore and celebrate the intricacies of human emotions and relationships. By employing magic in such a way, *Encanto* invites the audience to reflect on the broader implications of these portrayals, echoing Gadamer's idea that understanding is deepened through the interplay of the viewer's perspectives and the film's narrative. This hermeneutic engagement enriches the viewer's appreciation of the film, allowing for a more nuanced interpretation of its themes and cultural representations (Gadamer et al., 2012). The film entertains and educates through this approach, providing a richer, more layered understanding of its cultural context and themes. Instead of succumbing to cultural imperialism, *Encanto* employs magic to authentically highlight Colombian traditions and values, challenging the dominant narratives of cultural superiority and exotic otherness (Pieterse, 2019; Said, 2003). *Encanto*'s nuanced engagement with Colombian culture through its magical narrative suggests a deep respect for its source material, indicative of adaptation rather than appropriation, enhancing its cultural grounding (Sanders, 2016, pp. 26-28). Through its thoughtful use of magic, the film transcends conventional portrayals of Latin American cultures, offering a nuanced, respectful, and culturally rooted story that speaks to universal themes. In doing so, *Encanto* exemplifies how animated films can portray non-Western cultures in a manner that is both authentic and universally engaging, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of cultural diversity in contemporary cinema.

To sum up, *Encanto* illustrates how magical realism enriches storytelling and deepens cultural appreciation. The film brilliantly integrates magic with Colombian cultural themes, exploring identity, family, and heritage in ways that resonate globally. It uses magical elements for enchantment as tools to bridge the real and the fantastical, offering a nuanced view of the

Madrigal family's life that transcends typical cultural narratives. By doing so, *Encanto* challenges stereotypes and invites a more inclusive understanding of Latin American traditions. The film's approach to magic also actively counters the exoticization of Colombian culture, promoting a narrative that respects and authenticates its complexities. Ultimately, *Encanto* redefines animated cinema's potential, demonstrating how stories can effectively connect cultural narratives to foster broader understanding and appreciation. Its use of magical realism captivates and educates, setting a new benchmark for how animation can celebrate cultural diversity and inspire audiences worldwide.

5.3 Casting Spells Over Stereotypes: *Encanto*'s Enchanting Take on Gender Dynamics

Building on the use of magical realism in *Encanto*, which serves as a bridge connecting the magical with the everyday lives of the Madrigal family, the film also embarks on a compelling journey into gender dynamics. *Encanto* unfolds as an intriguing exploration of gender roles, set against the colorful backdrop of a Colombian family's life, offering a rich and nuanced narrative that challenges and redefines traditional gender constructs. This comprehensive analysis delves into how the film, through its diverse cast of characters and their unique abilities, provides a multifaceted critique of conventional gender norms and stereotypes. It examines *Encanto*'s portrayal of female empowerment, the complexities of masculinity, and the broader implications of these representations within the context of familial and community dynamics. Additionally, this piece addresses the film's progressive portrayal of gender roles while critically engaging with areas where traditional narratives persist, thereby providing a balanced view of its contributions to and limitations within the discourse on gender representation in contemporary media.

Encanto presents a nuanced portrayal of gender roles that both challenges and reimagines traditional narratives, particularly in the context of a Colombian family. The film pushes against the boundaries of traditional gender roles and stereotypes by presenting a range of characters with diverse identities and abilities, thus contributing to a more complex understanding of gender beyond binary classifications. This strategy aligns with feminist critiques of media representations. It offers a counter-narrative to the often limited portrayal of women and men in mainstream media (Barker & Jane, 2016), promoting a more inclusive and nuanced view of gender identity and roles. For instance, the film showcases female characters in solid and influential roles, exemplifying a departure from stereotypical gender norms. As the Madrigal family's matriarch, Abuela Alma embodies a leadership role

traditionally reserved for male characters in media narratives, challenging entrenched gender expectations. Her position defies conventional gender roles, highlighting the strength and resilience of female leadership through a feminist lens. The portrayal aligns with the discussions by Barker and Jane (2016), who emphasize the importance of examining how gender operates as a fundamental axis of social organization, influencing power relations and societal structures. By presenting a strong, capable woman in a leadership role, *Encanto* redefines the portrayal of women in animation and contributes to the broader conversation about gender equality and the significance of diverse and authentic representations in media. However, it is also essential to recognize that the film may inadvertently perpetuate some established stereotypes associated with South and Central American cultures. Specifically, the depiction of the “Latina matriarch” can be seen as a continuation of a recognizable type, where Latina women are portrayed as formidable, familial leaders. While this representation highlights strength and resilience, it could also reinforce a somewhat stereotypical view that confines Latina characters to specific familial roles. Acknowledging these subtleties provides a deeper understanding of how *Encanto* navigates the complexities of cultural and gender representation, engaging with both progressive portrayals and traditional stereotypes.

Building on this theme of nuanced representation, *Encanto*’s protagonist, Mirabel, further disrupts gender stereotypes through her unique narrative arc. Her character departs from traditional Disney princess narratives, distinct from the archetypal princess story; it is not about finding love or beauty but about self-discovery, bravery, and preserving her family’s legacy. Her quest underscores a narrative shift toward inner qualities and familial bonds, redefining heroism as more inclusive and grounded, presenting a more holistic view of a woman’s role and aspirations. *Encanto* diverges from traditional Disneyfication, which simplifies complex narratives into marketable forms, often at the expense of cultural depth (Schickel, 1997). Unlike typical Disney characters who follow predictable story arcs, *Encanto* introduces characters like Mirabel, who embarks on a journey of self-discovery and family unity rather than romance or royalty. The shift offers a more nuanced depiction of Colombian culture, challenges traditional gender norms, and opens discussions on family dynamics within a rich cultural context. This nuanced depiction allows for a richer engagement with the audience’s perceptions, echoing Gadamer’s hermeneutic principle that understanding arises from the fusion of the viewer’s historical context with that of the narrative (Gadamer et al., 2012). By prioritizing authenticity and complex character development, *Encanto* redefines Disneyfication, presenting multifaceted characters that engage audiences with relatable and

substantial societal themes (Wasko, 2020). Employing this technique highlights a significant evolution in how Disney portrays cultural narratives, moving towards more genuine and inclusive storytelling. Mirabel's narrative arc does not revolve around personal adornment or achieving societal standards of beauty; instead, her story is imbued with themes of courage, family unity, and the pursuit of collective well-being. This thematic focus shifts the discourse around femininity and strength, illustrating that a woman's value is not contingent upon her appearance or adherence to traditional gender roles but on her actions, choices, and the depth of her relationships.

Louisa's character explores the burdens associated with traditional gender expectations. Her extraordinary strength serves as a metaphor for the archetypal role of women as the unwavering backbone of the family, simultaneously showcasing the significant emotional cost such roles entail. This representation is deeply rooted in feminist theory, which critiques the societal expectation that women should silently shoulder emotional and physical labor (Barker & Jane, 2016). Louisa's narrative highlights the critical need for a fairer allocation of these responsibilities, challenging the notion that strength necessitates the silent endurance of hardship, a concept often disproportionately expected of women. Her song poignantly captures the anxiety and looming sense of overwhelm by these pressures, symbolizing the broader struggle against ingrained gender norms. Louisa's eventual vulnerability, acknowledging her limits, acts as a powerful counter to the unsustainable nature of these expectations, advocating for recognition of the need for support and balance in family roles. Through Louisa's story, *Encanto* addresses the nuanced aspect of strength as both a gift and a burden, inviting a reevaluation of the stereotypes that dictate the silent endurance of challenges as an inherent aspect of femininity.

Isabela Madrigal's evolution in *Encanto* challenges the conventional ideals of femininity and perfection, offering a refreshing perspective against the backdrop of traditional gender roles. Initially depicted as the embodiment of perfection, Isabela's flawless exterior and magical ability to spawn beautiful flowers symbolize women's societal pressures to conform to an idealized version of grace and beauty. This portrayal not only underscores the unrealistic expectations imposed on women but hints at Isabela's internal conflict, trapped within the confines of a prescribed identity. Her transformative journey begins in earnest during a revealing conflict with Mirabel, leading her to a moment of defiance where she conjures a cactus, a poignant break from her perfect blooms. Isabela's transformation is more than a personal rebellion against imposed perfection; it exemplifies the broader themes of Cultural

Hybridity, which challenge traditional views of identity as static and singular. Homi Bhabha (1994) and Jan Nederveen Pieterse (1995) discuss how cultural identities evolve through interaction, suggesting that identities can be dynamic and complex rather than fixed. In *Encanto*, Isabela starts as the “perfect” granddaughter, embodying the ideal feminine archetype. Her journey towards embracing her authentic, imperfect self aligns with Bhabha’s view of identity as a fluid construct shaped by cultural interplay (Bhabha, 1994). Similarly, Pieterse’s optimistic view on the innovation from cultural mixing reflects in Isabela’s newfound freedom in expressing her varied talents, challenging the singular notion of femininity (Pieterse, 1995). This narrative enhances *Encanto*’s storytelling and engages with significant discussions on the pressures of traditional roles and the empowerment of embracing a multifaceted identity. It showcases how contemporary media can encourage a nuanced understanding of identity in a globalized world. Isabela’s narrative critiques the pervasive culture of perfectionism, resonating with feminist calls for a broader recognition of women’s diversity and complexity (Barker & Jane, 2016). Through Isabela’s story, *Encanto* encourages dismantling imposed beauty standards and perfection, advocating for an inclusive, diverse, and authentically accurate representation of femininity.

The visual representation of characters like Mirabel, Louisa, and Isabela is a powerful testament to the film’s commitment to diversifying the portrayal of female beauty and strength. By eschewing traditional, narrow appearance standards, these characters embody a broader, more inclusive spectrum of beauty that challenges and expands the audience’s perceptions. This focus on varied physical appearances enriches the film’s narrative depth and aligns with contemporary discussions about body positivity and the importance of representation in media. Mirabel’s “normal” body shape symbolizes a significant shift from the archetypical Disney princess physique, promoting body positivity and inclusivity. The deliberate portrayal extends beyond mere character design, aligning with Ytreberg’s (2008) and Skar’s (2004) discussions regarding media’s power to sculpt societal perceptions of beauty. By presenting an alternative vision of beauty, *Encanto* nudges its audience towards embracing a broader spectrum of beauty standards, making Mirabel an accessible heroine whose resilience and relatability resonate across diverse audiences. Correspondingly, Louisa’s muscular build further subverts traditional media representations of femininity, introducing a narrative where strength and beauty are not mutually exclusive. Her character challenges entrenched beauty standards, advocating for a broader understanding of femininity, including strength as a form of beauty. Louisa’s depiction reflects the broader Cultural Studies

perspective on women's representation, emphasizing diversity and complexity in female strength (Barker & Jane, 2016). Through Louisa, *Encanto* contributes to redefining traditional narratives around beauty and strength, highlighting the value of diverse female experiences and perspectives. Further, Isabela's narrative arc from perceived perfection to a genuine embrace of imperfection illustrates the crushing weight of societal expectations on women. It is initially depicted as the perfect "golden child," but her journey toward authenticity underscores a critical examination of unattainable beauty standards. The moment she creates a cactus, symbolizing her break from the constraints of traditional femininity, signifies a broader cultural move towards recognizing and valuing diverse expressions of self. Isabela's evolution challenges rigid gender roles and celebrates beauty in imperfection, echoing contemporary discussions on gender and representation that critique conventional notions of masculinity and femininity (Barker & Jane, 2016). These character arcs enrich *Encanto*'s narrative landscape, underscoring the film's engagement with themes of diversity, authenticity, and the intricacies of individual identity. By exploring the cultural constructions of beauty and strength, the film advocates for a more inclusive representation that moves beyond stereotypes, marking a pivotal moment in animation. Through its portrayal of Mirabel, Louisa, and Isabela, the film sets a new benchmark in storytelling. It engages in a more significant cultural dialogue about gender, representation, and the transformative power of media to shape and challenge societal norms and values.

Encanto breathes new life into traditional narratives by showcasing a multifaceted portrayal of femininity and offering a nuanced reflection on masculinity, mainly through the character of Antonio Madrigal. His remarkable gift of communicating with animals departs from the conventional masculine traits of stoicism and dominance, spotlighting the qualities of sensitivity, compassion, and intrinsic harmony with nature. The representation challenges the traditional dichotomy of gender traits, blending what are typically seen as masculine and feminine qualities into a cohesive identity that celebrates emotional intelligence and environmental stewardship. Antonio's role within his family and the broader community underscores the pivotal role of empathy and collaboration, steering clear of the age-old trope that men must primarily act as protectors or providers through physical prowess. This progressive portrayal is a critique of, and a departure from, Disney's historical penchant for stereotypically masculine characters (Skar, 2004; Ytreberg, 2008), suggesting a move towards a more inclusive understanding of gender roles that value vulnerability and strength in care. Through Antonio, *Encanto* invites audiences to rethink entrenched notions of masculinity,

aligning with Gadamer's hermeneutic approach, advocating for a broader, more inclusive definition that honors the full spectrum of human emotion and connection. This careful narrative crafting aligns with the theories of hybridity by Pieterse (1995) and Bhabha (1994), emphasizing the constructive blending of cultural and gender identities against the backdrop of conventional expectations. The film thereby challenges and extends the boundaries of traditional gender norms, enriching its narrative with characters who embody traits of empathy and compassion, universally valuable yet often sidelined in male characters. By integrating such a character as Antonio, *Encanto* diversifies its story with complex portrayals and engages in a broader cultural conversation about redefining masculinity. The film's dedication to portraying characters with the capacity for nurturing and emotional connection is a powerful statement against the restrictive norms of gender roles, advocating for a society that values and recognizes the importance of inclusivity and equality in gender representation.

While *Encanto* significantly enriches the narrative landscape around gender representation, it simultaneously navigates and, at times, adheres to traditional narratives, revealing a nuanced engagement with gender roles. For instance, Louisa's portrayal, burdened with the weight of her family's expectations, subtly revisits the conventional depiction of women as inherent caregivers despite the film's critical stance towards such norms. Although challenging societal beauty standards, Isabela's journey towards self-acceptance subtly remains anchored in the emphasis on her physical beauty, inadvertently perpetuating long-standing ideals of female attractiveness. Mirabel's character, embodying non-conformity without possessing a magical gift, suggests an underlying message that significant value and recognition come through extraordinary achievements, which could potentially dilute the film's inclusivity message. Antonio's deep connection with nature, presenting a softer take on masculinity, may inadvertently suggest that such nurturing traits are innate rather than learned, subtly supporting gender essentialism. Furthermore, the absence of overt LGBTQ+ representation narrows the film's critique of traditional gender norms, preceding the opportunity to explore a broader spectrum of gender identities and expressions. These elements highlight *Encanto*'s complex engagement with gender representation, balancing between groundbreaking depictions and the gravitational pull of traditional narratives. The film contributes to a broader cultural dialogue on redefining gender roles yet underscores the ongoing challenge of transcending conventional narratives to embrace a more inclusive and nuanced portrayal of gender identity in media. This subtle approach invites viewers to reconsider and expand their

understanding of gender roles, illustrating the potential for animated films to reflect and influence evolving perceptions of gender in contemporary society.

In conclusion, *Encanto* stands as a pivotal exploration of gender dynamics, intricately weaving a narrative that both celebrates and critiques traditional gender norms. The film skillfully explores the intricacies of gender identity and representation through its array of characters and their distinct abilities, providing profound insights that deeply connect with themes of family and community. It challenges and redefines conventional narratives, presenting a more inclusive vision of gender roles that transcends binary classifications and stereotypes. By spotlighting its characters' strength, vulnerability, and diversity, *Encanto* contributes meaningfully to the discourse on gender, advocating for a broader understanding and appreciation of individuality and resilience. However, the film's journey through these themes reveals the nuanced terrain it navigates, balancing its innovative portrayals with moments that adhere to traditional narratives. This dual approach highlights the ongoing dialogue and tensions within gender representation in media, reflecting progress and established norms' persistent influence. *Encanto* thus emerges as a story about a magical family and a reflective mirror on society's evolving perspectives on gender, inviting audiences to engage with, question, and broaden their views on what it means to embody femininity and masculinity today. In doing so, *Encanto* does not offer simple answers but instead opens up spaces for conversation and reflection, making it a significant cultural artifact in the landscape of contemporary cinema. Its legacy may be in its ability to inspire further exploration and understanding of gender roles, encouraging a move towards more nuanced and equitable portrayals in media. As such, *Encanto* serves as a beacon for future narratives that champion diversity and complexity, reminding us that the real magic lies in our shared humanity and the boundless possibilities of who we can be.

5.4 Using Encanto in the classroom

Building on the previous analysis of *Encanto*, which explored the blending of magic with realism, gender roles, and the authenticity of Colombian culture, the findings from these discussions provide a nuanced foundation for the current exploration of educational strategies. These elements of *Encanto* not only deepen our understanding of cultural representation but serve as vital resources in developing intercultural competence among students. As the focus now shifts to educational practices, these cinematic insights offer valuable perspectives on how educators can employ innovative tools to foster empathy and cultural awareness in diverse learning environments. In the quest to cultivate intercultural competence among

students, educators continually seek innovative tools and methods that can enhance understanding and empathy toward diverse cultures. With its rich portrayal of Colombian culture and complex family dynamics, the film *Encanto* offers a unique opportunity for such educational endeavors. This section will explore the integration of *Encanto* into classroom settings, utilizing it as a practical resource to develop intercultural competence as framed by Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC), which is pivotal for nurturing students' ability to engage respectfully across diverse cultural backgrounds. By examining *Encanto*'s narrative and musical elements, this analysis will highlight how the film can serve as a rich, contextualized source of cultural information, allowing students to explore, analyze, and engage with cultural nuances and perspectives distinct from their own. Through targeted classroom activities and reflective discussions, *Encanto* entertains and educates, making it a valuable tool in the intercultural toolkit for educators striving to prepare students for a globally interconnected world.

Using the film *Encanto* in educational settings offers a dynamic method for developing intercultural competence among students, aligning with Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence (ICC). His model underscores the necessity of nurturing attitudes, knowledge, skills for interpreting and relating, discovery and interaction skills, and critical cultural awareness (Byram, 1997, p. 34). As a rich, contextualized source of cultural information, *Encanto* exposes students to Colombian culture through its narrative and musical elements, showcasing both "Big C" culture, significant, recognizable elements like art and food, and "Little c" culture, which includes more profound, daily practices and values not immediately apparent to outsiders (Munden & Sandhaug, 2017, p. 357). This broad exposure helps students appreciate the richness and diversity within individual cultures, fostering a more profound respect and empathy towards people from different backgrounds. Using the film in educational settings exposes students to the nuanced aspects of Colombian culture and cultivates an open attitude towards diversity. By engaging with the film's portrayal of both "Big C" and "Little c" culture, students develop a better appreciation and respect for cultural differences, which is crucial in nurturing the kind of receptive attitudes highlighted in Byram's model (Byram et al., 2001). Additionally, *Encanto* is an educational tool that enriches students' knowledge about Colombian traditions, values, and everyday practices. This exposure is essential for building a comprehensive understanding of a culture, fulfilling Byram's (2001) emphasis on the importance of deep cultural knowledge as a component of intercultural competence. The film's focus on "Little c" culture provides students with a more

intimate and comprehensive understanding of how culture influences individuals' lives and societal roles. This insight is crucial for building "critical cultural awareness." Students learn to critically analyze how cultural backgrounds shape people's perspectives and behaviors, enhancing their ability to interact respectfully and effectively in diverse environments.

As discussed in the analysis, the film provides a platform for a comprehensive exploration of themes such as resilience, community roles, and the impact of heritage on identity, which is crucial for building a broad understanding of intercultural competence. These themes resonate with students from various backgrounds, making the learning experience relatable and impactful, aligning with the educational objectives of the Council of Europe, emphasizing respect for diverse cultural affiliations (Council of Europe, 2001), and offering a foundation for discussions on globalization and cultural portrayal in media. Engaging with *Encanto* helps students critically assess how media shapes cultural perceptions and the authenticity of cultural representations. The engagement enriches their understanding of diverse values, attitudes, and behaviors, which aligns with the theoretical framework provided by Spencer-Oatey (2008). A suggested classroom activity to enhance this learning experience is the Cultural Comparison Discussion. Here, students watch the film and note themes like resilience and the influence of heritage on identity. They then discuss these themes, comparing how they are portrayed in the movie with their cultural experiences. Such exercise promotes cultural awareness by highlighting varying cultural responses to similar themes and fosters empathy and critical thinking. Such discussions, according to Barrett et al., are crucial for improving communication skills necessary for effective cross-cultural interactions (M. D. Barrett et al., 2014, p. 40), supporting Byram's emphasis on "skills in interpreting and relating" diverse cultural perspectives (Byram, 1997). This form of discussion enhances cultural awareness and improves students' ability to communicate across cultural boundaries—a critical component of ICC. Byram (1997) and Barrett et al. (2014) highlight the importance of dialogue in fostering understanding and respect among individuals from diverse backgrounds, and this activity aligns well with these educational goals (M. Barrett et al., 2014, p. 30; Byram, 1997, p. 4). Moreover, such discussions can mitigate the risk of cultural stereotyping by promoting a deeper understanding of cultural complexities, as students are encouraged to confront and dissect their preconceptions in a guided setting. The educational approach aligns with the concept of metacognition, which involves reflecting on one's thought processes and is a critical skill in intercultural education, as outlined by Olin-Scheller and Tengberg (Olin-Scheller & Tengberg, 2017, p. 419).

Furthermore, *Encanto* serves as an ideal case study to differentiate between authentic cultural representation and elements designed for entertainment. Themes of intergenerational trauma and identity within a family context invite students to explore how individuals shape their identities influenced by cultural and historical forces. This exploration deepens students' comprehension of how media constructs cultural narratives, a core aspect of critical cultural awareness. Students gain a nuanced understanding of how these representations impact cultural perceptions by critically analyzing media portrayals with *Encanto* as a focus. This method enhances their grasp of Colombian culture, as depicted in the film. It bolsters their ability to engage thoughtfully with global cultural narratives, fostering intellectual curiosity and promoting critical cultural awareness (Byram et al., 2001, p. 46). As such, integrating *Encanto* into the classroom as a teaching tool leverages its engaging story and vivid portrayal to foster a more profound, reflective intercultural competence. Accordingly, the approach enriches students' understanding of cultural diversity and prepares them for more nuanced interactions in a globalized society.

The narrative of *Encanto* offers a rich portrayal of “familismo,” a central value within many Latino cultures emphasizing strong family connections and responsibilities (Rodriguez et al., 2021). This cultural element is crucial in the film as it highlights the dynamics and roles within the Madrigal family, providing a vivid tableau for exploring how individual responsibilities and family expectations can shape personal identities and social behavior. Using *Encanto* as a teaching tool enables students to delve into how cultures articulate and manage familial obligations, which may differ significantly from their personal experiences. The exploration is crucial for developing empathy, a core factor of Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence. It encourages students to appreciate overt cultural symbols and the deeper, often unspoken elements of cultural identity that influence behavior and social roles (Byram & Golubeva, 2020). In the classroom, teachers can facilitate discussions comparing and contrasting the depicted family roles and expectations in *Encanto* with those of the students' cultures. This illuminates the concept of “familismo” and broadens students' perspectives, allowing them to see beyond their cultural assumptions. Such discussions can effectively demonstrate how cultural values shape individual actions and societal expectations, aligning with Byram's “skills of interpreting and relating” (Byram et al., 2001). These skills are essential for students to develop a nuanced understanding of recognizing and effectively interacting with cultural differences respectfully and informally. By integrating *Encanto* into intercultural education, educators leverage a familiar and

engaging medium to deepen students' understanding of complex cultural concepts, making the learning process enjoyable and impactful. The approach adheres to academic frameworks for intercultural competence and enhances students' ability to apply these insights in real-world interactions, fostering a more empathetic and culturally aware generation.

To further this learning, analyzing the song "We Don't Talk About Bruno" from *Encanto* in a classroom setting provides a dynamic and interactive way to develop intercultural competence among students. The activity aligns with Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence, emphasizing the importance of engaging students in exercises that enhance their understanding of different cultural perspectives (Byram, 2021, p. 146). In this activity, students delve into the lyrics to uncover themes of familial expectations and societal roles, directly engaging with the narrative to understand the complexities of the characters' interactions and their implications within the broader cultural context. This type of analysis helps students develop critical thinking skills by interpreting and relating these themes to their own experiences and the societal norms they observe around them (Byram & Golubeva, 2020). Moreover, using a popular film song as a medium for the exercise significantly increases student engagement. Music and film are powerful tools in education, known to enhance motivation and make learning experiences more memorable (Bøhn et al., 2018). The familiar and enjoyable format of a film song helps make complex concepts more accessible and relatable, effectively lowering barriers to learning. Such an approach makes learning enjoyable and ensures students are more receptive to understanding and discussing intricate cultural dynamics. Furthermore, engaging with the characters' stories through the song encourages empathy and perspective-taking. Students explore different emotional and psychological perspectives presented in the song, enhancing their ability to appreciate and respect diverse viewpoints and cultural narratives (Spencer-Oatey, 2008, p. 151). This exercise facilitates a deeper understanding of how cultural values and societal roles shape individual identities.

Additionally, the portrayal of the Madrigal family and their magical abilities in *Encanto* can be used to develop critical cultural awareness, an essential aspect of understanding how cultural narratives influence societal perceptions and behaviors. Characters like Luisa, Mirabel, and Isabel prompt discussions on unexamined cultural roles often perpetuated through media. This discussion can be framed within the context of Edward Said's "Orientalism" and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" critiquing how media portrayals may reinforce stereotypes and power imbalances through a Western-centric

lens (Said, 2003; Spivak, 2020). Role-play exercises enhance this learning experience. Students take on roles such as Luisa, Mirabel, or Isabella to deeply explore the characters' conflicts and societal roles. Role-play allows students to express opinions more freely, as they do not have to take personal responsibility for those views, which encourages robust discussion and a deeper understanding of the cultural dynamics portrayed in the film (Harmer, 2015, p. 353). This method helps develop Byram's "critical cultural awareness" by urging students to critically assess cultural practices and media representations (Byram et al., 2001, p. 7). Such activities enrich students' understanding of Colombian people as depicted in *Encanto* and enhance their ability to engage thoughtfully with global cultural narratives, fostering a well-rounded intercultural competence.

Incorporating the film *Encanto* into classroom discussions offers an opportunity to explore intercultural competence, including through the lens of gender roles. The film features complex female characters like Mirabel, Isabela, and Luisa Madrigal, each representing different facets of womanhood and strength. Such portrayals challenge traditional gender roles and provide a nuanced reflection of cultural identity, making *Encanto* a tool for teaching intercultural competence. It prompts students to examine how gender roles are culturally situated and expressed differently across societies, disrupting conventional narratives often depicted in media. The characters' unique abilities, meant to serve the community, encourage discussions on the variability of gender expectations across different cultures. Mirabel's role, in particular, highlights the societal pressures on women, a theme that resonates globally and transcends cultural boundaries. This aligns with Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence, particularly the "skills of interpreting and relating," which emphasizes understanding how personal and cultural identities are constructed (Byram & Golubeva, 2020). Additionally, hybridity suggests that cultural identities are often a mix of various influences, making them fluid rather than fixed (Bhabha, 1994). These theoretical perspectives help students see the characters in *Encanto* as representations of Colombian culture and as embodiments of a dynamic interplay of global cultural influences. Such discussions can be deepened by exploring the portrayal of Luisa, whose physical strength symbolizes the burden of familial expectations literally and metaphorically, challenging the traditional gender roles reinforced by the media. Discussing these dynamics in the classroom provides a basis for critical discussions about the pressures women globally face to conform to specific roles and the psychological impact of these expectations. This is crucial under Spivak's framework of subalternity, which examines how marginalized groups are portrayed

and their narratives constructed (Spivak, 2020, pp. 292-293). Therefore, using *Encanto* as a case study facilitates the exploration of gender through the lens of intercultural competence and encourages critical thinking about the role of gender in cultural narratives. The approach adheres to Byram's framework by developing critical cultural awareness among students and promotes a deeper understanding of global cultural diversity and the role of gender therein (M. D. Barrett et al., 2014). Consequently, *Encanto* serves as a tool for entertainment and a profound educational resource, cultivating a nuanced appreciation of intercultural and gender dynamics.

Encanto offers significant educational value in fostering intercultural competence but requires careful handling to ensure it serves as a constructive educational tool without reinforcing stereotypes. The film's portrayal of Colombian culture provides a rich medium for students to explore diverse cultural contexts. However, educators must be mindful of potential pitfalls to maximize its effectiveness in the classroom. Firstly, it is crucial to situate *Encanto* within the broader context of media portrayals of "non-Western" cultures. Disney films, including *Encanto*, often adapt cultural elements to align with Western norms, potentially simplifying and commodifying complex cultural narratives (Hutcheon & O'Flynn, 2013, p. 177). Such adaptations can lead to cultural appropriation, where cultural elements are stripped of their original context and repurposed to fit a different cultural agenda. Teachers should guide students in critically analyzing how *Encanto* represents and deviates from authentic Colombian culture and discuss Disney's influence in shaping these portrayals. Additionally, cultural imperialism and Americanization theories suggest that Disney films like *Encanto* may perpetuate Western hegemony by promoting Western viewpoints and ideologies (Pieterse, 2019). Furthermore, Stuart Hall (1992) argues that identities are not merely portrayed but actively constructed within and by power dynamics inherent in media representations, suggesting that films like *Encanto* play a crucial role in shaping and expressing cultural identities, thus influencing how audiences worldwide perceive these cultures. This aspect provides a framework for classroom discussions on how media influences cultural perceptions and identities. Acknowledging this bias is essential for fostering a balanced and respectful intercultural understanding. Lastly, while *Encanto* enriches the educational experience with its engaging narratives and visuals, educators must ensure that it does not oversimplify or stereotype the cultures it intends to celebrate. Encouraging students to assess the film's portrayals critically helps develop critical cultural awareness, a component of Byram's intercultural communicative competence model (Byram et al., 2001). This critical engagement

is vital for preventing the reinforcement of stereotypes and promoting a nuanced understanding of cultural diversity. While *Encanto* is a valuable tool for teaching intercultural competence, its effective use in the classroom depends on the educators' ability to provide adequate context, encourage thoughtful engagement, and facilitate discussions that enhance students' understanding of intercultural nuances. By addressing these challenges, educators can help students appreciate the complexities of cultural diversity and prepare them for more informed interactions in a globalized society.

In conclusion, *Encanto* is an effective educational tool in the classroom, facilitating the development of intercultural competence among students by aligning with Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence. The film's rich portrayal of Colombian culture through both "Big C" and "Little c" cultural elements provides an accessible and engaging medium for students to explore and understand diverse cultural perspectives and practices. Through activities such as analyzing thematic elements in songs, engaging in cultural comparison discussions, and role-playing, students can deepen their understanding of the complexities of cultural identity, familial dynamics, and societal roles as depicted in the film. However, using *Encanto* in educational settings must be approached critically to avoid reinforcing stereotypes and oversimplifying cultural narratives. Educators provide the necessary context and foster an environment that encourages critical thinking and reflexivity. This involves challenging the film's representations and discussing broader issues such as cultural appropriation and the influence of media on cultural perceptions. By doing so, teachers can help students not only appreciate the artistic and narrative elements of the film but also understand its implications in the context of global cultural dynamics and power relations. Ultimately, *Encanto* can be more than just a tool for entertainment; it can be a profound educational resource that promotes a nuanced appreciation of cultural diversity and intercultural competence. Educators can harness the film's potential to foster a more empathetic, culturally aware, and critically engaged student body by integrating theoretical insights and practical classroom activities. This approach enriches students' educational experiences and prepares them to navigate and contribute positively to an increasingly interconnected world.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the film *Encanto* as a celebration of Colombian culture and a pedagogical tool that can contribute to developing intercultural competence among students. By delving into the film's nuanced portrayal of a multi-generational family, each character's

unique magical abilities have been revealed as metaphors for deeper cultural and personal identities, reflecting the complexities of family dynamics, societal expectations, and individual growth. The analysis has confirmed the claim that *Encanto* serves as a vital resource for educational settings, where its rich narrative and aesthetic elements can foster a deep understanding of cultural diversity and empathy.

Through its innovative use of magical realism, *Encanto* transcends traditional animation boundaries to offer a story that is universally relatable and deeply rooted in the specificities of Colombian culture. The film's careful integration of cultural elements, from portraying Afro-Latino characters to including local music and traditions, enhances its authenticity and educational value. This approach enriches the viewers' experience and challenges prevailing cultural stereotypes, promoting a more inclusive understanding of Latin American traditions. The discussion on gender dynamics within the film has revealed *Encanto* as a text that challenges traditional gender norms and provides a nuanced reflection on femininity and masculinity. The film's characters, particularly the female leads, showcase strength, vulnerability, and complexity, contributing to a broader discourse on gender representation in media. The educational potential of *Encanto* has been highlighted through its alignment with Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence. The film's ability to facilitate critical discussions on cultural identity, societal roles, and familial dynamics makes it an exceptional tool for teaching and learning. Classroom activities derived from the film's content can engage students in meaningful dialogue and reflection, enhancing their cultural awareness and empathy.

Ultimately, this chapter has demonstrated that *Encanto* is more than a narrative about a magical family; it is a reflective, educational tool that invites audiences - especially young learners - to engage with, question and appreciates a more complex view of cultural identity and intercultural relations. The film celebrates Colombian culture and sets a new standard for how animated films can incorporate and honor cultural diversity. Through its thoughtful depiction of a vibrant cultural tapestry, *Encanto* encourages viewers to recognize the richness of cultures different from their own and underscores the importance of diversity and empathy in our increasingly interconnected world. This chapter affirms the claim that *Encanto* is a cultural artifact and a pivotal educational resource in contemporary cinema, contributing significantly to the discourse on cultural representation and intercultural competence.

6 Final reflections

The assessment of Disney's evolution in addressing racism and negative stereotypes, particularly in one of their recent films compared to an earlier release, has revealed significant progress. Through a comparative analysis of the films *Aladdin* and *Encanto*, it is evident that Disney has made conscious efforts to move away from harmful stereotypes and provide more nuanced representations of non-Western cultures. This shift is part of Disney's broader "Reimagine Tomorrow" initiative, which aims to amplify underrepresented voices and narratives within its media outputs (The Walt Disney Company, 2015b). Furthermore, Disney's portrayal of non-Western cultures, especially in the film *Encanto*, has shown a trend toward authenticity and respect for cultural diversity. The portrayal has shifted from the earlier Orientalist perspectives in *Aladdin* to more culturally authentic narratives, as seen in *Encanto*, which celebrates Colombian culture without filtering it through a Western lens. This evolution in portrayal addresses past criticisms and enhances the educational potential of these films in promoting intercultural understanding.

The potential of the movies *Aladdin* and *Encanto* to promote intercultural competence in the classroom has been affirmatively demonstrated through their use as tools for cultural education. These films provide opportunities for students to engage with and reflect on diverse cultural perspectives, thereby fostering a deeper understanding of other cultures. When approached critically, using *Aladdin* and *Encanto* in educational settings can support the development of intercultural competence, which is essential in our increasingly globalized world. In conclusion, this thesis illustrates significant shifts in Disney's representation of cultures, from *Aladdin*'s stereotypical depictions to *Encanto*'s more nuanced portrayal. While the films differ in their approach to cultural representation, both provide valuable resources for promoting intercultural competence. Crucially, the educational impact of these films extends beyond their narratives, emphasizing the importance of the methods used to teach them. Employing critical pedagogical strategies is essential to maximize the films' potential as tools for cultural education. Educators can better equip students to engage thoughtfully with media and foster a more inclusive and empathetic global community by teaching these films with a deep awareness of their cultural contexts and implications. Disney's evolving filmography reflects broader cultural shifts and offers a pathway to enhance intercultural understanding through film.

6.1 Contribution to Knowledge in the Field

This thesis contributes to the academic discourse by integrating a comprehensive analysis of media representations with a focus on intercultural education, filling a gap in Norwegian English didactics concerning the use of popular media to foster cultural understanding. The study advances the field by exploring how Disney's evolution in storytelling - from the orientalist perspectives in *Aladdin* to more culturally nuanced narratives in *Encanto* - reflects and influences contemporary global cultural perceptions. By employing a hermeneutic approach to film analysis, this work critiques the representations and examines how these films can serve as educational tools to enhance intercultural competence among students. Moreover, the thesis underscores the importance of critical media literacy in educational contexts, advocating for a more discerning consumption of media content that can influence societal and cultural norms. By highlighting Disney films' potential and limitations in fostering intercultural understanding, the thesis provides insights into the complexities of cultural representation in media. It offers practical recommendations for educators seeking to utilize these popular films as resources in culturally responsive teaching. As such, this thesis broadens the academic understanding of how Disney films portray non-Western cultures and enriches practical methodologies for leveraging these portrayals to promote a deeper understanding of cultural diversity in educational settings. It invites further research into the dynamic interplay between media production and cultural representation, encouraging a continuous dialogue on improving intercultural competence through educational media.

6.2 Limitations

While the study has highlighted significant strides in Disney's approach to cultural representation, several limitations of the results and the scope of the analysis warrant discussion. Firstly, the inherent biases of media representation and the subjective interpretation of films pose a considerable challenge. Even with a rigorous analytical framework, personal and cultural biases may influence the portrayal of cultures in the films and their reception by audiences. This interaction complicates the objective measurement of the films' educational impact on intercultural competence. Moreover, the study's focus on only two films limits the generalizability of the findings across Disney's broader filmography. Disney's narratives are vast and varied, and while *Aladdin* and *Encanto* provide valuable insights, they represent only a snapshot of Disney's engagement with cultural themes. Future research could expand to include a broader range of films to understand better the consistency and evolution of Disney's cultural narratives. Another limitation is the challenge of measuring

the actual impact of these films in classroom settings. While the thesis proposes theoretical educational benefits, practical applications in diverse educational environments could yield different outcomes. Variables such as teacher interpretation, student background, and educational context all influence the effectiveness of films as educational tools, which this thesis could not fully explore. Lastly, while the study makes strides toward understanding Disney's portrayal of non-Western cultures and its implications for intercultural competence, the complex dynamics of global media influence, cultural authenticity, and representation require ongoing scrutiny. This thesis underscores the necessity for continued critical engagement with media representations, advocating for a media landscape that respects and accurately reflects the diversity of global cultures. In conclusion, the thesis contributes to the academic discourse on media and cultural studies by highlighting both progress and areas for improvement in Disney's cultural representations. It also underscores film's potential as a powerful tool for fostering intercultural understanding, even as it calls for cautious and critical consumption of media narratives.

6.3 Further research

Building on the insights from this thesis regarding the potential of Disney films to foster intercultural competence, further research could explore the long-term effects of using such films in educational settings through longitudinal studies. These studies would assess how students' perceptions and understandings of different cultures evolve after being exposed to Disney films that portray diverse societies and values. Additionally, expanding the scope of research to include comparative studies would be invaluable. Researchers could better understand the progress in cultural representations and their impact on audiences by analyzing a more comprehensive range of films from various producers or contrasting older Disney films against more recent productions. This extended research could help refine educational strategies and provide more nuanced insights into how films influence cultural perceptions and intercultural competence, thereby supporting the development of more effective educational tools and curricula. Such studies would enhance the theoretical foundations laid by this thesis and contribute to practical applications in educational settings, fostering a more inclusive and culturally aware learning environment.

7 References

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