

ELLA ENCHANTED: THE CURSE OF CONSENT.

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The Tommy O'Haver 2004 film *Ella Enchanted* is rife with ideas of autonomy, power, objectification, and consent. Though a children's fantasy film on the surface, it disguises a labyrinthine commentary on how individuals, in this case minorities and women, are expected to perform for others without their say. Whether that be in day-to-day life, or dance and song, as shown in this particular scene with Ella's coerced rendition of "Somebody to Love". Given the gift, or rather curse, of obedience as a baby, Ella grows up lacking autonomy by magically complying with all orders given to her. Consent is often exploited as an instrument of power, especially within capitalist and gendered systems, it doesn't restrict itself to one definition. As shown through *Ella Enchanted*, consent, power, and objectification demonstrate how initial reluctance can evolve into willing consent. This however is dependent on Ella's agency being retained and enhanced. In the case study scene, Ella is forced to perform at the giant's wedding against her will. She begins as a nervous begrudging participant, gradually gains confidence and eventually surprises herself by enjoying the spotlight. This shift from compulsion to apparent pleasure complicates how audiences and characters within the film understand her performance. Through *mise-en-scene*, sound, and framing, the film stages Ella as both object and subject. While her obedience curse allegorises coerced consent, especially under patriarchal systems. Drawing on theories of the gaze by Sturken and Cartwright, as well as Passonen et al's definition of objectification, Ella's performance evaluates how pleasure and power often intertwine.

Sturken and Cartwright define spectatorship as a site of power, where the gaze, especially the cinematic gaze, structures relationships between those who look and those who are looked at. In visual culture, power is not only represented but exercised through acts of looking (Sturken, 87). This becomes particularly troubling when the person being watched cannot give full consent, as one would think of a cyber stalker or a peeping tom. In *Ella Enchanted*, Ella's curse of obedience places her in exactly this position, as peeping toms don't allow the decision of consent. It's not that Ella isn't aware she's being objectified but rather that she cannot deny their objectification, as she is both the focus of the gaze and powerless to resist it. Her coerced musical number becomes a visual display of her lack of agency, transformed into a moment of public entertainment. Passonen et al. develop this argument by redefining objectification as stripping away autonomy, not just sexualisation. They argue objectification is about being used as a tool for other purposes, regardless of whether the act appears pleasurable or not. "Any kind of person, or animal, can be objectified in the sense of being stripped of autonomy



and violation, and being treated as an instrument of gain for others” (Paasonen, 6). This framing is essential to understanding Ella’s curse, performance, and the world she lives in. Slannen, the elf, is originally expected to perform, as under the neoliberal society elves have been put to work as entertainers and giants as labourers. Clearly indicating the discourse of slavery and minorities. The giant leader, Koopooduck, then assumes Ella, being a fair maiden, will grace them with a song. So even though she is smiling and sings confidently at the end of her rendition of Queen’s song, “Somebody to Love”, she is not in control. In that moment her body is not her own and is used as a sexist means to an end.

The short extract uses functions and implications of mise-en-scene, sound, and framing, to objectify and exhibit Ella with performance. The “Somebody to Love” scene begins at nighttime with Ella and Char perched on a red-clothed banquet table. Lit by the candles surrounding them, the natural elements of wood, masonry, and vines show that it’s an old tavern that is lavishly cluttered with food, drinks, and people. The setting is simultaneously warm and communal, yet visually intimidating, its towering ceilings and cavernous structure position Ella as physically, as well as symbolically, out of place and small. This is further proven in costuming. Ella is dressed in simple and soft romantic styles, a puffed cotton blouse with barely subtle but intricate embroidery. Her leather belt is detailed with hand-painted flowers but her boots are brown and worn. This mixture of femininity and practicality, reflects in Ella’s character and ideology, as she enjoys presenting herself in a dainty and neat manner, but won’t choose fashion over comfort. All of which is startling inapposite to the giants and wedding guests, who sport loud prints, metallic, shimmering, or sheer fabrics. All costumes are warm-toned, blending seamlessly with the scenery. Scantly clad, the guests draw inspiration from 2000’s trends of exposed stomachs, asymmetrical tops, and low-rise mini skirts. Here Ella’s classic mediaeval fantasy elements are awkwardly conservative and childish. This all the more emphasises her diffidence and innocence due to the curse. Naturally, Ella doesn’t call attention to herself, she wears minimal makeup perhaps none at all in the movie world. The warmth in her lips and cheeks is a picture of good health and a blushing maiden. Her big brown eyes create a youthful doe-like effect so she appears subtle, sweet, and most of all meek. Ella’s costume reinforces her discomfort with performing in front of a crowd, yet this is what she’s made to do. When a literal spotlight hits her, the scene shifts from a celebration to an individual spectacle. Her role as a guest disappears, and she becomes an object on display.

Sound and dialogue exemplify this transition. Ella starts off singing quietly, voice trembling, but then the giants shout commands at her “Louder!” “Give it a little more soul!” treating her like a singing puppet, ignoring her reluctance and obvious attempts to leave. Even as her performance becomes more authentically confident, her voice fuller, shoulders back, and expression animated, the lyrics betray the situation. Close-ups are commonly used in this scene when the dialogue or lyrics hold great importance. For Ella, the significance of the song resonates when she steps further into the



frame and spotlight, aggressively proclaiming “One day I’m gonna be free”. Ironically this is a moment she doesn’t have any freedom, but she allows herself to embellish the moment with a positive memory. As Char saves her from falling off the stage in her cursed-induced dance, he dips her and the two hold close gaze. She sings the last line “somebody to love” reverting to Ella’s gentle but now stronger voice, inadvertently confessing her emotions to Char as she has now gained the confidence to pursue him and work around the curse. This is where it becomes tricky, is consent given if the partaker enjoys and agrees, but no choice was ever allowed? And what would Ella have agreed to if she didn’t have the curse? Catharine A MacKinnon’s work on non-consensual representation in pornography provides a useful comparison, saying images that appear pleasurable can still be exploitative if consent is missing (P. 7). Ella’s performance is similar. Though the scene is festive and joyful, it hides the spectacle of exploitation. The cheerful music, laughter, dancing, and silliness, all mask the disturbing reality of her lack of choice. Is her pleasure real, or just part of the performance? Is she reclaiming control, or simply adapting to survive? Viewers both within the film and outside it are left to wonder whether they are celebrating her success or complicit in her objectification.

Ella’s gift is bestowed by her Fairy Godmother Lucinda who believes obedience is a maidenly feminine quality, that she and her family should be grateful to receive. Ella’s curse is a near-perfect metaphor for the way that young women are socialised to see obedience, conformity, and people-pleasing, as universally virtuous. The curse’s charm sounds when Ella is given a command, and throughout the film, this scene particularly, treats her curse as a silly annoyance, only occasionally revealing dark consequences. Ella’s presence at a party could have gone south, she’s in a room filled with drunk guests who are much more powerful than her, not only in stature. Ella could be made to do various things against her will, she’s in great danger but only she is aware of this. What appears to her audience is willing consent, nobody thinks they can force her to perform, though that’s exactly the case. As this remains a kid’s film they change the tone to keep the family-friendly audience, but the implications of consent culture through her curse are very real and prevalent. When we focus too much on singular definitions of objectification, we assume people have grown up in a world where they have internalised none of the pressure of misogyny, racism and ableism. We teach young people that the only threats to this are external, and as long as they give willing enthusiastic consent, they will never have a damaging or uncomfortable experience. While external threats are real and scary, objectification can’t singularly be framed as actions others may harm people.

Ella’s position is shaped by class, gender, and magical law, which are based on real-world structures of patriarchy, neoliberalism, and racism. Thinking of socialisation broadly, in some way almost all the characters in *Ella Enchanted* are being objectified. Various creatures in the kingdom are used for entertainment, forced to work as slaves, or actively banished and killed. As seen with the elf Slannen, who is expected to adhere to his stereotype even by other minorities, in this case,



the giants. “There he is, there is our little entertainer.” The proceeding assumption that Slannen would be cheerful and subservient, though protests “I don’t sing”, is an outcome of a free enterprise economy that forces people into objectification. Slannen even shows his prejudices as he thought giants would be big, ugly and mean, admitting “You’re a lot prettier than I expected”. Passonen et al. explains “Research across academic disciplines has addressed a number of contexts in which people are treated as objects in ways that do not involve being sexualised– as in the case of trafficked farm labour” (P. 8). Though Slannen, the giants, and all other magical creatures, haven’t been objectified sexually, it’s still prevalent in this framework. Passonen et al. offer an excellent real-life example of the ownership of people as slaves in the United States. African people were perceived as property and instruments whose lives could be ended at their “owners” will. America gained from their objectification, and this type of dehumanisation exhibits that objectification can be the lack or eradication of autonomy and agency. It’s important to note that objectification and violations of consent don’t happen in a vacuum. Culture and systemic injustice drive violation, and that violation is taught everywhere, in classrooms, stories, and even at home.

Ella Enchanted uses the lens of consent, power, and objectification to critique gendered and capitalist structures. Ella’s coerced performance of “Somebody to Love”, argues that consent is not a fixed state, much like objectification, it’s shaped by agency, power, and context. Ella’s obedience curse allegorises coerced consent, revealing how her body becomes a tool under objectification and power, regardless of her apparent pleasure. Drawing on frameworks from Sturken and Cartwright’s theory of gaze and Paasonen et al.’s broad definition of objectification as the stripping of autonomy, this analysis examines how Ella’s loss of control complicates traditional readings and understandings of consent. Cinematic techniques of mise-en-scene, sound, and framing outline her switch from subject to spectacle, while the lighthearted tone masks the darker implications of exploitation, and how consent, control, and objectification can be entangled. Beyond Ella, it expands to other characters such as Slannen the elf or the giants, who are also objectified within a neoliberal social order. Ultimately the argument laid here is that consent must be understood relationally, within social, economic, and cultural systems that shape agency, as what appears consensual can remain deeply coerced.

Bibliography:

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