THE DISNEY-FICATION OF DISABILITY: THE PERPETUATION OF
HOLLYWOOD STEREOTYPES OF DISABILITY IN DISNEY’S ANIMATED FILMS

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Stephanie R. Kirkpatrick
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THE DISNEY-FICATION OF DISABILITY: THE PERPETUATION OF
HOLLYWOOD STEREOTYPES OF DISABILITY IN DISNEY’S ANIMATED FILMS

Stephanie R. Kirkpatrick

Thesis

Approved:              Accepted:

Advisor
Dr. Mary Triece

School Director
Dr. Carolyn Anderson

Committee Member
Dr. Therese Lueck

Dean of the College
Dr. James Lynn

Committee Member
Dr. Carolyn Anderson

Dean of the Graduate School
Dr. George Newkome

Date

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

From an early age we learn what we are good at, what we like to do, and what we
do not like to do. Knowing these strengths and weaknesses, however aware we might be
of them, helps us to find our place in society. What happens, though, if you are different
than everyone else and are never given the chance to learn what you are good at and what
you like to do? You become only aware of your weaknesses and if those weaknesses are
tied to that difference, what then?

This is what life is like for a small clownfish living in the Great Barrier Reef. His
over protective father wants him to be safe; not just from the dangers of the ocean but
from being made fun of or not fitting in because of a physical deformity. His father,
Marlin, is quick to tell his son, Nemo, what he can and cannot do. “You think you can do
these things, but you just can’t, Nemo” his father says, out of anger and fear; however, it
is something that Marlin must truly feel about his son’s small fin. This statement
highlights something that many people with disabilities are told over and over again from
a very young age and yet here we find such a stereotypic scene in a Disney animated
film; a film for both able-bodied and disabled children alike. Understanding how Disney
represents this often overlooked minority will add another piece to the puzzle that is the Wonderful World of Disney.

Over the past decade and a half, more than a dozen books have been written about Disney, stereotypes, and the media. What this thesis has to offer to this large and ever-growing body of research is a new focus to the subject—disability. Using a rhetorical analysis, the following thesis will examine how Disney portrays disability in its animated features—Dumbo (1941) and Finding Nemo (2003), by applying a Marxist cultural analysis. A Marxist perspective on ideologies and power will be used to evaluate the two Disney films. This type of critique is important to the development of a more complete understanding of the affects of media pedagogy on dominant ideologies and the perpetuation of hegemonic stereotypes—particularly in terms of disability (Kellner, 2003).

In regards to these two animated features, this critique will attempt to answer the following questions pertaining to the hegemonic portrayals of disability in Disney’s animated films:

(1) What sorts of messages do Disney’s animated features send about disability?

(2) Is knowledge or misunderstanding about disabilities furthered/perpetuated through these messages?

(3) What do the images and messages about disability say in terms of the culture in which these films are produced and distributed?

Answering these questions through a rhetorical analysis will shed light on the public discourses of media and how these discourses shape values and actions in society.
Once Upon a Time

With so many popular films to choose from, one may ask why evaluate Disney? Disney is known for its innocence and wholesome family values. When the name Disney is mentioned, most people have visions and memories of their youth. They think about watching the movies, playing with the toys of a favorite character or of visiting any of the many theme parks around the globe. This nostalgia has captivated generations of viewers. With the continuing growth of Disney film production and the success of their re-released classics, the company seems bound to captivate future viewers as well.

So maybe the question is not why evaluate Disney, but why not? Disney is considered dangerous in many ways by several media scholars. Its most unsettling danger lies in the idea of Disney being a type of cultural pedagogy that is absorbed by young people as simply being entertainment and nothing more (Sun, 2001). All of this information would seem to suggest that the Disney Corporation has a significant hold on the creation of childhood, as well as a firm grip on what information and images grace the screen of the public sphere (Smoodin, 1994; Wells, 1998; Zipes, 1995).

According to Wasko, who specializes in studying Disney and its subsidiaries, “Disney so deliberately promotes itself as family values and good entertainment – you just assume it’s going to be wholesome and good,” (Spitz, 1997). In fact, Michael Eisner, the former CEO of Disney, told the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 1998 in not so many words that Disney was a clean alternative to Hollywood with higher ethical standards. With such a stronghold on American youth and culture, it would seem logical that every aspect of Disney would have been examined thoroughly; however, this is not
the case. It is the aforementioned marketing and positioning that has allowed Disney to go un-dissected for so many years. Wells (1998) attributes the company’s illusiveness to the fact that almost everyone seems to have a childhood memory involving some aspect of Disney. It is for this reason that the company and its products have been taken for granted as a true cultural force. According to Davis (2006) the cultural force of Disney influences more than simply the film industry. She continues to explain that by “taking on the role of America’s predominant storyteller for most of the twentieth century, Disney became an inseparable aspect of American popular culture, as well as an integral part of the American social fabric” (Davis, 2006, p. 222).

Disney films convey social messages that need to be scrutinized in spite of the fact that so many Americans have an idealized view of Disney (Giroux, 1999). It is believed by many in the United States (and around the world for that matter) that just because the name Disney appears on the package it will be good for the masses (Zipes, 1997). Though droves of people believe this about Disney and their products, the fact remains that it is relatively unclear as to what effect Disney Entertainment has on society. Ironically enough Disney wanted people to examine and read the films he produced. “We make the pictures and then let the professors tell us what they mean” is a phrase that frequently left Walt Disney’s own mouth (Valpy, 2001). In a way he was saying that these pictures have deeper meaning than their face value. Disney wanted the educational community to challenge the pictures that society was consuming. He did not view his work as something so sacred and pristine that it should be off limits to critics.

However, many critics and professors come under fire when they dare to analyze The Mouse. In a recent study, Sun and Scharrer (2004) tried to show college students the
differences in the storyline and meaning of *The Little Mermaid* when told by Disney, as compared to the original story written by Hans Christian Andersen. The students overwhelmingly felt as though their childhood was under attack. Many of them had strong memories tied to Disney’s version of the story, while few if any of them had ever read Mr. Andersen’s version before entering the course. The researchers felt that these emotional ties were what kept even the truest of criticism from changing the students’ feelings about Disney. They also examined the idea that Disney portrays many of the dominant American ideologies in their films. “Even though a media text is open to interpretation, it has ‘framing’ power that limits the range of the decoding and discussion” (Sun & Scharrer, 2004, p. 38).

This study points to the heart of the problem and necessity of examining Disney and its products. “The boundaries between entertainment, education, and commercialization collapse through the sheer omnipotence of Disney’s reach into diverse spheres of everyday life” (Giroux, 1995b). There is a need to understand what is being consumed by both adults and children; though it would seem that children can be affected much deeper than their adult counterparts. In fact it is well documented, that most children understand and see far more things in their media then what adults would give them credit for comprehending (Bell, 1995; Brode, 2005; Cohan, 1996; Davis, 2006; Ellis, 2007; Giroux, 1999; Kinder, 1999; Lieberman, 1972; Miller & Rode, 1995; Murphy, 1995; Pinsky, 2004; Smoodin, 1994; Steinberg & Kincheleo, 2004; Sternheimer, 2003; Ward, 2002; Zipes, 1997). This makes the need to bring Disney, a major contributor to children’s media, under a microscope in order to examine the products they are producing. Zipes (1997), a fairy tale scholar sees these films that are
based on fairy tales as being a part of a child’s DNA; almost as if the fairy tale was apart of their history and had always been there. “We respond to these classical tales [Fairy Tales] almost as if we were born with them, and yet, we know full well that they have been socially produced and induced and continue to be generated this way through different forms of the mass media” (Zipes, 2006, p. 1). He sees the cinematic adaptations of fairy tales as being able to display an artificial reality in which children can “assemble and reassemble the frames of their lives for themselves” for better or worse (Zipes, 1997, p. 110). This becomes increasingly problematic considering educators studying children’s learning behaviors through films note that children do not make logical comparisons between real life and what they see in movies. In many cases the educators have determined that children see the film as real life.

The question of what children are seeing in Disney films seems to be just the tip of the iceberg when approaching this subject. A key issue would be to ask: how much of what they see do they understand? However, with little information about how influential the media actually is on people’s beliefs, it would be a daunting undertaking to attempt to answer that question in a single inspection. This study examines a portion of the larger societal question; specifically, I examine how stereotypes of disability are portrayed in Disney animated features. To that end, this study will first examine how media is influenced by dominated values and ideologies before exploring how this study will approach and define disabilities. This definition will lead to an outline of the evolution of disability stereotypes in Hollywood and the media. Finally two of Disney’s animated feature films will be dissected one piece at a time, in order to completely grasp how stereotypes influence the dominate reading of a text. Particularly, this thesis will strive to
develop an understanding of how hegemonic stereotypes of disability are portrayed in children’s films.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review will address several areas that need to be examined in order to set-up the analysis of Disney’s films to follow. One such area discussed is exploring the idea that the media is shaped by the dominant values and needs of society. This section will focus on the ways that mass media function hegemonically to reflect dominant values. In examining these hegemonic influences, Disney’s storylines and story choices will be addressed. Another area to be examined in the literature review will be Marxism and ideologies. This section will illustrate the power of a dominant culture and a dominant reading on the production and reproduction of images in the public sphere. It will also allow for a clearer understanding of how a Marxist perspective of power and hegemony will be applied in the following critique. The literature review will conclude with an inspection of current perspectives, findings and beliefs in the area of disability studies and research. This area will detail current methods for examination, definitions of disability and will follow the development of disability stereotypes in films, both animated and live action.
Historically, fairy tales have transported social norms, as well as a moral code of right and wrong. The stories were written as social critiques and entertainment for the elite of society. Not until the 1800s were these tales available to the masses and targeted particularly at children (Zipes, 1997). These tales have transcended place and time, and have become a part of societal framework, and there is no questioning that the tales animated counterparts are doing the same with a modern twist (Schenda, 1986). A study of fairy tales becomes more complicated when the original stories are changed to meet the changing norms of society (Davis, 2006; Giroux, 1999; Miller & Rode, 1995; Pinsky, 2004; Schenda, 1986; Zipes 1995, 1997, 2006a). For example, the story of *Pinocchio* was originally written by an Italian author, Carlo Collodi, not Walt Disney. The tale of the young puppet was originally intended to mock and criticize the Italian government and elite citizens, not to teach American children the evils of lying, cheating or stealing (Zipes, 1997). The idea to make Collodi’s tale into an animated feature was not one that Disney bought into wholeheartedly. It wasn’t until he saw “Yasha Frank’s musical *Pinocchio: A Musical Legend* in June 1937 that he embraced the idea of the film” (Zipes, 1997, p. 83). Disney’s version took many liberties with Collodi’s novel such as moving the location of Pinocchio’s adventures from Italy to a made-up land that resembles Switzerland or Germany, as well as removing any element of socio-political critique. Literary scholar Frances Clarke Sayers (1965) views the liberties taken by Disney with stories such as *Pinocchio* (1940) as having a complete disregard for the tales “anthropological, spiritual, or psychological truths” (p. 1). The film maker simplified a
multi-chaptered novel into an 88 minute Americanized animated tale about not lying, “letting your conscience be your guide,” and becoming a “real boy.” According to Zipes (1997):

A key for Disney in reshaping Frank’s musical and the Colloid material was to make the relationship between father and son more harmonious and tender; to “Americanize” the representation of boyhood itself; and to simplify the plot so that his moral code of success based on conforming to the dictates of good behavior and diligence could be transmitted through song, dance, and rounded images of tranquility. (p. 83)

If Disney had been unable to “Americanize” Pinocchio’s storyline, it is highly doubtful that the film would had ever been made, because the original story would not have fit with what a majority of people would be able to identify with and understand.

Many Disney films, the fairytales especially, are not American in origin, and Disney must make sure to Americanize the stories for his audience. This Americanizing sometimes changes the original meaning (Zipes, 1997). According to several media scholars the changes that Disney makes to classic fairy tales, however problematic they may be for critics, demonstrates how popular culture messages—regardless of medium—tend to reinforce the dominant images of society (Bruce, 2001; Davis, 2006; Dudley, 2005; Giroux, 1999; Kellner, 2003; Kinder, 1999; Lull, 1995; Nelson, 2000; Norden, 1994; Riley, 2005; Roper, 2003; Smoodin, 1994; Ward, 2002; Wells, 1998). Media influence is extremely subtle, yet ever present in the way thoughts about the world are formed. This influence does not take place over night but is shaped day in and day out by the images and stories presented to the public through the media (Kellner, 2003; Sun, 2001). Kellner (2003) termed this indoctrination process of ideologies as cultural pedagogy, meaning that the media “contribute to educating us how to behave and what to
think, feel, believe, fear, and desire—and what not to” (p. 9). Knowing how the public understands the media and the role it plays in socializing people into certain belief systems is important to consider, especially in a media based society where most people’s leisure time is spent consuming media (Sun, 2001). However, not all media is consumed and absorbed equally nor is it produced in the same way.

Davis (2006), both a communications professor and Disney film researcher, states that “a film reflects the society which produces it” (p. 116). In other words, a film is only produced if it illustrates ideas and representations a majority of that society is able to relate. “Films were intended to be mass produced commodities in a rational process based on cost efficiency, and their major design was for profit” (Zipes, 1997, p. 69). This principle of production reflects the fact that the industry’s sole concern is financially motivated. If a film is to make money it must be something that many people see as true or believable. Davis (2006) states:

In Hollywood, both in the past and in the present, what decides whether or not a film will be made, ultimately, is whether or not it is believed that the film will make money. If a film is to make money, it must appeal to a mass audience. If it is to do this, it must contain ideas, themes, characters, stories, and perceptions to which it can relate. It must, in other words, be relevant to the audience’s world view if it is to be successful. (p. 17)

Simply producing a film for monetary gain means that nothing is sacred and nothing is off limits. No matter how offensive an image or stereotype may be to a minority portion of the population, it can be used over and over again if the majority agrees with what is being shown on the screen. These repetitious portrayals are what influence societal values and views over time. “Media images help shape our view of the world and our deepest
values: what we consider good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil” (Kellner, 2003, p. 9). Kellner and other media scholars refer to this control and power as hegemony.

Hegemony is a term that explains the process by which a dominant group maintains their power and control over other groups (Lull, 1995). One way that elite groups maintain their power is through control over the creation and distribution of mediated messages. The elite use the media to “perpetuate their power, wealth, and status [by popularizing] their own philosophy, culture and morality” (Boggs, 1976, p. 39). In fact almost all of the media consumed in the world is distributed by only a handful of companies or media corporations; among them Disney (Grioux, 1999; Kellner, 2003; Sun, 2001). Dr. Justin Lewis, Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies at Cardiff University in the United Kingdom, explains that these few corporations exercise unprecedented control over the images and messages the public is exposed to, resulting a very limited world view, which is dominated and skewed by corporate interests (Sun, 2001). In the documentary *Mickey Mouse Monopoly: Disney, Childhood and Corporate Power*, Dines explains that:

Coded in media images are ideologies—how we think about the world, beliefs systems, constructions of reality and we develop our notions of reality from the cultural mechanisms around us and the most important cultural institutions is indeed the media. It gives us a whole array of images, of stereotypes, belief systems of race, class and gender. (Sun, 2001)

Hegemonic practices and dominant ideologies can be found in Disney’s animated films, which is why they can be fruitfully examined for the ways they perpetuate dominant understandings of a host of issues and groups. The following analysis focuses specifically on hegemonic portrayals of disability in Disney films from a Marxist lens.
A Marxist Cultural Analysis

The following analysis takes a Marxist cultural perspective, which focuses attention on hegemonic portrayals of disability and the economic interests underlying such portrayals. However, a full understanding of what Marxism is and how it will be applied to this analysis of Disney’s disability portrayals is needed. To begin with, Marxist criticisms can be approached using several different definitions, which vary depending on the critic’s focus. For the purpose of this study, Marxist theory will draw from the standpoint of it being concerned “with ideology, with class, and with the distribution of power in society” (Brummett, 2006, p. 151).

Marxism is based on the studies and assumptions of the nineteenth century German philosopher, Karl Marx. His social critiques were rooted in a format which laid out the base/superstructure of power and materialism (See Appendix A). Williams (1973) explains that “in the development of mainstream Marxism itself, the proposition of the determining base and the determined superstructure has been commonly held to be the key to Marxist cultural analysis” (p. 163). In an article on Marxism, Lull (1995) explains that “Classical Marxist theory, of course, stresses economic position as the strongest predictor of social differences” (p. 61). In many cases this base/superstructure relationship is explaining the power struggle of capitalistic consumer societies like the United States.

The base and superstructure described by Marx and Marxist theorists, details how a society develops. The base (see Appendix A) refers to the basic needs of a society—such as how needs are met and materials are produced in order to meet those needs.
These basic needs are similar to the individual human needs described by Maslow (1970) in his *Hierarchy of Needs*. These principles are commonplace within psychology and other social science disciplines and these *needs* parallel very closely to the principles and development of the Marxist base/superstructure (Huiett, 2004; Marx & Engles, 1965; Maslow, 1970, 1999). Without basic needs being met, no higher thought or application can be achieved, which is why it is termed the base; nothing can grow or develop without a strong foundation. The base determines what kind of higher thought and ideas can take place. In a capitalist society, the base is characterized by class divisions in which one class owns and controls the means of production. In order to critique the capitalist base/superstructure Marxist critics use historical materialism, a philosophy which “holds that ideas, rules, laws, customs, social arrangements—in short, everything belonging to the world of ideas or concepts—grows from material conditions and practices” (Brummett, 2006, p. 151).

These ideas and concepts make up the superstructure and are important to study since they convey social beliefs and values including “who should govern whom, of who is more or less valuable, of laws and morals, of aesthetics and taste in art and entertainment, and so forth” (Brummett, 2006, p. 151). According to a Marxist critique of culture, the superstructure reinforces the economic structures in place. Marx (1968) explains this best by saying “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.” Simply meaning that if a person has power in society (their social being), this power will affect their consciousness because they will want to maintain that power no matter what. Applying Marxist views on the base/superstructure relationship we can understand
Disney films as profit driven and as conveying values that support or do not deviate substantially from the economic status quo.

Hegemony is concerned, as mentioned earlier, with the maintenance of power one group exerts over another (Hall, 1977, 1981; Kellner, 2003; Lull, 1995, Williams, 1973, 1976). In order for hegemony to be effective it depends on subordinated people—minorities—accepting the dominant ideology as “normal reality or common sense…in active forms of experience and consciousness” (Williams, 1976, p. 145). The idea of hegemony and power may be one of the strongest, if not the strongest, points of interests for a Marxist critic. According to Brummett (2006):

Marxist critics study the way in which large groups of people are empowered or disempowered. They assume that every society has power structures that privileged some groups while placing other in a relatively disadvantaged position. Such differences in power need not be intentionally planned by any group, nor do they need to be startlingly obvious. But such differences will be consistent throughout most of the experiences within a culture. (p. 156)

Ideologies

According to Brummett (2006), “More and more Marxist theorists are coming to see the practice of reading texts as a sort of material experience with ideological consequences” (p. 156). It is for this reason that ideologies need to be explored and understood before proceeding with this critique. Antoni Gramsci, the Italian intellectual—“to whom the term hegemony is attributed—broadened materialist Marxist theory into the realm of ideology” (Lull, 1995, p. 62). This expansion of Marxist theory, shifted critiques away from a preoccupation with a “capitalistic base and towards its
dominant dispensary of ideas,” which focused on giving “structure to authority and dependence in symbolic environments that correspond to, but are not the same as, economically determined class-based structures and processes of industrial production” (Lull, 1995, p. 62). According to Marxist theory class based structures and industrial bases greatly shape ideologies. But what exactly is an ideology and how are ideologies going to be approached in the following critique?

A definition of ideology has yet to be purely or simply stated by any of its many scholars (Lull, 1995), and no “single adequate definition of ideology” exists (Eagleton, 1991, p. 1). For the purpose of this study, honestly no single definition would sufficiently describe all the areas of ideological thought that are going to be explored. In order to illustrate the variety of meanings that can be placed on the term ideology, Eagleton (1991) put together a comprehensive list in Chapter one: What is Ideology in his book Ideology: An Introduction. A portion of the list is as follows:

(a) The process of production of meanings, signs and values of social life;
(b) A body of idea characteristic of a particular social group or class;
(c) Ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power
(d) False ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power
(e) Systematically distorted communication;
(f) That which offers a position for a subject;
(g) Forms of thoughts motivated by social interests;
(h) Identity thinking. (p.1-2)

Several of these definitions of ideology can be explored together in a single critique. The above definitions work together in order to describe how influential ideologies are on one’s own social reality.

“Ideologies do not consist of isolated and separate concepts” (Hall, 1981, p. 89). Stuart Hall (1981), a cultural studies scholar, explains that ideologies work as “a
distinctive set or chain of meanings” (p. 89) for each individual critic. For this particular critique, the second definition—a body of idea characteristic of a particular social group or class—will be of particular importance in understanding how certain characteristics (stereotypes) become tied to a particular group in society, like the disabled. This definition works hand in hand with the fourth one, false ideas which help to legitimize a dominant political power. Since the purpose of producing characteristics based stereotypes about a certain group would use false or exaggerated ideas in order to legitimize the elite, dominate or popular world view. The fifth definition—systematically distorted communication—will be outlined in this thesis in regards to the development and use of disability stereotypes in film. This particular definition helps to provide an understanding of how the development of these stereotypes in the media systematically distorted the worldview or popular view of real disability. The final definition of ideology to be addressed in this analysis is the eighth definition—identity thinking. This ideology definition explains how people view their own or someone else’s identity in a social realm. Identity thinking is perpetuated in the media and “ideologies make inequalities and subordination appear natural and just” (Kellner, 2003, p. 11). This thought process is reaffirmed in the formation and thoughts about identity. For the purpose of clarifying the ideological stance in this study, these different definitions of ideology are loosely tied together in an attempt “to show how various people’s voices and experiences are silenced and omitted from mainstream culture and struggles, to aid in the articulation of diverse views, experiences, and cultural forms, from groups excluded” (Kellner, 2003, p. 11-12) or misrepresented in mainstream media images.
Though controversial, many scholars believe that the mass media can be used as a means of introducing “elements into individual consciousness that would not otherwise appear there, but will not be rejected by consciousness because they are so commonly shared in the cultural community” (Nordenstreng, 1977, p. 276), and “there can be no arguing with the fact that Disney entertainment—from the most prevalent single media conglomerate in existence—exerts a greater influence on our line of vision than any of its competitors” (Brode, 2005, p. 6). Media conglomerates, such as Disney, own and produce most of the media consumed by society. “By the end of 2006, there are only eight giant media companies dominating the US media” (Shah, 2009, p. 1), Disney being one of them. Disney operates a $22 billion media and marketing empire, which bombards viewers from every angle to watch, to buy, to memorize and to experience (Giroux, 1995b), therefore it is easier for Disney (and other media conglomerates) to use and reuse images and ideas that are favorable towards their own identity, regardless of the consequences for society as a whole. Favorable images in this case, refer to images that reinforce an able-bodied society as ideal. It is important to note that “hegemony does not mature strictly from ideological articulations” (Lull, 1995, p. 62) but through a buying in process about ideas, principles, rules and laws by a subordinated public. It involves the idea that people must be in willing agreement to be “governed by principles, rules, and laws they believe operate in their best interests, even though in actual practice they may not” (Lull, 1995, p. 63). Hegemonic ideologies invite one to view the world in a particular way, usually the dominate way. These ideologies are perpetuated through the disregard of a minority group or sheer misinformation about a particular group. It is the
disregard and misinformation about minority groups that is of particular concern in this hegemonic critique of the portrayals of disability in Disney’s animated feature films.

For example, portraying a group of people who are viewed by the majority as being “the same yet different” or as simply being “special,” would seem to pose many challenges. Since most of people in the United States do not have to deal with disability on a daily basis, creating a disabled character that a majority of people understand usually means relying on ideologies which often times translates to stereotypes. The use of stereotypes is undeniable in Disney’s films and though intent may seem to play an integral role in understanding their use in film, it is not the focus of this analysis. The interest of this study is to examine the images for the ways that dominant understandings of disability are conveyed in Walt Disney’s animated films, regardless of intent. In fact, Walt Disney vehemently denied intentionally including harmful material or stereotypes of any kind in his films during his testimony in 1947 in front of the House Committee on Un-American Activities. In that testimony Disney (1947) stated:

We watch so that nothing gets into the films that would be harmful in any way to any group or any country. We have large audiences of children and different groups, and we try to keep them as free from anything that would offend anybody as possible. We work hard to see that nothing of that sort creeps in. (p. 3)

Disney’s statement notwithstanding, popular films warrant critical scrutiny for the ways that dominant beliefs and stereotypes are perpetuated, regardless of authorial intent.

Though a continuous debate rages over whether the media has any ability to influence societal values, some scholars believe that when it comes to minority groups, such as people with disability, the media portrayals of these groups is very important to their overall images and self identity (Ellis, 2007; Woodward, 2005). In fact, “a
substantial body of research has indicated that both entertainment and news media have considerable influence on both positive and negative stereotypes held by the public of minority group members” (Farnell & Smith, 1999, p. 659), which is why “most academic experts in the field [disability studies] focus on the rift between society and the individual with disabilities” when examining characters and films (Riley, 2005, p. 21). One reason for the rift is that a disability subculture is almost none existent. Norden (1994), a disability scholar, further explains:

While most minority groups grow up in some special subculture and, thus, form as series of norms and expectations, the physically handicapped are not similarly prepared. Born for the most part into normal families, we [people with disabilities] are socialized into that world. The world of sickness is one we [people with disabilities] enter only later—poorly prepared, and with all the prejudices of the normal. (p. 12)

As strange as it may sound, not having a strong subculture as a backbone to their world, many people with disabilities know nothing other than that they “aren’t like everyone else” and the majority of media reaffirms this belief to a point. A secondary reason, for this rift may be that a majority of able-bodied individuals have become so familiar with the media images of disability “that people believe they [films] show the reality of disabled people’s lives” (Distorted Images, 2008, p. 1). Though the lack of a subculture in which to grow in is important to recognize for this critique, the latter reason for the rift is more influential in how these stereotypes are written and read by the majority.
While studying disability may be a complex issue, finding a definition is not quite so hard. A disability is essentially defined as a describable, measurable condition in which an expected specific human ability is curtailed or absent (Raymond, 2008). Most disabilities are classified as either being physical or mental in nature. Though a majority of people do not have any type of disability, most people feel that could identify one and would know one if they saw one. Interestingly enough, even if the average person does feel that they know what a disability is/looks like, “the media, the politicians, the medical community and the people with disabilities themselves differ on who deserves to be classified as disabled” (Riley, 2005, p. 3).

The controversy over who is considered disabled differs depending on culture. This is because it is culture that defines what is or is not considered to be disabling (Raymond, 2008). Something such as a reading disability in the United States—where literacy is valued—may not even be noticed or diagnosed in another culture or country. Since culture is the defining principle for disability, it would make sense that as the cultural norms change so do disabilities, meaning that even over time in the same area different things maybe considered disabling. The funny thing about all of this is that many disabilities are never medically diagnosed which seems ironic considering how health conscious the United States’ culture tends to be (Norden, 1994).

For many, even in the U.S., disabilities are self-diagnosed or ignored completely due to fear of becoming a social outcast even in this day and age. Many Americans can only see a person as being their disability and see that disability as their defining
characteristic. Most people cannot see or understand that in many cases it is society and even the environment that is disabling, not the person who is disabled (Riley, 2005). It seems that people have trouble looking past the disability itself, let alone the stereotypes surrounding it.

Part of Your World: Theories for Examination

There are two models used by scholars when examining disabilities. Both of these models try to help people understand two different methods used when approaching the subject of disability despite context or medium (Ellis, 2007). These two models allow for differing views, not only for studying disability, but also for understanding persons with disabilities.

The first model is called the Medical Model (Ellis, 2007). This particular model is also referred to as the Individual Model or the Overcoming Model. This model views disability in terms of medical diagnosis and relies on the particular diagnosis in order to explain the impairments. This approach to disability aims for the “normalization” or the “fitting in” of people with disabilities which is often done through the medicalization of the conditions (Roper, 2003). Medicalization of disabilities means that each person’s disability has its own individual pathology and therefore has its own individual illness. Though examining disability through this lens lends itself to individualizing disability it is focused more on how to cure the individual, which is not always the best way to approach disabilities. “Activists rightly shunned the medical model as discriminatory,
because it immediately places disability in the category of a deviance or illness that needs to be cured” (Riley, 2005, p. 7).

In contrast to the medical model, the social model looks towards society to define disability not doctors or medicine to say what is disabling. Ellis (2007) explains:

- The notion of an un-adaptive society has recently emerged through a social model of disability to disentangle impairments from the myth, ideology, and stigma that influence social interaction and social policy. This theory argues that impairment (the limitation in a person’s physical or mental functioning) becomes a disability because of social structure. (p. 136)

Michael Oliver, a pioneering member of the British disability activism movement, helped to redefine disability as a social construction under the social model by separating disabilities from impairments (Ellis, 2007; Duncan, Goggin & Newell, 2005). In this separation, impairment is considered to be lacking a part or all of a limb, or having a defective limb, organ or mechanism of the body (Ellis, 2007). The important thing to note about impairment is that impairment does not keep a person from doing anything an *abled-bodied person* can do; however, impairment can still hold the same stigmas as a disability, especially for an uneducated public. A disability under this model is defined as a disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by social values or views which do not take into account people who have physical or mental impairments and thus excludes them from the participation in mainstream activities. In many cases disability can be a form of social oppression (Ellis, 2007). This idea is explained further by Roper (2003):

- It [the social model] holds that impairments are not inherently disabling, but that disability is caused by a society which fails to provide for people with impairments, and which puts obstacles in their way. (p. 1)
At first glance this model may seem outdated upon its current conception, since many countries have some form of disability rights and legislation. However, at deeper inspection this model is extremely accurate.

Laws and rights do not necessarily ensure tolerance and equality; they ensure legal ramifications for failure to comply but nothing more. They can not force people to accept or include people with disabilities into mainstream society. No law can make people see past a disability and see that person as something other than their disability, especially when the mass media is saturated with images of the polar opposite. That is why, as Riley (2005) points out, there needs to be a distinction between the two models if the media is to ever get an accurate representation of disability. Riley (2005) continues by explaining that “nearly all the problems in the representation of people with disabilities can be traced to the imposition of the medical model on what would otherwise be compelling and newsworthy narratives” (p. 12). It is because of this need for a complete understanding of the different ways disability can be portrayed that Kolbes (1988) wrote the book Disability Drama in Television and Film. The aim of the book was to begin closing the gap between the actors playing a character with disabilities and true life people with disabilities. The point of the book was to reinforce the need for a definite understanding of both the medical diagnosis as well as the social implications that go along with the disability if people were to continue to write, direct, and produce films and television shows that portrayed characters with disabilities. Since there seems to be a lack of understanding in the matter, Hollywood continues to produce a palatable over-sweetened version of the truth about life with a disability. This act in turn leads to the development of stereotypes about what life is really like with a disability (Riley, 2005).
Tale as Old as Time: Portrayals of Disability in Film

A stereotype is simply a gross generalization about a topic rooted in some vague truth. Hollywood does rely on certain stereotypes or generalizations about people in order to tell their stories. There is simply not enough time in a film or television show to explain every aspect of that particular character’s individuality. Hollywood relies on the fact that parts of these stereotypes do fit some people and that the viewing public is familiar with it already. This familiarity allows the filmmakers to skip over most of the character development and just highlight what makes their character special or important to the story (Bluestone, 2000; Chellew, 2000; Davis, 2006; Ellis, 2007; Farnall & Smith, 1999; Kolbes, 1988; Nelson, 2000; Norden, 1994; Riley, 2005). However, the fact remains that though some people may fit into part of a stereotype no one ever fits the entire stereotype and that stereotype does not define who that person is and what they can do (Kolbes, 1988). Dr. Alvin Poussaint, Director of the Media Center at the Judge Baker Children’s Center, explains that that even educated people hold “stereotypes…and tend to write from a stereotypic point of view because they don’t know another way to write it…they write what they know,” which is usually based on the media they have consumed and been exposed to which is usually stereotypic (Sun, 2001). Writing about disabilities would mean that stereotypes about disabilities are formed and have been formed in the same way any other stereotype developed. It is the purpose of this critique to break down the stereotypical portrayals of disability as they appear in Disney films in order to gain a better understanding of how the stereotypes are used in a hegemonic fashion to exploit persons with disabilities.
Since the advent of the talkie, Hollywood has never hesitated to use disability in any way to get a laugh, a scream and ultimately to make a profit (Riley, 2005). Riley (2005) also points out just how familiar disability stereotypes actually are to the masses, he states:

As a test for measuring how wayward the press can be, the disability community presents a fascinating example of a sustained pattern of missed opportunities and looping lazy returns to the familiar stereotypes of the angry misshapen villain, the innocent victim, the awesome “supercrip,” or the exotic Coney Island freak. (p. 2)

In fact, the misshapen villain and Coney Island freak are commonplace stereotypes for persons with disabilities superseding Hollywood itself. These two stereotypes play upon a natural fear and intrigue many people have with difference. This is attributed to the fact that disabilities inherently seem to pose a threat to the body, and people are fascinated by what they do not understand (hence the popularity of circus side shows in the 1800 and 1900s). This fear and intrigue is “hardly surprising, given the fact that the genre [horror] has initiated and perpetuated many of the most insidious and enduring stereotypes about physical disability” (Olney, 2006, p. 22). This fear is born from the ignorance and misunderstandings of what is *normal*, yet this innate fear is played upon and used against people time and time again in horror films even today.

Horror films so routinely depict physically disabled characters as misshapen monsters that rage against their fate and hate those who are considered to be of able-body that audiences and writers for that matter can no longer watch or write a horror film without using these stereotypes (Olney, 2006). The use of such stereotypes is attributed to the fact that those responsible for the messages and representations in films are able-bodied folks who continue to dominate the industry, both behind and in front of the
cameras (Kolbes, 1988; Norden, 1994; Olney, 2006; Riley, 2005). Hollywood is full of people who have been socialized in society and they have, like everyone else, internalized certain values and norms (usually the dominant ones) which tend to come out in their writing, directing and acting (Sun, 2001). Jenny Morris (1991) argues that cultural portrayals (stereotypes) of disabilities are usually about the feelings of non-disabled people and their reactions to disability, rather than about disability itself. According to this idea, disability thus becomes a metaphor for evil in almost all media texts. Morris (1991) states further that:

In doing this, the writer draws on the prejudice, ignorance and fear that generally exist towards disabled people, knowing that to portray a character with a humped back, with a missing leg, with facial scars, will evoke certain feelings in the reader or audience. The more disability is used as a metaphor for evil, or just to induce a sense of unease, the more cultural stereotypes are confirmed.” (p.93)

The introduction of these cultural stereotypes began in the 1930s with the aforementioned horror genre. The movie the *Freaks* (1932), for example, is one of the earliest films to depict disabilities of any kind. The movie is about circus side-show performs who tire of being gawked at by normal people and who then turn to murdering anyone who can be considered normal due to their anger at being disabled. Scholars have concluded that the title of the movie itself has several meanings: (1) is a literal take on side-show freaks or circus freaks, and (2) the idea that these characters are freaks of nature or are out of sync with the natural world (Norden, 1994). This film can be classified as a horror film in the classic sense of the murders that take place; however, many disabilities scholars would consider this film to be horror due the use of fear about disabilities and the reliance on stereotypes that perpetuate this fear. The fear quality is played up by all involved in any horror film and *Freaks* in no exception. The simplicity of the misunderstandings
surrounding disabilities is what Hollywood draws upon and this misunderstanding has always produced large showings at the box office. As mentioned earlier, if the money is there then they will continue to use these stereotypes through the production and reproduction of horror films. Few if any films come to mind that can be classified into this genre where the villain or killer is not in someway disabled either mentally or physically. “One would think that in the eight intervening decades some sort of evolutionary development in the representation of disability might have occurred” (Riley, 2005, p. 76). This is not, however, the case at hand.

Hollywood has seemingly produced a winning combination with disability and horror films, so much so that Disney films, according to Davis (2006), follow the same storylines as horror films time after time. Davis (2006) considers both the *Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *Peter Pan* (among others) to fall completely within the horror genre. She states:

The horror genre posses many attributes in common with Disney’s animated films, thanks no doubt to the fact that Disney’s major source of stories has been fairy tales (which share major story elements and themes with classic horror films). (p. 22)

To further illustrate her point she does a brief comparative analysis of *One-Hundred-and-One Dalmatians* (1961) and *Silence of the Lamb* (1991). Though there seems to be little connection between the two films, considering one is rated G and considered to be family entertainment while the second is rated R and consider to be anything but a family friendly film, the story lines are remarkably similar. Consider the plot for *Silence of the Lambs* (1991). It consists of a man kidnapping and murdering “various women with the intention of making a suit of clothes from their skins” (Davis, 2006, p. 26). *One-*
Hundred-and-One Dalmatians (1961) is a film about “a psychotic woman who is systematically kidnapping the ‘children’ of various families of Dalmatians with the intention of slaughtering them and making a coat from their skins” (Davis, 2006, p. 26). The similarities between the two stories are eerie when explained in these terms and yet parents see no problem with their children watching Disney’s One-Hundred-and-One Dalmatians (1961) but would never think about letting their children watch Silence of the Lambs (1991). The parallels between Disney and horror films do not stop with simply this one coincidence. What makes a character good or bad and whether a bad character can be redeemed or reformed is a theme that Disney and horror films have very much in common (Davis, 2006). Case in point of these likenesses were found during a study sampling 435 adult viewers reflecting on watching Disney films as children (Wells, 1998). Wells (1998) reported that of those 435 participants “107 (24.6%) noted that they had cried or been in some way afraid when watching a Disney animation” (p. 236).

The fear and horror involved with Disney films seems to reinforce not only the findings of the aforementioned study, but also the views of film critics as well. “The fact is that Disney films’ subject matter has at times been considered—at least by some film review boards—as possibly too intense and/or frightening for the child audience” (Davis, 2006, p. 26). Despite these opinions and the various links, the similarities seem to foreshadow and hint at the idea that like the rest of Hollywood horror films, Disney too has used the standard disability stereotypes in some of his animated classics in order to add a bit of horror and intrigue to his films. The main difference noted between horror movies and Disney is in the target audiences. “Disney targets children and families
(despite the high degree of violence and terror which is typical in Disney films) while horror movies mainly target adult males” (Davis, 2006, p. 25).

These ties become even more haunting for many scholars of both Disney and disabilities when combined with the fact that research has shown that people engage in horror films, like *Freaks* and the *Hunchback of Notre Dame*, due to repulsion and curiosity not empathy or sympathy (Larsen & Haller, 2002). This point is driven home further by a quote from the 1939 version of the *Hunchback of Notre Dame*: “The ugly is very appealing to man...its instinct. One shrinks from the ugly yet wants to look at it. There is a devilish fascination in it. We extract pleasure from horror” (Dieterle, 1939).

Since there is a high degree of curiosity and repulsion among horror film viewers, major issues in the portrayals of disabilities began to emerge and do not end with horror films.

A Whole New World: Not Just in Horror Films

Disability stereotypes are not solely confined to the horror genre. Filmmakers have ventured away from simply using the misshapen villain and Coney Island freak stereotypes as fall backs. Riley (2005) and other scholars have identified several other prominent stereotypes of disabilities that appear and reappear in film: (1) the person with a disability as victim; (2) the person with a disability who triumph against all odds over his or her infirmity; Riley (2005) termed this the *supercrip*; (3) the person with a disability who is a burden on friends, family, or society because the of physical limitations or psychological problems he or she faces; and (4) the idea that bad parents, mothers in particular, are punished for their wayward actions by the birth of a disabled
child (Ellis, 2007; Farnall & Smith, 1999). These stereotypes gained popularity during the 1990s, when disability rights became the new civil rights movement (Ellis, 2007). The idea of using these other stereotype may have been to lessen people’s fear of disability however it seems that during this period people became more willing to try and understand (Farnall & Smith, 1999). These stereotypes also helped to give disabilities a more realistic voice in film and in the media. However, Ellis (2007) explains, these stereotypes are no better than the ones found in horror films and they are just as damaging because the effect is ultimately the same no matter the intent. She continues this thought by saying:

Rather than projecting a disability culture or encouraging pride in disability identity, these films [Australian films of the 1990s], depicting minor and major characters with impairments, most often encourage the subordination of the disabled in order to rehabilitate another minority group. (p. 136)

It has been shown time and time again that stereotypes, no matter how well meant they may be, are still damaging to the group they attempt to categorize (Sun, 2001). “I would add that the media are complicit in this construction of disability because it defines the ways in which people with disabilities are regarded, enforcing stereotypes that prolong the domination that has kept the community down” (Riley, 2005, p. 9). And though it can be argued that these portrayals reflect a multicultural and diverse media, disability culture remains in the background and disability pride and identity marginalized (Ellis, 2007).

Disney lauds itself for portraying a multicultural cast, and being among the first to introduce such an array of differences (Brode, 2005). Though diverse representation is better than no representation at all, Disney researchers have continually dissected troubling ideologies and problematic portrayals of gender roles, racial stereotypes and
violence within the text of Disney’s animated films (Bell, Haas, & Sells, 1995; Girox, 1999; Pinsky, 2004). These ideologies and portrayals do not even account for the consumerism taught and reinforced in the films, and none of the research has yet to address where disability portrayals fall in this extensive body of research (Giroux, 1995a, 1999, 2000; Kinder, 1999; Pinsky, 2004; Steinberg & Kincheleo, 2004). There is no question that children and adults both with and without disabilities “have much to gain from knowing about disabilities and how to appreciate differing abilities inside and out…sweeping disability-related issues under a rug does not serve anyone,” (Canary, 2008, p. 455). Yet, do hegemonic portrayals of disability in Disney’s animated features further such knowledge or simply perpetuate a problem? This question will be at the heart of the following critique.
CHAPTER III
A MARXIST CRITIQUE OF PORTRAYALS OF DISABILITY IN DISNEY’S
ANIMATED FEATURE FILMS

Though several, if not all, of Disney’s animated films could have been included in this study due to their disability portrayals, *Dumbo* (1941) and *Finding Nemo* (2003) will be the focus of the following analysis. In regards to these two animated features, this critique will attempt to answer the following questions pertaining to the hegemonic portrayals of disability in Disney’s animated films:

(1) What sorts of messages do Disney’s animated features send about disability?

(2) Is knowledge or misunderstanding about disabilities furthered/perpetuated through these messages?

(3) What do the images and messages about disability say in terms of the culture in which these films are produced and distributed?

While these questions only begin to dissect the top layer of the larger issue of stereotypes in Disney animation, they will offer a brief look at how disabilities are portrayed and perpetuated on the screen of the public sphere.

While *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) may be the earliest Disney animated representation of disability, *Dumbo* (1941) offers not only an early look into
Disney’s use of disability stereotypes such as the Coney Island Freak, but also a glimpse at one of the earliest portrayals of the supercrip stereotype. The following analysis also takes into account the specific context in which the movies were initially viewed so as to shed further light on the ways the stereotypes operated hegemonically. The evolution of stereotypes and the storyline of *Dumbo* (1941) is mirrored, to an extent in Disney-Pixar’s *Finding Nemo* (2003) over 6 decades later. The film *Finding Nemo* (2003) sheds light on the ways that disability portrayals have both evolved and remained constant over the decades. This will be accomplished through a compare and contrast analysis of the two aforementioned films, which will allow certain similarities and differences to be highlighted. These similarities and differences are important to identify in an ever growing and evolving field of research on disability stereotypes in media.

The Greatest Show on Earth

When Helen Aberson Mayer and Harold Pearl wrote the simple story about a baby circus elephant with large wing-like ears that learns to fly, never did they imagine the popularity and success the children’s book would have as an animated film; especially with World War II on the American horizon (Pace, 1999). Despite the looming war, movie goers seemed to adore the little flying elephant and *Dumbo* (1941) succeeded financially at the box office, grossing $1.6 million (Maltin, 1995). Though *Dumbo* (1941) was Disney’s fourth animated feature film, the studio was barely surviving—like most of the country at this time.
Coming out of the Great Depression, the American public was looking for any excuse to escape and make believe again, and Disney was happy to provide one. The Circus of America website describes the circus’s situation at the time as followed:

As the American circus dug out of the ashes of the depression, it did not have the same splendor or glory. The large roaming tented circuses of the twenties and the thirties no longer commanded the American landscape. The circus was no longer the only exciting form of popular entertainment and was fighting for its very existence. (p.1)

The circuses of the 1940s had barely survived and Disney was able to play upon the fondness most people still felt toward the circus by using the nostalgia attached to it in order to transport the viewer to a place not touched by the harshness of the Depression. In his fourth animated feature, Disney was able to take the circus back to its pre-Depression splendor and use *Dumbo* as way to recoup his earlier financial losses—*Pinocchio* (1940 and *Fantasia* (1940).

F-R-E-A-K

While *Dumbo* (1941) was making money at the box office, circuses around the country were making money off their sideshow performers as well. The Coney Island side show was one of the most popular of the time and possibly the most famous, which is most likely why the stereotype reflects its name. Not to be left out of the money making phenomenon, Hollywood had embraced films such as *Moby Dick* (1930), *Frankenstein* (1931), *Freaks* (1932), *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1939) which used disabilities as a way to strike fear into viewers. Film scholars refer to this Hollywood era as the “golden age of the freak-show” (Norden, 1994, p.109). The fear of becoming
disabled is something that seems to be inherent among the majority of able-bodied persons (Morris, 1991; Norden, 1994; Riley, 2005; Roper, 2003). This fear is born from ignorance and misunderstanding about what is “normal.” Hollywood played on these fears; although many disabilities scholars would argue that giving Hollywood credit for consciously constructing these stereotypes may be going too far (Morris, 1991; Norden, 1994; Riley, 2005). A winning combination of using person’s with disabilities in order to scare and intrigue the majority of the population had been discovered on film, but this combination was nothing new. Norden (1994) explains:

Though movies are intimately tied to the twentieth century, they are informed to a large extent by negative attitudes towards physically disabled people that predate the cinema by centuries and have found their way into a variety of cultural expressions. (p. 4)

Since the idea of fear and disability has been around for centuries, it would seem that the question becomes why continue to use stereotypic characters and storylines that continue to perpetuate misunderstanding and fear? Giroux argues that just because an image has been used in the past, does not mean that it should continue to be used, especially if that image can be considered stereotypic (Sun, 2001). “Capitalizing on its inroads into popular culture, Disney generates representations that secure images, desires, and identifications through which audiences come to produce themselves and negotiate their relationship to others” (Giroux, 1999, p.126). Smoodin (1994) would agree that one of Disney’s sole concerns when producing a film is not with stereotypic representations but with the consumerism tied to the film. Decisions about the movie, its story line and its characters are decided based on what will sell, meaning that the moral compass of most studios is replaced for one constructed with dollars and cents. Giroux’s rationale explains
why Disney and the majority of Hollywood continues to use such stories and stereotypes, because their sole concern is not bettering the world but simply making money (Norden, 1994; Riley, 2005; Zipes, 1997), which is exactly what *Dumbo* (1941) did for Walt Disney Studios.

The side show freak was extremely popular both in person and on screen in the late thirties and into the forties, and Disney embraced its popularity in *Dumbo* (1941). Though Dumbo’s character was not intended to shock and scare people with his ears (Refer to Figure 4.2), the little elephant is used in the sideshow and is pointed and laughed at by the paying public just like any other sideshow freak of the time. In fact one of the elephants in the film actually calls Dumbo a freak, after his mother attacks a boy who was picking on her baby. “I don’t blame her (Mrs. Jumbo) for anything…It’s all the fault of that little F-R-E-A-K” (Sharpsteen, 1941). Disney is not shy about making sure the viewer understands and sees Dumbo’s problem and that he is considered by all of those at the circus as a miscreant and trouble maker solely because of his ears. By doing this, and taking the baby elephant away from his mother, Disney is able to build up a sympathetic audience—something not often found during this time in regards to disability.

In fact, for the better part of the twentieth century, generally society was not sympathetic or in anyway understanding when it came to disabilities; Dumbo’s treatment among his circus peers was no different (Morris, 1991; Norden, 1994; Raymond, 2008; Ripley, 2005) even if the viewing audience was sympathetic. Figure 4.1 shows a picture of one of the elephants actually pulling on little Jumbo Jr.’s ear shortly after the stork had delivered him. The elephant is making sure that all the others can see what is wrong
with the baby, that he is not *normal*. Another one of the on looking pachyderms says, “Just look at those E-A-R-S” (Sharpsteen, 1941) again making sure that everyone is aware of the little one’s problem area. The elephants comment on how silly his ears look, laugh about them, and nickname the baby elephant Dumbo, instead of Jumbo Jr. If it is the society that determines what is disabling or not, as mentioned previously in this thesis, it is clear by this early scene in the film that the circus society into which Dumbo was born considers him to be “different” (Morris, 1991; Norden, 1994, Raymond, 2008).

Since people with disabilities often found themselves in situations similar to the one just described in *Dumbo* (1941), they would often go to work for the circus or were put in asylums and institutions during the first half of the twentieth century (Raymond, 2008). By doing this those with disabilities were kept away from “normal” people, or the majority of society. Many people, especially those from a strict religious backgrounds, believed that if a person was disabled either they or their parent had done something to incur the wrath of God, which was the cause of the disability (Chellew, 2000; Ingstad, 1995; McDonnell, 1998; Norden, 1994). In any case, the majority of the general public was not interested in allowing persons with disabilities to integrate into society. So much misunderstanding and fear surrounded disabilities that many countries had policies of sterilization for those individuals deemed to have genetic disabilities that could be passed on to their children; essentially people of the 1930s and 40s were trying to eradicate disabilities in any way. “By the 1940s, the popularity of these practices was declining, in part because of the horror generated by the reports coming out of Hitler’s Germany” (Raymond, 2008, p. 36). However, Hitler’s Germany was not the only place using propaganda and stereotypes in order to influence society’s views of disabilities. Some
literature indicates (Morris, 1991; Norden, 1994; Riley, 2005) films of the period did speak to the public’s fears of or disdain for those with disabilities. Disney, in some ways, played into these fears when producing *Dumbo* (1941); however, the baby elephant also portrayed disabilities in a way that garnered some amount of sympathy on the part of the viewer. This sympathy changed the way that disabilities could be seen on film despite the favoritism of Hollywood for their disabled horror monsters and villains.

Soaring Past Expectations

Aberson and Pearl’s original story always had the little elephant learning to fly and being accepted as a star at the circus—overcoming his disability. And in this case Disney left the story alone in function and simply expanded on scenes and added music. His choice to leave the story alone is rare for a Disney animated film. The studio was in need of a financial boost and produced and released the film in under a year; a quick turn around even by today’s standards of animation. Unfortunately, in Hollywood, overcoming a disability was a new idea and not viewed as a popular one either. Norden (1994) explains that the shift in societal mentality is slow to begin with, but that Hollywood and the film industry itself would take even longer to accept the shift and the idea of persons being able to overcome their disabilities. He continues to explain further:

Though the tendency of majority society and its filmmakers to perceive disabled people as freakish continued into the 1940s and indeed had never quite disappeared, some signs suggested changing interests and concerns… Some significant developments in rehabilitative care for people with physical disabilities had developed. (p. 143)
Despite the fact that Hollywood is usually sluggish in adopting a new phenomenon, Disney was able to construct a story using both the circus freak mentality while giving life to the idea of being able to overcome a disability, the supercrip stereotype. Ironically this type of champion feel good story would not reach its height of popularity until nearly fifty years later in the 1990s after another significant societal shift—the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Yet, Walt Disney was able to produce such a film successfully because of how he had told the story.

Disney made the baby elephant with big ears the innocent victim, something different for a Hollywood character with disabilities at the time. He wanted Dumbo’s difference to be clear but he also wanted the audience to be on his side. He wanted people to look past Dumbo’s disability and see an outcast struggling to fit in to the circus world he is supposed to be apart of. Once his ears make their appearance on the screen the little elephant is essentially shunned by the circus society. Dumbo’s only friends are his Mother, a mouse (who is not truly apart of the circus), and a group of crows (who have nothing to do with the circus). His only connection back to the circus is his mother and when she is taken away the little elephant is literally left alone to fend for himself.

Dumbo’s loneliness teaches him indirectly that his ears are the root of his problems. He learns that his disability is something to be ashamed of. The portrayal of Dumbo as shameful is significant in light of research on individuals who live with disabilities. Scholars (Morris, 1995; Norden, 1994; Raymond, 2008; Roper, 2003; Whyte, & Ingstad, 1995) have noted that people with disabilities often go through a period in which they blame the disability for whatever is going on around them; this blame is usually tied to disabilities incurred as an adult. Although not every person with a
disability experiences shame tied to their difference, popular films such as Dumbo convey the message that disability is shameful. Disability scholar and advocate, Jenny Morris (1991) explains the effect of this misrepresentation as a part of society’s general oppression of person’s with disabilities. She states:

The way that the general culture either ignores of misrepresents our experience is part of our oppression. However, mainstream culture is also the poorer for this. Surely, the representation and exploration of human experience is incomplete as long as disability is either missing from or misrepresented in all the forms that cultural representation takes. (p. 85)

Riley (2005) admits that media images are not the only factor in this puzzle of stereotypes and misunderstandings, yet explains that these continuous misrepresentations do affect images of self for members of a minority group. Dumbo’s shame perhaps relevant for some with disabilities in many cases simply a misrepresentation and more likely tied to a more common shame that everyone feels growing up. Considering that most people grow up not liking something about them selves or had some part of their bodies ridiculed by others, Dumbo’s shame about his ears seems less tied to his actual disability and more tied to his opinion of self. This quality of the film, however, allows nearly every viewer to be able to identify with Dumbo, helping the audience to look past his ears as a disability. Even when told by Timothy the Mouse (his friend) that his ears are beautiful, Dumbo hides behind them. Dumbo does not trust anyone not to make fun of him or his ears, something that has been systematically taught to him throughout his short young life.

Timothy feels sorry for Dumbo when he sees the other elephants picking on the “little guy” and wants to help him. Disney is hoping that the audience feels the same. “Lots of people with big ears are famous…” Timothy tells Dumbo in order to make him
feel more comfortable with his ears, but then struggles to come up with any examples (Sharpsteen, 1941). The idea to overcome the disability in order to be accepted by circus society is introduced at this point of the film. This idea also introduces a new stereotype to the audience, the *supercrip.* “Supercrips are people who conform…by overcoming disability and becoming more ‘normal,’ in a heroic way” (Roper, 2003, p. 3). To help this idea along, Timothy decides that the only way to help Dumbo fit in at the circus and to be reunited with his mother, is for Dumbo to become the headliner of an act involving all the other elephants. Unfortunately the failure of this first attempt only makes matters worse, because Dumbo is reduced to a clown after he causes the big top to fall. His ears, his disability, once again become the thing that is seemingly holding him back from success, acceptance and his mother; a “normal” life. By being demoted to a clown it seems that the expectations for Dumbo overcoming his disability are nonexistent. This feeling of failure and hopelessness is reiterated to the crows in a speech made by Timothy:

> Why I ask ya why…just because he’s got those big ears, they call him a freak, the laughing stock of the circus. Then when his mother tried to protect him they throw her into the clink and on top of that they made him a clown…socially he’s washed up. (Sharpsteen, 1941)

Without knowing how to overcome his disability, Dumbo seems doomed to go through life at the circus as a clown and side show freak.

However, finding themselves in a tree forces Timothy to try to sort out how it could have happened. While Timothy tries to figure it out, one of the crows mockingly yells, “Maybe ya flew up?” (Sharpsteen, 1941). As ridiculous as this idea seems to the crows Timothy believes it, and sees flying as the answer to all of Dumbo’s problems.

> “Dumbo you flew…your ears are perfect wings… the very things that held you down are
going to carry you up and up and up…” (Sharpsteen, 1941). The crows, however, make a
good point, a point that could hinder Dumbo’s ability to overcome—“have you ever seen
an elephant fly?” This point does not deter Timothy and his determination is
acknowledged by the crows. The crows are the one’s that give Dumbo the “Magic
Feather” that will help him fly and lead to his ultimate fame and success (Refer to Figure
4.4).

The controversial crows, however, add and interesting twist to this analysis that
needs to be acknowledged. Many (Bell, Haas, & Sells, 1995; Grioux, 1999, Maltin, 1995;
Sun, 2001) view the crows as stereotyped representations of African Americans, yet
others (Brode, 2005; Pinsky, 2004; Watts, 1997) would argue that these characters are
actually a positive representation of a minority group. “Dumbo, however, couldn’t have
achieved his hard-won success without strong support from a little brown mouse and five
black crows” (Brode, 2005, p. 51). Dumbo is not accepted by anyone other than those
who can also be considered a minority; those are the characters that reach out to the little
abandoned elephant. Steven Watts (1997), a film historian, noted:

Since the film could be viewed as an attack on unthinking prejudice, what was
more appropriate than to have the most persecuted group in America, African
Americans, teach the young elephant how to survive and soar? (p. 91)

Was Disney making a conscious critique on how America was treating all minority
groups, or simply trying to put them all down through caricatures? No analysis has yet to
decisively prove it one way or the other, because every critical lens has been different
(Hall, 1981; Kellner, 2003). However, for the purpose of this critique, the surrounding
characters’ attributes are not nearly as important as their actions, because these actions
are what ultimately lead to the formation and use of a new stereotype, the supercrip.
The “Magic Feather,” given to Dumbo by the crows, is ultimately a psychological trick (or motivator depending on how one wants to view it) and when lost in midair would have caused even more humiliation for the little elephant if he had not decided that he did not need it to fly. There are two important things to take away from this method of overcoming a disability. First, in order to overcome a disability it must be that person’s decision. The decision or the action of overcoming a disability is not something that can be forced on someone or expected of them; force and expectations can lead to the supercrip stereotype becoming problematic. The supercrip stereotype “focuses on a single individual’s ability to overcome, then puts onus on other disabled people to do the same” (Roper, 2003, p. 3). Second, the responsibility or belief that all disabled people can overcome their disability to be “normal” is not realistic or rational. What happens to those who can’t or won’t live up to the stereotype and overcome their own disability?

Though it can be viewed as commendable that Disney broke from the commonplace stereotype of the time about disability—the side show circus freak—in his production of Dumbo (1941), all he essentially does is begin the institution and perpetuation of another harmful stereotype. This stereotype and storyline will begin to increase in use throughout the rest of the century, reaching its height of popularity after the passage of the ADA in 1990.

From Clown to Clownfish

When work began on the film Finding Nemo in 1997, the writers and directors conceived it to have a totally original story line, the most high-tech computer aided
animation to date and some of the biggest names in film and television to voice some of
the most memorable characters in recent history. And though the computer animation
pushed the envelope and the voice talent for the film was remarkable and well done, the
story line was eerily similar to a Disney film produced almost 65 years earlier, Dumbo
(1941). Both stories revolve around a physically disabled child with extremely similar
names (Dumbo and Nemo), an overprotective parent who is separated from the child they
protect, a stand-in father-figure/mentor who drives the desire to overcome the disability,
and the child finally overcoming their disability in order to be unconditionally accepted
by their peers. Taking a closer look at these similarities will allow one to see how little
and yet how much has changed in the portrayal of disabilities stereotypes, with particular
focus being paid to the supercrip stereotype.

The first similarity between Dumbo (1941) and Finding Nemo (2003) is that the
main characters in both films are born with a noticeable physical disability. Both are
animals with exaggerated human qualities. For example, both characters are able to
display physical emotion such as fear, sadness, joy, and determination; all qualities a
clownfish and an elephant are not known for using (Refer to Figures 4.3, 4.6, and 4.7).
The choice to use animals for these stories serves a possible twofold purpose. The first
being that animals talking, displaying emotion and having a world similar to what the
viewer knows allows for a fantastical quality that could not be gained through the use of
human characters. Second, it is possible that the physical disabilities of both characters
are less scary and in some instances less noticeable for a human audience if the
disabilities are shown in animal form. These disabilities, though never directly identified
as such in the films, are a source of the underlying drama and story development
throughout both movies. One could even argue that it is the disabilities that ultimately lead to the separation of the child character from its parent. Nemo, for example, swims out into the open ocean in defiance of his father’s protectiveness and is ultimately captured by the dentist. Dumbo, in contrast, is being picked on by onlookers and his mother attacks those picking on her baby, ultimately leading to her being labeled as “mad” and taken away from her son.

Though the fundamentals of how the disabled main characters are taken away from their parents differs, the purpose illustrates the second similarity between the two films, the over-protective parent. Marlin, Nemo’s father, is scared of the ocean after his wife was killed by a barracuda trying to protect Nemo and his brothers and sisters. This fear and cautiousness translates to over-protectiveness when Nemo is born with a small fin and struggles with his swimming. Mrs. Jumbo, on the other hand, is simply trying to keep Dumbo from being hurt emotionally by others. Her protectiveness is not brought on because of a tragic event; it is simply brought on because her child is ridiculed by others from the moment his large ears are discovered. This ridicule endured by her child forces her to want to protect him from any excessive pain. Mrs. Jumbo’s protectiveness can also be partially linked to guilt since it is her fault her child is disabled. As mentioned earlier, many people believed during the 1940s that a disability from birth was brought on as punishment for something terrible the parent had done (Chellew, 2000; Ingstad, 1995; McDonnell, 1998; Norden, 1994). This belief in many cases lead to the parent being the sole protector of the child at all cost—as demonstrated by Dumbo’s mother. Whatever the rationale for the protective behavior it becomes secondary, because the result in both cases is the same. Both children are taken away from their protective parent.
The separation of parent from child leads to the third similarity, which is that the “orphaned” child is taken under the protective wing of a father-figure/mentor. This figure takes the place of the child’s parent, with a slight difference. In both cases the mentor wants and expects the child to be independent to a point since the child is essentially orphaned, without the parent’s protection the child must learn to adapt or use their disability in order to survive. In Nemo’s case becoming a better swimmer means escaping the dentist’s office fish tank and being able to find his father. Dumbo needs to build an act and become a headliner in order to get his mother out of the “clink.” The ultimate goal of both mentors, Timothy and Gill, is to help the children overcome their disabilities in order to reunite with their parents. An example of this push for self-reliance comes when Nemo gets stuck in the filter of the fish tank; Gill (his mentor) orders the others not to help him. The dialogue of the scene is as follows:

**Gill:** Nobody touch him! Nobody touch him.
**Nemo:** Can you help me?
**Gill:** No. You got yourself in there, you can get yourself out.
**Deb:** Ah, Gil...
**Gill:** I just want to see him do it, Okay? Keep calm. Alternate wriggling your fins and your tail.
**Nemo:** I can't. I have a bad fin
**Gill:** Never stopped me
_[Turns to show Nemo his broken fin]_
**Gill:** Just think about what you have to do.
_[Nemo wriggles out of the filter]_
**Gill:** Perfect.
(Stanton & Unkrich, 2003)

While Nemo’s father would have rushed to his aide, Gill—who has a similar disability to Nemo (Refer to Figure 4.7)—allows and forces the little clown fish to save himself. An interesting aspect to consider is that the children in both films always had the ability to
“overcome” their disability; however, it is not realized until they are away from their overprotective parents and are forced to learn how to use their disability to their advantage.

Allowing the children to experience life and use their disabilities leads to the fourth and final similarity between the two films, overcoming the disability and the development of the supercrip stereotype. As explained earlier, the supercrip is someone who overcomes their disability in order to become “normal.” Morris (1991) details the purpose of these overcoming stories and the supercrip mentality as being more about helping the non-disabled audience feel comfortable with disabilities. She continues:

Overcoming’ stories have the important role of lessening the fear that disability holds for the non-disabled people. They also have the role of assuring the non-disabled world that normal is right, to be desired and aspired to. (p. 101)

Dumbo learns to fly and ultimately saves his mother, and Nemo learns how to swim well enough to save Dory in the fishing grounds. Interestingly enough, most characters who display the supercrip stereotype are male, just like Nemo and Dumbo. The rationale for this is that women already tend to be viewed as dependent, while men are viewed as independent (Roper, 2003). A disabled male therefore violates this norm and must overcome their dependency and reliance on others in order to become “normal;” that is, to fulfill the expectations of masculinity. Disney’s animated disabled males are no different; they perpetuated the same belief of male independence and ability to overcome. Interestingly enough, neither story would have ended with the stereotypic “happily ever after” Disney is known for, if they had not been a product of this stereotype. The supercrip stereotype allows the story to have a climax and happy resolve that would otherwise not exist.
Disability scholars as well as the disabled community have condemned film makers for making their lazy returns to the same overused, yet successful stereotypes about disabilities time and time again, and until now Disney’s role in all of this has gone unnoticed. Riley (2005) criticizes the movie industry in general for a lack of evolutionary development in the representation of disabilities over the near eight decades of production, and though the films being analyzed in this thesis have several striking similarities there are two important differences that must be noted.

The first major difference between the two films, *Dumbo* (1941) and *Finding Nemo* (2003) is that Nemo is constantly surrounded by others with some degree of disability, while Dumbo is the only disabled character in the entire film. There are fish with memory loss, OCD, split personalities, injured fins, a fish eating disorder that is likened to alcoholism and even H₂O intolerance. Sixty plus years ago, a movie would have never been comprised of such a variety of ability levels and issues. An example of the variety of disabilities and the acceptance surrounding them is demonstrated in an early scene in the film during Nemo’s first day of school. When Nemo meets some of his classmates for the first time he is confronted with questions about his small fin and learns more about his classmates than he bargained for. “What’s wrong with his fin?” “It looks funny.” The children ask these questions of Nemo and embarrassed, the small clownfish shies away. Marlin, Nemo’s overprotective father, comes over to explain that he was born with the small fin and that they call it his “lucky fin.” As if to outdo Nemo’s fin the children begin to tell about their “disabilities.” Pearl, the little octopus, adds that one of her tentacles is shorter than all the others; Sheldon, the seahorse, explains that he is H₂O intolerant (and sneezes); and Tad, a bright yellow fish, yells that he’s obnoxious. The
children’s willingness to out their own disabilities is something that would not have happened in Dumbo’s world or in 1941 America for that matter.

The animated characters in *Finding Nemo* (2003) were created in an era of acceptance and tolerance. After the passage of the ADA in 1990, people became more aware of their own disabling qualities. “One need only read the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 to recognize the wide range of disabling circumstances” (Norden, 1994, p. xi). Disney-Pixar’s *Finding Nemo* (2003) does a wonderful job of demonstrating the variety of disabilities that are in the world and how to be accepting and tolerant of them as well. Although, the variety and amount of diversity in disability in refreshing, the studio still uses the disabilities as a way to get a laugh from the audience which is in no way furthering a person’s understanding or compassion toward those with a disability. Using a disability in a mocking way in order to get a laugh from the audience only teaches people that disabilities should be pointed out and laughed at, because they are funny—referring back to the side show freak mentality of laughing at disabilities.

The reliance on established stereotypes is a hard habit to break, and though Disney-Pixar does make a huge stride in *Finding Nemo* (2003) in terms of the variety of disabilities constantly being portrayed in the film, the studio is still reliant on those tried and true stereotypes; the freak and the supercrip. The reliance on these stereotypes however leads to the second and final important difference between *Finding Nemo* (2003) and *Dumbo* (1941)—what the performance of the heroic act ultimately means for the day to day life of the character overcoming their disability.
In *Dumbo* (1941) the little elephant’s success at flying lands him fame, glory and a million dollar contract; the ultimate American dream. It is the fame and glory that allow him to become a part of “normal” circus society. Without the monetary status and the fame, Dumbo would not have been able to live a “normal” life because a disability during this period of time meant extreme dependency on the rest of society, in this case the rest of the circus (Morris, 1991). In contrast, Nemo never receives fame or glory for his knack at overcoming his disability. When Nemo saves Dory from the fish net, along with hundreds of other fish, he is not immediately lifted to fame and fortune. Instead the little clownfish is finally seen by his father and the rest of the reef as being able to be a functioning member of society. This change in how he is viewed is what allows him to live a normal life—going to school, having a family, and making new friends. The normal life Nemo achieved by overcoming his disability is the last thing the viewer sees.

Disney’s change in what happens to the character after they overcome their disability is important because few people ever achieve the level of fame that Dumbo did at the end of the 1941 film. Though the idea of overcoming a disability and the *supercrip* stereotype will continue to be problematic, representing an average or “normal” existence after the overcoming is much more realistic for those with disabilities to achieve in real life if they choose.
CHAPTER IV
CONCLUSION

Happily Ever After?

People with disabilities are often overlooked as a minority group, and sometimes even as people in general, by the media. Their disabilities are used in stereotypic fashions as demonstrated early in this thesis. Even in today’s society people with disabilities are portrayed in only a handful of ways; most frequently as the supercrip and the villain lashing out at society. The consistent use of stereotypic portrayals of disabilities does not offer any information that would help the general public truly understand what life is like with a disability.

The use and perpetuation of these disability stereotypes are a part of nearly every type of media, including Disney. Although this thesis has traced the evolution of the supercrip stereotype, which is often used in Walt Disney’s “happily ever after” stories, it is still a problematic portrayal, however positive it may seem. Since the majority of people with a disability will never be able to fully overcome their disabilities in order to truly be seen by society-at-large as “normal,” the perpetuation of the supercrip (overcoming) mentality is harmful because it sets an unrealistic expectation.
Such expectations become even more problematic in terms of Disney animation, because the majority of the film viewers do not see any of Disney’s characters as being disabled. While working on this paper and explaining my thoughts about Disney’s films, people would say to me “Well, what’s Dumbo’s disability?” or “Nemo has a disability? Oh yeah he does—I never thought about it like that.” Thoughts like this are problematic because they illustrate how easily Disney animated features can escape critiques and analysis. The lack of visibility and recognition of disabilities is just one more issue that needs to be considered and addressed when furthering this research.

Breaking the Magic Spells of Stereotypes

Although stereotypes will more than likely continue to be used in film and in society, it is more important that they are recognized and discussed for what they are and what they perpetuate. Letting stereotypes go unexamined simply because they appear in allegedly wholesome family entertainment, is no reason not to examine the films critically. Allowing one’s nostalgia for Disney and its films to cloud critical vision serves no one. Stereotypes become increasingly dangerous when they are the only source of knowledge about a topic. They begin to take on a life of their own, which in turn is extremely problematic for society as a whole. It is when stereotypes are the only source of knowledge that misunderstanding and hatred can grow, something that can be extremely dangerous for a group of people who already have been portrayed as freaks and villains for centuries, and who are feared more for what they represent (human frailty and mortality) than the people they are.
This analysis has shown that Disney does rely on disability stereotypes and the hegemonic reading of those stereotypes in their films. Inherently these stereotypes do not further knowledge about disabilities but simple illustrate how disabilities are treated among the majority at the time the film is released. In some instances Disney does step outside of the norm in order to create his happily ever after usually by simply creating a new stereotype. However, as explained earlier, a stereotype regardless of intent or purpose is still problematic because they are reliant on the dominate ideologies of the time and not necessarily the truth of what life is like with a disability.
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APPENDIX A

A DIAGRAM OF MARXIST THEORY BASE AND SUPERSTRUCTURE

Superstructure

- activities involved in “making history;” legal and political activities;
- social consciousness; social political, intellectual life process;
- discourse/language/culture/ideology; IDEAS are used to support the economic system

Base

- material life; production of means to satisfy basic needs; mode of production; relations of production; economic structure of society;
- extra-discursive; materiality—control of the product constitutes control of the superstructure

Dialectical relationship, each influences the other;
- but not indeterminate relationship (their respective forces are not equal);
- Base exerts itself as most influential in the last instance

*Based on notes/handouts from Dr. Mary Triece Rhetorical Criticism (2007)
APPENDIX B

COMPLETE LIST OF DISNEY’S FULL-LENGTH ANIMATED FEATURE FILMS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs</td>
<td>1937</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Pinocchio</td>
<td>1940</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Fantasia</td>
<td>1940</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Dumbo</td>
<td>1941</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Bambi</td>
<td>1942</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Victory Through Airpower</td>
<td>1943</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Saludos Amigos</td>
<td>1943</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>The Three Caballeros</td>
<td>1945</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Make Mine Music</td>
<td>1946</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Fun and Fancy Free</td>
<td>1947</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>Melody Time</td>
<td>1948</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>The Adventures of Ichabod and Mr. Toad</td>
<td>1949</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>Cinderella</td>
<td>1950</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>Alice in Wonderland</td>
<td>1951</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>Peter Pan</td>
<td>1953</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>Lady and the Tramp</td>
<td>1955</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>Sleeping Beauty</td>
<td>1959</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>101 Dalmatians</td>
<td>1961</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>The Sword in the Stone</td>
<td>1963</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>The Jungle Book</td>
<td>1967</td>
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<td>21</td>
<td>The Aristocats</td>
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<td>22</td>
<td>Robin Hood</td>
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<td>23</td>
<td>The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh</td>
<td>1977</td>
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<td>24</td>
<td>The Rescuers</td>
<td>1977</td>
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<td>25</td>
<td>The Fox and the Hound</td>
<td>1981</td>
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<td>The Black Cauldron</td>
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<td>2000</td>
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<td><em>Atlantis: The Lost Empire</em> (2001)</td>
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<td>52.</td>
<td><em>Chicken Little</em> (2005)</td>
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<td>55.</td>
<td><em>Meet the Robinsons</em> (2007)</td>
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APPENDIX C

DISNEY FILMS ANALYZED IN THIS STUDY, WITH PLOT SUMMARIES

**Dumbo** (1941)

When the little baby elephant is first delivered by the stork all the other elephants think he is
simply the perfect addition to the herd however, once he sneezes and reveals the enormous size of
his ears that opinion changes. Little Jumbo Jr. is renamed Dumbo, and the cruelty and tease does
not end there. In an attempt to protect her baby Mrs. Jumbo, Dumbo’s mother, attacks a group of
children who are harassing him. This outburst leads to her being locked up in solitary
confinement, leaving little Dumbo all alone. A small mouse, who lives at the circus, notices how
poorly the other elephants treat Dumbo and feels bad for him. The mouse, Timothy, decides that
he will help Dumbo by making him a headliner of an act however, that plan fails when Dumbo
trips over his large ears causing a pyramid of pachyderms to come crashing down along with the
big top. This failure lands Dumbo a new act with the clowns. One morning however, Dumbo and
timothy find themselves in a tree among crows. Not knowing how they got there, Timothy decides
that Dumbo must have flown up with his huge ears. The crows find this proposition hysterical
however, the help Timothy devise a plan involving a “magic father” that will convince Dumbo he
can fly. That night when Dumbo jumps off the platform in his clown act, instead of landing in a
vat of foam he takes to the sky and amazes everyone at the circus. Dumbo’s ability to use his ears
as wings automatically catapults him to fame and fortune. His mother is released and Dumbo and
her live happily ever after.

**Finding Nemo** (2003)

After his wife and all but one of his children were killed in a barracuda attack, Marlin, the
clownfish, was extremely precautious and overprotective of his son Nemo. To amplify Marlin’s
protectiveness further, Nemo was born with a small fin which hindered his ability to swim
extremely well. On Nemo’s first day of school, his father follows the class on what he feels is a
dangerous field trip. Angry that his father was there and in order to prove a point Nemo swam out
into the open ocean, where he was scooped up by a diver. In a panic Marlin tries desperately to
swim after the boat and the diver that have taken his son. He soon run in to another fish named
Dory, who despite her short term memory loss, vows to help Marlin find his son. The two of them
encounter sharks, jellyfish, sea turtles and whales on their way to Syndey Harbor to rescue Nemo.
Nemo meanwhile has found himself in a dentist office fish tank, where he meets a variety of fish
who befriend him. One of the fish named Gill, who also has a small side fin, devises a plan to help
Nemo and the rest of the fish in the tank to escape. Nemo eventually escapes and is reunited with
his father, and Nemo, Marlin and Dory live happily ever after.
APPENDIX D

DISNEY FILMS ANALYZED IN THIS STUDY, WITH PICTURES AND CAPTIONS

Figure 4.1 While the other elephants make fun of and pull on Jumbo Jr.’s ear, Mrs. Jumbo rushes to her baby’s defense. It is in this scene that the other elephants begin to call Jumbo Jr. “Dumbo” because of his large ears.

Figure 4.2 This picture shows how large the little elephant’s ears really are. Dumbo puts his ears out like this to mimic a boy who is at the circus sideshow. The boy (who also had large ears) was making fun of Dumbo, and becomes the target of Mrs. Jumbo’s when she tries to protect her baby.
Figure 4.3 After being made a clown, which is considered by everyone else in the circus as a disgrace, Dumbo really begins to miss his mother. Timothy the Mouse—Dumbo’s only friend—takes Dumbo to see his mother in the “clink.” It is during this scene that the song “Baby Mine” is performed during the film.

Figure 4.4 Timothy and the Crows devise a plan to help Dumbo gain the confidence to try to fly. The magic feather, which can be seen in this picture, is the root of this plan.
Figure 4.5 Nemo’s lucky fin is visible in this picture. It is because of the small fin that his father does not think he can do some things, like swim long distances.

Figure 4.6 After fighting with his father and swimming out past the drop off, Nemo is scooped up by a scuba diver and taken to a dentist’s office in Sydney, Australia. Nemo is scare because he has been taken from his father and his home. It is this separation that lends itself as the driving force for the rest of the film.
Figure 4.7 While in the tank at the dentist’s office, Nemo is surrounded by a cast of characters with varying disabilities. Gill, the angle fish, also has a damaged fin. This character in particular helps Nemo to see that his disability is not his defining characteristic. Nemo learns that having a small fin or a damaged fin does not necessarily mean you cannot do something.

Figure 4.8 The “Tank Gang” befriends Nemo and tries to help him escape the tank so he can get back to the reef. When the audience is introduced to the fish in the tank, it is the second time in the film that all the fish surrounding him have some degree or type of disability. The first time is when Nemo goes to school for the first time and makes friends with some of the other kids—each one of them introduce themselves by explaining their disability.