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# Cruella de Vil and the Fairy Godmother: Watching Disney With My Students

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Alejandra Martinez<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

In this article, I reflect on the importance of critically analyzing the cultural products aimed at children. To achieve this kind of analysis, my students and I have developed a performative exercise in which we have co-created a theatrical piece. A fragment of the script appears below where we appropriate and reconstruct the contents of children's films from a critical point of view. For those who participated, this performance produced a transformation in our representations. The performative exercise highlights how, through critical analysis and performance, we are able to reconstruct those characters we have known and loved since childhood.

## Keywords

critical pedagogy, pedagogy, cinema studies, co-construction

## Introduction

“Why do you tell us this? Why do you do this *to me*?” That must be the strangest thing I have ever heard in my classroom. These questions were from student F., who was unhappy to hear that some contents in movies he had watched as a child weren't innocent. I confess that I was speechless. I felt like Ursula, the evil sea witch in *The Little Mermaid* (Disney, 1989) who steals the voice of Ariel, or Cruella de Vil, the odious antihero of *101 Dalmatians* (Disney, 1961) who is eager to buy puppies to sew a coat with their fur. In short, I felt villainous.

Since 2002, I have taught a course called Sociology of Media at the University Siglo 21 of Cordoba, Argentina. One goal in my classroom has been to instill in my students a critical stance toward media content because they study communication, including advertising, graphic design, and public and institutional relations. To achieve this objective, I deploy all resources to challenge my students' points of view. I ask them to think for themselves, which forces me to approach every class with renewed energy. Sometimes I am lucky to have inquisitive students and sometimes not, but I am convinced that it is important to persevere in this pursuit. In the classroom, I fuse two of my passions, teaching and research, so I usually work in class with the same children's films I analyze in my research on representations of gender, class, ethnicity, and nationality (Martinez, 2008, 2009, 2013; Martinez & Merlino, 2012; Martinez & Papalini, 2012). My papers about cinema have always tackled the content of animated films, highlighting the reproduction of traditional gender representations, or the personification of differences of race and class in innocent

characters that look like animals. However, in this article, I write differently. I speak about how the appropriation of media content by analysts produces a transformation in their own representation and results in the reconstruction of characters known (and loved!) since early childhood.

This article is the product of a joint exercise with my students, in which our analytical work turns to performance, showing the transformation of the points of view of the researchers. I show the mutation of my own representations and those of my students in a process of deconstruction and reconstruction of models of heroes and heroines that we learned in early childhood. We rewrite the characters, and they acquire unthinkable characteristics in the context of children's films.

I am interested in studying the content of cultural products aimed at children because I believe, like Dorfman and Mattelart (2002), that children's literature allows the study of social disguises and hidden truths of contemporary men and women. One does not expect to find such themes in children's cultural products, but they are in fact there. According to Deleyto (2003), it is because of the entertainment value, ideological “innocence,” and impressive global reach that media content aimed at children demands critical consideration. The author says that Disney movies are texts with a message intended to “educate” children.

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Giroux (1999) insist that entertainment is always an educational force. Within this “edutainment,” animated films operate as teaching machines and “they possess at least as much cultural authority and legitimacy for teaching roles, values, and ideals as more traditional sites of learning” (King, Lugo-Lugo, & Bloodsworth, 2010, p. 36). As King, Lugo-Lugo, and Bloodsworth (2010) say that in children films

race and gender have shifted, taking on superficially positive qualities, which seemingly affirm and empower difference and restrain significant force as a means of projecting fantasies, policing deviation, arranging hierarchies, grounding identities, and reinforcing exclusions. (p. 5)

Animated children’s films contribute to the reproduction of meanings and dominant hierarchies. Therefore, it is likely that children will internalize the content as a particular worldview. As Signorielli (2001) says, nowadays children are born into homes in which “for the first time in human history, a centralized commercial institution, rather than parents, church or schools, most of it tell the stories” (p. 341).

### *First Class of the Semester*

In the first class of the semester, senior students majoring in advertising, graphic design, and public and institutional relations come to my class with little enthusiasm. They do not want to study sociology. Instead, they want to plan advertising campaigns, design logotypes, and assemble business communication plans. But despite their resistance, the class starts at 4:45 p.m. I introduce the subject and explain that we will have classes every Thursday between 4:45 p.m. and 9:25 p.m. (a sigh always follows). I describe the basic literature we will read—Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Gramsci, Adorno and Horkheimer, and Bourdieu—all of which are impossible to pronounce (more sighs). Then I explain the structure of the exams. One (boring) hour later, the day’s activity begins. I invite my students to watch a video, which wakes them up somewhat. I am still hopeful that the material might interest some of them. Students watch me while I struggle to connect the DVD, the speakers, and the projector. “What are we going to watch?” is always the first question, and “Disney stuff” is my answer. I hear some disappointed sighs and some excited exclamations of “good!” One of the male students says, “Please don’t play songs. I can’t stand them.” “There will be songs,” I reply with a smile. Of course, there will be. “Songs are very important,” I explain.

I select three video excerpts, but I have many more ready to be played. Optimistic as I am, I think that this exercise will provoke a discussion among the students. The first video we watch is a scene from *The Lion King* (Disney,

1994). Scar, the lion that is overshadowed by his brother King Mufasa, meets with his minions, the hyenas Shenzi, Banzai, and Ed. Scar laments, “I’m surrounded by idiots.” The YouTube video ends, and while I search for the next piece on the Internet, some students squirm on their chair. The next video is an excerpt from the 1967 film *Jungle Book* (Disney). The protagonist, Mowgli, is in a swamp, talking to a gang of vultures. With the arrival of the anti-hero, the magnificent tiger Shere Khan, the piece ends. The students still don’t know what I intend to do. Silently, they expect a sociology class that never comes. Then I play a video with a talkative donkey and an ogre who tries to remove the animals from his swamp (*Shrek*, Dreamworks, 2001). Donkey sings “Cause I’m all alone. There’s no one here beside me . . .” while the ogre tries to frighten him. The video ends with the terrifying face of Shrek in extreme close-up, growling. I press pause and the furious gesture of the ogre freezes on the screen behind me. I ask, “What can you tell me about these pieces?” Silence. A student in the front row checks his notebook to see if any of the blank pages can unravel the mystery. Another one makes a joke that provokes the laugh of his closest companions and most of them avoid my gaze, trying to escape the question. Finally, a girl sheepishly raises her hand and says, “Could it be that most of the characters are animals that act like humans?” “Yes!” I answer, “That is right!” With the ice broken, the other students feel encouraged to describe what they have just seen. I am happy, but the debate I am trying to generate still doesn’t begin. A student in the back of the room who has so far remained silent says, dubiously, “Is it possible that the donkey speaks like a Mexican?” “Bull’s-eye!” I think to myself. Another student asks, “The hyenas speak like Mexicans too, don’t they?” And another one says, “And the vultures have Latin American accents! One is Cuban, another is Mexican . . .” We analyze the movies in their “Latino” version. In the English version, those characters that sound Latino in Spanish are usually performed by african american actors and actresses. For example, Donkey in *Shrek* is Eddie Murphy and Shenzi, *The Lion King*’s hyena, is Whoopi Goldberg. My enthusiasm is growing and I ask, “So, what characteristics do those animals have?” The students are now interested in the exercise. “They are scavengers!” “They are culturally associated with social stigmas.” I open a PowerPoint slideshow and start to show pictures of characters from other movies like *Happy Feet*, *Rio*, *Shark Tale*, *Madagascar*, *Ice Age*, and so on and the students begin to remember many others. Some argue among themselves, Walt Disney is at times a God and at times a demon. Hours pass and the possibility of sharing a sociology class does not seem so terrible for any of us anymore.

In the following classes, we will analyze media, searching for stereotyped representations of gender and family, different social classes, and characters from different

national and ethnic groups. We will talk about princesses and princes, thinness and fatness, beauty and ugliness, skin colors, and happy endings. We will analyze reality shows, TV series, and newspapers, but we will always return to animated movies because they show social structures that people encounter in the most impressionable stage of their life, childhood, leading them to perpetuate biased representations and stereotypes (Signorielli, 2001). In class, we will discuss the work of authors who denounce racism, sexism, and colonialism in children's productions (among others, Buhler, 2003; Deleyto, 2003; Dines & Humez 1995; Dorfman & Mattelart, 2002; Giroux, 1999; King et al., 2010; Signorielli, 2001). For some students, I will be the Fairy Godmother that frees them from the need to be beautiful, loved, and live happily ever after, while others will accuse me of stealing their childhood innocence.

F.'s original complaint, "Why do you tell us this? Why do you do this *to me*?" places me in second place, as Cruella de Vil, the horrible woman who destroys the dreams of her students. The teacher who says that romantic love is a cultural construct and that the notion of "eternal happiness" should not be linked to objective conditions of existence such as beauty, wealth, and youth. Some students appreciate the exercise and others are sorry to betray their beloved "Uncle Walt." In the end, however, I see any reaction as positive. The only thing that discourages me is indifference.

### Creating Again (Re-Creating)

The piece I present below comes from my growing interest in performance ethnography. It is a play in four acts, co-developed by volunteer former students and me. As an exercise, I asked them through their Facebook accounts to write down what they felt when we analyzed animated films. Seventeen students responded to my request. Some wrote excitedly about being able to "see," and others were disillusioned by the idea of childhood characters not being innocent. From their expressions, I started writing the first sketch of a script that I shared with them while it was still a rough draft. They appropriated it, improved it, rewrote sections, and introduced characters. One of them participated making a drawing inspired in the script. I added some voices, including those of Norman Denzin, Walt Disney, and Henry Giroux. Together we constructed a text that illustrates what impact the films had on my students and me, elucidating cultural pieces that we previously took for granted. We recreated the films' contents and revealed other meanings that emerged from our analysis. I like to think of this exercise as a coperformative-critical-representation (Hamera, 2013), as well as a personal/political praxis and an aesthetic/epistemic performance (Spry, 2011).

Through performance, as Denzin and Giroux say, "persons represent, disrupt, interpret, 'engage and transform . . .

the ideological, shape and materials circumstances that their lives'" (Denzin & Giroux in Denzin, 2003, p. 266). This performative exercise allowed my students and me to deepen in the movies' representations from a constructive perspective that challenges the "reiterative power of discourse to create and produce the phenomena it regulates and constrains" (Tedlock, 2011, p. 334). By co-writing this piece, we resist and intervene on "normative constructs of human being and reified structures of power" (Spry, 2011, p. 504). As Homi Bhabha (in Spry, 2011) says, through performance we seek to disrupt, dislodge, and dislocate hegemonic constructs of gender, family race, class, and imperialism.

I have included only the first act of the play below because the script is still incomplete. We have not been able to reach a consensus about the ending of the story. Some collaborators want to conclude with a happy ending, in which each character gets married. Others, including me, would like a different conclusion, maybe one that breaks with traditional stereotypes of everlasting happiness, based on looks and wealth. If we ever finish this play, I will share the entire piece.

### Waking Up Snow White: The Story of a Betrayal (Play in Four Acts)

**Authors in alphabetical order:** Antonella Capanera, Alejandra Martinez, Virginia Mustafa, Maria Belen Saez.

**Illustration:** Alejandro Pellegrini

**Collaborators:** Julieta Noriega, Franco Strada, Javier Pesci, Magdalena Bertone, Alejandro Pellegrini, Lucrecia Contrini, Nicolas Rivadulla, Tatiana Marengo, Maia Paszucki, Matias Cipollatti, Cecilia Hansen, Fernanda Gamerman, Anna Piccinini, Ignacio Pagliano

#### Characters:

Snow White (Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Disney, 1937)

Merida (*Brave*, Disney-Pixar, 2012)

Prince Charming

Young Hercules (*Hercules*, Disney, 1997)

Cruella de Vil (*One Hundred and One Dalmatians*, Disney, 1961)

Flotsam and Jetsam (Ursula's green moray eel minions, *The Little Mermaid*, 1989)

Offstage voices: Henry Giroux, Norman Denzin, Walt Disney

Stage indications: The assembly of the scene should not look too real. It must be almost awkward, like a school play. Light and music are key to achieving the desired effect. Disney characters are represented by the narrator (who plays Cruella de Vil) and her students. Norman Denzin, Walt Disney, and Henry Giroux are offstage voices.



## ACT ONE

Darkened stage. *In crescendo* Mozart's Requiem. The left half of the stage begins to glow softly with a dark blue light. Small stars twinkle above. It is obvious that they are Christmas lights or something similar. No scenery or props. The light gradually increases and the scene changes to dark red, while the music remains almost inaudible. A figure is silhouetted on stage wearing dark clothes that cover her body and part of her face. It is the narrator, Cruella de Vil. A student playing young Hercules is sitting on the floor covering his face with his hands.

**Walt Disney (off):** I think of a child's mind as a blank book. During the first years of his life, much will be written in the pages. The quality of that writing will affect him profoundly (in Giroux, 1999, p. 17)

**Flotsam and Jetsam** (sighing in the dark, their luminous eyes are the only thing the public may see): We hear you master . . .

**Henry Giroux (off):** Education is never innocent because it always presupposes a particular view of citizenship, culture, and society (1999, p. 31)

**Young Hercules:** We will feel betrayed and disappointed. Why do you have to say that? Why do you do this to us? *Often I have dreamed/Of a far off place/Where a hero's welcome/Would be waiting for me/Where the crowds will cheer/When they see my face/And a voice keeps saying/This is where I'm meant to be . . .* (He sighs while he sobs)

**Cruella de Vil:** Knowledge sometimes brings pain . . .

**Norman Denzin (off):** Reality becomes a political, visual, and auditory construction. The person who manipulates the images and sounds of everyday life controls the way everyday life is perceived and understood (1995, p. 199).

Blackout and sudden silence. The other side of the stage (dark before) is now illuminated with a pink tone. Edward Krieger's song "Morning Mood" can be heard. Birds sing. Two assistants appear, carrying a prop log with difficulty. One of them represents a bluebird and the other one is dressed as a squirrel. A third assistant, dressed like a rabbit, carries a basket of flowers in his arms. They dance awkwardly to the music while they set the props down on stage. Two actresses appear on stage at opposite ends. One represents Snow White and the other, Merida. Both are beautiful, young, and slender. Merida carries a bow in her hand and arrows in a quiver on her back. Snow White approaches the log holding her skirt and dancing to the music. Animal-assistants approach her and applaud vigorously. She spreads a shawl on the floor, lies down, and sighs loudly. Suddenly, she gets up and looks around. She takes flowers from the basket, lies down again with a bouquet in her hands, and

closes her eyes. Merida sits on the log and watches Snow White with a dismissive gesture. The music stops.

**Snow White (singing with her eyes shut):** *Someday my prince will come . . .*

**Merida (holding her chin with both hands):** He won't come because he doesn't even exist!

**Snow White (ignoring Merida and continuing on her reverie):** We will be happy forever.

**Merida:** According to statistics . . .

**Snow White:** Shush! You will frighten my prince with your horrible and negative . . . just, shut up!

Snow White closes her eyes; she doesn't want to see. She dreams of a man whom she hardly knows. She dreams of a happier new world. She sings (Merida covers her ears with both hands): *Someday my prince will come/Someday we'll meet again/And away to his castle we'll go/To be happy forever I know//Someday when spring is here/We'll find our love anew/And the birds will sing/And wedding bells will ring/Someday when my dreams come true . . .*

Behind the castle Prince Charming appears. He is young and beautiful, but a little disheveled. He wears tights, boots, and a cape. He drags a rusty sword on the floor.

**Prince Charming:** Evening . . .

Merida looks the man up and down and does not respond to the greeting. One of the animal-assistants (who is dressed as a squirrel) tries to sit on her lap, but she pushes him to the ground.

**Snow White:** Excuse me, sir? Sir? MISTER! Are you my prince charming?

**Prince Charming (depressed):** Yeah . . . well . . . I . . . I used to be a prince, yeah . . . but now I am a symbol of male domination and I am unemployed. Times change, you know . . .

**Snow White (confused):** Then . . . leave! That's not in the script.

Snow White lies back down again. In a few minutes, she begins to snore softly. Two of the animal-assistants lie at her feet. The prince, head down, sits on the trunk near Merida. She pats him on the shoulder with a hint of shame.

**Merida:** Don't be bitter . . . something will occur to the script writer, you'll see.

The prince shrugs and holds his head with both hands.

**Merida:** Sir? Mr. Prince? Remember that to reenter the fairytales you shouldn't take your looks for granted. Change that attitude, man! Freshen up a bit! Princes evolved. Look, if you wish we can help you a little

bit, maybe with an “extreme makeover” . . . but nothing is free here at Disneyland, OK? We’ll see how you can return the favor to me and my little friends of the forest. Perhaps sharing merchandising rights? (She smiles tenderly, as do all the Disney Princesses).

**Prince Charming:** Yeah . . . I dunno . . . I feel like . . . I feel like a frog, go figure . . .

**Merida:** Hey! Don’t play smart with me, mister. I know everything about that Frog story. Don’t forget I’m an armed woman!

**Prince Charming:** Do you have a husband?

**Merida:** Of course not! Haven’t I just told you that I’m an armed woman?

**Prince Charming:** Yeah, well . . . (he suddenly cheers up) do you want me to sing you a song?

**Merida:** Not in a million years.

**Prince Charming (he sings romantically):** I know you. I walked with you once upon a dream . . .Blackout. Slap sound.

**Prince Charming:** Ouch! You will *never* get married, woman . . .



## END OF ACT ONE

### Final Words

It is not easy to develop a critical reading of children’s films. It is difficult for its recipients, who are seduced by the magic of the stories, songs, and characters they know in detail (Martinez and Merlino, 2012; Martinez 2013), and it seems to be hard for researchers, who find it difficult to put into question the contents produced by companies like Disney, Blue Sky, or Dreamworks. To expose racism, colonialism, and sexism in films in which “good always wins” and endings are happy involves breaking with the idea of sacredness that sustains them (Budd & Kirsch, 2005). This sacredness is most evident when the characters are not

human beings but animals. It is more difficult to think critically when analyzing actors who hardly seem to fit the context of political, racial, gender, or social class issues. According to Dorfman and Mattelart (2002), since animals do not belong to the right or to the left, they are painted to represent a world without patterns of socioeconomic pollution. Nature is hard to challenge. Therefore, the animal disguise assumed by the issues addressed in children’s movies tends to soften them.

[T]hese characters are not simply transformed into some generic “human” (for there are no generic humans); rather, they are inscribed, for example, as white “humans,” black “humans,” asian “humans” or Latino “humans.” Thus, we maintain that animal and other non-human characters undergo a kind of racialized anthropomorphism within animated films. (King et al., 2010, p. 57)

I agree with Henry Giroux (1999) when he argues that the product offered by Disney and other similar producers is historically based on a certain idea of innocence associated with childhood, shown in the context of a softened view of the world. This idea runs counter to the aggressive business expansion strategies aimed at producing higher profits. According to Giroux, the idea of innocence that extends over all of their stories hides ultraconservative values based on the strict separation between men and women, uncontested nationalism, and a notion of freedom of choice attached to consumerism. I agree with Denzin when he says, “All representations of cultural experience are ideological and hence must be read for the multiple meanings that are contained within their texts” (2004, p. 9) and with Giroux when he explains that “culture is public pedagogy, a set of recurring interpretive practices that connect ethics, power, and politics” (in Denzin, 2003, p. 265).

Giroux says that “by spreading its ideology all over the globe ( . . . ) Disney has transformed into a pivotal cultural force” (2010, p. 415). Innocence, embodied by both animal and animated characters, is an umbrella these movies use to protect their arguments, which is why they are difficult to challenge. From this perspective, those who sow the seed of suspicion in these productions have, according to the producers, a way of seeing that is convoluted and overly complicated, undermining peace at home and youth (Dorfman & Mattelart, 2002). To delve into the ideological constructions that underlie the tender and pure message offered by children’s movies, it is almost denying childhood itself and the values that built us as people (Budd & Kirsch, 2005).

I am sorry to steal your happy endings, dear students, prospective advertisers, designers, and public relations specialists, but from your creative minds will emerge social representations that media will broadcast in the future. Therefore, innocence is a privilege that you aren’t allowed to enjoy. You must know that in your hands lies the chance

of “a radically free democratic society, a society where ideals of the feminist, queer, environmental, green, civil rights, and labor movements are realized” (Giroux, 2001a, p. 9; McChesney, 1999, p. 290 in Denzin, 2003, p. 189).

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