Deviance in Disney
Representations of Crime in Disney Films: A Qualitative Analysis

by

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzed the representations of crime and criminals in Disney films. The enormous popularity of The Walt Disney Company in the United States has lead it to become an important purveyor of information about identity, thus taking part in American children’s formation of ideas about the world. In questioning what Disney films teach children about crime and its roots, this study examined thirty-two of the most popular Disney films. A qualitative coding scheme was used to monitor various characteristics of the criminals, focusing specifically on portrayals of social class, race, and gender. This study also looked at ways in which images of crime have changed over time in Disney representations and what new kinds of criminals are introduced in more recent films. Results of the study indicate that Disney films largely neglect the influence of social conditions on crime that are heavily correlated with actual crime in the United States.
INTRODUCTION

According to cultural critic, Henry Giroux, approximately 200 million people a year will watch a Disney film (Giroux, 1999). Steven Watts (1997), a professor of cultural and intellectual history of the United States, claims that Walt Disney is perhaps the most influential man of the twentieth century. And in 1963, Walt Disney was awarded the George Washington Award for “promoting the American way of life” from the Freedom Foundation (Watts, 1997). What is it about Disney films that are so pervasive as to “promote a way of life,” to represent cultural ideals, and arguably to have an affect on the way in which American society views the world?

Walt Disney was born in 1901 in Chicago to a religious, middle-class family who did not believe in the need for, or appropriateness of, entertainment. His Protestant, socialist father had a strong work ethic and was determined that his sons adopt it as well. However, always interested in art, drawing, and the theatre, Walt eventually went to art school and later began to animate his own cartoons. Through hard work, determination, and his brilliant imagination and ability to captivate others, Walt Disney emerged as head of the most successful animation company in the United States (Gabler, 2006). Walt Disney as a man and as an entrepreneurial genius has been the focus of much academic research (see, for example, Watts, 1997; Gabler, 2006; Davis, 2006; Bell, Haas, & Sells, 1995; Giroux, 1999; Ward, 2002; Bryman, 2004), largely because of his films’ enormous popularity and the cultural canons that are exuded by his stories, characters, and representations (Davis, 2006).
Walt Disney himself continuously denied any political or ulterior motives in creating his films, even declaring that his only intention was to delight his audience with visual stimulation, hilarious gag sequences, and to appeal to the inner child in everyone (Watts, 1997). In an article in the *Overland Monthly* magazine, Walt Disney (1933) wrote, “When our gang goes into a huddle and comes out with a new Mickey Mouse story, we will not have worried one bit as to whether the picture will make the children better men and women, or whether it will conform with the enlightened theories of child psychology… It is not our job to teach, implant morals or improve anything except our pictures” (p. 138). Attempting to reach as large an audience as possible, Disney tailored his scripts, stories, pictures, and characters to satisfy and tempt mass audiences and appeal to the simplistic desires of the common American. Therefore, Disney was shocked that academics and historians eagerly sought out his films for scholarly research and analysis. In an interview for *Time* magazine, Disney (1937) claimed, “We just try to make a good picture. And then the professors come along and tell us what we do.” However, it was Disney’s very ability of appealing to mass audiences, to the everyday citizen, that makes his films culturally relevant as academic tools; his films have become symbols of American culture and they have embodied the beliefs, assumptions, priorities, and values of the public at large. For those who study culture, Disney films are sites where social understandings are on display. “In short, to understand Walt Disney, one of the most emblematic of Americans, is to understand much about the country in which he lived and which he so profoundly affected” (Gabler, 2006, p. xx).
Popular media is inextricably linked to popular ideas. The proposal that media acts as a socializing force, reflecting already existing societal beliefs and ideologies while also affecting collective consciousness by infusing national discourses with its images and messages is one that has been the focus of a great deal of empirical and theoretical attention (Giroux, 1999; Watts, 1997; Davis, 2006; Bell, Haas, & Sells, 1995; Bryman, 2004; Dowler, Fleming, & Muzzatti, 2006; Ewen, 1988; Gauntlett, 1995; Gerbner, 1969; Haney, 2005; Carney, 2004; Romero & Stuart, 1995; Lutz & Collins, 1993; Reese, Gandy, & Grant, 2001).

In capitalist societies, where the power of commercial images has become ubiquitous, the tendency toward aestheticization may be among the most profound arenas for… the ‘phenomenon of reification,’… the process by which the social relations of a modern exchange society assume the apparent status of universal truth, stamping their ‘imprint upon the whole consciousness of man’ (Ewen, 1988, p. 156).

Here, sociologist and media studies professor, Stuart Ewen, explained the theoretical rationale behind the dominant cultural role that media images play in the United States as representing “universal truth” in society.

The Walt Disney Company is one of the most popular entertainment industries in Hollywood. Social scientist and scholar Alan Bryman (2004) wrote a book called “The Disneyization of Society,” in which he addressed the enormous impact that The Walt Disney Company has had on United States culture by saturating it with Disney images, products, and theme parks. Walt Disney himself and his animated characters have become cultural icons, easily recognizable by and highly familiar to the vast majority of Americans. Indeed, American culture has become so deeply intertwined with Disney that its films and images are inseparable from how Americans view their own reality (Bryman, 2004; Giroux, 2002). This incredible
prevalence and popularity of these images not only reflects American preferences, but their widespread circulation and incorporation into cultural mores affects and shapes American ideology. The Walt Disney Company has become one of the dominant storytellers in the United States, introducing the population to ideas about culture and identity. Especially because Disney films are most targeted at children, they become some of the first defining representations of North American society for the growing child. The Walt Disney Company influences the way in which children are introduced to ideas of culture, morality, history, politics, race, gender, sexuality, and the criminal justice system through these magical images and stories that are so beloved.

Mary Romero and Abigail J. Stewart (1999) discussed the concept of “master narratives,” which are the stories a society tells about people and ideological foundations and values that inherently become cultural pedagogy. Disney films are brimming with master narratives that define different social groups and cultural systems. For example, Disney largely portrays female success as finding a handsome man to marry; love as being defined in heterosexual terms; childhood as a time of joy and innocence; and darker skinned people as more criminal than lighter skinned people, to name just a few. This study examined the master narratives and representations of crime and criminals in Disney films, beginning with the fundamental premise that Disney portrayals affect the way Americans understand their criminal justice system and crime in this country.

In this paper I suggest that there are many master narratives swirling within the American criminal justice system. Among the most powerful of these is the notion that criminality is individualized (Haney, 2005). Individualism is integral to the
American understanding of the nature of crime, the nature of criminal perpetrators, and what causes people to transgress. An individualist philosophy explains crime by arguing that people commit crime because of some inherent quality of their personality. An individualized conception of crime ignores the effect that social conditions have on crime rates and criminals, and absolves a society of any responsibility for contributing to the roots of crime (Haney, 2005). These narratives of individualism are embedded in Disney films, and I have examined what forms these representations take and how they change over time.

The incredible infusion of Disney into American culture has established the films as foundations, unchallenged by parents and deemed not only appropriate, but healthy modes of entertainment for children (Giroux, 1999). Henry Giroux (1999) argued that The Walt Disney Company has monopolized the concept of innocence, and explained, “As suburban America witnesses urban violence invading its schools, homes, and neighborhoods, Disney becomes a symbol for the security and romance of the small-town America of yesteryear—a pristine never-never land in which children’s fantasies comes true, happiness reigns, and innocence is kept safe through the magic of pixie dust” (p. 17). It is this very belief that Disney is synonymous with innocence that the company is relieved of serious questioning, considered appropriate for any child, regardless of the political or cultural undertones that are glossed over in a dream-like fashion. Giroux (1999) elucidated that it is this association of Disney as a pure, unadulterated, and cultural given that allows the ideology expressed in the films to permeate society’s values in such a way that goes largely unnoticed and unquestioned. In terms of criminal justice ideology, this concept of Disney’s
monopolization of innocence allows for Disney to define what makes someone not innocent. Those characters in opposition to the kind, gentle, compassionate, and often passive “good guys” are inevitably evil. The “bad guys” are inherently wicked, frequently jealous, and often insane (Davis, 2006; see also Haney, 2005). They are rarely shown as a product of their surroundings, but rather possess some trait that makes them different from the lovable virtue of the other characters.

Media such as Disney films function as a socializer and a teacher (Giroux, 2002), introducing ideas about dominant criminal ideology to children. In the case of American media, the lesson is an individualistic one. The focus on crime as being individually determined allows Americans to overlook the enormous disparities in terms of race and class differences that exist in their prison populations (Haney, 2005). Such an attitude neglects the incredible social and environmental forces, such as poverty, that frequently lead to a life of crime. In order to address overarching systems of disadvantage that exist in the United States, it is necessary to examine the widespread images of crime and criminals that the American media projects and infuses into cultural ideology (Haney, 2005). This study looks at one popular avenue of criminal representations that are extremely familiar and a cornerstone of most children’s upbringing: Disney films.

Disney films are meant to entertain, to enchant the average citizen and to create characters to which the audience can relate. Clearly, the films are doing their job, though the larger messages they paint to children must be addressed in discourse on The Walt Disney Company and its place in American society. “Children are very likely to incorporate the things they see in movies into their play, thereby repeating,
analyzing, and incorporating into their subconscious the ideas and themes they take away from the films” (Davis, 2006, p. 27). Crime and justice are central elements to the plot of every Disney film. They permeate viewers’ subconscious and leave resounding images of what crime looks like and how it is dealt with. This study examined the cultural understandings braided into Disney films and in particular sought to answer the following question: how are crime and criminals represented in Disney films and how have these representations changed over time?
In this literature review I will examine the main bodies of research and literature that address the ways in which media affects culture, and both the reality and representations of crime in the United States. More specifically, I will first consider early media research and theory, media effects, media influences, framing, master narratives, and social representation theory. Then I will move to images of crime and criminals in the American media, and I will finish with the subject of media and children.

Early Media Research and Theory

The birth of media research occurred during the political instability of the pre World War II era. With the dramatic rise in popularity of the radio and the intrusion and development of propaganda as a means of persuasion, scholars became interested in the idea that media content could have an effect on culture (Giles, 2003). This research was conducted and reported on in a rather negative portrayal, debasing the media and referring to the perversion and danger that the media could bring to the cultural arena. In fact, a popular metaphor at the time coined by political science professor, Harold Lasswell (1935), was to equate the media to a hypodermic needle, a device that would inject and infect the cultural body and affect popular ideology.

Largely two groups propelled the emergence of media research and theory, one being the North American field of sociology and the other the Frankfurt School, a group of social theorists who moved to the United States from Germany in the 1930s.
to escape Nazi persecution (Giles, 2003; Lutz & Collins, 1993). Working within the broader Marxist tradition, members of the Frankfurt School were highly critical of the media, and believed it to engage in mass deception. They equated mass media with popular culture, which historically has often been the framework used in media theory. One of the leading figures of the Frankfurt School, critic Theodore Adorno, claimed the media promotes conformity and dispels individuality in favor of mass-produced art. He wrote, “With the liquidation of its opposition to empirical reality art assumes a parasitic character. Inasmuch as it now appears itself as reality, which is supposed to stand in for the reality out there, it tends to relate back to culture as its own object. The monopolistic hold on culture, which forbids anything that cannot be grasped, necessarily refers us back to what has already been produced in the past” (Adorno, 1991, p. 65). British writers also condemned television after World War II for its intrusion in the common household and its spread of homogeneous messages (Leavis & Thompson, 1948). George Orwell’s 1984 embodied the general sentiment that the media was an “instrument of social oppression” (Giles, 2003, p. 15) and detailed the negative effects implicit in increased popularity of the television (Leavis & Thompson, 1948).

**Media Effects**

Much of the early empirical work on media in the United States and in Europe involved questions about media effects on the individual. The 1960s and 1970s saw a growth in popularity of this “media effects” research, as behavioral psychology dominated the media discourse and defined its pedagogical role as being influential.
on individuals’ behavior (Giles, 2003). In particular, studies on the effects of media violence on children were a focal point. Albert Bandura, one of the most prominent behavioral psychologists, conducted a groundbreaking study using a “Bobo” doll to observe the effects of modeling behavior (Bandura et al., 1961). In this study, Bandura arranged for adults to punch, kick, and hit the doll while children watched. He found that the children who observed this behavior were much more likely to act aggressively toward the doll than children who did not witness this scene, even though there were other toys in the room with which they could have occupied themselves.

Bandura (1977) discussed the “social learning theory” which explained behavior as largely resulting from observing and replicating the behavior of others. “Social learning theory approaches the explanation of human behavior in terms of a continuous reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioral, and environmental determinants” (Bandura, 1977, p. vii). Bandura proposed that the act of encoding symbols and representations of salient behavior is highly influential on psychological development and the way in which people perceive acceptable actions. These influences can come from a wide variety of environmental factors.

Some forms of modeling are so intrinsically rewarding that they hold the attention of people of all ages for extended periods. This is nowhere better illustrated than in televised modeling. The advent of television has greatly expanded the range of models available to children and adults alike… Models presented in televised form are so effective in capturing attention that viewers learn much of what they see without requiring any special incentives to do so (Bandura, 1977, p. 24-5; Bandura, Grusec, & Menlove, 1966).

Bandura’s research and his “Bobo” doll study falls under the highly contested debate as to what affect violent television programs actually do have on children. Because of
practical and ethical limitations, studies of this nature can only suggest a correlation between watching violent television and exhibiting violent behavior, not causation.

There have been numerous studies that have shown that children who watch more violent television are more aggressive (Eron, 1987; Turner, Hesse, & Peterson-Lewis, 1986; Belson, 1978; Muson, 1978; Eron & Huesmann, 1980, 1985). In order to determine whether watching violence increases the audience’s aggressive impulses or if naturally aggressive people are drawn to violent programs, researchers devised experiments with the hope of eliminating the effects of potential lurking variables that could have contributed to the correlation between violent media and aggressive behavior. Psychologists Leonard Eron and Rowell Huesmann (1980, 1985) conducted several studies of their own and have compiled the work of many researchers who have largely come to the conclusion that viewing violent media actually does increase aggression in audiences (Eron & Huesmann, 1986). Their study (1980, 1985) tracked and observed the behavior of 875 children who were exposed to varying amounts of violent television at the age of 8-years old, and then were tested again at 19-years old. They found that viewing violence at age 8 did predict more violent behavior at age 19, and interestingly, the aggressiveness level of a child at age 8 did not predict how much violent television they watched as a 19-year-old. Viewing violence led to increased aggression, not the reverse. Although some speculation still exists about this relationship, the overwhelming evidence points to the fact that viewing violence does in fact increase violent behavior, as declared by the 1993 American Psychological Association’s Commission on Violence and Youth. A more recent study by Jeffrey Johnson and colleagues (2002) entitled “Children in the Community
Study” conducted a 17-year longitudinal investigation into the relationship between violent media and behavior while attempting to control for potential contributing variables. They found that “time spent watching television was associated with subsequent aggression, whether or not there was a history of aggressive behavior. Thus, although aggressive individuals may spend somewhat more time watching television than do other individuals, this tendency does not appear to explain the preponderance of the association between television viewing and aggressive behavior” (Johnson et al., 2002, p. 2471).

Studies on violence in media are only a subset of the larger media effects field of psychological research. Behaviorist approaches, such as that of Bandura, were practiced at the same time as cognitive psychology looked at the effects of media on individuals’ thought processes and cognitions, rather than behavior. The approach of cognitive psychology became much more popular and widely accepted, as researchers began to concentrate on the formation of ideas and personality characteristics that resulted from media exposure (Broadbent, 1961; Reeves & others, 1991; Berkowitz, 1984; Bushman, 1995).

Both the behavioral and cognitive psychological media effects research has received criticism for a number of reasons (Ang, 1994; Hall, 1980). First, there was concern that the research was attempting to prove causal relationships between media and behavior or thought, when in fact it is impossible to isolate these variables and observe the direct effects. In addition, the field was criticized for being too individually focused and ignoring the larger social context of media and the effects it can have on societies, not just individuals (Giles, 2003). Sociologist David Gauntlett
(1995) advocated for the use of the word “influences” rather than “effects” when discussing media’s place in society and its relationship to individuals. As early as the 1960s there was an attempt to broaden the media effects concept to include the social and cultural milieus of media.

Gauntlett was not alone in proposing a semantic and fundamental shift from effects research to studying media influences. Joseph Klapper (1960), a sociologist and mass communications researcher, coined the “phenomenistic approach” to looking at media, which was defined by its focus on the phenomenon of media influences on a culture rather than specific effects on the individual. “It is in essence a shift away from the tendency to regard mass communication as a necessary and sufficient cause of audience effects, toward a view of the media as influences, working amid other influences, in a total situation” (p. 5).

As a caveat to his phenomenistic approach, Klapper noted that while his method looked at the interplay of mass communication and culture, it must be understood that mass communication comes in many different forms and its effects “are likely to differ, depending upon whether the communication is or is not in accord with the norms of groups to which the audience members belong” (Klapper, 1960, p. 6). Klapper believed that mass communication content cannot change societal norms on its own, but that the information presented becomes incorporated into people’s pre-existing conceptions of society. “Regardless of the condition in question—be it the vote intentions of audience members, their tendency toward or away from delinquent behavior, or their general orientation toward life and its problems—and
regardless of whether the effect in question be social or individual, the media are more likely to reinforce than to change” (Klapper, 1960, p. 8).

George Gerbner, a well-known scholar in the field of communication research, also ascribed to the idea that media and culture interact, and he devised the “cultivation theory” to explain this relationship (Gerbner, 1969). Gerbner used the word “cultivation” to describe the process by which communities use message systems to transmit “common culture… and public notions about facts, values, and contingencies of human existence” (Gerbner, 1969, p. 123). These message systems take many different forms and can be mass-produced and rapidly distributed, creating a collective understanding for the way people view society and the people and structures in it. Illuminating some of the methods of transference of these message systems, Gerbner referred to the general social process of publication, which he defined as “the creation and cultivation of shared ways of selecting and viewing events and aspects of life” (Gerbner, 1969, p. 125).

Publication is thus the basis of community consciousness and self-government among large groups of people too numerous or too dispersed to interact face-to-face or in any other personally mediated fashion. The truly revolutionary significance of modern mass communication is its ‘public-making’ ability. That is the ability to form historically new bases for collective thought and action quickly, continuously, and pervasively across previous boundaries of time, space, and culture. The terms of broadest social interaction are those available in the most widely shared message systems of a culture. Increasingly these are mass-produced message systems. That is why mass media have been called the ‘agenda-setters’ of modern society (p. 126).

In addition to the ideas about consciousness making, Gerbner’s theory discussed the overall way in which information is transmitted and implicated into societal norms and common knowledge of the general public. Gerbner addressed the
different effects various forms of mass media can have on collective consciousness and interpretation of presented material. He noted that, naturally, news stories hold more credibility than do fairy tales in terms of the presentation of factual evidence, however, he claimed that “in the general process of image-formation and cultivation, ‘fact’ and ‘fable’ play equally significant and interrelated roles” (Gerbner, 1969, p. 127). He discussed the unique role that fiction plays in having the freedom to select and present stories and characters that are completely conceived in the minds of the writers and artists. He posited that these characters are formed from drawing on the social and cultural contexts in which they are created. “The requirements that make the treatment of specific subjects secondary to the requirements of telling a ‘good story’ might make the treatment of those subjects more revealing of the underlying assumptions cultivated in the story-telling process” (Gerbner, 1969, p. 128). These fictional images become entwined into the population’s collective ideal of the world.

**Framing, Master Narratives, and Social Representation Theory**

From ideas about the socializing function of media, I turn now to more recent work that looks further at the ways this socializing is accomplished, and its powerful effects. I will begin with a description of framing, which is the process through which people come to define and classify the world around them (Goffman, 1974), and then I will turn to a more in depth consideration of master narratives and social representation theory.
Framing

Sociological theory has many paradigms that explain how people view the world and make sense of it in their everyday lives. Erving Goffman (1974) is credited as one of the earliest theorists to develop the idea of “framing.” Goffman defined framing as the way in which people develop methods of organizing, categorizing, and interpreting everyday experiences. Frames are the ideological structures that govern thought processes and dictate personal views of the world and what goes on in it.

“Whatever the degree of organization, however, each primary framework allows its user to locate, perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences defined in its terms. He is likely to be unaware of such organized features as the framework has and unable to describe the framework with any completeness if asked, yet these handicaps are no bar to his easily and fully applying it” (Goffman, 1974, p. 21). Goffman’s points of interest are the invisible structures that constitute everyday situations and “asks about the central working principles that animate any particular mode of activity. ‘Frame analysis’ is the attempt to become cognizant of the rules for cognition and communication that are bound up with the production of any world” (Gonos, 1977, p. 858). Theorist Stephen D. Reese (2001) wrote in accordance with Goffman, “Unquestionably, the way information is structured affects cognitive processing, and audience schemata interact with texts to determine the ultimate meaning derived from them” (p. 9). Reese explained that the value of frame analysis lies in its methodological emphasis on the way in which these structures are established.
Master Narratives

Frames and framing have been reconsidered by narrative theorists and reconstituted as master narratives to explain how people understand the world and tell stories about it. Mary Romero and Abigail J. Stewart (1999) specifically addressed the roles that stories play in the creation and maintenance of social identity: of individuals themselves and in relation to others. Romero and Stewart called these stories “master narratives,” paradigms and norms that become incorporated into the public’s perception of reality. “‘Master narratives’ are stories that are so familiar they seem inevitable and obvious in their meaning, even when they happen to us. Master narratives are the stories we were taught and teach ourselves about who does what and why. They are often elaborated, plot-filled stereotypes that tell us not only what someone is like but also where they’ve come from, what they’re likely to do, and just how far they’ll get” (Romero & Stewart, 1999, p. xiv). These narratives and expectations people have for themselves and others operate strongly in their perceptual schema. People constantly categorize, stigmatize, and make assumptions about people that fit into their own ideas of social organization.

Master narratives are largely created and maintained by those in power, disseminated through political and economic systems that become deeply engrained in cultural systems (Romero & Stewart, 1999). Political, economic, social, and cultural systems are saturated with these master narratives that serve as ideological hegemony and become so familiar that they avoid consideration. “They are, then, widely circulating in the culture, not only in obvious ‘story’ forms (movies, literature, television) but also in our accounts of our own and each others’ lives. They gain
strength from repetition and mirroring; they accumulate familiarity and clarity while blurring and erasing plot elements that don’t fit” (Romero & Stewart, 1999, p. xiv). Master narratives have been a relatively recent focus of research. For example, Fine (1992) has looked at rape victim accounts; Haney (1994) has looked at images of the death penalty and capital crime; and Carney (2004) has looked at images of women charged with failure to protect.

**Social Representation Theory**

“Nobody’s mind is free from the effects of the prior conditioning which is imposed by his representations, language and culture” (Moscovici, 1984, p. 8).

Moscovici, one of the founders of the social representations theory, described how people come to know the world by its representations. He explained, “Our reactions to events, our responses to stimuli, are related to a given definition, common to all the members of the community to which we belong” (Moscovici, 1984, p. 5). These definitions are not innate, immutable concepts, but rather are socially constructed, and subsequently become the fabric of public discourse through their wide dissemination. People often overlook how a culture defines and represents social categories and identities, and instead accept the status quo as a natural given. Once these symbols and representations have become so common and popular, their origins and implications are forgotten. An earlier scholar and pioneer of social psychology, Kurt Lewin, wrote, “Reality for the individual is, to a high degree, determined by what is socially accepted as reality” (Lewin, 1948, p. 57).
In discussing this process, Moscovici elaborated, “I do not wish to imply that such representations don’t correspond to something we call the outside world. I simply note that, where reality is concerned, these representations are all we have, that to which our perceptual, as well as our cognitive, systems are adjusted” (Moscovici, 1984, p. 5). Moscovici explained that representations have two primary roles: they “conventionalize objects, persons, and events,” and they are “prescriptive, that is they impose themselves upon us with an irresistible force” (Moscovici, 1984, p. 7-9). The former details the process of creating models and categories to frame and organize daily experiences and the people encountered. Words are assigned meaning and heuristics are created to enable easily drawing associations between certain groups, people, actions, and events. Inherent in this process is the desire to over-generalize and to force outliers into the closest existing categorical definitions. Through this process people can neglect certain personal aspects of individuals and assign them stereotypic qualities that may not be accurate descriptions. According to Moscovici, the latter role of social representations is to institutionalize these stereotypes and systematic classifications through the power of tradition and influence from the past. “This force is a combination of a structure which is present before we have even begun to think, and of a tradition which decrees what we should think” (Moscovici, 1984, p. 9). Structural systems and means of communication have become deeply engrained in societal perceptions of reality.

Catherine A. Lutz and Jane L. Collins, trained respectively in anthropology and sociology, analyzed the social representations present in the magazine National Geographic. Their focus on this particular magazine as a strong purveyor of cultural
pedagogy derived from its incredible popularity and its unique position to provide information on cultures outside of the United States through descriptive imagery, text, and photography (Lutz & Collins, 1993). Similar to The Walt Disney Company, *National Geographic* began as a small project that continuously gained recognition and popularity as it entered the mass communication realm to become one of the most widely viewed cultural publications. *National Geographic* is now the third largest magazine in the United States (Lutz & Collins, 1993). “*National Geographic*’s success, in these accounts, is attributed to its editors’ accurate reading of the American people and ‘what they want to know’ about the world; to its adoption of innovative photographic technologies; and to its ability to secure a reputation for itself as an impartial, accurate, and genteel source of information about the world and its inhabitants” (Lutz & Collins, 1993, p. 16).

Lutz and Collins (1993) claimed that photographs published in *National Geographic* “call up and then reinforce or challenge shared understanding of cultural difference” (p. 2). The representations in these magazines become incorporated into American collective perceptions of the societies depicted. Simply put, the images become reality. Stuart Ewen (1988), a prominent scholar in the history of consumer society and visual culture explained,

Within the selectively seductive frame of the commercial image, the dominant power relations of contemporary society are transmitted, not as a set of arbitrary rules by which the exploitation of labor and resources is enforced, but as a natural, even beautiful rendering of things. The secrets of power remain protected. As a panorama of apparently random images, the implicit language of style offers a way of seeing, and of not seeing, the world we inhabit, and our places within it. If affects our understanding of value, of social power, and of social change. At the same time, it may restrain the horizons of critical thought (p. 156-7).
National Geographic magazine markets itself as a purveyor of objective information about the world. However, Lutz and Collins (1993) argued that it is largely biased and construed to mirror Western agendas. The images are exploitative and exotify non-Westerners. “Most important is the fact that those understandings or strategies for describing human differences have helped create and reproduce social hierarchies” (Lutz & Collins, 1993, p. 3).

National Geographic’s images have been powerfully loaded since the rise in the second half of the nineteenth century of photography as an acceptable empirical source (Tagg, 1988). “Photographs… were viewed not as metaphors for experience but rather as sections of reality itself. If photographs of the West were exotic, it was assumed that the West must be exotic… When photographs depicted Indians as ‘savages,’ Indians were confirmed as savages” (Lyman, 1982, p. 29). “The Geographic capitalized on this notion of the photograph as evidence and established itself as a source of accurate and timely information on the colonial world” (Lutz & Collins, 1993, p. 28). This model illustrates the power of images to incorporate certain themes and representations into the American perception of the outside world.

Similar themes are present in the ways individuals and social hierarchies are represented within the United States’ borders. Social and forensic psychologist Sarah Carney (2004) looked at how the media represents cultural ideas of gender, race, blame, and responsibility. Specifically, Carney studied the social representations that news stories use when describing cases of mothers charged with “failure to protect” their children. Her media analyses revealed implicit racial and gender biases engrained in United States society.
Social psychologist, Jill G. Morawski (1988, 2004), examined the historical portrayal and treatment of race in the field of psychological study. Morawski discussed the conflation of objectivity with whiteness in defining normal behavior and unbiased observations. White experimenters were seen as empirical scientists with the ability to be objective. “The experimenter’s status, one privileged by gender and race as well as education, was just one of the myriad problems in race research that initiated methodological discussions. Whether it be the establishment of group norms, statistical methods to account for variance, control of dialect effects, representative sampling, or test-forming, race research generated methodological disputes” (Morawski, 2004, p. 218).

Through the work of early media researchers who advocated for an examination of media influences on cultural ideology, to the introduction of the ideas of framing, master narratives, and social representations, to the more recent and specific studies on current American representations, I now shift to looking at ways that crime is represented in the American media

*Crime in the News*

How the media portrays those who commit crimes and what those representations say about an American understanding of criminal behavior and its roots is at the heart of this study. According to criminological theorists Ken Dowler, Thomas Fleming, and Stephen L. Muzzatti (2006), “Arguable one of the most significant and potentially illuminating areas of criminological inquiry is the analysis of crime, media, and popular culture” (p. 837). These researchers discussed the
impact that technology has had on the ability to communicate information about crime and criminals, dramatically increasing the American public’s exposure to particular stories and cultural trends through television, film, newspaper, magazines, and the Internet. Because stories of violent acts of crime are disproportionately represented in the news and media and are highly sensationalized, the American public comes to believe that this type of crime occurs much more frequently in real life than it really does (Haney, 2005). “It is the televisual which has above all reduced the apparent gap between ‘news’ and ‘fiction’ in its generic cross-dressing… This is a multifaceted phenomenon as the ‘news’ and ‘fiction’ undergo a rapidly accelerating process of hybridization” (Brown, 2003, p. 53).

Craig Haney (2005) examined the monopolization of crime-related news media by the relationships created between reporters, police, and other criminal justice officials. This leads to a biased media portrayal of criminal behavior that is beneficial to law enforcement agencies. Criminal justice agencies have specific people whose job it is to gather information about crimes and relay it to the media, while “promoting a positive image of the organization” (Haney, 2005, p. 31). In turn, the news reporters become reliant on the flow of information from these agencies, resulting in a heavy dominance of news reports from special interest groups. Haney (2005) cited one study that found that “almost three-quarters of network news sources were political leaders or governmental officials” (p. 31). These news stories become master narratives, in the Romero & Stuart (1999) sense, perpetuating the dominant hegemony and conception of crime put forth by those in power. Haney explained that commercial interests, media conglomerates, and political and economic leaders feed
the public such images and representations that satisfy the public’s desire to place all of the blame for crime on those individuals who commit the acts. “Thus, the ways in which current structural arrangements and economic policies may contribute to chronic poverty, the impact of deep poverty on the day-to-day lives of the poor, or the role of poverty in the genesis of socially problematic behavior (such as crime) tends to be deemphasized or ignored altogether” (Haney, 2005, p. 33). If criminality is a problem of the individual, then the public need not address larger social problems and systematic failures that are in fact the breeding grounds for much crime.

Factual reports on crime in society are by no means the only exposure to crime through the media. Crime as entertainment has permeated Americans’ everyday lives, and become a foundation of popular culture in literature, television, and film (Dowler, Fleming, & Muzzatti, 2006). Dowler, Fleming, and Muzzatti stated that the preponderance and wild popularity of crime drama series is problematic because the shows do not draw clear distinctions between fiction and reality. Some even incorporate information from well-known real cases into the fictional shows, further blurring the distinction and giving the impression that the information is interchangeable from one medium to another. The public is inundated with images of crime and criminals throughout their lives, which very likely contribute to their ideas about who or what makes a criminal (Haney, 2005; Carney, 2004; Farr, 2001).

Many social theorists and media scholars have examined these representations and found recurring themes in television and film. Dario Melossi (2001) described the basic media representation of a criminal as “one who poses a deadly threat to society’s moral order” (p. 10). Melossi went on to explain,
The causes of such a threat, if at all relevant, are to be found within the criminal himself, or herself, and not in social relationships. Examples are the periods when national states were first established in the nineteenth century, the world-wide Depression in the 1930s, and the period after 1973 till today, that Eric Hobsbawm has very aptly dubbed ‘the crisis decades’ (Hobsbawm 1994: 403-32). During these periods imprisonment rates tend to increase, and the public rhetoric is one re-emphasizing the value of the collectivity around concepts such as ‘the state,’ ‘the nation,’ ‘the community’ (p. 10).

Here, Melossi not only categorized most representations of people who commit crimes as inherently criminal, but also noted that these representations have the ability to change over time and reflect contemporary historical trends.

These images are incredibly powerful, especially so because the majority of the public lacks direct contact with violent crime (Haney, 2005; Haney & Manzolati, 1980). Media representations are the closest many people come to the reality of crime and criminals and the evaluation of the best strategies for curtailing deviant and violent behavior. For instance, to explore the effect that television representations of crime had on viewers, Haney and Manzolati (1980) conducted a study in which they administered hundreds of questionnaires asking participants about their television habits and their thoughts on matters related to criminal justice. They found that those who watch significant amounts of television (four or more hours a day) had theories about crime that were incredibly similar to the ideas presented in crime dramas. Mainly, these ideas included believing criminality to be individually located as a dispositional trait, and discounting the significance of unemployment in determining criminal behavior (Haney, 2005; Haney & Manzolati, 1980).

Haney’s work, while it focused on television and news reporting, did not neglect the impacts of crime in film. He claimed (2005), “Film provides one of the
few mediums through which any kind of in-depth study of criminal behavior is even attempted for public consumption. Yet, almost invariably, such films sensationalize the nature of criminality, pander to the worst conceivable popular stereotypes, and are similarly uninformed by any realistic analysis of the social contextual and personal historical causes of crime” (p. 39-40). If film in general falls prey to oversimplification of criminals and the roots of crime, then children’s media, which is less sophisticated, is even more susceptible to utilizing the most basic, uncomplicated images to portray the distinction between “good” and “evil.”

**Conclusion**

Media studies scholar, Máire Messenger Davies (1997), stressed the recent increased importance of media on children’s development of perceptual schema given new developments in technology and the increased availability of television and film.

“As children in industrialized societies lose their freedom to walk the streets and fields, these mediated forms are an increasingly important source of information for them about the outside world” (p. 5). The effect of media images and cultural representations on a child goes beyond the child’s ability to distinguish between fantasy and objective reality. Davies (1997) proposed that what is critical to children’s development of thought-processes for viewing the world is merely the presentation of ideas that are relevant to a child’s life. “Knowing that something is imaginary thus does not seem to lessen its perceived power” (p. 13).

Amy M. Davis, a media scholar who addressed issues of representations, said, “Children are very likely to incorporate the things they see in movies into their play,
thereby repeating, analyzing, and incorporating into their subconscious the ideas and
themes they take away from the films” (Davis, 2006, p. 27). Similarly, psychologist
Bruno Bettelheim (1975) wrote about the power of fairy tales to affect the uneducated
child and the sophisticated adult alike, as the stories speak to the most universal
human sentiments and social concerns. He discussed the polarization of good and bad
in each fantasized character, again pointing out that there is no ambiguity or external
explanation for why someone is bad.

As one of the most popular distributors of fairy tales, and of children’s film in
general, The Walt Disney Company is in a unique position to maintain, create, and
disseminate master narratives of representations of crime and criminals. Their films
were, and still are, incredibly popular, as Walt Disney himself created the company
with the goal of appealing to a wide variety of people and to speak to the desires of
his audience. “Simply put, Disney had a visceral instinct for the rhythms and
emotions of mass culture” (Watts, 1997, p. 33). His characters and films have become
cultural icons, archetypes of American childhood.

Ironically, Walt Disney claimed that his films were not meant to instruct,
serve any educational or political goal, or to advance any particular agenda. Perhaps
unbeknownst to Walt Disney, his films and stories became educational tools and
cultural paradigms by the very fact that they are able to tap into individual and
collective joys and pleasures (Davis, 2006). In their book on the politics of film,
gender, and culture, Bell, Haas, and Sells (1995) claimed that Disney has “inserted
itself into both the cultural register of common sense as well as the political,
economic and ideological institutions of our society” (p. 3). Disney films help define
and regulate societal values and identity roles, providing structural frameworks for which to use in making sense of the world and the people in it (Giroux, 1999).

Alan Bryman (2004) wrote of “The Disneyization of Society,” as the American cultural landscape is truly saturated with images produced by The Walt Disney Company. Not only are these images seen in films, but they are in theme parks, toys, stuffed animals, games, posters, lunchboxes, clothing, advertisements, stickers, keychains, birthday cakes, and even modern literature and Broadway musicals. At the core of most Disney films lies the struggle between good and evil. Steven Watts (1997) said it well when he noted, “The Disney entertainment formula was simple: in a brisk and attractive manner, present the clash of virtue and wickedness, satirize human frailties, and personalize themes” (p. 59). When stripped of their idealized beauty and utopian happy endings, Disney films are filled with the dominant social conceptions of crime and criminals: the frames and master narratives that are so deeply engrained in American cultural ideologies.

This literature review has covered general media research, mass communication theories, behavioral and cognitive psychological studies, sociological analyses, the concepts of frames, master narratives, and social representations, theories of crime in the media, and theories of crime in children’s media. Davis (2006) said succinctly, “A film reflects the society which produces it” (p. 116). We have seen that media does matter, and while it reflects societal norms and values, it also likely affects cultural perceptions and modes of identity creation, maintenance, and structural organization. Many theorists and researchers have speculated and
demonstrated that media does influence how people think about crime in general, and how they explain, or fail to explain, its root causes.

Traditional media research has focused on the behavioral effects that media has on its audiences (Giles, 2003). Researchers in cognitive psychology, sociology, and other social theorists have expanded the traditional behaviorist approach of studying “media effects” to include more far-reaching impacts that media can have on culture, such as the creation of a cultural discourse on crime and criminals. The following study examined the psychological and sociological narratives that are produced by Disney and the influence they have in creating thought-processes for viewing the world, not just on an individual level but on a societal level. Again, media content becomes reality (Davies, 1997), and Disney becomes reality for many children in the United States.

The images in Disney films, while concentrated, simplified, and idealized, represent the ways in which American society introduces the concept of criminality; drawing a distinction between those people that are “good” and those that are “bad” (Giroux, 1999). The repetition with which children are shown these criminal images in Disney films builds a vision of someone who commits a crime as inherently bad, devoid of other redeeming qualities, or any social or environmental explanation for why they became “bad.” The following study critically examined the ways in which these ideas of culture, crime, and media are embodied in the representations of crime and criminals in Disney films.
**METHODS SECTION**

*Selecting the Sample*

In order to determine the way in which Disney films frame cultural pedagogy in teaching children about what constitutes crime and criminals in the United States, I decided to base my sample on the most popular and most widely viewed Disney films to examine their representations of crime. I wanted films that were iconic and that spanned the decades. Since I proposed that Disney’s representations become incorporated in the American collective consciousness and ideas about crime, it is only fitting to look at the films that are most commonly viewed and thus the most influential. In defining “popularity” I considered a number of indicators. Empirically, profits generated from each film were a relatively good gauge as to the film’s success and integration into the cultural domain. However, certain films have come to define and represent Disney more so than others. These are the films that are constantly released on VHS and DVD, who’s characters are plastered on endless numbers of products such as posters, billboards, lunchboxes, stickers, cereal boxes, blankets, clothing, etc. Popular character identities are sold as toys and Halloween costumes and come to life in Disney’s theme parks, as workers parade around dressed as the beloved characters and interact directly with children. These were the films and the characters with which I was most interested because of their status as symbols of American culture. Their enormous prevalence establishes them as some of the earliest archetypal identities that children encounter, taking part in shaping children’s conception as to how the world and its inhabitants function and behave.
Throughout its history, Disney has used multiple different means of categorization and promoting films, such as the Disney Classics collection, the Gold Collection, the “15 Untouchables,” the Masterpieces, etc. Some of these groupings are fluid, some are more inclusive, and they are all dependent on the year in which they were created. Also, Disney has produced some films on their own, some in conjunction with other production companies, and in 1991 Disney entered into an agreement to co-produce films with the animating studio, Pixar. I carefully examined all of these lists and selected some films from each of them based on their success in the box office and their status as iconic images of The Walt Disney Company. In order to be included in the sample, films had to be feature-length, animated, available currently, and recognizable as iconic.

I decided to use only feature-length, animated films because these films are responsible for the enormous growth in popularity of The Walt Disney Company and have become the foundations of the studio. Animated films give the film creators the most flexibility in creating the stories and images, and therefore are better able to depict the creators’ imagination and their perception of what the audience will appreciate, be entertained by, and relate to. Each specific image and frame has to be chosen and created, thus nothing appears by accident on the screen. Because the images are not reliant on pre-existing people already familiar to the general public, their fabricated appearance is able to stand alone as iconography, images that then become cemented into the cultural framework and recognized as real characters.

Given my criteria and the availability of films, I selected the following films for my sample: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Pinocchio* (1940), *Dumbo*

**Procedures**

The first part of my procedure consisted of a preliminary viewing of my selected films. I acquired my targeted films, some on VHS and some on DVD, from many different libraries, home collections, and video rental stores. I watched several films from different time periods in order to conceptually gain a framework for the films and their characters. During this stage, I used no coding schema and instead took general notes on images of crime, criminals, and acceptable and unacceptable behavior. I began to develop my coding scheme based on themes I was seeing throughout the films.

After I had completed my preliminary viewing stage, I generated a list of codes that had emerged as persistent themes in the films and their portrayals of the
villains. These codes were major descriptions of the villains and the nature of their crimes (see “Coding Scheme” below). I then watched all of the films in chronological order beginning with Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs from 1937 and recorded the relevant aspects in each code for each film. This step included re-watching the films that I had viewed in the preliminary stage.

In addition, I brought my films and my coding scheme to a larger group to check reliability. I watched some of the films with various student colleagues, as well as with my advisor, Professor Sarah Carney, to ensure that my analyses and interpretations were consistent with what others believed to be the communicable messages from the representations of crime and criminals. At the end of the process, I had viewed all films twice, and many I had watched three times.

**Coding Scheme**

From my notes and preliminary viewing, I had generated a list of codes that described the main villains in the films. Primary codes included: physical description, gender, race, social class, motives, powers, sidekicks, exploitation, insanity/madness, infantile behavior, prison/incarceration, criminal explanation, possible redemption, enjoyment, religion, punishment, and demise. For “physical description” I listed elements of the villains’ physical being such as size, color, facial features, hair, dress, posture, presence, and body language. “Gender” as a code was more straightforward, and was classified as either male or female. “Race” was more a little more complicated as I recorded the race of the general population in each film, as well as specific racial markers present in the villains. Under “social class” I recorded the
stated or implied wealth and status of the villains. I also kept track of any professions or jobs the villains held. For “motives” I recorded the stated desire of each villain, the goal that led them to commit their crimes. “Powers” was in reference to any physical, magical, or intellectual power the villains possessed and the circumstances in which they exercised this power. Under “sidekicks” I listed any other characters that worked for the main villain or helped commit their crimes. I used the code “exploitation” to keep track of instances in which the villain specifically exploited other characters, using them for their own benefit. This included physical, sexual, and monetary uses of others in order to exert force and dominance, or to advance their desired goal. “Insanity/madness” was used to monitor references to villains as mentally unstable, crazy, and needing psychological help. Under “infantile behavior” I recorded instances in which the villain acted childlike or inappropriate for their age. In the code “prison/incarceration” I recorded mention of the need to contain villains or the actual imprisonment they received as punishment for their crimes. Under “criminal explanation” I recorded any indication for why a particular character was a villain and any social or environmental factor that contributed to their criminality. “Possible redemption” contained instances in which suggestions were made that a villain could outgrow their criminality or decide to abandon a life of crime. I distinguished between the presence of the suggestion and whether the criminal was actually able to change. Under “enjoyment” I recorded whether a villain derived any sense of pleasure from committing crime, both in reference to their goal and to an innate sense of joy from inflicting evil. “Religion” was straightforward and contained mention of a villain’s religious affiliation and instances in which they prayed or spoke of God or
spirits. For the code “punishment” I recorded whether or not the villain was punished for their crimes, and if so, how. Lastly, under “demise” I noted whether the villain dies and if the death is self-inflicted or executed by another character.

Not all of these codes were relevant to each main villain, but the presence or absence of them was significant to examine. I created a spreadsheet with all of these codes paired with each film and filled it in as I watched the films. In addition, I created a separate document for each film and recorded all aspects of criminal behavior and the way in which “criminals” were treated by society in the films. I kept track of any instances in which there was a notable distinction made between good and evil or ambiguities and variations in the acceptability of typically considered criminal behavior. I arranged for some friends and colleagues to watch several of the films with me and give their impressions of the criminals, their behavior, and their treatment by other characters. Films that did not lend themselves to my coding scheme were dropped.

**Analysis**

After I had completed the coding phase of my procedure, I looked at persistent themes that emerged throughout the procedure. One theme that consistently distinguished villains from each other involved criminal motivations. Thus, for the purposes of analysis, villains were divided into categories based on their motives. Using my codes, I examined the different ways the villains were represented within each category, keeping track of descriptions and personality traits. I then looked across the films within each group to draw conclusions about the specific motives.
A second major theme throughout the films involved the ways in which demographic information contributed to the images of crime and criminals. I specifically focused on social conditions that surrounded the lives of the villains, such as social class and race. I looked for consistent references, or, more commonly in this case, the absence of references, to the effect that social conditions have on shaping criminals.

Gender was another theme that required closer examination. I inspected the ways in which representations of male and female criminality differed, and ways in which they were similar. Lastly, I considered the change in representations of crime and criminals over time. I contemplated questions such as, has the criminal become more complicated recently? Are there new kinds of criminals? Are there ways that criminals can reform? Do they reform? Are there representations that have remained constant, and if so, what are they? Through these larger themes that I singled out as persistent and inherent to a criminal’s identity, I considered the general images of crime that Disney communicates to the public. I then compared these representations to what I had learned about crime and criminals in the United States. The results and discussion of my study that follow describes and elaborates on the host of Disney criminals that have become so deeply integrated into American society.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From 1937 with the production of the first Disney feature-length animated film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, The Walt Disney Company has introduced the American public to a host of criminals, partly comprised of villains, witches, sorcerers, and wizards. As previously explained, the Disney formula consistently pits good against evil, and the struggle between the two serves as the foundation for the stories. Those that embody the “evil” component make up the category of criminals that are the focus of this study. Their identities represent the Disney ideology of what constitutes crime and criminals in American society.

From watching Disney films, certain critical messages are transmitted to the general population about the American view on crime. Overall, from the earliest Disney films to the most recent, crime is individualized and unconnected to social conditions. The villains embody a sense of total and utter evil. They are villains and nothing else, with almost no redeemable characteristics. Their motives and their personality characteristics vary, but still retain a fundamental representation of the causes of crime that is largely inconsistent with the reality of crime and criminals in the United States. The villains in Disney films are almost all from the upper or middle class and are already in relatively high positions of social, economic, or political power. Largely motivated by greed and a hankering for excess, the Disney criminals transgress to satisfy their inherently evil desires, though crime in America is much more a derivative of poverty than of an internal greed and villainy (Haney, 2005). The real causes of crime are erased from Disney pictures and replaced with stylized
representations that do not challenge the societal structures in the United States but instead satisfy the viewer’s desire to see good prevail over evil. This idea will be further explored later on.

The depiction of crime and criminals changes over time, though not in a completely chronological fashion. Generally speaking, images of crime in the earlier films are much more straightforward. In these films, it is immediately obvious as to which characters are the criminals and the explanations for their motives and actions are more clearly stated. In some of the later films, crime is more disguised and manifests itself in sometimes surprising ways. Crime is expanded and exists in more complex situations.

There are definite themes that run within the band of Disney villains, and can be grouped together into categories of different typified faces of evil. Motives and personality characteristics largely define whom the criminal is and thus were used as qualifiers when comparing various villains. All of the villains are seeking some form of power. Of course, “power” is a very broad term and can encompass many different forms of political, economic, and social clout. The use of the word “power” here is meant to suggest that each of these villains are motivated by a desire to acquire something that they believe will advance themselves and bring them a particular gain. None of these villains are in positions in which they commit crimes in order to survive. They are all in rather comfortable situations and are driven largely by greed and an internal compulsion to transgress. Some are seeking high status and acclaim (the Queen, Lady Tremaine, Gaston). Others are driven by specific material wishes and desires of wealth (Stromboli, Cruella de Vil, Edgar, Medusa, Mr. Clayton,
Randall Boggs, Skinner), some are trying to overtake the throne or to become the ruler (Prince John, Ursula, Jafar, Scar, Hades, Shan-Yu, Yzma), others are seeking revenge (Captain Hook, Syndrome), and still others act solely out of a desire to inflict evil (the Sheriff, Madame Mim, Maleficent). I will now describe these criminals in the context of what motivations fuel their criminality.

**Status-Seekers**

“Magic mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?” *Snow White, 1937*

![Image of Disney characters](image)

© The Walt Disney Company

This iconic and infamous question illustrates the evil motives of the status-seeking Disney criminals. As earlier stated, one of the major motives for villainy in the Disney films is the desire to maintain or reach a position of high status. Examples of this type of motive come from many films, but for the purposes of this paper I looked particularly at the villains in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), and *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), who are united by their quest for status. They are interested in less tangible markers of success, and want beauty, fame, and respect, rather than political power or wealth. All of them are already quite high
up on whichever social ladder they are on, but are driven by their desire to be on a higher rung.

With the inception of the wicked Queen in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), Disney began a legacy of criminalizing strong, powerful women, causing her to fall prey to her vanity and jealousy. The Queen in *Snow White* is motivated by her yearning to be the most beautiful woman in all of the land, and is characterized by a sense of wickedness that is intensely startling at its depth; her searing cruelty is almost palpable. She instructs her huntsman, “Take [Snow White] far into the forest, find a glade where she can pick wildflowers, and then my faithful huntsman, you will kill her! But to make doubly sure you do not fail, bring back her heart.” The Queen must eliminate the only one more beautiful than she.

In the storybook opening and plot synopsis at the beginning of *Snow White*, the Queen’s epithet is “wicked and vain,” along with other descriptions implying that she is undesirable and unappealing. She insists on being the “fairest of them all,” and as long as she is deluded into thinking she is, she is controllable and not outwardly evil to Snow White, the idealized heroine and the antithesis to the wicked Queen. The pure, humble beauty scrubs the floor and wears rags, content and accepting of her position. She befriends the animals and is childish, innocent, and modest. This is sharply contrasted to the conniving, mystical Queen, who is “mad, jealous, and will stop at nothing.” She chants incantations and conjures spirits from her prophetic mirror, constantly producing swirling, bubbling smoke. This invokes the image of a witch or the spiritual religious women who conspires with the Devil. She wears all black, has a black crow as a pet, and lives amongst rats. The Queen is depicted with
frightening, ominous surroundings, always dead center in the camera shot and eerily lit. In fact, the film constantly juxtaposes the sunny, pleasant images of Snow White as an idealized image of well-being and charity with the dark castle and evil lair of the Queen. As these settings and scenes imply, the Queen is only evil, and is solely defined by her disdain for Snow White. She is never shown not talking about her appearance, Snow White’s appearance, or Snow White’s death. She lives alone and is feared by the community, largely because of her supernatural powers. Her wickedness is permeating and far-reaching.

The personal characteristics and motives for power of the Queen in Snow White (1937) are similar to those of the evil stepmother in Cinderella (1950). Cinderella’s stepmother, Lady Tremaine, is obsessed with being a member of the elite, and marries into a wealthy family of which she becomes the head after her husband dies. The narrator explains in the beginning, “It was upon the untimely death of this good man, however, that the stepmother’s true nature was revealed: cold, cruel, and bitterly jealous of Cinderella’s charm and beauty.”

Lady Tremaine has two motives, one of which is to savor the glory of her wealthy lifestyle with her inherited estate and fortune with Cinderella as her maid, and the other is to have one of her daughters marry into the royal family. Because Cinderella is beautiful and kind and the rightful heir to her father’s fortune, Lady Tremaine attempts to secure her place as the head of the household by subjugating and exploiting Cinderella. Lady Tremaine’s unappealing daughters join her in the terrible treatment of Cinderella. They force her to clean the entire house, bring them breakfast in bed, and do their laundry, ironing, and mending, all the while insisting
that it is done in an outrageously short amount of time. They are ungrateful for her work and scream and yell at her constantly. Lady Tremaine demands Cinderella re-clean everything she has already done, attempting to create unnecessary work for her. Even Lady Tremaine’s cat, Lucifer, is nasty to Cinderella. Lucifer the cat is treated like royalty in this household, and acts like a human, sleeping in his own canopy bed.

Like the Queen from *Snow White*, Lady Tremaine is an imposing, calculating, sly, and manipulative woman. She is elegant, with fancy clothing and jewelry, lovely makeup, and perfectly coiffed hair. Very concerned with appearing civilized and refined, she often scolds her daughters for their bad manners. “Girls, above all, self control!” she reminds them. To her dismay, her daughters are particularly unattractive and homely looking. They do not have the fine facial features of their beautiful stepsister, Cinderella, and are rather repulsive. Even their voices are coarse and piercingly nasal. They are spoiled, rude, and competitive with each other. Likely because of their undesirability, Lady Tremaine feels the need to belittle Cinderella even more, jealous that her own daughters are not, ironically, more like Cinderella. Rather similar to the Queen from *Snow White*, Lady Tremaine is the epitome of the cruel, status hungry woman who only cares about her own materialistic well-being. She possesses a sense of entitlement that to her justifies child abuse.

A criminal from almost forty years later, Gaston from *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) is quite different from these other two female villains, but similar in his desire for beauty and status. His two concerns are to wed the most beautiful girl, and to be publicly admired. However, he is incredibly conceited, obnoxious, chauvinistic, and vain. Physically, he is handsome and muscular, and is revered by his friends and the
other men in his provincial town in France. Yet Gaston is furious that Belle, the most beautiful girl in town, will not agree to marry him. His determination runs deep, and after Belle humiliates him with her rejection of a wedding proposal he sneers, “I’ll have Belle for my wife, make no mistake about that.” Gaston is determined to wed Belle, both because she is beautiful and because she rejected him. He says to his friend, “Who does that girl think she is? No one says no to Gaston! Dismissed, rejected, publicly humiliated, why it’s more than I can bare. I’m disgraced.” Gaston makes it his goal to redeem his reputation, both in the public’s eyes and in his own.

Throughout these three films persists the theme of criminality deriving from a desire for status, specifically in terms of beauty and social standing. In these films, the Queen, Lady Tremaine, and Gaston are selfish, cruel, and only concerned with their own agendas. Physical attractiveness is one of the highest markers of success for these villains, and they crave to be admired by the public within their social circles. They are already in elitist positions, yet their greed drives them to harm those who stand in their way of even greater means of marking their status and success.

Within this grouping of villains it is undeniable that a gender bias exists in the portrayal of the villains. The two female villains, the Queen and Lady Tremaine, are treated much harsher than is Gaston. The women are portrayed as pure evil and utterly despicable, whereas Gaston is ridiculous and somewhat laughable in his stupidity, and even admired by many of the townspeople. Gaston himself is also sexist and chauvinistic, though is never reprimanded for it. Instead, he has beautiful girls swooning over him and wishing that they were the objects of his desire. I will further address issues of gender in a later section. It is important to note that these
characters span a wide time frame (from 1937 to 1991), indicating that the idea of criminality as resulting from a desire to increase status existed back when Walt Disney began producing feature-films and is still prevalent in the more modern day. These particular characters are less interested in material or political gain, unlike the characters we will now shift to looking at.

Wealth-Seekers

“I’ll need those witless peasants to dig up my gold!” (Pocahontas, 1995)

The villains in this group are driven by their desire to acquire some particular commodity or money. Many of them exploit young, innocent characters in their quest for wealth or goods. These villains are from the films *Pinocchio* (1940), *101 Dalmatians* (1961), *The Aristocats* (1970), *The Rescuers* (1977), *Pocahontas* (1995), *Tarzan* (1999), *Monsters, Inc.* (2001), and *Ratatouille* (2007). Each of these villains...
has a particular goal: the acquisition of something that will bring them money or material gain. Spanning a period of over sixty years, these films showcase a type of villain that is seen again and again throughout the decades. Like the status-seekers, these criminals are not in positions of hardship, but rather are determined to get whatever it is they want as an additional benefit to their lives.

Greedy, dishonest Stromboli is the villain in *Pinocchio* (1940), who is obsessed with making the largest possible profit from his traveling theatre show. He is a fat, dark skinned, Italian puppeteer with dark hair and a long dark beard. With the help of his sly fox accomplice, Stromboli tricks Pinocchio into joining his theatre shows, promising him fame and fortune, which he has no intention of delivering. He exploits Pinocchio’s unusual identity as a wooden puppet that can talk and walk. Stromboli is a cruel manager, has a bad temper, hits Pinocchio when he makes a mistake, and threatens him with more physical abuse. He laughs at Pinocchio when he asks to go home after his first day of work and instead locks him in a birdcage and snorts, “This will be your home.” Stromboli calls Pinocchio his “little wooden gold-mine” and tells him that when he gets old he will make good firewood. Stromboli is a selfish, gruff, and exploitative business manager who only cares about making the most profit off of whatever and whomever he can.

Moving later to the 1960s, Cruella de Vil, in the film *101 Dalmatians* (1961), is similarly greedy and exploitative and is driven by her desire to make a coat out of Dalmatian fur. She is highly concerned with fashion and decides that she must have this coat; the fact that she has to steal and kill one hundred and one puppies to do so does not deter her in the least. She tries to manipulate her friend, Anita, and her
husband, Roger, into selling their puppies to her, but when she is denied, decides that she must steal them. Her personal desires are of the utmost importance to her and she has no regard for how her actions will negatively affect others. Cruella de Vil is a socialite, yet she does not appear to have many friends, and her only concerns involve materialistic gain. She is wild and less composed than the earlier female villains, yet she still maintains a powerful presence that intimidates and demands respect. She becomes crazed by her lust for this coat, and refuses to give up at any point.

Crime in *The Aristocats* (1970) illustrates the power of money in corrupting traditionally good people. In the beginning of the film, Edgar is the trusted butler of Parisian Madame Adélaïde Bonfamille. He is portrayed as a friendly, loyal employee and friend of Madame Bonfamille. When he learns that Madame’s estate and fortune will be left first to her cats after her death, then passed down to him after the cats die, he becomes determined to dispose of the cats so that he will be the first beneficiary. Mesmerized by the amount of money that will be left, Edgar’s character changes into one of a criminal. He is not typically an evil person, but is driven by greed in this particular situation. Edgar becomes conniving, deceitful, conceited, and rude, changed from his earlier more passive, dutiful persona.

This is one of the only instances in Disney films in which the criminal is someone who is not a member of the upper class elite or in some other position of power, be it social or magical. Even though Edgar seems content with his life and fairly well off financially, demonstrated by the fact that he is joyful, clean, and employed, he is still in a profession of servitude, whereas none of the other villains have been. This idea that criminals in Disney films come almost exclusively from the
upper class will be addressed later. Though Edgar is not in traditional position of power, he certainly is not poverty stricken and works in an elegant mansion and seems to be treated very well.

Several years later in *The Rescuers* (1977), the criminal is a woman named Medusa, the owner of a pawnshop who is obsessed with finding an enormous diamond hidden in a famous pirate’s cave. Though quite sexualized, she is a rather repulsive, middle-aged woman with smudged makeup, a revealing but unflattering dress, and frizzy hair. She is curt, angry, manipulative, and bossy. Her eyes are huge and green and reminiscent of devilish cat eyes. Medusa forces an orphan girl named Penny to aid her in this search, exploiting Penny for her small size and ability to fit down the small mouth of the cave. Medusa is completely insensitive to the well-being of the child and only cares about finding this diamond, which she explains is “filled with power.” Penny has already retrieved numerous other jewels, diamonds, rubies, and pearls from this cave, but none have quenched Medusa’s desire for the famed biggest and most powerful diamond. Medusa curses her assistant, Snoops, for being “too soft” and not leaving Penny down in the cave for long enough, instead pulling her up when she becomes frightened of the dark and the water. Miss Bianca, one of the mice attempting to save Penny from this horrible woman, says of Medusa, “She is insane, utterly mad.” In fact, Medusa does come across as rather crazy, and even has two enormous crocodiles as pets. She seems to have had some concern for her physical appearance, yet is currently too distracted to engage in any personal up keep. Her cruelty results from her selfish desires and lack of general empathy.
Moving toward more modern depictions of crime, the film, *Pocahontas* (1995) exhibits Governor Ratcliffe as the wealth-seeking villain. Head of the Virginia Company and searching for gold in the New World, Governor Ratcliffe is a heartless and greedy, but also ridiculous, criminal. He knows that he is not well liked, and considered a “pathetic social climber who’s failed at everything,” yet he is determined that his men find copious amounts of gold, showing King James how successful he can be. Governor Ratcliffe is fat, elaborately dressed, and well groomed. He is not a burly, tough and strong man, however, and is highly femininized. He has pigtails with bows in his hair and wears pink. Governor Ratcliffe does not do any of the manual labor himself, and justifies it by explaining, “I’d help you to dig boys, but I’ve got a crick in my spine.” His assistant Williams even dresses him. He is solely concerned with the acquisition of gold, and uses his men to find it for him. Governor Ratcliffe is supportive and encouraging of his men to their faces, but behind their backs he calls them “witless peasants” and says he needs them solely to “dig up [his] gold.” As a villain, Governor Ratcliffe’s greedy motives and cruel actions are characteristic of the Disney wealth-seeker, yet he is strikingly laughable and in the end serves as a mockery for his men.

Again motivated by exploitative greed, Mr. Clayton in *Tarzan* (1999) plays the role of the supposed guardian for gorilla researchers Jane and Archimedes Porter on their expedition in the jungle. Clayton actually has his intentions set on trapping the gorillas in cages and selling them in England. Clayton poses as a caring guide and protector to Jane and Archimedes, but is using them and their knowledge of gorillas to lead him to the pack so that he can capture and sell the animals. Mr. Clayton is well
groomed, muscular, and has an angular face with a heavily pronounced jaw. He looks refined, wears stylish clothes, and smokes a pipe. Aggressive and always armed with both a sword and a gun, Clayton fires his rifle continuously and unnecessarily. Manipulative and sly, Mr. Clayton takes advantage of everyone else’s interests so as to achieve his own goal of finding the gorillas. He has no concern for others and is offensively smug and conceited when it appears he has gotten his way. When he traps Tarzan, Jane, and Archimedes on his ship, he sarcastically says to Tarzan, “So sorry about the rude welcome, old boy. But I couldn’t have you making a scene when we put your furry friends in their cages!” When Tarzan asks him why he is taking the gorillas captive, Clayton responds, “Why? For 300 pounds sterling a head. Actually, I have you to thank my boy, couldn’t have done it without you.” Clayton is obnoxiously demeaning in his use of an affectionate term for someone he has just lied to, taken advantage of, and imprisoned.

Just two years after Tarzan (1999), in the Pixar film, Monsters, Inc. (2001), the main villain is a monster named Randall Boggs, who is a sly chameleon with the power to make himself invisible. Crime in this film lies in corporate corruption, insidious within the company’s employees, and supported by the head of the company, Henry J. Waternoose. Their company, Monsters, Inc., is run by monsters who scare children at night, bottle their screams, and use it as energy to power their city. Randall and Waternoose are running a covert operation to extract screams from children illegally, attempting to “revolutionize the scaring industry” and increase their energy supply. Randall calls this an “evil plot” and Waternoose gives away his true
wicked character as he declares, “I’ll kidnap a thousand children before I let this company die. And I will silence anyone who gets in my way!”

From the most recently made Disney film, wealth-seeking chef Skinner is the villain in Ratatouille (2007). Skinner is a short, dark-skinned, bad tempered, and conceited chef who tries to profit off of his recently inherited famous restaurant label by marketing cheap, low-quality frozen food. He is an angry man who is unpleasant and rather absurd. Though concerned with fine dining and cuisine, Skinner chooses to forgo the restaurant’s haute culinary reputation in favor of a quick buck from the easily marketable gimmicky food. He is demeaning and mean to other people. When Skinner learns that the restaurant actually rightfully belongs to a young chef named Linguini who has recently received high praise, Skinner becomes determined to bring Linguini down, deceive him, and keep the restaurant in his own name so that he makes the most profit. Skinner is portrayed as insane when he begins to realize that Linguini is relying on a rat.

Stromboli, Cruella de Vil, Edgar, Medusa, Governor Ratcliffe, Mr. Clayton, Randall Boggs, and Skinner are united their desires to acquire material wealth, which lead them to commit crimes in pursuit of these goals. Aside from Edgar, the rest of these villains are never shown in any positive light, and are solely defined by their quest for a particular commodity and their lack of concern for whoever stands in their way of its attainment. All of these villains are insanely greedy, and rely on the exploitation of the innocent to satisfy their desires. Despite their deep-seated wickedness, none of these characters are particularly terrifying. There is a sense of foolishness in their personas that is not seen in characters like the Queen in Snow
White (1937) or Lady Tremaine in Cinderella (1950). Even those who are appearance-conscious seem rather ridiculous in their crazed, wild obsessions. This group of villains also spans a large period of time, from Pinocchio in 1940 to Ratatouille in 2007, suggesting that the desire for material acquisitions has been a cause for crime throughout the entirety of Walt Disney’s career and after his death. In addition, this particular criminal motive is the most commonly seen in comparison to the other categories of Disney criminals. Crime as resulting from a mission to acquire wealth is a popular theme amongst Disney films and persists to the present day.

**Throne-Seekers**

“I am your master now! Genie, grant me my first wish, I wish to rule on high, as sultan!” (Aladdin, 1992)

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<tr>
<th>Prince John</th>
<th>Ursula</th>
<th>Jafar</th>
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<tr>
<td>Robin Hood</td>
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© The Walt Disney Company
Like Jafar from *Aladdin*, this group of villains is united in their desire to become the absolute ruler and to usurp political power from the current, decent character in charge. They come from the films *Robin Hood* (1973), *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Aladdin* (1992), *The Lion King* (1994), *Hercules* (1997), *Mulan* (1998), and *The Emperor’s New Groove* (2000). There is also certainly an element of revenge that exists in most of their motives, yet their main desire is to dispel the ruler in power and assume the throne themselves. Some of these villains are funny; some represent corruption and jealousy from within the ruling body, and some are just plain wicked. Whatever their characterization, this relatively recent group of villains introduces the idea that crime can be driven by a desire to rule.

In the film *Robin Hood* (1973), the main villain, Prince John, takes over the throne and is an evil, yet ridiculous character. He comes from an earlier time, 1973, than the rest of the villains in this category, and he is somewhat different in that when the film begins he has already assumed the throne after conspiring to send the real king, his brother, King Richard, away. Prince John lives by the motto, “Steal from the poor to feed the rich.” He is a terribly greedy, self-centered, vain, and childish lion. Prince John delights in his collection of taxes, playing with his money and laughing at his ability to exploit his constituents for his own benefit. He is narcissistic and gazes admiringly at himself in the mirror, readjusting his crown that is clearly too large for his small, measly head. He proudly explains to Sir Hiss that his crown gives him “a feeling of power” and a “cruel chuckle.” Prince John is infatuated with himself and his acquisition of the royal throne and the ability to collect as much money and riches as possible. The power only brings him cruelty. Prince John wields his political
position of power to enforce his domination over his constituents. When they publicly mock him and denounce him as a ruler, he retaliates by increasing taxes and throwing those who cannot pay in jail, just because he can. He has no intention of helping others or advancing the state of his kingdom.

Ironically, Prince John is highly concerned with his name going down in history as a great ruler, yet his conception of “great” is limited and only self-serving. He is solely interested in the superficial aspect of fame and power. Though he is desperate to be admired, a fear of inferiority lurks inside of Prince John. He is seized by jealously of his brother, King Richard, whom his mother always preferred, and was loved by the kingdom. Prince John refuses to let anyone speak King Richard’s name, the utterance of which sends him into a fury. He tries to grasp onto any indication that he himself is great, and is incredibly susceptible to flattery as a temporary ego booster, even when it is clearly undeserved. Robin Hood and Little John easily steal from Prince John by distracting him with foolish compliments that he delights in hearing. Prince John frequently regresses to the state of a young child whenever he becomes upset or feels threatened and sucks his thumb, calling for his “mommy” as a childish melody plays in the background. This infantile depiction of the villain, Prince John, is highly pronounced and persists throughout the film. Not only does he exhibit these childish habits, but he is small, weak, and stupid throughout the duration of the film.

Prince John’s motives shift and become redirected toward seeking revenge on Robin Hood for his continuous humiliation. Prince John becomes so intent on killing Robin Hood that he looses sight of his typical interest: money. He says that he would
give all of his gold if he could just get his hands on Robin Hood. He is crazed by his embarrassment, and after he realizes that his mother’s castle has been torched and Robin Hood is still alive, Prince John cries, sucks his thumb, and calls out for his mother. Sir Hiss yells that the Prince has “gone raving mad.” Indeed, throughout the whole film, Prince John comes across as an evil, yet ridiculous and silly character. He is superficially power-hungry and is motivated by humiliation, both by Robin Hood and his brother King Richard.

The rest of the villains in this category are from almost twenty years later, beginning with Ursula, the Sea Witch, of The Little Mermaid (1989). She is bitter, sly, and seeking power and revenge. Banished from the kingdom by King Triton, Ursula plots to overtake the throne from the depths of her dark and frightening ocean lair. She is an enormous octopus, purple and black in color, and is quite grotesque. Her facial features are very exaggerated and she looks almost clown-like with a gigantic mouth and huge eyes. She has a sexualized, voluptuous, but overweight, body and shimmies and shakes her chest continuously, stressing the importance of “body language” when appealing to a man. Her femininity is highly salient, though portrayed extremely negatively, and her seductiveness is seen as predatory. Ursula wears a sexy black dress that has no straps and a very low cut back. Clearly she is image-conscious herself, and wears makeup, jewelry, and nail polish. She expresses an attraction to handsome Prince Eric, and even attempts to marry him toward the end of the film. However, she is single and lives only with her two eels and her prisoners. Her attempts at being lady-like are in vain, and once she gains power from King Triton she assumes the voice of a man. Ursula is power-hungry, vengeful, and cruel.
As she applies makeup and hair mousse to her rather hideous visage in her mirror, Ursula tells the heroine of the film, Ariel, that she can help her. She claims, “It’s what I live for, to help unfortunate merfolk like yourself. Poor souls with no one else to turn to.” Ursula then goes on to sing a song about how kind and helpful she is.

I admit that in the past I've been a nasty. They weren't kidding when they called me, well, a witch. But you'll find that nowadays, I've mended all my ways. Repented, seen the light, and made a switch to this.

Ursula claims to be a reformed criminal, though nothing in her seems genuinely generous or reformed. Even though she claims to have changed and now lives to help others, she keeps many unhappy-looking prisoners and seems to relish in their misfortunes, all the while delighted by her own powers and abilities. There is no indication that she has changed at all. This song and claim seem sarcastic and an example of her further deceitfulness. As an outcast, she lives to undermine the power of good that rules over the sea and bemoans her own “deprived” situation.

At the end of film, Ursula temporarily gains control of King Triton’s crown and staff. Crazed with power, Ursula claims to be “ruler of all the ocean.” She greatly enlarges herself, bubbling up from the sea to the surface and begins to speak with a deep, man’s voice. She is absolutely terrifying and looses all indications that she is a female. This is an interesting suggestion that the more evil a woman gets, the manlier she becomes. This will be further explored later. She bellows, “The waves obey my every whim. The sea and all its spoils bow to my power!” This demented greed ends up leading to her downfall. Ursula, the Sea Witch, is a villain characterized by her cruelty, her desire to assume the throne, and her utter repulsiveness that permeates her every action.
Jafar from the film *Aladdin* (1992) is the Sultan’s long-standing advisor who conspires to take over the throne. He is first introduced by the narrator as “a dark man with a dark purpose.” In fact, his skin is quite darker than that of the other “good” characters, and he has a large bulbous nose, physical characteristics stereotypically Arabic. Jafar’s determination to usurp the Sultan’s power leads him to try multiple plans: locating the magic genie, marrying Jasmine, and then wishing for absolute power from the genie. Ultimately, he becomes so obsessed with ultimate power that he brings about his own downfall. He is manipulative, conniving, conceited, and cruel. Jafar’s pet bird, Iago calls him, “Your mighty evil one.” Unlike Ursula, Jafar is tall, slender, clean, and respectfully dressed. Yet he is creepy and sly, and has a staff that can hypnotize the Sultan to follow his command. He uses his position as the supposed trusted advisor to undermine the Sultan and bring power to himself. He commands the large, muscular, burly guards to carry out his wishes and is eventually reprimanded by the Sultan for overstepping his boundaries. Jafar’s relationship with other people is characterized by the disrespect he shows everyone. He is chauvinistic and demeaning toward Jasmine, he calls the genie “slave” and is completely unappreciative of the genie’s services, and he even insults his pet and friend, Iago.

Jafar’s unquenchable desire for power inevitably drives him crazy. Excited by his latest plot, Jafar doubles over in a fit of laughter, to which Iago exclaims, “Oh boy, he’s cracked. He’s gone nuts.” Later, as Jafar is swept up in demanding more and more power from the genie, the genie calls him “senior psychopath.” In an attempt to attain “absolute power,” Jafar transforms into a genie, red and devilish looking. His voice becomes much deeper and booms, “The absolute power! The earth
is mine to command, to control!” This insane and snowballing desire for power ends up trapping him in a genie lamp, powerless and stuck. Jafar illustrates the relationship between the criminal quest for power and insanity portrayed in Disney.

Like Jafar, Scar from *The Lion King* (1994), made only two years later, is also determined to become the ruler and is slender, dark in color, sly, and vicious. Scar is even more drastic in his plots to overtake the throne as he actually kills the king, his brother, Mufasa. Scar’s face is shrunken and sullen, and he has a pointy nose and chin, with green, beady eyes. One of his eyes has a white scar over it. Like his name and his facial marker, Scar is like a bad mark on the family. Zazu the bird reassures Mufasa, “There’s one in every family, sire… and they always manage to ruin special occasions.” Scar is naturally the “bad” child in the family and always has been. He claims to have inherited brains, but not brute strength, and thus uses his manipulative, coy intellect to kill his strong and powerful brother, Mufasa.

Scar always lurks in the dark and is friends with the dejected, foul hyenas. He mobilizes them to help overthrow Mufasa, and they follow him blindly. The hyenas march in strict line as Scar sings about becoming king. They are reminiscent of the Nazi army, heads obediently turned to their leader and following robotic movements. After Scar kills Mufasa and sends Simba away, he allows the hyenas to enter Pride Rock and live amongst the other animals, sending the kingdom into a state of disarray and destruction. Scar breaks the circle of life that is so essential to the maintenance of life in Pride Rock. He disrupts the balance of the food chain and brings the hyenas up from the bottom to live amongst the pure, uncorrupt creatures. Pride Rock becomes dark and bleak, barren and without food and water. Even the hyenas are unhappy with
the way things are, telling Scar they have a “bone to pick” with him. Scar’s greed and criminal actions disrupt the harmony of nature.

In the film *Hercules* (1997), the villainous god, Hades, is the Lord of the Underworld, but wants to take over rule of Mt. Olympus from Zeus, where the rest of the gods reside. He is large, tall, overweight, and filthy, with yellowed teeth and eyes. Quite notable about him is his comedic nature. He is constantly cracking jokes and does not seem incredibly tough or frightening. His large size is attributed to being overweight rather than muscular. Hades is cowardly and enlists others to battle Hercules while he sits and watches, laughing at their attempts. His cohorts are not very loyal, and humorously purchase memorabilia in support of Hercules, an enemy of Hades. Though Hades is physically unattractive, greedy, and lacking empathy, he is not a completely despicable character and brings much humor to the film.

*Mulan* (1998) is an especially frightening film in its depiction of war and mass murder. The main villain, Shan-Yu of the Hun army, is absolutely terrifying. He is determined to take over China, and is powerful, enormous, muscular, imposing, and sadistic. He has darker, greyer skin than the heroes of Imperial China and has piercing yellow eyes, thick eyebrows, a menacing mustache, and sharp, pointy fingernails. His teeth are like fangs. His armies have similarly colored skin, and are incredibly evil looking. They are fierce and numerous. “Tell your Emperor to send his strongest armies, I’m ready,” he challenges scouts from Imperial China. The Huns have much blood on their hands as they’ve burned entire villages and killed many innocent people on their quest to kill the Emperor and take over China. There is nothing humorous about Shan-Yu. There is something different about this film in that it
involves mass murder. In other Disney films death is sometimes, but not always involved, and when it is, very few people are killed. The expanse of dead bodies and pillaged and burned villages depicted in this film is horrifying, depressing, and eerie. Shan-Yu as a character embodies these terrible war crimes and exudes fear and terror.

Yzma from *The Emperor’s New Groove* (2000) is the Mesopotamian Emperor’s advisor who is trying to take over the throne and rule herself as Empress. She first oversteps her boundaries as advisor by attempting to rule the empire from behind the Emperor’s back, an act that leads to her being fired. Then desiring to assume ultimate power, she tries multiple times to kill the Emperor. Yzma is the only character in the film that does not look like a typical human. Instead she looks like a bug, with purple skin, huge yellow eyes, a pinched face, an enormous mouth, and is terribly skinny and slender. Her femininity is highlighted with her excessive jewelry, fake eyelashes, low-cut black cocktail dress, and her employment of a hunky and muscular male assistant, Kronk. She has a shrill voice and cruel demeanor, but is not very composed and is more on the wild side. She is conniving, sly, manipulative, greedy, and self-absorbed. However, she is foolish in her frustration at her inability to prevail, and is brought down by her assistant, Kronk who is an idiot. She is a humorous character despite her wicked intentions.

Prince John, Ursula, Jafar, Scar, Hades, Shan-Yu, and Yzma are united in their motivations to overthrow their current ruler and to usurp their power. It is notable that almost all of these villains come from films that are relatively recent. Thus the association of criminality with a desire to overtake the throne is a more recent development in Disney ideology. Interestingly, all of these characters except
for Shan-Yu have some sort of personal relationship with the current ruler, be it familial or occupational. There is a sense of revenge and bitterness that exists within these characters largely because they are not the ones in power. They are also somewhat comical. Shan-Yu is also the most terrifying and least humorous of all these characters, perhaps because of his lack of connection to the people he is attempting to thwart and thus can be portrayed as the proverbial and fundamental opposite of goodness. Each of these criminals is driven by their own personal desire to acquire power for themselves.

**Revenge-Seekers**

“*I’ll be a bigger hero than you ever were!*” (*The Incredibles*, 2004)

The villains in this category are motivated by their desire to prove their strength and superiority over those who have slighted, offended, or dominated them in the past. Though some of the villains in other categories have desires for revenge incorporated into their main motives of status or power, Captain Hook from *Peter Pan* (1953) and Syndrome from *The Incredibles* (2004) are the two best examples of
Disney criminals primarily motivated by a desire to harm a particular person because of humiliation or rejection they suffered at the hands of this person.

Captain Hook from *Peter Pan* (1953) is motivated by his desire to seek revenge on his nemesis, a boy named Peter Pan who once cut off his hand and fed it to a crocodile. Captain Hook is tall and lanky, yet muscular and well dressed and coifed. He is a crooked pirate who sneers and bemoans his inability to catch Peter Pan. As head of his pirate ship, Captain Hook postpones his and his crew’s normal mission of piracy, instead focusing on the destruction of Pan. Though his crew is unhappy with this change of plans and believes they are “playing ring around the rosy with Peter Pan” instead of acting like pirates, Captain Hook has a one-track mind and is determined to kill Peter, no matter what. “I’ll get you for this Pan if it’s the last thing I do,” he frustratingly yells. Though well-dressed and concerned with his appearance, Captain Hook is portrayed as ridiculous and childlike. Despite his older age and extensive experience as a murderous, blundering pirate, Captain Hook is made to look a fool by Peter Pan, a child and the “spirit of youth,” who outwits and outfights him constantly. Captain Hook is also terrified of the crocodile that ate his hand and runs for cover whenever it is near, jumping into the arms of his assistant like a baby and hiding under a chair and blanket, crying for help.

From almost fifty years later, Syndrome from *The Incredibles* (2004) is also an obsessed, crazed villain. Initially an awkward looking, devoted fan of the superhero Mr. Incredible, Syndrome tries to become Mr. Incredible’s assistant, calling himself Incredikid, though he has no physical superpowers and instead relies on his intellect to develop technology that can simulate the powers of the “supers.”
Mr. Incredible rejects the boy, telling him he works alone and that he should go home. In retaliation, Syndrome spends years manufacturing gadgets and robots in an elaborate plan to become the most powerful superhero, which entails a convoluted ploy to put an entire city in danger and then to save it. After capturing Mr. Incredible, Syndrome explains, “All I wanted was to help you. I learned an important lesson, you can’t count on anyone, especially your heroes. Now you respect me, because I’m a threat. And that’s the way it works.” Syndrome is a very unappealing, unattractive character that has a warped sense of good and evil deriving from his shattering rejection as a young boy. Though clearly very intelligent and resourceful, Syndrome becomes insane with vengeance that he funnels into a bizarre obsession with reeking havoc and cruelty in order to then be revered as a hero.

Though this particular theme of crime spans a long time period in Disney films, beginning in 1953 and reappearing in 2004, this highly concentrated, one-track desire for revenge is not frequently portrayed as a singular motive. In fact, revenge has been part of the motives of some of the other villains I have already examined. Consider status-hunger Gaston from *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) who becomes obsessed with marrying Belle partly because she publicly humiliated and denounced him; Governor Ratcliffe from *Pocahontas* (1995), motivated by a desire for wealth but also to prove to those who do not like him that he can in fact be successful; Prince John from *Robin Hood* (1973) becomes uniquely consumed by thwarting Robin Hood who steals from and embarrasses him; Ursula from *The Little Mermaid* (1989) was banished from the kingdom by King Triton whom she tries to overthrow; similarly, Hades from *Hercules* (1997) was banished from heaven and confined to hell and now
tries to seek revenge on Zeus. Thus, revenge is a popular motive among criminals, though not frequently the only motivation behind acting criminally. The two most obvious examples of seeking revenge solely for its own intrinsic value are Captain Hook and Syndrome.

These two characters, Captain Hook and Syndrome, are similar in their villainous attempts to seek revenge. Deeply hurt and humiliated by particular individuals, they completely restructure their lives around bringing harm to them in retaliation. Though occasionally frightening in their cruelty and resourcefulness, they are ultimately unsuccessful in their attempts and instead end up appearing even more ridiculous for their failures and intense, unrewarding obsessions. The image of crime these two perpetuate stems from internal turmoil and a desire to redeem themselves through crime, which only ends up bringing insanity and demise.

**Evil-Seekers**

“You poor, simple fools. Thinking you could defeat me, me! The Mistress of All Evil! (Sleeping Beauty, 1959)

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<tr>
<th>Character</th>
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<tr>
<td>The Sheriff</td>
<td>Robin Hood</td>
<td>1953</td>
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<td>Madame Mim</td>
<td>The Sword in the Stone</td>
<td>1963</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maleficent</td>
<td>Sleeping Beauty</td>
<td>1959</td>
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A small percentage of the Disney villains are characterized by no particular motive except to perpetuate the forces of evil and to take pleasure out of others’ pain. These criminals are not looking for a tangible acquiescence of status, money, or power for themselves, but rather they are evil for the sake of being bad. Although the villains in the other categories have seemed to enjoy and take pleasure in their malicious ways, these villains, from the films *Robin Hood* (1953), *The Sword in the Stone* (1963) and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) are criminals only for this reason. They are solely motivated by their desire to stop the forces of good.

The Sheriff from *Robin Hood* (1953) is referred to by the townspeople as “old bad news himself” and he takes sadistic pleasure in exploiting the poor for their small amounts of hard earned money. The Sheriff laughs at Friar Tuck, sarcastically calling him the “do-gooder,” and knows that whatever good Friar Tuck has attempted, he will be able to undo. In a painful scene, the Sheriff seeks out the only coins hidden in the cast of a poor man with a broken leg. He bangs on the cast and knocks the coins out, laughing and purposefully exuding his mercilessness. He explains, “Prince John says that taxes should hurt.” The Sheriff also visits a poor family of rabbits and takes their only hard-earned coin as well, chiding them, “The family that saves together, pays together.” As his last biting, hurtful remark that he makes when he steals the poor’s money, the Sheriff joyfully and sarcastically reports that Prince John blesses them. The Sheriff justifies his evil actions to the poor and absolves any sense of guilt by explaining that he is just doing his job. He sings, “They call me a slob, but I do my job.” He sheds any sense of personal responsibility for bringing about great misfortune to the already underprivileged because he is doing this work under orders
from someone else. However, the film does not excuse him for his actions, and in the end when King Richard has been reinstated and Prince John brought down and imprisoned, the Sheriff is right there with him in jail.

In *The Sword in the Stone* (1963), the villain is a wizard named Madame Mim. She exists as the evil counterpart to the good wizard, Merlin. She loves evil, delights in sickness, and hopes that people’s ailments are serious. She declares, “Black sorcery is my dish of tea” and vows to destroy the young, valiant, and kind Arthur because anything “good” is actually bad in her book and must be eliminated. She explains, “With only a touch, I have the power to wither a flower. I find delight in the gruesome and grim.” Though set on doing away with Arthur, she does not seek him out; he accidentally falls into her house through the chimney. Once alerted to his “goodness” she takes up the task of his eradication. She is the opposite of pleasantry and hates sunshine. Lying and cheating are frequent activities for Madame Mim whenever given the opportunity. She is unpleasant and does not have redeeming qualities. Despite her obsession with evil, Madame Mim is not frightening, but instead is a laughable buffoon. She is short, overweight, unkempt, messy, childish, and goofy. She feels compelled to convince Arthur that she is truly powerful in her ability to enact evil magic. To show him, she changes her size and her appearance, both of which are not very awe-inspiring or frightening. Madame Mim is a surprising character to serve as the embodiment of evil, and is a complete opposite of Disney’s more well known evil-seeking villain, Maleficent.

Though created before Madame Mim, Maleficent, the villain in *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) is perhaps Disney’s most terrifying villain, the pinnacle of evil. She
acts solely out of a desire to harm, rather than to achieve any particular personal gain, and is commanding and frightening. Her character is reminiscent of the Queen from *Snow White* (1937) and *Lady Tremaine* of Cinderella (1950) in her searing feminine cruelty, yet Maleficent’s singular motive to harm rather than to obtain something specific makes her that much more wicked. Maleficent’s agenda is to assert her power and to remain perpetually feared by everyone. She calls herself “the mistress of all evil,” and associates herself with “all the powers of Hell.” She wears all black and even has horns, suggesting her relationship with the Devil. Tall, and slender, Maleficent is incredibly imposing, yet carries herself with composure. Her angular face is neatly painted with bright red lipstick and lavender eye shadow, and her arched eyebrows are stylized and intense. Though devilish and cruel, Maleficent maintains an aspect of female beauty.

Maleficent first appears at the ceremony for baby Aurora, materializing out of a green, swirling cloud in the middle of the floor as the doors burst open, wind blows in, the music becomes violent and daunting, and her elaborate fiery black cape flaps around her. She is equipped with a crystal ball atop a staff, and a black crow. Maleficent places a curse on the long awaited newborn daughter of the King and Queen, Aurora, that by Aurora’s sixteenth birthday, she will prick her finger on a spindle and die. Sarcastic, sly, and manipulative, Maleficent knows her strength is far greater than that of anyone else. However, the fairy, Fauna, reminds the others that, “Maleficent doesn’t know anything about love, or kindness, or the joy of helping others.” The fairies try to defeat Maleficent and her curse with kindness, the “only thing she can’t understand and won’t expect.” Thus the fairies hide Aurora in a
cottage in the forest for the first sixteen years of her life. Maleficent spends these sixteen years miserable. The narrator reads, “For everyone knew that as long as Maleficent’s domain thundered with her wrath and frustration, her evil prophecy has not yet been filled.” Furious with her helpers, she refers to them as “hopeless, and a disgrace to the forces of evil.” For Maleficent, the forces of evil reign and are the only worthy judges.

Finally, when Maleficent believes she has killed Princess Aurora and brought misery to the kingdom, she gloats, “A most gratifying day. For the first time in sixteen years I shall sleep well.” Inflicting pain and suffering on others is what Maleficent lives for. She sadistically tortures her prisoner, Prince Philip, and reminds him that he will not get his fairytale ending. Throughout this film, Maleficent is essentially synonymous with the Devil. As Disney’s most villainous villain, Maleficent is unique in the combination of her physical power, an impending sense of doom, and the sole desire to destroy and to spread evil. She is not seeking anything concrete. She is internally evil because she wants to be.

The Sheriff from Robin Hood (1973), Madame Mim from The Sword in the Stone (1953), and Maleficent from Sleeping Beauty (1959) are united in their existence as villains for the sake of being villains. They take great pleasure in committing their crimes, and express a desire to undermine the forces of good. They are not personally invested in acquiring anything, except the knowledge that they brought evil, destruction, and cruelty to their victims. Both the Sheriff and Madame Mim, though utterly vile in motivation, as characters are somewhat laughable and
goofy. They are not physically attractive, and do not possess a deep sense of anger. In contrast to this image, Maleficent is thoroughly terrifying and strikingly cruel.

**Further Reflections**

Through the exploration of these villains’ identities, it is evident that crime exists in this world of Disney as a cause of some inherent character flaw in the criminal and is unrelated to social conditions. Each of these villains is naturally a bad person or animal, and is portrayed as the foil to the heroic characters that embody innocence, charity, and purity. Though their motives differ, the villains are actually quite similar. They are largely greedy, self-absorbed, manipulative, cruel, and lacking empathy. They are all seeking some sort of power, be it status, wealth, or political rule. Their crimes are committed for selfish reasons, driven by their internal desire to transgress. Most of the villains are also characterized by insanity and madness. This further locates criminality within the individual, as portraying the villains as crazy or insane makes them seem like they are personally afflicted with some psychological illness that is unique to them.

The Disney representation of criminality as deriving from an internal quality is consistent with how Americans generally view crime in the United States. Craig Haney (1982) discussed the idea of psychological individualism that entered American thought and explanations for behavior in the nineteenth century and heavily pervades the American legal system, specifically in terms of criminal justice.

This paradigm manifested itself conceptually in various ‘scientific’ analyses of the criminal type, social Darwinist doctrines that portrayed criminals as evolutionary misfits, and in widespread disease metaphors for crime. Its legal influence could be seen in free will doctrines of criminal
responsibility, the movement to indeterminate sentencing, and in various "bad blood" and habitual criminal statutes” (p. 192).

This idea of criminality residing within the individual has enormous implications for how Americans view crime, portray it in the media, and make plans for its eradication. Haney (2005) discussed the benefit to the general society of viewing crime as deriving from inherent character flaws rather than socio-economic structural failures, in that it absolves the general public of any responsibility for the causes of crime. “Locating the causes of capital crime exclusively within the offender—whose evil must be distorted, exaggerated, and mythologized—not only makes it easier to kill them but also to distance ourselves from any sense of responsibility for the roots of the problem itself” (Haney, 2005, p. 44). Thus the popular Disney representations of villains as intrinsically evil and self-motivated are consistent with the American public’s conception of crime and reinforce the idea that crime is not a societal structural problem. I will now address two ways in which Disney films neglect the impact of social conditions on crime through the absence of a relationship between social class and race with crime.

Social Class in Disney Crime

Though crime in the real world is much more prevalent amongst the poor (Haney, 2005), almost all of the Disney villains come from the privileged elite. This absence of a connection between crime and poverty is not unique to Disney films and in fact is common in the American mass media. “The role of poverty in the genesis of socially problematic behavior (such as crime) tends to be deemphasized or ignored altogether” (Haney, 2005, p. 33). Not one of the Disney villains is portrayed as
struggling to make ends meet. In fact, the opposite is true. Even Edgar, the butler from *The Aristocats* (1970), one of the only criminals whose profession is one typically of someone from the lower-middle class, is nowhere near destitution, and is initially jolly, content, well-dressed, and clean.

While most of the elite villains are largely well off and in rather powerful positions, those characters that do commit crimes to help the poor are always the virtuous, good guys. Consider the heroes Robin Hood, who “steals from the rich to feed the poor,” Aladdin who has “gotta eat to live, gotta steal to eat,” and the rats in *Ratatouille* (2007) who also live off of stolen food. Both Robin Hood and Aladdin help the poor with their stolen goods. These images glorify the poor and make their lifestyle seem not so bad. Because the villains are from the upper class and are not criminals because of systems of injustice, discrimination, and poverty, American ideas about the legitimacy of their dominant institutions and structures are upheld and do not require society to rethink how to better distribute wealth as a means of potentially reducing crime (Fine & Carney, 2001; Carney, 2004).

**Race in Disney Crime**

Like the neglect of social class in the depiction of criminal roots, race is also largely left out of the Disney picture of crime and criminals. Although the jails in the United States are disproportionately populated with people of color (Carney, 2004; Haney, 2005; Davis, 2003), most of the Disney criminals are white, largely because most of the Disney story lines are about people who are white. This “whiting out” (Fine, 2000) of race is consistent with United States’ political and representational
systems that implicate “white” as the national American identity and normalize white people and their behavior (Morawksi, 2004; Harris, 1993). “Whiteness has come to be more than itself, embodying objectivity, normality, truth, knowledge, merit, motivation, achievement, and trustworthiness; it accumulates invisible and unrecognized supports that contribute to the already accumulated and bolstered capital of whiteness” (Fine et. al, 2004, p. viii). Not only does Disney insert general representations of dominant white hegemony into the United States’ cultural framework, but it suggests that crime is unrelated to social conditions such as race. The non-white characters that are exceptions to this Disney prototype are portrayed using racial stereotypes and depict negative qualities of non-white people and culture.

Critical race theorists Cheryl Harris (1993) and Omi and Winant (1994) addressed the enormous problems of equating whiteness with normalcy. “Race becomes ‘common sense’—a way of comprehending, explaining, and acting in the world” (Omi and Winant, 1994, p. 60). In the United States, “white” becomes synonymous with privilege and power, even going back to the founding of the United States, where “the very fact of citizenship itself was linked to white racial identity” (Harris, 1993, p. 1744). This defines those who are not white as “the other,” and therefore deviant from societal norms and less deserving of social, political, and economic capital. Whiteness becomes a system of hegemony, systematically subordinating those who are non-white. Harris (1993) explained, “In ways so embedded that it is rarely apparent, the set of assumptions, privileges, and benefits that accompany the status of being white have become a valuable asset that whites sought to protect and that those who passed sought to attain -by fraud if necessary.
Whites have come to expect and rely on these benefits, and over time these expectations have been affirmed, legitimated, and protected by the law” (p. 1713). Indeed, these systems of dominance are so powerful that they are incredibly difficult to question and to change. Those in power (mostly whites) want to remain in power, and therefore largely try to avoid any contestation to their policies and institutions.

White racial privilege is institutionalized in most aspects of American society, including the way that images of race are represented in the media (Fine et al., 2004; Omi and Winant, 1994). The Walt Disney Company largely follows this prescription for maintaining the dominant racial hegemony, and by locating the majority of its films within solely the white world leaves little room to challenge the implicit racial injustice in the United States. Because the majority of Disney characters and criminals are white, crime is represented as largely unrelated to race. In Disney, social conditions do not affect crime, and crime is merely a derivative of personality characteristics, individual in origin and nature. However, this is not at all how crime exists in the real world in the United States. American prisons are disproportionately populated by people of color (Haney, 2005), and social conditions are enormously influential in predicting who commits crimes (Carney, 2004; Haney, 2005; Davis, 2003). Therefore, Disney’s representations of criminals and their motivations mask the reality of crime in the United States and its deep association with race.

In the exceptions when Disney does stray from the all-white setting, its portrayal of people of color relies on negative stereotypes, glorifying the white characters and chastising the non-whites. The criminals in these Disney films are the people are color, of non-white races, made to seem especially different from the
traditional white American. Giroux (2002) explained that these films “produce a host of representations and codes in which children are taught that cultural differences that do not bear the imprint of white, middle-class ethnicity are deviant, inferior, unintelligent, and a threat to be overcome” (p. 121). The films I specifically examined for racist portrayals of crime are *Pinocchio* (1940), *Aladdin* (1992), *Peter Pan* (1973), *Pocahontas* (1995), *Lady and the Tramp* (1955), and *The Lion King* (1994).

In almost every Disney film, the villain has darker skin than does the hero, who is usually pale and has typically American facial features. Beginning with *Pinocchio* (1940), Stromboli, the villain, has darker skin, more hair, and a thicker accent than does the virtuous Geppetto, who has light skin, white hair, and a softer face, despite the fact that both men are Italian. As the criminal, Stromboli’s race is highlighted and marked as different and less desirable.

![Stromboli and Geppetto](image)

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Similarly, in *Aladdin* (1992), Jafar and the other “bad guys” are stereotypically Arab in appearance, with bulbous noses, long beards, heavy accents, and menacing eyes. Although Aladdin is Arabic as well, he has a small nose, no
accent, no beard, lighter skin, and appears “Americanized,” (Giroux, 2002, p. 120), as he is the hero of the film.

The release of this film caused a giant uproar, as many people were concerned with the racist and derogatory depictions of Arabs. In addition to its physical character representations, *Aladdin* contains overt negative commentaries on Arabs and life in the Middle East. The lyrics of the original opening song were incredibly offensive:

Oh I come from a land, from a faraway place  
Where the caravan camels roam  
Where they cut off your ear  
If they don't like your face  
It's barbaric, but hey, it's home

This song was very controversial and created such a public outcry that a year after the film’s release, the lyrics were changed to:

Oh I come from a land, from a faraway place  
Where the caravan camels roam  
Where it's flat and immense  
And the heat is intense  
It's barbaric, but hey, it's home

Even after the public campaign to remove the offensive lines, the image of barbarism was still included. The criminalizing of Arabs is undeniable in this film, and the timing of the film’s release was especially problematic for Arab racial identity as the
American mass media was already printing many negative images of Arabs during the Gulf War (Giroux, 2002), which took place between 1990-1991. *Aladdin* is one of the best examples of Disney’s portrayal of evil as racially non-white.

In both *Peter Pan* (1953) and *Pocahontas* (1995), the renditions of American-Indians are racist and incredibly demeaning. They are frequently referred to as “savages,” and are uneducated and wild. The images in *Peter Pan* are especially offensive; the Indian chief and his people look like caricatures and are poorly spoken and idiotic.

Racism in the film *Pocahontas* exists more in the story telling than in the character representations. This film portrays the exploitation brutally inflicted on the American Indians as a romanticized encounter between a British colonizer, handsome and blond John Smith, and Pocahontas, a beautiful and sexualized American Indian. The film ends happily ever after, strategically erasing the terrible pain, torture, and destruction the colonial powers brought to Pocahontas’ people and society. Here, Disney rewrites history and in doing so redefines an event that would objectively be described as criminal behavior. This is a combination of Disney working with cultural norms that
are already prevalent in American society: the United States’ rendering of its own
imperialism, and Disney’s ability to define on screen what does and does not
constitute crime. This portrayal is steeped in racism as Disney erases the racial
discrimination and persecution that ensued in colonizing the United States.

*Lady and the Tramp* (1955) exhibits one of the earliest and only portrayals of
Asians, as seen in the cruel and criminal Siamese cats. They have stereotypical Asian
features: slanted eyes, buckteeth, and heavy accents. The cats are mean, sly, greedy,
and are distinctly different from the other, good animals that speak with Western,
British and American accents and are of high class and/or good moral character.

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The use of racially coded language is present throughout many of the Disney films,
and plays a highly significant role in the voices of the criminals in *The Lion King*
(1994). Whereas all of the “good” characters speak in typical elite American or
British accents, the cohorts of the villain, Scar, “speak through the voices of Whoopi
Goldberg and Cheech Marin in jive accents that take on the nuances of the discourse
of a decidedly urban, black and Hispanic youth” (Giroux, 2002, p. 121). The hyenas
live outside the borders of the kingdom in the terrifying Elephant Graveyard and are
not even part of the idyllic circle of life the film so magically depicts. They are
outcasts, dirty, hungry, vicious, and stupid. The association of these racially coded voices with the criminals implies a connection between urban, black and Hispanic youth with crime. Though this representation of crime existing amongst the poor and non-white may be more consistent with actual crime in the United States, the intensely negative portrayal of these criminals is stark and over simplified, reinforcing the idea that people of color are more criminal and of lower status. In addition, because there are no favorable images of non-whites, these degrading representations serve as the only identities of people of color in Disney films.

Disney’s stance on crime is generally that it is unrelated to race, however, when there is a relation, crime is committed by those who are non-white and negatively racially stereotyped. The world of Disney is predominantly a world of Western whites. When a different race is specified and particularly marked, it is almost always as part of the criminal identity, and opposite to the hero who has lighter skin, Anglicized facial features, and speaks with a standard American English voice. Although Disney generally leaves out the fact that crime is heavily affected by racial social conditions, when Disney does include characters of non-white races, they are shown with such negative imagery that it suggests to children that people of color are inherently criminal. Scholar and activist, Angela Davis (2003), wrote, “Because of the persistent power of racism, ‘criminals’ and ‘evildoers’ are, in the collective imagination, fantasized as people of color” (p. 16). These images help to perpetuate a system that makes it difficult to break free of the interrelation between crime and race. Omi and Winant (1994) explained, “A vast web of racial projects mediates between the discursive or representational means in which race is identified and
signified on the one hand, and the institutional and organizational forms in which it is routinized and standardized on the other” (p. 60). In representing something about the relationship between race and crime, The Walt Disney Company reinforces the American system of racial hierarchy and white privilege while condemning people of color as criminals.

**Gender in Disney Crime**

The Walt Disney Company has received much criticism from feminist and critical researchers who believe that representations of women in Disney films are frequently sexist and misogynist (Bell, Haas, & Sells, 1995; Davis, 2006; Giroux, 1995). In terms of gender and its relation to crime, female Disney villains are typically treated harsher than are male villains. In Disney, the male criminal is often humorous, laughable, and childish, whereas the female villains are frequently portrayed as pure evil, sexual, bad to the bone and utterly despicable. Of course this differentiation does not apply to every Disney film, yet there is a prevailing image that when females are criminals, they are particularly vicious. Overall, there are more male villains in Disney films than there are female villains, which is consistent with the greater proportion of convicted male criminals in the United States (Haney, 2005). Yet the female villains in Disney films seem to stand out and to shock more so than do the males, possibly because a female villain is a deviation from the norm. The wicked, evil stepmother is often the remembered and featured villain of Disney films, and her representation is highly significant.
The female villain’s sexuality is highlighted and a key aspect to her criminal identity. Especially noticeable is the contrast of these villainous middle-aged women to the innocent, generous female characters. Innocence is neatly encapsulated in the young heroines of the film, such as Snow White, Cinderella, Aurora, and Ariel. “Feminine sacrifice and nurturing is drawn in pear-shaped, old women past menopause, spry and comical, as the good fairies, godmothers, and servants in the tales” (Bell et al., 1995, p. 108). In contrast to both of these positively portrayed groups, the female villains are middle-aged and at their sexual peak (Bell et al., 1995). Thus the time when women’s sexuality is most salient is the time when they are the most criminal.

In fact, the majority of female Disney villains are highly sexualized in their representations in terms of dress, body language, speech, manners, and motives. Some of the best examples are Cruella de Vil from *101 Dalmatians* (1961), Medusa from *The Rescuers* (1977), Ursula from *The Little Mermaid* (1989), and Yzma from *The Emperor’s New Groove* (2000).

All of these women wear low cut, revealing dresses, a lot of makeup, have seductive,
strong voices, and flaunt their sexuality in ways that are menacing and highly contrasted to the virtuous younger and older females in their respective films who are portrayed as much more conservative. Ursula explains to Ariel the significance of “body language” when trying to attract a man, as she shimmies her voluptuous chest and shakes her wide-set hips and buttocks. Yzma has a handsome, younger, and stupid accomplice named Kronk, and it is implied that she has some sort of dominating sexual relationship with him. The narrator explains that Kronk is Yzma’s current “right hand man,” and that “every decade or so she gets a new one.” Yzma flirts with Kronk and calls him “darling” as she seductively beckons him to her bed.

Another incredibly sexualized female who works for the powers of evil is Meg in the film Hercules (1997). Meg sells her soul and freedom to Hades to save the life of her boyfriend. Though not villainous for her own motives, she helps Hades in his plan to destroy Hercules, and to do so uses her feminine good looks and sexual appeal to trick and destroy Hercules. Though very physically attractive throughout the film, her overt sexuality is most apparent when she is the most criminal. She sways her hips and seductively beckons and touches Hercules while she tries to lead him to his death. Throughout these Disney films and others, female criminality is associated with female sexuality. These representations suggest that an overly sexualized woman is someone to be feared because her wicked motives and manipulative behavior lead her to transgress.

Whereas sexuality is featured as a characteristic of female criminals, a theme that is repeated throughout the representations of male villains in Disney films is a display of infantile, childlike behavior. This serves to diminish their terror and
reduces to the criminal to that of a harmless child, rather than an evil, frightening villain. The best examples of this portrayal are Captain Hook from *Peter Pan* (1953) and Prince John from *Robin Hood* (1973). Both characters regress to a childlike state when they become frightened or angry. Prince John cries, sucks his thumb, and calls out for his “mommy,” and Captain Hook jumps into the arms of his assistant like a baby when the feared crocodile is near. In *Robin Hood*, Prince John’s two closest allies, the Sheriff and Sir Hiss, also display infantile behavior. The Sheriff falls asleep to a lullaby and Sir Hiss sleeps in a cradle. All of these images paint the picture that even when some males are bad, they are not *that* bad and are really just like mischievous kids.

In many of the Disney films, sexuality is particularly interesting in that when some of the villains reach a pinnacle of evil, their genders switch: females become more like males and males become more feminine. No example of a masculine female is more evident than Ursula. She is one of the only female villains that is truly overweight and physically repulsive. Ursula has short hair and speaks with a deep voice. When she momentarily gains control of King Triton’s crown and staff, assuming the role of ruler, she becomes enormous, bubbling up from the sea and roaring with declarations of ultimate power in a loud, unarguably man’s voice.

When women turn into men in Disney films they become more terrifying and dreadful. In contrast, male villains that assume feminine qualities are more laughable and silly. Governor Ratcliffe of *Pocahontas* (1995) even looks like a woman with his pig-tales, hair bows, and pink outfit. Besides the fact that he is overweight and ugly, he seems almost dainty in his refusal to engage in any manual labor and his
possession of a stuck-up, snooty pug dog. Though certainly evil and intent on killing and exploiting the American Indians, the character representation of Governor Ratcliffe is not especially condemning and certainly not as frightening as manly Ursula. Through this use of gender reversal, Disney continues to portray female villains are superiorly evil to male villains. When women become men they are especially terrible, but when men become women they are ridiculous, laughable and much less terrifying.

In terms of gendered motives, the only two categories in which there are more females than there are males are those seeking status and pure evil. These two motives are defined by their intangible results. The villains in these categories are neither looking to become wealthy or to assume political power, but rather are interested in beauty, social status, and pure evil. This pegs them as particularly bad in that they act for reasons that are not always reducible to a physical, obvious goal, but rather their cruelty comes to define them more so than what they actually care about accomplishing. Interestingly, in the more recent films when Disney begins to consider the idea that a criminal can change and find redemption, the only characters that do are male. Whereas villainous men are often silly, laughable, and feminine, female villains are frequently vindictive, cruel, overly sexualized, and when they are especially bad, manly.

**Recent Shifts in Disney Crime**

Since The Walt Disney Company began producing feature length animated films in 1937, its representations of crime and criminals has changed in some distinct
ways, and has also remained constant in other ways. On the whole, Disney films continue to portray crime as unaffected by social conditions and instead as resulting from an individualized notion of inherent criminality. Not one Disney villain is more inclined to commit crimes because they live in extreme poverty, are unemployed, or because they have experienced such disadvantage from institutionalized systems of oppression. To the present day, Disney films largely ignore the true factors that most contribute to increased rates of crime in the United States.

However, the conception of what constitutes crime and criminals has expanded somewhat in more recent years. Most notable is the introduction of the reformed criminal, the corrupt corporation, and the child as criminal. In addition, the quality of animation and the inclusion of more satirical, culturally and historically relevant figures has increased as time has gone on. Especially significant was the Disney relationship with, and eventual absorption of the modern animation studio, Pixar. In 1991 the two studios made a $26 million deal to produce three films in conjunction, the first of which was *Toy Story* (1995). Creation and production of the stories and films was done by Pixar, while Disney took care of marketing and distribution. Thus the fresh, new ideas of the animators at the Pixar studio brought in a broadened perspective to the Disney production team.
Introduction of the Reformed Criminal

“There’s something sweet, and almost kind. But he was mean, and he was coarse and unrefined. And now he’s dear, and so unsure, I wonder why I didn’t see it there before… True that he’s no Prince Charming, but there’s something in him that I simply did not see.” (Beauty and the Beast, 1991)

Belle sings these words in Beauty and the Beast as the Beast begins his transformation from criminal to hero. Crime becomes more complicated and has many faces in the later films. Some of this idea is first seen in Beauty and the Beast (1991) and The Emperor’s New Groove (2000). In both of these films a main character is first associated with evil, but then reforms and finds the good that actually does reside within them. In both cases, this transformation is largely due to the budding friendship with the epitome of innocence and goodness. It also must be noted that neither of these reformed characters are the main villains of their films, and

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each film does contain another villain who is purely evil. However, this notion that
criminality can be broken does exist in these films. This idea of reforming criminals
also exists in *Finding Nemo* (2003) and *Ratatouille* (2007), though is not a main
feature of the films and does not involve main characters undergoing complete
personality changes during the film. In these films, the reformed criminals are already
reformed before the film begins, but as characters maintain their criminal identity.
This introduction of the potential for criminality to be broken varies, and is only
explored in the later Disney films, beginning in 1991 with *Beauty and the Beast*.

In *Beauty in the Beast*, the Beast becomes a hero, yet he did not start out as
such and was actually far from it. Formerly a prince, the Beast was “spoiled, selfish,
and unkind.” After being transformed into a hideous beast and confined to his
enchanted castle, the Beast loses all hope and becomes angry, aggressive, violent, and
vindictive. He has a ferocious temper and is incredibly frightening and unkind. In
fact, he is strongly associated with images of domestic violence. It is not until his
servants urge him to change his ways that he begins to act gentler toward Belle. At
first he struggles with the task, continuing to growl and to lose his temper. He
expresses his frustration to his servants in thinking that Belle will never be able to see
beyond his hideous appearance.

As Belle and the Beast begin to get along, Belle realizes that there is some
kindness within the Beast. The Beast falls in love with Belle and transforms into an
amiable character. As Belle and the Beast dance, the teapot and servant, Mrs. Potts,
sings a song that contains the lyrics: “Finding you can change, learning you were
wrong.” This is a powerful image. The Beast does have good in him; either it was
always there or he developed it after meeting Belle, but this film puts forth the idea that someone so terrible can shed their evil ways.

This idea of a transformation from selfish, villainous behavior to that of charity and love for others is strongly demonstrated in *The Emperor’s New Groove* (2000) with the character Kuzco, the Emperor of Mesopotamia. At first, he appears to be young and innocent, but he is a conceited, selfish, and exploitive ruler. Kuzco decides to destroy a village in his empire to make himself a summerhouse, not caring that he will displace the village’s residents and leave them homeless, one of which is a kind, innocent man named Pacha. Kuzco maintains an air of superiority that indicates he thinks his own frivolous desires are far more important than the homes and lives of his constituents. Pacha angrily says to Kuzco, “I was always taught that there was some good in everyone, but you prove me wrong.”

It is not until Kuzco falls into his own misfortune, is transformed into a llama, and must rely on the help of Pacha, that he begins to expose a different side of himself. At one point, Kuzco saves Pacha’s life by pulling him off a crumbling cliff. Kuzco showers himself in praise, impressed by his own strength and hero-like actions. Pacha says, “I knew it all along. There is some good in you!” Disgusted, Kuzco tries to deny it, but accidentally says, “Come on, what’s the big deal, nobody is that heartless!” He tells Pacha not to read “too much into it” and that he still plans to destroy Pacha’s village, despite the fact that he just saved his life and admitted that he was not “that heartless.” This is the first indication that a more caring, empathetic side of Kuzco exists.
After Kuzco and Pacha again have to work together to defeat Yzma does Kuzco begin his transformation. He becomes much less selfish, and even sacrifices himself at one point to save Pacha. After all has been resolved, Kuzco apologizes for his cruelty toward those in his Empire he had mistreated. He also agrees to spare Pacha’s village and instead builds his summerhouse on an adjacent hill so that the two can remain friends and recreate together. Kuzco and Pacha become very close and Kuzco is welcomed to Pacha’s family. Kuzco is a changed man, and will now rule with kindness and empathy. His relationship with, and dependence on Pacha unlocked a different, and compassionate side of Kuzco that had been dormant.

In Finding Nemo (2003), a hilarious group of three sharks play the roles of reformed criminals. The sharks decide to change their naturally violent behavior and give up eating fish in an attempt to dispel their dangerous image. They conduct meetings in the style of an Alcoholics Anonymous gathering and recite the following pledge in unison, “I am a nice shark, not a mindless eating machine. If I am to change this image, I must first change myself. Fish are friends, not food.” They introduce themselves and declare how long it’s been since their last fish binge. However worthy their goals, two out of the three sharks are unable to shake their natural inclination to eat fish, which they themselves are considering crimes. One of the sharks arrives at the meeting with the skeleton of his supposed “fish friend” hanging off of him. Another shark, named Bruce, looses his calm, gentle composure after he smells blood, which turns him into a ravaging, hungry monster. Bruce will stop at nothing and frantically chases after the fish. He smiles and says, “Here’s Brucie!” in the style
of Jack Nicholson, the serial killer, in the film *The Shining* (1980), as if he is a deranged madman.

Both Bruce and the other two sharks attribute Bruce’s criminality to the fact that he had an absent father growing up. Bruce cries at the shark meeting over the fact that he never knew his father, and after his attempted attack on the fish, the other two sharks try to justify Bruce’s violent actions by declaring, “He really doesn’t mean it, you know, he never even knew his father.” They explain he “really is a nice guy.” This is the first instance in a Disney film where some sort of hardship in a villain’s life is used as an explanation for the development of their criminality. This recent addition to the Disney prototype could reflect the growing cultural sentiment that crime should be considered from a broader perspective, taking into account more than the idea of inherent criminality of an individual.

Though the idea of circumstance as being a part of the development of criminality is suggested in *Finding Nemo*, as well as the existence of the possibility to reform, these sharks cannot fully break their criminal tendencies and still can be driven to eat fish. Granted, sharks naturally eat fish to survive, but this film represents the sharks as reforming criminals, and the act of eating fish as criminal. Despite their efforts to change, the sharks maintain their criminal tendencies and identities.

In *Ratatouille* (2007), the culinary staff is comprised of people who are not from high culture and some in fact were criminals who have reformed largely because of their love of cooking. They are described as “artists” who left their lives of crime to pursue the art of cuisine. Though they have reformed, they are still defined as previous criminals, and are somewhat frightening looking. This association of
criminality and people not from elite backgrounds is a more accurate representation of crime in the real world. It is interesting to note that even though these people do not commit crimes in the film, they are still defined by their criminal history.

In both *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) and *The Emperor’s New Groove* (2000), there is a main character first introduced as a villain that then undergoes a process of redemption that brings out a sense of goodness in them. This is a much more recent addition to the Disney repertoire of villainy. Critical to these characters’ change is their friendship with innocence. Though this idea does exist in Disney films, it is still necessary to keep in mind that neither of these changed characters, the Beast or Emperor Kuzco, are the main villains. In each film, there still exists a character that embodies evil and does not possess redeeming characteristics. However, the representation that someone can undergo a complete change from a life of villainy to one of love and generosity is powerful. The two more modern films, *Finding Nemo* (2003) and *Ratatouille* (2007), introduce even more new ideas about where crime comes from and who is a criminal in relation to the process of reformation. As mentioned before, it is very notable in all four of these films that the reformed criminals are always male. Men have the potential to grow and change for the better, whereas female villains possess a deep-seated wickedness that lasts forever. However, in the last two decades Disney has somewhat broadened its representation of criminality in terms of identity and possible reformation.
Introduction of Corporate Corruption

“I’ll kidnap a thousand children before I let this company die. And I will silence anyone who gets in my way!” (Monsters, Inc., 2001)

This increased conception of crime is more minimal, though still quite interesting. In the films Monsters, Inc. (2001) and The Incredibles (2004), white-collar crime makes an appearance as the heads of corporations exploit and profit off of their employees and clients. In Monsters, Inc., the owner of the energy company, Henry J. Waternoose engages in a covert operation with one of the employees, Randall Boggs, to illegally extract screams from children in an effort to keep the company alive and well. They attempt to “revolutionize the industry” by manipulating and exploiting children for their own gain. Similarly, in The Incredibles, when Mr. Incredible works for an insurance company, he is reprimanded by the
company’s boss, Gilbert Huph, for making insurance benefits too accessible to his clients. Mr. Incredible’s good-hearted and compassionate nature prevents him from denying his clients health coverage in favor of making a larger profit for the company. Huph explains to Mr. Incredible, “I’m not happy, Bob. Not happy… What I can’t handle is your customers’ inexplicable knowledge of Insuricare’s inner workings. They’re experts, experts, Bob! Exploiting every loophole, dodging every obstacle. They’re penetrating the bureaucracy!” Huph clearly does not care about helping his sick, unfortunate clients, but instead declares that Insuricare is supposed to help first and foremost their stockholders. This portrayal is a glaring indictment on the corruption that exists within insurance companies profiting off of their customers maladies and denying them benefits. This corporate corruption in both of these films is particularly interesting as mirroring the increased criticism that companies have received in the last few decades for their exploitive practices, nationally and abroad with the expansion of globalization.

**Introduction of Children as Criminals**

“He tortures toys, just for fun!” (*Toy Story*, 1995)

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<tr>
<th>Sid</th>
<th>Darla</th>
<th>Syndrome</th>
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In 1995, *Toy Story* became the first Disney film to feature a child as its villain. Criminal children are also seen in *Finding Nemo* (2003) and *The Incredibles* (2004). This growing trend of criminalizing children in Disney films is consistent with increased incarceration and prosecution of children in the United States beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Chamberlin, 2001; Rutherford, 2002). As the number of juvenile offenders increased, the media played a role in fueling this trend and changing the way children were treated. “The media’s involvement in publicizing many of the violent crimes committed by juveniles has sparked public demand for stricter penalties. In response, some politicians have promoted measures to ‘get tough’ on juvenile crime” (Chamberlin, 2001, p. 2).

In *Toy Story* (1995), the criminal, Sid, is a terrifying young boy who “tortures toys just for fun.” He is a punkish kid who wears a black T-shirt with a skull, listens to heavy metal music, and loves explosives. The toys call him a “psycho” and shiver in fear when they hear his voice. Sid even tortures his sister and gets kicked out of summer camp. His parents seem to have no control over him and to tolerate his violent behavior. Sid is sadistic, mischievous, and frightening. He is a true public menace. Similarly, Darla from *Finding Nemo* (2003) is the daughter of the dentist who collects fish. The fish know and fear her as the “fish killer,” as she violently shakes the bags of fish her father gives her as presents. She is aggressive, goofy looking, and rambunctious. Though she does not specifically intend to harm the fish, and thus is less evil than Sid, she is portrayed as a villainous character that inspires terror and an impetus to escape for the fish. The third child villain is from the film, *The Incredibles* (2004), and is the eager and excited boy, Buddy, who becomes
disillusioned and hurt when his favorite superhero, Mr. Incredible, rejects him as an assistant. Years later Buddy then becomes the evil Syndrome, calls himself Mr. Incredible’s “nemesis,” and invents deadly weapons. Buddy/Syndrome is a terrifying child/adolescent and a great danger to the public. All three of these children represent a new category of criminals that reflect the growing fear that children and adolescents are becoming more deadly and need to be contained.

Across the decades Disney has maintained its stance on crime and criminals such that there is a disconnect between crime in reality and crime in their films. Criminals in Disney are not generally representative of criminals in American society and thus ignore the societal problems that in fact contribute to increased crime. However, Disney’s conception of crime has broadened in the more recent years, potentially signaling the beginning of a shift toward a more representative depiction of crime in the United States.
CONCLUSION

The Walt Disney Company is an incredibly powerful socializing force that both mirrors and introduces ideology and master narratives about identity in the United States. Henry Giroux (2002) explained that in the world we live in today, media has come to take the place of primary agents of communication and education for children, calling Disney films “teaching machines” (p. 100). Disney films and images, because of their incredible popularity and associated aggressive marketing campaigns, have become cultural icons and part of the pedagogy that Americans inevitably use in educating the public. Disney characters and merchandise is everywhere, on posters, clothing, bedding, toy store shelves, key chains, cereal boxes, stuffed animals, stickers, billboards, and even PowerPoint lectures in university classrooms. Disney’s representations become conflated with reality (Bryman, 2004; Giroux, 2002) and should occupy an important position in the discourse on criminal justice ideology, especially because of their messages to children about why crime exists, where it comes from, and who commits it.

Disney films employ a variety of master narratives about criminal justice and the roots of crime. The main themes addressed in these films in relation to crime have to do with crime as individualized, crime as unconnected to social conditions, the role of gender in crime, redemption for criminals, and punishment for criminals. Children develop their ideas about what causes crime, how criminals act, and what should happen to these criminals partly from watching Disney films and incorporating representations from these master storytellers of American life.
Crime as an individualized, inherent personal characteristic is especially prominent in Disney films. In fact, every Disney villain examined in this study is motivated by his or her own internal desire to gain something or to transgress in order to supplement an already privileged lifestyle. Whether the motive is to acquire status, wealth, power, or to seek revenge or pure evil, each villain’s motive is their own and does not reflect any outside environmental factors. Crime is completely isolated in the individual. This individualized conception of crime is further suggested by the fact that almost every criminal is defined by, or associated with insanity or madness. This locates a villain’s criminality within their own psychology, and further delineates a criminal from the rest of society, and more specifically, the good, virtuous characters who are always sane. Locating crime solely within the individual neglects the suggestion of any potential social conditions contributing to criminality.

The fact that crime exists in the world of Disney images and representations as unaffected by social conditions is a gross misrepresentation of crime in the United States. In reality, crime is deeply connected to social class and race, in that people of low social class and people of color disproportionately populate jails and are convicted of crimes (Carney, 2004; Haney, 2005). By largely disassociating social conditions such as race and class from crime, Disney representations ignore underlying structural failures in the United States that contribute to the inextricable link between race and class and the racism implicit in the American criminal justice system (Fine and Carney, 2001; Omi and Winant, 1994).

Whereas Disney certainly does include some representations of non-white characters, the criminals and villains are always the ones most heavily associated with
non-white characteristics. Disney represents people of color as more villainous than white Western Europeans and white Americans. This teaches children a racist message about crime: darker people are more criminal.

While there are some instances in Disney films in which race is linked to crime, there are virtually no images in Disney that suggest that extreme poverty has any relation to crime. In reality, poverty is one of the most significant predictors of crime and criminality (Haney, 2005). Disney’s erasure of this fact allows the American public to ignore the structural inequality deeply engrained in the United States and its criminal justice system, absolving the larger society of any responsibility for incidents of crime.

Like the deep-seated racism that exists in Disney crime, sexism also is rampant in female villainy. On the whole, women in Disney that commit crimes are portrayed as more evil, less controllable, and more sexualized than are men. Even though there are many more male villains than female villains in Disney films, the female villains are particularly vicious and thus stand out as archetypes of evil. While criminal females are characterized by searing cruelty and over-sexualized portrayals of femininity, men as criminals in Disney are often silly, laughable, and childlike, and thus able to be more easily excused. In fact, in the later films when Disney introduces the idea that criminals can reform their behavior, it is only the men who are able to do so. Female villains are eternally sinful, and there is no hope of curing such an affliction for them, whereas men, through a friendship with an innocent character or a personally motivated desire to change or engage in a different activity can bring them out of a criminal lifestyle.
Though crime in Disney is individualized and largely unconnected to social conditions, there are instances in which people of color and women are particularly criminalized. In addition, the way that crime is dealt with in terms of punishment for these individuals suggests that society would do best to dispose of them or to lock them up. In most of the Disney films, the villain dies, their death either brought on by himself or herself or by the hero of the film. Once they are gone, everyone else can live happily ever after because “crime,” embodied by the villain, is eradicated.

In some films, such as *Robin Hood* (1973) and *Aladdin* (1992), the villains are imprisoned. In *Aladdin*, the genie comments that Jafar will be locked in the Cave of Wonders for ten thousand years, correspondingly in the American criminal justice system a sentence of life without the possibility of parole. The permanence of such a sentence suggests that the best way to deal with crime is to remove the person who commits it. The fates of the Disney villains, death or incredibly long prison sentences, suggests to children that criminals must be eliminated. This is an especially powerful message in a society that employs the death penalty, given that such a system is reliant on the idea that killing criminals will rid a society of crime. Again, this representation is inconsistent with the reality of the situation. In the United States, states with the death penalty actually have higher rates of violent crime than do states without this punishment (Haney, 2005). Yet Disney films teach children that death for criminals is the most common, and best way to eliminate crime from society.

This paper has examined the ways in which Disney films perpetuate a particular American view of the criminal justice system, and how Disney introduces its underlying concepts and ideas about crime to children. I began by considering the
popular literature surrounding the effects and influence media can have on culture, specifically in terms of crime in the media. I then conducted my own study and analysis of these representations in one of the most popular modes of media and entertainment in the United States: Disney films. In the documentary *Mickey Mouse Monopoly* (2002), Dr. Gail Dines from Wheelock College explains, “These are not notions that necessarily Disney invented. But what they do with these notions is they caricature them, they wrap them up in this “magic kingdom” wrapper, and they sell them to children. And that’s really the power of Disney.”

The value of studying the representations of crime in Disney lies in the idea that children, as well as adults, learn from the media. What do viewers learn about crime through the eyes of Disney? They learn from Disney that crime is something one is born with. Evil is committed by evil people. Their criminality is unrelated to social conditions and certainly not a factor of poverty. These suggestions simultaneously allow Americans to ignore serious problems that exist in systems of disadvantage in the United States, and lead Americans to believe that the best means of crime control is to get rid of the criminals. However, research has shown that mass incarceration and use of the death penalty does not lower crime rates (Davis, 2003). Yet when the mass media, such as Disney, continuously portrays crime as it does, it remains difficult to change the American consciousness that rests so strongly on the idea that the criminals themselves are the problem. Deviance in Disney both reflects and affects popular conceptions about crime in the United States.
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