Subcultural Appropriation of Disney Normative Characters in Countercultural Performance Responses

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Introduction

Walt Disney is remembered fondly as "Uncle Walt" who re-told fairy tales in ways that were less gruesome than their originals and moved audiences to laughter and tears. Disney's hard upbringing led to his strict personal belief system that reinforced proper behavior and a heterosexual, nuclear family structure. Fantasy was Disney's favorite escape as a child, and he loved telling stories as an adult so much that he made it a wildly successful business. Starting in 1923 as Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio, Walt Disney began with animated shorts before eventually moving into feature-length productions. The power to reach audiences comes with the ability to convey a worldview to the public. Disney used his adaptations of fairy tales from authors such as the Brothers Grimm, Charles Perrault, and Hans Christian Anderson to entertain and teach children and adults what the perfect fantasy world could be.

Disney's versions of classic fairy tales supported a white, heterosexual, Judeo-Christian worldview known as heteronormativity. This heteronormative culture maintains a dominant status in American society called hegemony. Dominant cultures often inspire the formation of subcultures whose members do not fit the hegemonic normative culture. This paper will incorporate the work of Dick Hebdige and Judith Butler to explain subcultural creation and modes of response to hegemony, specifically through drag's appropriation of characters. Character traits being normalized or vilified is in issue of semiotics, meaning the signs of characters and traits signify one as "good" or "evil" dependent on their performance of certain characteristics.

Drag is a subculture, with much diversity within itself, and serves as the model for studying counter-hegemonic subcultural appropriation of symbols. In "Critically Queer," Judith Butler discusses identity formation, gender performativity, and gender norms as they relate to the heteronormative and the subcultures that challenge hegemony. Disney classic films served to bolster the existing hegemonic culture while simultaneously inspiring a subversive response to the heteronormative via drag character appropriation. The characters in Disney productions became popular icons, which inspired people of all kinds to emulate their traits. By nature, drag is a performance of exaggerating attributes and attitudes. I will define drag as a subculture and situate character appropriation by drag queens as a sub-cultural response to hegemony.

In my narrative analyses of several Disney-era films, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Dir. Cottrell, Hand, Jackson, Morey, Pearce, and Sharpsteen, 1937), *Sleeping Beauty* (Dir. Geronimi, 1959), *101 Dalmatians* (Dir. Geronimi, Luske, and Reitherman 1961), and *The Little Mermaid* (Dir. Clements, Musker, 1989), I will discuss specific characters and traits that lend themselves to re-interpretation by drag performers. The theories of Hebdige and Butler will support my thesis that villains are turned from symbols of evil to representations of power and beauty. The excessive nature of drag gives performers the opportunity to incorporate vilified

traits into their performance art. Vanity is a common thread among Disney villains and a cornerstone of drag culture. Like the villains, drag queens are judged for their outward appearance and theatrical nature with little to no information provided on their backstory.

Walt Disney and His Films

Walt Disney became a renowned storyteller who exerted a strong moral influence on society through his productions. Whiteness is notable in protagonists while antagonists and supporting characters are disproportionately stereotypical non-white others. Disney added the character King Louis to *The Jungle Book* (Dir. Reitherman, 1967), even though Rudyard Kipling's original book specified the monkeys had no leader. In both versions, the monkeys have proven themselves to be a threat by kidnapping Mowgli. King Louis is a reference to Jazz singer Louis Armstrong and is meant to code the monkeys as Black. The monkeys lived in the ruins of the man village, signifying sub-standard housing in America's Black community. In the scene featuring the monkeys, Baloo dresses in drag to infiltrate the group and rescue Mowgli. Part of Baloo's drag is coconut shells meant to accentuate Baloo's lips, a sadly common stereotype of Black representation from early animation (Metcalf 121). The question arises: why would a benevolent storyteller vilify and stereotype minority groups?

Looking at Disney's life helps shed light on why he may not have understood his privilege as a straight white male. Understanding Disney's legacy foregrounds my thesis of Disney supporting his own dominant culture through storytelling and drag subculture responding by appropriating his characters. Walt Disney had a lifelong passion for performance and animation. In 1923, Disney signed with distributer J.M. Winkler to publish the film series *Alice's Wonderland* and the Walt Disney Studios was born. *Oswald the Lucky Rabbit* (Dir. Disney, 1927) was the first entirely animated product of the studio that was licensed by a distributor. This led Disney and chief animator Ub Iwerks to develop their signature character, Mickey Mouse. Mickey Mouse was featured in the production *Steamboat Willie* (Dir. Disney, Iwerks, 1928) and became a beloved character. Disney then produced *Silly Symphonies* (Dir. Disney, Iwerks, et al, 1929-1939), which were Academy Award-winning animations.

The success of these projects inspired Disney to create the first ever feature-length animated film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. His studio went on to produce television, live-action films, wildlife documentaries, and training videos for the military. The classics stand out as productions of the studio because of their artistic merits and the re-telling of fairy tales and myths. Disney established himself as a producer by making these stories his own. Disney became the mediator for the authors of fairy tales and myths such as the Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Anderson, and Charles Perrault. Over the years many people have been exposed to the Disney version of these stories before the original authors' versions. Disney's productions were popular worldwide, and the Disney brand has become iconic in many countries. The Disney brand is more often associated with storytelling than the anti-Semitism and labor abuses that were a part of Disney and company. Disney's productions were able to obscure these highly impactful realities in the public's recollection of Disney history.

Disney's classics reflect an ideology of heteronormativity and serve to bolster the heteronormative hegemonic state. A heterosexual union to produce a nuclear family is either the initial goal or final destination for heroes. Villains have antagonistic goals relative to jealousy or lust for power. These character types and their traits add to the hegemonic heteronormative while coding those outside of hegemony as evil. Heroes and heroines are disproportionately

heterosexual and white, or white-coded, while villains are coded as societal others beyond their roles as antagonists. Skin color, aversion to love, exaggerated mannerisms, and an anti-hegemonic purpose are character traits of villains that code them as others who exist in society. Disney used behavioral coding to influence audience perceptions of individuals and groups who did not conform to the hegemonic normative in American culture. Protagonists are shown to be even-tempered and rational in the face of great distress while antagonists become enraged at any difficulty they encounter throughout the narrative. Behaviors, appearance, and mannerisms of the heroines versus the villains reinforce an ideology of heteronormativity being proper.

In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the young princess Snow White is revealed to be more beautiful than her stepmother, the Evil Queen. The queen's magic mirror is her window to specific knowledge, and she uses it to bolster her vanity. The Evil Queen is obsessed with being the fairest in the land. The revelation of Snow White usurping this position sends the queen into a vengeful quest to kill Snow White and once again be the fairest in the land. The queen sends her huntsman to kill Snow White, but he spares her and brings the queen the heart of a pig to satisfy his order of bringing Snow White's heart as proof of her death. Snow White connects with seven dwarfs and is later found by the Evil Queen. The queen disguises herself as a peddler and gives Snow White a poisoned apple that causes her to fall into a deep sleep until a handsome prince awakens her with true love's kiss.

The queen's goal is based on the sin of vanity and is juxtaposed with Snow White's virtuous humility. Snow White is rewarded with a handsome prince. The relationship is the story's conclusion, making a heterosexual relationship Snow White's final goal. The queen threatens this relationship with her murderous intent. The need to vanquish the queen arises from her threat to the relationship. Vanity is coded as a sin, which is a gateway to threatening the protagonists' relationship. In the original Grimm fairytale, the prince orders Snow White's body carried to his castle that jostles the piece of apple from her throat and wakes her. The kiss was given magical properties and is a metaphor for heterosexuality being a cure. A wedding was still in the original story, but romantic contact was not the original savior of Snow White. Disney also altered the Evil Queen's death. In the original tale, the prince and Snow White make the Evil Queen dance herself to death in hot iron shoes. In Disney's version, the Evil Queen is struck by lightning and falls off a cliff. The accidental nature of the Evil Queen's death in Disney's version began a tradition of omitting some violence from the original stories. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was the first feature-length animated film ever, and Disney used it to purvey his vision for his company and society.

Sleeping Beauty offers a similar heterosexual love plot with Maleficent acting as the threat to hegemony. The story begins at the christening of Princess Aurora. Three color-coded fairies are the saving grace in this story. Flora (red for roses), Fauna (green for the forest), and Merriweather (blue for the sky) are bestowing gifts of beauty and song upon the princess when Maleficent makes her entrance. Maleficent enters the christening in a flash of lightning, clap of thunder, and gust of wind which naturally draws the attention of all to her. This behavior is considered anti-social, as one who is not the guest of honor should not draw attention to oneself at any occasion. Maleficent, angry at not receiving an invitation, curses Aurora to prick her finger on the spindle of a spinning wheel and die before the sun sets on her sixteenth birthday. Maleficent demonstrates a lack of social graces with propensity for vengeance and angry outbursts. The audience is not given any back-story on the relationship between King Stephen and Maleficent. When Merriweather sneers, "You weren't wanted!" we are given no information

about why. The audience is left to infer this darkly dressed, green-faced sorceress is ostracized solely for who she is.

Merriweather alters Maleficent's curse from death to sleep, and we hear a non-diegetic choir sing, "For true love conquers all." The fairies take Aurora into the woods to raise her in safety. Maleficent eventually locates the child, lures her to a spinning wheel, and the kingdom is put to sleep with Aurora. Prince Philip, betrothed son of a fellow king, vanquishes Maleficent (in the form of a dragon) and wakes Aurora with a kiss.

The original tale, written by Charles Perrault and later re-told by the Brothers Grimm, mentions a group of fairies being invited to the christening with the exclusion of one fairy. In these stories, a kiss is used to waken the sleeping princess, but the jealous fairy is not mentioned again. The antagonist in the original is not the villain we know from Disney films. She is someone with powers who responds strongly to social slight. In a departure from the original story, Maleficent is an active threat to the love between Aurora and Phillip beyond her original curse. Maleficent must be vanquished for her interference in the dominant love plot. Defense of the relationship through Prince Phillip's thrusting of a phallic sword demonstrate the proper steps to achieve the reward of a heterosexual romance, thus bringing the story to its intended conclusion: the romantic coupling of Aurora and Phillip.

The backstory of Maleficent is left a mystery until the 2014 film *Maleficent* (Dir. Stromberg, 2014). Villains have become so popular their history and futures are subjects for modern productions. In the original *Sleeping Beauty,* the audience is left with the basic interpretation that Maleficent is acting-out after not receiving an invitation to Princess Aurora's christening. The sin of jealousy leads Maleficent down her counter-hegemonic path of conflict with the dominant heterosexual romance. Maleficent has nothing to gain from the death of Aurora or hindering her marriage to Phillip. Maleficent is an antagonist whose primary goal is vengeance for a social slight. The antagonism seems to have an incredibly weak root and positions Maleficent as an unjustifiable threat to romance. For the sin of threatening romance, Prince Phillip vanquishes Maleficent.

Maleficent has the Latin root "mal" meaning "bad" and is defined as "Of a thing or spiritual agency: harmful, hurtful…a person, act, or disposition: given to evildoing, criminal" ("maleficent, a," *OED Online*). Maleficent also resembles the word "malevolent" which means "Of a person, feeling, or action: desirous of evil to others; entertaining, actuated by, or indicative of ill will; disposed or addicted to ill will" ("malevolent, a," *OED Online*). The character Maleficent has a green face, which is code for jealousy while simultaneously marking her as non-white. The initially fatal curse on Aurora is meant to come into effect on her sixteenth birthday. The original tale places the curse on the princess's fifteenth birthday. The "Sweet Sixteen" party is a coming-of-age celebration recognizing a teenager's transition into young adulthood, thus Maleficent is threatening tradition along with an innocent infant.

The castle Maleficent inhabits is dilapidated, dark, and in a land plagued by constant thunder and lightning which symbolize her wrath and frustration. The castle of King Stephen is light, clean, and in good repair. A person's home is said to reveal aspects of their personality and character, and Disney uses this idea in the creation of heroes and villains. Heroes have orderly, well-maintained homes and villains live in poorly maintained substandard dwellings. The insinuation is: good and bad people can often be identified by the state of their homes.

Keeping a tidy home was presented as a key component of being a proper American citizen. This connects to protagonists being inherently virtuous and antagonists lacking the most basic positive qualities. One public safety film called "The House in the Middle" from 1954 suggests that a clean home was more likely to survive nuclear fallout while an untidy home would catch fire and become more of a threat to the neighborhood. The message regarding home-maintenance as a virtuous quality affecting the common good is explicit in this case. A villain's home being in a poor state implies a lack of basic competence and virtue on their part. Maleficent is more than a jealous party-crasher: she is an immoral neighbor. The virtuous quality of maintaining a good home is instilled in the characters of heroines such as Snow White and Cinderella. Cruella De Vil, from *101 Dalmatians,* owns a crumbling mansion, Ursula, from *The Little Mermaid* lives in the bones of a deceased sea monster, King Louis, from *The Jungle Book,* lives in ruins, and Prince John's castle in *Robin Hood* (Dir. Reitherman, 1973) eventually burns.

Not all villains present a romantic threat, but the threat of the family unit is also presented as a driving force behind many villains' purposes. The supposed natural progression of a heterosexual romance is the creation of a nuclear family unit. *101* Dalmatians brings the villain Cruella De Vil into the cast of characters, and she unquestionably commits the sin of vanity. Cruella wants to skin Dalmatian protagonists Pongo and Perdita's litter of puppies to make a dog-skin coat. Horace and Jasper, Cruella's inept henchmen, kidnap the puppies and take them to the run-down De Vil mansion. Pongo and Perdita are in pursuit and with the help of local farm animals the puppies are located along with a plethora of pet-store Dalmatian puppies. Pongo and Perdita manage to escape the villains and make it home to their owners (affectionately called pets) Roger and Anita.

Cruella De Vil displays a lack of social graces as she barges in to Roger and Anita's home to try to purchase the puppies. A trail of green cigarette smoke and a split coloring of black and white hair remind the audience of a skunk's appearance and odor, recalling Maleficent's green smoke and fire. Anita holds her nose against the smoke to complete the metaphor. Cruella's fur coat easily doubles her character's size that gives her an overbearing presence. Cruella is partially based on actress Tallulah Bankhead, who was known for her raspy voice, dramatic expressive nature, and referring to most people as "darling" (Hutchinson). The signature raspy voice and flare for the dramatic are noted characteristics of Bankhead's personality and influenced the creation of Cruella's character. Cruella's evil nature is established just prior to her entrance by her inspiration of lyrics for Roger's latest melody. As Cruella arrives, Roger sings (in a composition by Mel Leven), "Cruella De Vil, Cruella De Vil, if she doesn't scare you, no evil thing will. To see her is to take a sudden *chill*, Cruella, Cruella. She's like a spider waiting for the kill. Look out for Cruella De Vil."

The De Vil mansion is considered abandoned by the local farm characters, and the interior gives audience the same impression. For her façade of glamour, Cruella seemingly lacks the capital to back it up. Cruella presumably lives in a different residence, but we only see her bedroom as she takes a call from Jasper while smoking and reading the paper. Anita and Roger have a modest house, but the character Nanny suggests they keep their residence in good repair. Cruella's abandoned mansion and bedroom of her other residence are the only clues the audience has as to her character's living conditions.

Outbursts of rage and attempted vehicular homicide follow in the climax of *101 Dalmatians* suggesting theatrical people have malicious motivations and behave erratically.

Anita is mild-mannered, Nanny is jovial yet tough, and Roger is a quirky artist trying to support his household. Pongo and Perdita are naturally upset at the dognapping of their puppies, but they demonstrate grace under fire compared to Cruella's frequent rages. Cruella De Vil's name even reduces to "cruel devil" which leaves no room for any redeeming qualities.

The primary goal of Cruella is rooted in vanity, but her actions present a threat to the family unit the film's introduction created. Cruella's car is as much of a status symbol as her furs. The car is shown to be fast and powerful with a long hood and headlights, which appear to be glaring eyes. The shape, length, and representation of power in the car make it phallic in appearance and function. Following the destruction of Cruella's phallic car, she is rendered powerless. The family unit has survived and increased to 103 members plus Nanny. This symbolizes the protection and proliferation of the family unit against counter-hegemonic forces. The sin of vanity is the root of Cruella's behavior, but her threat to the family unit brings the need to vanquish the villain.

The Little Mermaid was produced after Walt Disney's death in 1966, but the film reflects the ideology Disney established during his lifetime. Adapted freely from Hans Christian Anderson's story, the Disney version depicts the story of a mermaid named Ariel. In love with a human named Prince Eric, Ariel trades her beautiful voice for legs in a bargain with the sea witch Ursula. Ariel has three days to receive a kiss of true love from Eric or she will lose her voice forecer. Ursula has fewer outbursts but exudes a similar level of drama and theatricality as Cruella and Maleficent. The name Ursula comes from the Latin word Ursa, meaning bear. It signifies a large body type and one who is formidable in battle. The famous drag queen and actor Divine, who passed away in 1988, was an inspiration for the character Ursula. (Davies) The name being derived from a word meaning bear suggests a large body size and formidable threat. Basing the character of a villain on a real-life drag queen is suggestive of subcultural appropriation of villains informing the development of specific villain characters. This raises the question: Is this a demonization of a subculture or homage to a performer?

Theatricality and a flare for the dramatic are strong components of Ursula. Ursula laments her present existence outside of the palace and claims to be starving as she tosses a shrimp into her mouth. Once again, we are given no specifics on our villain's former status or relationship with the present monarchy. The audience needs to know this character is a subversive, counter-hegemonic force that threatens the heterosexual love interest in her quest for power. Ursula attempts to disrupt Ariel and Eric's relationship to gain control over Ariel. Using Ariel as a hostage allows Ursula to exchange her control of Ariel for control of King Triton, and thus the powerful trident and the kingdom. The motivations of the villain are reduced to the points of lust for power and loathing for hegemony with no explanation of any contributing factors. After taking possession of the trident, Ursula aims it at Eric with the intention of killing him. Ariel grabs Ursula and re-directs the lethal shot to Ursula's pet henchmen, eels Flotsam and Jetsam. Enraged, Ursula uses magic and grows to a gigantic size. Ursula summons a storm and whirlpool that trap Ariel and raise shipwrecks from the ocean floor. Eric boards one of the ships and steers it into Ursula, puncturing her stomach and killing her. This restores Ariel's voice, the previously transformed merfolk, and King Triton. Ariel is transformed into a human by Triton and marries Prince Eric. Ursula's emotional volatility and lust for power contributed to her undoing, and the protagonists, who kept emotional control and focus, were rewarded with a heterosexual union.

Hegemony and the Heteronormative Worldview

The films I have discussed all feature heterosexual protagonists facing antagonists who seek personal gain at the cost of the protagonists' relationships or families. The Evil Queen against Snow White (Prince), Maleficent against Aurora (Phillip), Cruella against Pongo and Perdita's family, and Ursula against Ariel (Eric). The representation of heterosexual love as a dominant force for good and the ideal goal of anyone who identifies as good proliferates heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is a worldview of heterosexual romance being a preferred and normal sexual orientation. Disney classics and other films perpetuate the heterosexual romance as a primary motivation for a protagonist and the antagonist as one existing outside of this normative or opposing the heterosexual romance. Heteronormativity is not unique to Disney as it is a key component of hegemonic maintenance in many cultures worldwide. Fairy tales have disproportionately featured heterosexual protagonists, but Disney used his character designs to reinforce hegemony through white protagonists and "others" as antagonists. The power and opportunity inherent to those who fit the heteronormative created a concentration of hegemonic members at the highest levels of media production in many businesses and maintained a standard of behavioral norms in the works they produced. In *Media and Society*, O'Shaughnessey and Stadler write, "The topics of heterosexual bonding, marriage, and family are the central issues of many films and television shows, particularly romantic comedies, melodramas, soap operas, and sit-coms. The conclusions of mainstream films used to almost always point to happiness through the establishment of the heterosexual couple and the family" (O'Shaughnessy and Stadler 288). This statement is supported in my analyses of Disney classics, and it holds true in many other productions.

Disney productions of classic fairy tales eliminated explicit unpleasantness such as dancing to death in hot iron shoes (*Snow White*) or suicide due to heartbreak (*The Little Mermaid*) and this makes the stories more family-friendly when compared to the original versions. Some scholars lamented the changes to these classic tales while many moviegoers lauded the omission of violence. The description of these productions as family-friendly means they are palatable for every age group, but the implicit meaning is they represent foundational values for the family.

The heterosexual nuclear family unit is disproportionately presented as an ideal that proliferates the already pervasive status of hegemony. Hegemony is defined as "Power and leadership maintained through processes of struggle and negotiation, especially through winning the consent of the majority of people to accept the ideas or ideologies of the dominant group as common sense" (O'Shaughnessy and Stadler 205). Groups subordinate to hegemony are contained, if not controlled, in ideological spaces that otherize them thus fueling the subcultural response of semiotic appropriation. Those in control of prominent media outlets such as television and mainstream cinema typically fit, and actively seek to maintain, the hegemonic norm. Proliferation of the heteronormative through representation and coding semiotics is thus a cycle of hegemonic self-interest.

Heterosexuality is shown to be natural, rational, and ultimately triumphant over any opposing force in the Disney classics. Antagonists are, by definition, the opposing force, but what stands out is the design of the specific characters. Human antagonists are disproportionately shown as societal others, which is possibly a contributing factor to their anti-hegemonic dispositions and plot goals. Cruella De Vil is noticeably more emotionally expressive and

volatile than any other character in the film, human or animal. This volatility is rooted in vanity and focused on the destruction of the protagonists' family unit. The family unit consists of a white family, Roger and Anita, and the Dalmatians that are white with black spots. Maleficent is the only humanoid character that is not white. Maleficent is green to signify jealousy, and her primary goal is also focused on familial destruction. Princess Aurora, Prince Phillip, their families, and all characters connected to them are Caucasian.

Even in films that feature animal protagonists, being drawn as lesser members of their species otherizes antagonists. One example is Prince John's lack of a mane in *Robin Hood*. King Richard, the rightful king, and Prince John are both drawn as lions. The absence of a mane in the design of Prince John's character positions him as a feminized male member of his species. This message supports the vilification of those who do not fit the typical mold of their species. Non-normative gender performance by villains is meant to show these characters as morally weak and marks conforming gender performances as attributes of virtuous characters. On these implicit validations of norms, Judith Butler writes, "Heterosexuality can augment its hegemony *through* its denaturalization, as when we see denaturalizing parodies which re-idealize heterosexual norms *without* calling them into question" (Butler 23). For example, Ursula is dramatic, jealous, and seeking an elevated social station. Ursula is an octopus with humanoid characteristics, and her humanoid skin is purple. We do not see other members of the species to know if this is typical. The merfolk are the only other hybrid species shown in the film. They are on the side of good and entirely Caucasian.

Vilification of character traits is behavioral coding to audiences signifying traits as evil and part of the antagonist's motive. Opposing the heterosexual couple is an active threat to heterosexuality in general and lacking heteronormative characteristics codes one as a vilified other. Labels of good and evil are used to convey deeper meanings regarding hegemonic status and confer the corresponding rewards or punishments onto characters. Audience members who identify outside of the hegemonic normative must negotiate their own response to this representation, creating an opening for subcultural formation.

Subcultures and Drag

A specific definition of subculture reads, "An identifiable group within a society or a group of people, esp. one characterized by beliefs or interests at variance with those of the larger group; the distinctive ideas, practices, or way of life of such a group" ("subculture, n," *OED Online*). Subcultures are a response to and exist in-tension with hegemony. The use of bricolage, or appropriation and recombination of hegemonic symbols, is a key and subversive component of subcultures. Hebdige discusses bricolage as an assertion of a subculture's identity in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* when he writes, "It is basically the way in which commodities are *used* in subculture which mark the subculture off from more orthodox cultural formations" (103). Subcultures are often, though not exclusively, made of youths who appropriate symbols and fashions and redefine these symbols. Groups like Teddyboys, Rastafarians, and Hipsters have influenced the meaning of simple objects such as the paper clip and basic colors like red, yellow, and green, to signify a connection with their particular subculture. The commodities of high or low fashion, makeup, and characters are elements recombined in drag subculture and known for their excess. Power, a key aspect in hegemony, is reinforced through overt and subliminal messaging. In the bricolage of drag, symbols are often appropriated and reconstructed as an intentional response to hegemonic norms of gender. This appropriation not only challenges

hegemonic normativity, but also begins to concentrate the power of representation within the subculture.

In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Hebdige wrote about reconfiguring semiotics of hegemony into tropes of subcultures. This model serves to illustrate the same process of semiotic appropriation employed by drag culture. Heavy make-up, dirty jokes, and flouncing are discouraged as norms. Drag has taken these elements and exaggerated them into a mediated response to hegemony. Styles of drag represent varying points on the social scale of drag queens, and this value system is used and understood by members of the subculture. Drag is a performance by nature, and the performative element of drag may seem superficial. The performative aspects of drag are deeper ways of rebutting gender norms by amplifying superficial qualities such as make-up and gender performance. These performers are exaggerating norms, which have been re-enforced by media and society for generations. Attributes of gender are deconstructed and exaggerated which fueled the proliferation of the counter-hegemonic performance art that is drag.

Drag has been considered a subculture within the gay subculture, but it has asserted itself as an independent subculture with its own hierarchy and syntax. Groups within drag include *glam queens* whose characters are high-class, *trash/clown queens* who are comical and have exaggerated features, and *street queens* who work in prostitution and dress the part (Barrett, 1). Within drag ball culture there are even more categories of performance such as *luscious body, school boy/girl, realness, town & country, butch queen,* and *realness*. The documentary *Paris is Burning* (Dir. Livingston, 1991) shows the depth of drag ball culture and the different choices performers make in qualities they choose to emulate.

Performers in drag culture are often ostracized from their biological families, and this has led to the formation of houses, such as LaBeija and Xtravaganza. Houses are family units that have formed outside the traditional nuclear family structure. The members of these houses share a mutual bond, regard each other as family, and often use the house name as their family name. The leaders of these houses have taken the most top prizes of anyone and have earned respect for their realness. Realness is a drag queen's ability to pass as female without being read. To read someone is to see through their drag and know them to be anatomically male and deliver insults to that affect. One who has continuously flawless performances is described as legendary.

More inter-cultural terms exist in drag subculture than can be listed here. In *From Drag Queens to Leathermen,* Rusty Barrett wrote about the many sub-divisions of gay culture. Drag is so evolved as a subculture it has enough diversity within it to devote a chapter to indexicality and identity among African American drag queens. In this chapter, Barrett explains, "Among African American drag queens (AADQs), to say that something is *fierce* means that it is so exceptionally stylish or impressive that it draws attention. To pee means to do something exceptionally well" (33).

Its language and syntax combined with style, formation of family units and other groups within the culture mark drag as a subculture. A life with standards, rewards, punishments, and inter-cultural hierarchy (i.e. glam queens being considered superior to street queens) prove the formation of a distinct culture in the image of the existing hegemonic structure. Excess is a key component of drag culture as performers exaggerate features, attitudes, and styles. On style, Hebdige writes, "Style in subculture is, then, pregnant with significance. Its transformations go 'against nature', interrupting the process of 'normalization'. As such, they are gestures,

movements towards a speech which offends the 'silent majority', contradicts the myth of consensus" (18).

The semiotics of hegemony is vital to understanding bricolage, an intentional semiotic appropriation as a newly formed system of communication (Hebdige 104). Disney establishes and reinforces gender performance normativity through the behavior of characters combined with their actions and role in the narrative. Queering the normative typically results in punishment or death for the offending character. As children learn simple concepts of good and evil, these messages teach aspects of performativity during the formative years. These messages serve to bolster hegemony and further ostracize counter-hegemonic others.

Semiotics "suggests that all communication is based on sign systems that work through certain rules and structures" (O'Shaughnessy and Stadler 131). Hegemony depends upon ascribed symbolic meanings being accepted as a perpetuation of its power. Maintenance of semiotic power also serves to keep subcultures "…if not controlled; then at least contained within an ideological space which does not seem at all 'ideological': which appears instead to be permanent and 'natural'… " (Hebdige 16). Containment is accomplished through vilifying mannerisms and traits such as flouncing, exaggerated gender performance, and a generally otherized physical appearance. These elements are all part of drag subculture which is evidence of subversion through bricolage.

This idea of bricolage informing subcultures translates to drag as a subculture re-purposing the villain as a star. Character traits that are punished in films are lauded and exaggerated in drag performances. In *Critically Queer* Judith Butler discusses gender as performative with a specific discussion of drag performance. She explains "The conclusion is drawn that gender performativity is a matter of constituting who one is on the basis of what one performs. And further, that gender itself might be proliferated beyond the binary frame of 'man' and 'woman' depending on what one performs, thereby valorizing drag not only as the paradigm of gender performance, but as the means by which heterosexual presumption might be undermined through a strategy of proliferation" (24). Gender norms are subversively exaggerated in drag performance art, and the proliferation of drag performance serves to challenge the hegemonic heteronormative while simultaneously asserting the subculture that is drag.

Subcultures are comprised of those who do not see themselves represented in mainstream presentations of hegemony, such as the Disney classics. An audience will seek to view themselves in the characters portrayed on screen, and those who identify with the hegemonic normative will easily find themselves shown as heroes and heroines crafting a heterosexual family unit. Others outside hegemony must negotiate their own response to the supposed vision of themselves. Incorporating well-known characters into a drag performance is common, and those who perform drag are left with many choices of whom to portray. A performer has the choice to embody a character as Disney presents them or to add their own traits and flare to the character. As a member of a subculture, drag performers are otherized which raises the question: why not play heroines?

Disney villains like Maleficent, Ursula, and Cruella DeVil are antagonists, but their design goes beyond opposing the protagonist. The attitudes and traits of these characters reflect highly dramatic and theatrical personalities fueled by vices such as greed, jealousy, and lust for power. Contrarily, the heroes and heroines opposing these villains are portrayed as levelheaded, virtuous, un-witting recipients of socioeconomic power whose primary challenge is the

construction of a heterosexual family unit. Any socioeconomic power the villain possesses or obtains is represented as dubious, a function of their counter-hegemonic goal, and a threat to the hegemonic protagonist. A villain seeking power represents subcultural others who would threaten the hegemonic normative should they ever seek or obtain their own power. This representation serves to bolster hegemony while instructing youth on behavioral traits associated with villains, and children will recognize these traits in subcultural others they encounter throughout their lives. Behavior associated vice with theatricality speaks with specificity to each audience member experiencing these characters. Villains are coded, in a thoroughly deliberate manner, as threats to hegemony by their threats to heterosexual romance and conservative behavior. This threat is usually the result of a desire for power or vanity over love for themselves and often for the price of the love interests of the protagonists.

Disney characters helped inspire drag performance responses to hegemony through its advocating of hegemonic normativity. Theatricality, exaggerated gender performance, and heavy make-up are all components of drag that are shared by villains such as Maleficent, Cruella De Vil, and Ursula among others. Those who see aspects of themselves represented as villainous may choose to appropriate a character like Maleficent or Ursula in their drag performance to add a positive aspect to vilified character traits like exaggerated gender performance. Butler calls drag an exposure of "the 'normal' constitution of gender presentation" through its bold display of a performativity deemed improper by the heteronormative (Butler, 26).

Gender is a key component of drag, but the meaning and influence goes further. As Butler explains, "The critical promise of drag does not have to do with the proliferation of genders…but rather with the exposure of the failure of heterosexual regimes ever fully to legislate or contain their own ideals…drag tends to be the allegorization of heterosexuality…an allegory that works through the hyperbolic… " (27). The use of gender to highlight and satirize the heteronormative is both a source of power for drag and a lure for audience members.

Butler's assertion of drag as exposing hegemony's failure to contain subversive elements compliments Hebdige's ideas of hegemony proliferating through containment of competing elements. This validates the power and influence drag has on hegemony through the bricolage of hegemony's own semiotics. The subversive property of bricolage is enhanced by the popularity and proliferation of drag culture. Each performer is channeling a character and ideology that is greater than the individual. "Performativity, then, is to be read not as self-expression or self-presentation, but as the unanticipated resignifiability of highly invested terms" (Butler 28). Butler's statement affirms drag as bricolage through altering the signification of a villain from evil to an affirmation of subcultural power.

According to Hebdige, subcultures are often commodified by the dominant culture. Harris Glenn Milstead, best known by the stage name Divine, is an example of a drag performer who became so well known he became the inspiration for a Disney villain, Ursula (see fig. 1). Divine was a large-bodied performer who wore heavy make-up and made vulgar jokes. Audiences loved Divine because he wore glamorous clothes that were not typically seen on someone with a large body type. Divine ate, dressed, and shopped to excess. Exaggeration of hair, makeup, and attitude are key components of being a drag queen. The irony is Divine was the antithesis of a glam queen in spite of his lavish lifestyle. Divine gained notoriety in John Waters films and later became a sought-after drag star. Divine also had a musical career, which led to further recognition and commodification. Divine passed away in 1988 from heart failure,

just before beginning a regular acting job on the series *Married with Children* (*I Am Divine*, Dir. Jeffrey Schwartz, 2013).

Figure 1, Divine and Ursula from Tim Brayton; "The legacy of The Little Mermaid, 25 years later"; The Film Experience; thefilmexperience.net, 17 Nov. 2014, http://thefilmexperience.net/blog/2014/11/17/the-legacy-of-the-little-mermaid-25-years-later.html.

A drag queen becoming a success in popular culture and getting an acting job as their male ego was unheard of at the time. Divine broke into the main stream and became a success. Using Divine to inspire the creation of a villain signifies a success in drag subculture. Drag queens have emulated villains such as Maleficent, the Evil Queen, and Cruella De Vil because of their vanity and exaggerated characteristics. Drag incorporated the excess and exaggeration of villain characters into its own cultural fabric on such a massively successful level it inspired the design of a villain character.

Ursula is one of the most frequently emulated characters in Disney drag, no doubt an homage to the roots of the character (see fig. 1). Performers give their own interpretation of Disney's version of Divine, which makes them readers as well as performers. As Roland Barthes writes, "…a text is made of multiple relations of dialogue…but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader…the reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" (148). This shows the reflexive nature of creative works and people. Subcultures, authors, distributors, and performers all influence hegemony despite its continued efforts at self-proliferation. Barthes asserts, "…the birth of the reader must be at the death of the Author" (148). A gathering of readers can lead to the creation of an entire culture.

Figure 2, Daniel Coz as Ursula from Daniel Coz; "Disney Villains Medley"; YouTube; youtube.com, 20 Oct. 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=beBJgKfTOvY.

Drag has houses, families, internal styles that have a hierarchy, and its own unique syntax. The subculture has been commodified in the form of events such as Disney-themed drag shows and the television series *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009-2018). RuPaul is the host, mentor, and head-judge of his television show. As a leader of drag queens, RuPaul must use wit, sarcasm, and a wealth of experience performing to manage the fierce attitudes of drag queens. Judge Michelle Visage frequently elicits attitude from the contestants by serving tea. Tea is drag culture's word for truth, and it is typically a harsh truth

Drag queens are being celebrated as pop-culture icons that create their own fierce characters or amplify existing fierce characters. Drag has evolved from a clandestine performance to an experience sought by audiences worldwide. Heavy eye-make up, extreme vanity, and a flare for the dramatic are pre-requisites to being a successful drag queen. Maleficent is a popular character among drag queens because of her intense expression and highly theatrical entrances and exits. Ursula's large body type makes her a favorite among drag queens who share that body type, though not exclusively. Drag performers lip-sync just as Ursula did when she took Ariel's voice. One needs only search Instagram or any public source for a variety of interpretations of the Ursula character. Cruella's vanity and sharp tongue make her an ideal character for a drag queen because the two characteristics are noticeably shared between Cruella and drag queens (see fig. 3).

Concentration of power is important in drag. Contests of power occur among drag queens, between performers and audiences, and between performers and unfriendly groups. Drag queens are the headliners, and they claim the room through heckling, being a spectacle, and outright declaring they own the room. Being members of the same subculture does not guarantee a cohesive relationship. In fact, drag queens often sharpen their proverbial teeth by reading each other and serving heavy doses of tea. This regular friction primes headliners for the challenges they face with their audiences. Some audience members respect performers while others may

attempt to draw attention back to them, steal tips, or heckle the drag queens. Glam queens function as clown queens even though their character differs, because these queens are headliners first of all.

Figure 3, Cruella De' Drag Queen from Joey SFX Simmons; "Cruella De' Drag Queen - Disney Drag Transformation"; YouTube; youtube.com, 26 Feb. 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YFpxTWxENWA.

Modern audiences are interested in the motivations of a villain, deconstructing the gender binary, and celebrating differences in others. This does not apply to all, but a show starring drag queens being renewed for eight seasons confirms drag has been commodified. Disney villains are no longer undesirable others. Villains are characters who are worthy of portrayal. The physical attributes, mannerisms, and styles of villains match drag's quality of excess and ferocity. Disney re-imagined the fairy tale and drag re-presented the villain. Separating characters from their narratives has breathed new life into the imagination of who these fictional individuals are. Performers can incorporate their own sassy style into the delivery of a villain because the character does not need to conform to Disney's presentation. Disney drag shows are filled with expletive-laden wit and banter, much unlike the classic film characters (see fig. 4). Drag has asserted itself as a style and made these characters a unique part of its subcultural fabric. Maleficent is seen as a flouncing drag queen instead of a cold disgruntled sorceress. Any character can make highly sexual jokes or curse out an audience member, fellow performer, or random instigator.

The concentration of power, specifically the power to interpret and portray a character, is with the drag queens. Audiences respond positively and with increasing interest to these new versions of classic characters. Gay men who perform drag were once vilified for improper gender performance or made into jokes because they dressed as women. The connection between these vilified people and the villains they choose to appropriate lies in being otherized for performance of character traits that lie outside the heteronormative. The bond these performers felt with vilified characters and traits has informed their performance art and led to a shift in the power of interpretation. An author or filmmaker can present a character, but once that character has been given life, an audience has the power to re-write that life. Drag is both a challenge to hegemony and its own powerful subculture. The transition from secrecy to commodification through performances and media representation proves these characters have been re-presented, and audiences love drag's re-imagining of the normative.

Figure 4, Michelle Visage Singing "Poor Unfortunate Queen" from Daavaaad; "Michelle Visage – 'Poor Unfortunate Queens' – RuPaul's Drag Race BOTS – Detroit 6/4/16"; YouTube; youtube.com, 5 Jun. 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zwbc-D7wN20.

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