In the article *Hegemony*, James Lull explains that hegemony is a “power or dominance that one social group holds over others.” It is a relationship between those in society who are superior to those who are subordinate. Hegemony is “a method for gaining and maintaining power.” Today many dominant mass-media sources use hegemony for their own good but not necessarily for the good of everyone. These mass-media companies use their own ideologies and are able to introduce them into the individual’s consciousness. The individual does not reject these ideologies because they are commonly accepted within society.

In his book, Lull quotes intellectual Antonio Gramsci who states that “mass media are tools that ruling elites use to perpetuate their power, wealth, and status [by popularizing] their own philosophy, culture, and morality.” In other words, the companies in our society who have the most wealth, status, and power are able to use mass media in order to disseminate messages of their choice. Because these messages tend to be commonly accepted cultural assumptions and norms across a wide spread variety of people, no one objects to them. Social theorist Philip Elliot suggests, “The most potent effect of mass media is how they subtly influence their audiences to perceive social roles and routine personal activities” (qtd. by Lull). When an individual sees the assumed societal norms, or social roles depicted through mass media, it is reinforcement for the way the individual sees him or herself within society (Lull).
Disney is a company recognized as one of the largest media institutions in the world. Disney is also a company that is less recognized for their use of hegemony within their media. Disney, well known for its hundreds of movies and other sources of media aimed at children, constantly displays certain negative ideologies within the plots of their stories. Two consistently reoccurring ideologies seen in Disney movies are that women are inferior to men and comply with what men want from them and that everything dark is associated with negativity or evil. Each Disney movie displays these ideologies a bit differently. However, when analyzed, it is very clear to see that these Disney movies are dispensing sexist and racist ideologies to their consumers. Two Disney movies in particular that display these sexist and racist ideologies are *The Lion King* (1994) and *Tarzan* (1999).

The plots of both *The Lion King* (1994) and *Tarzan* (1999) take place in Africa. The first is about a young prince lion cub, Simba, who is next in line to become king of Pride Rock. His power-obsessed uncle Scar plots with the hyenas in order to kill both Mufasa (Simba’s father, older brother of Scar) and Simba. Simba leaves Pride Rock for years due to Scar’s trickery, but Nala, his female friend (and later mate), persuades him to return home and take his rightful place as king (*The Lion King*, 1994).

The latter movie is about an English baby who becomes orphaned in a jungle in Africa. Sabor, a female leopard, killed his parents. Kala, a gorilla who lost her own son to Sabor, rescues him. Kala takes him in, accepts him as her own son, and names him Tarzan. Kala is the mate of Kerchak, the very large, fierce, and rather vicious leader of the tribe of apes, who does not accept Tarzan as one of them. Although Tarzan loves his gorilla family, he grows up being very aware of how different he is from them. When
Jane, Professor Porter (Jane’s father), and Clayton arrive in Africa, the missing link finally connects for Tarzan. Jane and her father came to study the gorillas, while Clayton, who is supposed to be their guide, has a different agenda.

With song lyrics suggesting ideas such as “two worlds, one family,” or all of us being connected in “the circle of life,” both films seemingly portray a sense of community and coming together. While this may be true, these movies also have underlying messages that promote a continuing separation between different groups of people.

**Sexism**

Both films portray sexism in similar, yet different ways. In *The Lion King* (1994), there is a distinct depiction of both Mufasa and Scar that displays sexism through gender roles. Mufasa is the king of Pride Rock. He is strong, wise, powerful, and muscular, as well as a good fighter and the largest lion in the Pride Lands. He has a yellow-orange fur coat and a brownish-red mane. According to his animators, “he was given broad shoulders and a pronounced jaw to make him seem king-like and like the most powerful lion” (Mufasa). Mufasa also has a perfect coat of fur and a full mane. Scar, on the other hand, is portrayed as the opposite of Mufasa. Scar has a reddish-brown fur coat with a black mane and bright yellow-green eyes. He lacks physical strength and has a very deceiving, evil nature. His animators designed him to move about in a gliding, slithering manner, rather than in the way stronger, stockier lions do (Scar). The way Scar moves and speaks resembles the way a female may be thought to move or speak: sleek and elegant, rather helpless at times, and anxious for power. This depiction between the two lions suggests that in order to be a leader, one must hold traits that resemble those of a
man. Someone who possesses any traits that resemble femininity is likely to be less of a being. When this ideology is portrayed in films over and over again, it reinforces the way people behave in society.

Like Scar, the actual female lions in the movie have much less leadership power than the male lions. In fact, they appear to have even less power than Scar. The first real interactions with the female lions in the film occurs while Simba’s and Nala’s mothers are bathing their cubs. The lionesses are also the ones expected to do the hunting for the rest of the pride. This is the same ideology of a typical womanly role in society: a stay at home mother, taking care of the children and cooking. Towards the end of the film when Scar takes over Pride Rock, there is no longer any food left to hunt, and Scar verbally abuses Sarabi (Simba’s mother). The lionesses are seemingly powerless against Scar, and it is not until Simba returns that anything is done to try to go against Scar’s ill-willed power. Also, once Nala and Simba come back into each others’ lives, they automatically begin to fall in love, as if that is specifically what the female is supposed to do. This depicts the ideology that women are powerless, and that they require the presence of a man in order to achieve anything.

In Tarzan, as in practically every other Disney movie, boy meets girl, girl barely knows boy, and girl falls head over heels for boy – for no apparent reason. As soon as Tarzan and Jane interact for the first time, it is apparent that feelings are going to occur between the two. Tarzan literally sweeps Jane off her feet as he saves her from a group of baboons who are chasing after her. These stereotypical gender roles continue in Tarzan. Tarzan is a very muscular man who saves everyone from danger on numerous occasions; Jane is the stereotypical female, wearing a dress and heels in an African
jungle. She is unable to save herself so Tarzan saves her instead. She falls head over heels for a man she barely knows. She is very, very talkative; at one point in the film, Tarzan puts his hand over her mouth to make her stop talking. Her father and Clayton also comment about how Jane is a “crazy girl” when she is ranting about something. They also makes the comment “Women, how typical.” Clayton is a “manly man,” depicted in a manner similar to Mufasa – muscular, with broad shoulders and a defined jaw line. Professor Porter is an older, weaker man and is treated as a lesser by Clayton. As for the gorillas, they also stay within their gender roles. The female gorillas take care of the babies, and the male gorillas protect the females and children. This is especially true for Kerchak, the leader of the apes, who is very large, muscular, violent, vicious and who lacks emotion.

These reoccurring ideologies throughout Disney films explain how hegemony operates. The consistently depiction of women who are lesser than men, men who have to look and act a certain way, and women who magically fall in love with a man simply restate what is commonly accepted throughout society, even if society does not fully acknowledge this acceptance.

**Racism**

In both *The Lion King*, and *Tarzan*, one major issue arises when analyzing these two films. These movies are both depictions of Africa, but the only African characters depicted are animals. Up until recently, there had been no depiction of African people in Disney films. The people who were pictured in Tarzan were all white Europeans. What ideology does this teach the children, whom these Disney films are targeted towards?
In *The Lion King*, as previously stated, Scar has a darker mane and coat of fur than any of the other lions in the film. Scar, as we know, is evil. He kills Mufasa and attempts to kill Simba in order to take their place as King of the Pride Lands. When Scar takes over the Pride Lands, he teams up with the hyenas.

The hyenas are depicted as dangerous, ugly, dirty, or as Simba puts it, “slobbering, mangy, stupid vultures.” Of the three hyenas depicted, one has a Spanish-speaking accent, the other has a voice of a black woman, and the third simply does not speak at all because he is so stupid. The two that do speak, do so with bad grammar. Just like Scar, the hyenas are, of course, darker than most of the other animals. The hyenas live in the one place the people from the Pride Lands are not supposed to go because it is too dangerous. This place is an elephant graveyard, which, especially in comparison to the Pride Lands, is an awful place. There are skeletons everywhere, the sky is always dark, and there is no sign of plants or green in sight.

There is a reoccurring ideology in Disney films that everything that is darker always turns out to be evil. In *The Lion King*, the darker animals are evil and have less power than those with lighter fur. It seems as though when Scar teams up with the hyenas, they accept him as “one of them.” Although they are on the same level with Scar, he still has power over them. When Scar is singing about pairing up with the hyenas to take over Pride Rock, he states that you can tell the “lights are not all on upstairs,” and calls them idiots. There is a distinct separation between the powers each animal has. One could relate this to white privilege. Although whites and blacks may both be living in poverty, whites are still in the power position and therefore have some privileges or power over the minority group.
In *Tarzan*, the gorillas are the only depiction of Africans in this film. Kerchak, the very dark, very large, dominating male gorilla, is depicted as highly aggressive and violent and does not show any affection. He is also verbally abusive towards Kala and wants nothing to do with the Europeans who have come to the jungle. Tarzan, the white European male, claims he is going to “be the best ape ever” and is seen saving the other gorillas on many occasions. He saves them from Sabor, as well as from Clayton who tries to lock them up in cages in order to bring them back to England for money.

This again shows the ideology of darker creatures being evil or depicting the darker characters as black people. Clayton putting the gorillas in cages to ship them to Europe has a distinct correlation between Europeans putting Africans on a ship for the slave trade. Because the gorillas are the only depiction of any African characters, a viewer could relate the gorillas with black African people and interpret Tarzan, the white man, as saving the “blacks” from harm.

Once these Disney movies are analyzed, the way Disney displays messages within their media that correlate with the negative aspects of society becomes obvious. The hegemony that Disney exerts through all of their children’s films relates with the sexism and racism that continues in society today. Disney is able to encode these ideologies within its media because these ideas are commonly accepted within society. This company controls much of the mass media outlets for children, but with the ideologies they support, consumers should not support them. Unfortunately, because these ideologies of sexism and racism are so ingrained within society, it seems as though Disney will be able to continue its output of hegemony through its media for as long as it exists.
References:


*Tarzan*. Walt Disney Pictures, 1999. DVD.

*The Lion King*. Walt Disney Pictures, 1994. DVD.